

The Sun

**Senators want judicial vacancies filled quickly  
Two seats open on District Court  
case backlog feared**

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Howard County's three state senators are pressuring the governor's office to rapidly fill one of two open seats on the District Court bench, warning of the potential for a mounting backlog of court cases and some messy politics.

As of yesterday, half the District Court's four judgeships were empty -- vacated by the elevation Friday of Judge Lenore R. Gelfman to the Circuit Court and the fall retirement of Judge R. Russell Sadler.

There has been some concern in Howard's legal and political communities that to ensure diversity on the bench, Gov. Parris N. Glendening might wait until the nominees for the second vacancy are named by the local judicial nominating commission.

Some local political and legal observers also say Glendening may be gun-shy about making the appointments after Howard's bitter judicial election.

But state Sen. Christopher J. McCabe, a Republican representing portions of Ellicott City and western Howard, said he does not want Glendening to delay in selecting a judge to fill Sadler's seat in order to make both appointments at the same time.

"Our intent is at least to get the current vacancy filled right away" and not hold up the process, McCabe said.

Raymond C. Feldmann, a Glendening spokesman, said the governor had interviewed two of the seven nominees to fill Sadler's seat and would fill that vacancy as soon as possible. He said he could not predict when or whether Glendening would appoint the judges at the same time.

Glendening "is trying to balance the need to do it quickly with the need to do it right," Feldmann said. "He is not going to be boxed in by some arbitrary deadline."

The governor has had the list of nominees from the judicial nominating commission for Sadler's seat since September. Gelfman's vacancy -- officially declared Friday -- should be advertised soon, state court officials said. The process of nominating other candidates for her spot could take as long as two months.

McCabe said he wanted to avoid the sort of political tumult that accompanied the October 1995 appointments of Circuit Judges Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton. Despite grumbling about a growing backlog of cases in Circuit Court, Glendening waited several months to appoint the two. One vacancy had been open for a year.

The delay "increased the visibility and scrutiny of {the appointments} that set off a chain of events that resulted in an {election} that wasn't in the benefit of Howard County," McCabe said. "We obviously want to prevent" that from happening again.

In that hard-fought election campaign that ended last month, Hill Staton lost her seat on the bench to Gelfman, while her running mate, Leasure, was elected.

McCabe said he was working with Sens. Martin G. Madden and Edward J. Kasemeyer, who together represent the Columbia, Elkridge and Savage areas.

Unlike circuit judges, district judges do not have to stand for election after their appointment. They need only be confirmed to their 10-year terms by the state Senate.

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Yesterday, McCabe contacted the Governor's Office of Legal and Regulatory Affairs, which oversees the judicial appointment process.

McCabe said he gave Glendening credit for diversifying the bench since coming into office but added, "That was then. I think now we need to be more concerned about the administration of our courts."

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