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HEADLINE: 6th District incumbent uses billboards to get message out;
But challengers criticize Rawlings Blake's visibility;
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Neighborhood City Council campaigns typically include brochures, door knocking, handshaking and mailings, but not billboards -- until now.

The 6th District is one of the more hotly contested council races because the incumbent, Stephanie Rawlings Blake, is eight months' pregnant and hasn't been able to aggressively campaign. As a result, a host of challengers feel they have a chance to unseat the two-term council member in the primary Tuesday.

Rawlings Blake hasn't knocked on many doors in her community and has instead purchased six billboards to get her message out.

If the stakes seem higher, they are. The switch to single-member districts from a format that awarded the top three vote-getters council seats is forcing the new, more drastic, campaign tool, Rawlings Blake said.

"Up until this point, people really hadn't needed (billboards) for these races," she said, noting that her challengers are attempting to capitalize on the fact that the incumbent has been largely absent from the campaign trail. "But the dynamics change with an election where it is basically winner take all."

The 6th District stretches from the Howard Park neighborhood in West Baltimore to Roland Park in North Baltimore. The area has been represented, in part, by Rawlings Blake, the council's vice president, for eight years.

There is no shortage of opponents -- five Democratic challengers -- and most are attacking Rawlings Blake's visibility in the community, which they say was negligible before her pregnancy.

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"I am out there and the incumbent hasn't been," said Charese Williams, a Patterson High School teacher. "And people appreciate it when you are out there personally meeting with them. They have an incumbent whose name they don't even know."

Williams, 32, said her primary goal for seeking a council seat is to help strengthen education, which she calls her passion. Williams is considered Rawlings Blake's most formidable opponent in terms of fund raising and notable endorsements.

Seth A. Rosenberg also claims to rarely see council members attending community meetings or events.

"That's the primary reason I wanted to run," said Rosenberg, 24, who runs a computer consulting firm. "We need someone that is responsible and more responsive. Someone that is going to be in the community. I'm not going to wait four years for it to be election time to come back into the community. I will be here."

Rosenberg said he is running for council to help form stronger plans for improving education and economic revitalization, as well as to improve quality of life.

Vincent "Rick" Fullard, who owns the Yellow Bowl Restaurant on Park Heights Avenue, is part of a merchants' association that wanted slots at Pimlico Race Course, which borders the 6th District. The slots proposal was defeated this year in the state legislature.

"We are getting poorly represented up here," said Fullard, who ran in the 1999 Democratic mayoral primary. "We wanted slots to come and we needed some leadership to represent what the constituents wanted. We invited our council person to our meetings and she never showed up."

Fullard, 40, points to 224 vacant houses in a 15-block stretch of Park Heights Avenue as a problem that needs to be dealt with. He is promising voters that, if elected, he would turn the properties into suitable homes.

Kelley C. Brohawn, a real estate agent, is also promising voters that he will address the vacant housing situation in the district, which he says Rawlings Blake has ignored.

Brohawn, 45, who ran for mayor in 1995, says he will push for a five-year property tax rate reduction of 5 percent each year.

"That will put thousands of dollars back into the pockets of homeowners and mean they are less likely to run from the city, as people are starting to do," Brohawn said. "A rate reduction creates a stronger tax base for the city and doesn't tax people right out of here."

Rawlings Blake, an attorney, said her record of helping the community speaks for itself. She is most proud of being appointed council vice president by her colleagues.

Kevin L. Williams is a self-proclaimed community activist who believes his district needs a change.

"As this race goes on I'm beginning to see this thing as more of a popularity thing," said Williams. "I'm not hearing a lot of messages from the other candidates, I just see a lot posters and signs."

Williams, 34, a manager at an adult disability home, said he wants to bring more jobs to the area.

Melvin A. Bilal, an attorney, is running unopposed in the 6th District Republican primary.

GRAPHIC: MAP(S), Baltimore City Council District 6

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