

The Sun

**Columbia man appointed to District Court
Glendening names attorney Axel to one of two vacancies
Long considered favorite
Coalition to press for next opening to be filled by black**

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Gov. Parris N. Glendening has appointed a Columbia attorney to Howard County's District Court bench, prompting renewed rancor over the issue of diversity in judicial appointments in the county.

After Glendening announced the appointment Friday of Neil Edward Axel, 47, who is white, leaders of the county's largest African-American group vowed to press for an African-American to be appointed to a second vacancy on the court.

The Rev. Robert A. F. Turner, president of the county's African American Coalition, which represents about 50 black organizations in Howard, said he was not surprised by the appointment of Axel -- long considered a front-runner for a District Court seat -- and thinks Axel will do a good job.

But Turner said he expected Glendening to choose Assistant Attorney General Pamela Junette Brown, the only black person recommended to the governor on a list submitted in September by the county's judicial nominating commission for the first District Court vacancy.

That commission is to submit a second list of recommendations early next month for the second District Court opening created when District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman moved to Circuit Court last month.

In making the appointment, the governor can pick from either list or take the rare step of ignoring the recommendations.

Turner's lobbying for a black person to be appointed district judge follows last year's bitterly contested county Circuit Court race in which Gelfman bumped Howard's first black judge, Donna Hill Staton, off the circuit bench.

"We were expecting the governor to be consistent with his appointments so the bench could reflect the diversity in our county," Turner said. "We want to know how committed he is to making this diversity issue more than rhetoric but reality. We want action."

Turner said he called the governor's office Friday to set up a meeting to discuss the issue, but had not received a response.

Committed to diversity

A Glendening spokesman said the governor has shown his commitment to diversity in his appointments.

"Obviously, {Glendening} believes that Mr. Axel is the most qualified individual," said Raymond C. Feldmann. "{Glendening} will continue to look for the most qualified person from a diverse pool that represents the entire state."

Axel, who has had his own law firm in Columbia for seven years and is chairman of the Maryland Special Olympics, will fill the seat vacated by District Judge R. Russell Sadler, who retired in the fall.

Axel was co-chairman of the campaign ticket last year of Hill Staton and Circuit Judge Diane O. Leasure, who was elected.

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After they were appointed by Glendening in fall 1995, Hill Staton and Leasure fought an electoral battle for most of last year against Gelfman and Ellicott City attorney Jonathan Scott Smith, who lost along with Hill Staton.

Axel's service as co-chairman for the campaign of Glendening-appointees Leasure and Hill Staton last year led members of the legal community to speculate that that would earn him a District Court appointment from the governor.

But Feldmann, the governor's spokesman, said Axel's involvement in the campaign had nothing to do with his appointment.

Said Axel: "I got involved in the campaign because I felt strongly {about} the sitting judge principle and the appointments the governor made."

In a statement, Glendening said he was pleased to appoint Axel: "In addition to years of experience in private law practice, {Axel} also has been involved in activities in his community that have helped to improve the lives of Howard countians," Glendening said.

Selection praised

Several Howard attorneys lauded Glendening's selection of Axel on Friday.

Fred H. Silverstein, an Ellicott City attorney who is immediate past president of the Howard County Bar Association, said: "He is a wonderful guy. He is such a class act."

Also Friday, seven local lawyers advanced their names for Gelfman's vacant District Court seat by applying to the local judicial nominating commission.

Those seven candidates will be interviewed by the commission Feb. 5. No more than seven names will be forwarded to the governor the next day.

4 female candidates

Two of the seven are African-Americans and four are women.

Howard legal observers predict that the second appointment likely will be a black woman.

"I don't recall having seen the governor appoint two white males back to back in any jurisdiction," Silverstein said.

The only African-American on the list of recommended candidates for the first District Court vacancy -- whose candidacy remains alive for the second position -- is Brown, 42, an assistant attorney general for nine years.

The two African-Americans among the seven applying for the second District Court vacancy are Assistant Public Defender Alice Gail Clark and Administrative Law Judge Cornelia Bright-Gordon.

Del. Frank S. Turner -- a Democrat who represents North Laurel, Savage and parts of east Columbia -- said he supported Axel for the first opening. For the second vacancy, he sent a letter to the commission endorsing Clark.

Along with having a qualified judge, Turner said, having an African-American on the bench is important to the community.

Glendening "will probably look for the second appointment to be diversity," Turner said Friday. "It's important that 58,000 young people in Howard County see that regardless of who you are or what you are, you can rise to become what you work hard to achieve."

But Turner, the leader of the African American Coalition, said he wanted action from the governor, not promises.

"I get uncomfortable with the response, 'Well, the next time,'" he said. "It's past time for African-Americans to be represented on the bench."

The seven lawyers who applied for Gelfman's seat are:

James Francis Brewer, 51, who has a general practice in Arbutus. The Glenwood resident handles domestic cases, criminal defense work and workers' compensation and applied for the first seat.

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Bright-Gordon, 41, an administrative law judge with the state office of administrative hearings, part of the executive branch.

Clark, 56, an assistant public defender in Howard County for five years. She also applied for the first seat.

Sue-Ellen Hantman, 51, a prosecutor in the state's attorney's office from 1980 to 1989 and since 1995. She lives in Columbia and applied for the previous opening.

Michael J. Jack, 41, a civil litigator with a Baltimore firm. The Glenwood resident has also done criminal defense work.

Mary Catherine O'Donnell, 42, a senior assistant state's attorney in Howard County for 15 years who now works in the attorney general's office. The Ellicott City resident also applied for the first seat.

Robert N. Stokes Jr., 47, a general business attorney in Columbia. He has had a solo practice in Columbia -- where he also lives - for five years. Previously, he was a partner in a firm in Upper Marlboro.

In addition, six candidates from the first list will remain eligible for consideration by the governor in making the second Howard District Court appointment.

They are:

Dario Joseph Broccolino, 52, of Ellicott City, executive director of the Maryland State's Attorneys Association since 1988.

Brown, who is an assistant state attorney general in the tort claims unit.

Carol A. Hanson, 44, of Ellicott City, district public defender for Howard and Carroll counties.

Bernard A. Raum, 52, a master in chancery for the Howard Circuit Court since 1981.

Constantine James Sfekas, 43, of Ellicott City, who has worked in Baltimore for about nine years, focusing on litigation.

Michael Allen Weal, 51, a senior assistant state's attorney who has worked in that office 20 years.

Axel said Friday he was excited about the appointment to the \$89,200-a-year judicial position. "The opportunity to serve the community is thrilling to me," he said.

He said he was most pleased by the reaction of his children, Justin, 16, and Tracy, 12. "My kids are just on cloud nine," he said. "As a father, that's a tremendously warm feeling."

Axel graduated from Syracuse University's college of business administration in 1971 and got his law degree from American University in Washington three years later.

He is president of the Children of Separation and Divorce Center, a nonprofit Columbia organization that provides services to families; has served on programs to help limit substance abuse; and coaches his son's soccer team.

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Caption:
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Caption: Neil Edward Axel: "The opportunity to serve the community is thrilling to me."

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