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Voters to get last word in judges race
Contentious contest focuses on crime, governor's popularity
Heavy turnout expected
School board seat, charter amendments to be decided today
CAMPAIGN 1996

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As the bitter fight for Howard County's Circuit Court bench wound to a close yesterday, the candidates kept up their fight -- waving signs, calling supporters, looking for a final edge as the campaign finally crested into Election Day.

If past voting patterns are a reliable guide, more than 100,000 Howard County voters will go to the polls today to select a school board member, decide on 13 proposed changes to the county charter and help elect a president and two congressmen.

But the most closely watched Howard race -- locally and by political and legal observers around the state -- is for two seats on the Circuit Court bench, a battle focusing as much on race, crime and the popularity of the governor as it does on the future of Howard's judiciary.

The year-old struggle is between two judges appointed last fall by Gov. Parris N. Glendening, Diane O. Leasure and Donna Hill Staton, and two opponents, District Judge Lenore R. Gelfman and attorney Jonathan Scott Smith.

Some have called the campaign the nastiest and costliest judicial election in Maryland history. Financial disclosure reports filed 12 days ago showed that the opposing tickets had raised about \$360,000 combined.

Gelfman and Smith have spent their money attacking Glendening and making crime an issue -- and promising to fight it from the bench.

Despite ethical restrictions on the public comments of sitting judges, Leasure and Hill Staton have been equally pointed in responding -- calling their rivals "hypocrites" who misrepresent their own records and the role of judges.

The issues of race and diversity also have run through every phase of this campaign. Leasure and Hill Staton are the Circuit Court's first female judges. Hill Staton is its first black.

From the beginning, Smith and Gelfman have said that Glendening emphasized the quest for diversity on the bench above qualifications in his selections.

By the standards of the fractious campaign, yesterday was relatively quiet.

The morning began with Gelfman, Smith and campaign volunteers at busy intersections around the county, waving signs and smiling at rush-hour commuters. Sign-waving and door-knocking have been staples of their campaign.

Later, at the Gelfman-Smith headquarters on Route 108, campaign workers were answering phones and outfitting volunteers with 3-foot-high signs saying "Elect Gelfman Smith Judges" and brown grocery bags full of campaign fliers.

Leasure and Hill Staton, who spent the weekend at Columbia village centers and county libraries meeting voters, spent yesterday

helping with phone banks targeted at swing precincts around the county.

If one or both of the sitting judges loses, they can remain in office until the election results are certified Nov. 15. After that, a winning challenger has 30 days to take office, though a losing judge could voluntarily step down before the new judge takes office.

If there is a period when there is no judge in the courtroom -- one has stepped down and the other is waiting to be sworn in -- the administrative judge of the court can ask for assistance in the form of a retired judge, for example, who could take the bench temporarily.

If her candidates win, said Deborah E. Dwyer, campaign chairwoman for the challengers, they will consult with the judges holding the seats to arrange an orderly transition.

Meanwhile, the Howard school board campaign has been a far less contentious affair, matching retired Howard teacher Jane Schuchardt and community activist Francine Wishnick. Both are seeking to replace board member Susan Cook, who did not seek another six-year term.

Schuchardt says the board needs a lifelong educator in Howard schools, while Wishnick says the board would benefit from her broader leadership and planning experience in local groups, including the Columbia Council.

In recent weeks, a community evaluation of middle schools -- which called for broad changes, such as a re-emphasis of academics over the promotion of self-esteem -- has become a significant issue.

Wishnick, who was one of the authors of the report, has pledged to put almost all of its recommendations in place as soon as possible if she is elected.

Schuchardt has embraced some portions of the report. Schuchardt also has questioned whether an author of the report should be charged with deciding what parts of it should be adopted by the system.

Another issue that has played a role in defining the candidates' differences is creationism.

Schuchardt says that biology students should be exposed to creationism as an alternate explanation to evolution -- a position school officials say differs from the curriculum, even though Schuchardt says Howard textbooks present creationism that way. Wishnick says creationism has no place in Howard biology classrooms.

In other balloting, county voters have 13 charter amendments to sort through. Many make only minor changes -- such as making language in the county's charter gender-neutral.

But some are more substantive, including a change that would establish a redistricting commission to take part of the redistricting power away from the council members whose careers depend on political boundary lines.

The council ultimately would vote on the lines.

Howard voters also get some say in the larger contests for Congress and the president.

In the 3rd Congressional District, including Elkridge and most of Columbia, voters must choose between Democratic Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin and Republican Patrick L. McDonough.

In the 6th Congressional District, including Ellicott City, North Laurel, western Howard and parts of Columbia, voters will decide between Republican Rep. Roscoe G. Bartlett and Democrat Stephen Crawford.

The incumbents are favored in both congressional races. But in the local races, the only thing political prognosticators can say with confidence is that Howard County voters will go to the polls.

In recent years, the voter turnout in Howard has hovered at almost 85 percent. Because the race between President Clinton and Republican Bob Dole has been lackluster, those numbers might go down.

But with 122,579 registered voters in the county, an 82 percent turnout would put county vote totals at more than 100,000.

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