



PRIMARY: SEPT. 11, 2007

For winners, city's issues to broaden

BY JOHN FRITZE
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[SUN REPORTERS]

For months, Baltimore's top Democrats have focused almost exclusively on crime and education in their bids for citywide office. But whoever wins in Tuesday's primary election will face four years of other daunting problems — including many that have barely registered during the campaign.

Bumpy roads and leaky sewers. Persistent pockets of poverty and neighborhoods riddled with abandoned homes. An increasingly clogged transportation system and a regional competition to attract relocating military workers. Whether to back slots and, if so, where. The job, to put it mildly, will not be easy.

"Whoever is elected after Tuesday is going to have to continue the momentum and progress that Baltimore has been fortunate to have achieved over the last five to six years," said Donald C. Fry, president of the **Greater Baltimore Committee**. "What's critically im-

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portant is having the political will to make tough decisions."

Seven Democrats are running for mayor, including Mayor Sheila Dixon, City Councilman Keiffer J. Mitchell Jr., Del. Jill P. Carter and schools administrator Andrey Bundley. Four are running for president of the City Council, including the incumbent, Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake, community activist Michael Sarbanes and City Councilman Kenneth N. Harris Sr.

Assuming the Democratic nominees win in November's general election — a near-certainty in a city with an overwhelmingly Democratic voter registration — they will face tough decisions al-

most from the moment they are sworn in this December.

Early stages of the annual budget process begin at the end of this year. The city's \$2.65 billion budget — for years buoyed by real estate taxes in strengthening neighborhoods — is showing signs of weakness. Belt-tightening at the state level, meanwhile, is likely to translate into less money flowing in from Annapolis for local programs.

And as officials wrestle with less revenue from real estate taxes and the state government, they are also under pressure to cut the property tax — the city's largest source of revenue — because the rate is higher than any other jurisdiction in Maryland. Less tax revenue will make it harder for the city to pay for everything from police to park maintenance, but keeping the rate high could stunt development.

The city's tax rate is \$2.268 per \$100 of assessed value. The next highest rate, in Baltimore County, is \$1.10 per \$100 of value.

John T. Willis, a senior executive in residence at the School of Public Affairs at the University of Baltimore, said one of the most pressing issues in Baltimore and other urban centers is expanding the local economy and the tax base.

"What hasn't received a lot of attention, [and] which is imperative for any local government, is how do we improve our job opportunities and our tax base," Willis said. "Part of the decline of the American city has been the relative decline of its incoming wealth compared to its neighbors."

Recent polls for *The Sun* have indicated that residents feel crime is the most pressing issue facing Baltimore — and the leading candidates have spent much of the summer campaign debating whether to confront violence with a big increase in police officers or a more community-friendly approach. But residents often offer entirely different ideas for dealing with crime, such as better street lighting and home ownership programs.

"Every last one of them have to give the residents of Baltimore a reason to stay here," Mary M.



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Hughes, a member of the Panway Neighborhood Improvement Association in Northwest Baltimore, said of the candidates. "I think people just want to feel like, 'Hey, this is not a bad place to live in.' And I don't think that feeling is here right now."

Increasingly, whatever happens to crime in Baltimore extends into the suburbs. Last week, Baltimore County police said that the shooting of a man in front of his Rosedale home in July was ordered to silence his testimony in a pending city homicide trial.

And while the candidates have largely focused on challenges above ground, one of the biggest issues facing Baltimore runs out of sight, underground. Like other East Coast cities, Baltimore must deal with a dilapidated sewer system. Local governments across the country are borrowing billions to make federally required repairs to reduce the amount of sewage leaking into streams.

Overall, the city's sewer system serves about 1.6 million customers and the water system serves about 1.8 million. Baltimore has consistently increased its sewer and water fees — which also affects suburban consumers tied into the city's system — for more than a decade and has spent about one-third of the \$1 billion it expects will be needed to upgrade the system by 2016.

Those repairs, which are already under way, will ultimately help reduce pollution in the Chesapeake Bay. But in the meantime, they can tear through neighborhoods, rip up sidewalks and streets, clog traffic and limit parking.

Northwest Baltimore could wind up dealing with traffic and parking problems from an entirely different source — Annapolis. Gov. Martin O'Malley has suggested that slot machines could very well be on their way to Maryland's racetracks, including Pimlico, to help balance the state's budget. City government will not have a direct say in the matter, but it will be affected.

In other cities, local leaders have used the bully pulpit to negotiate for a portion of the revenue collected from slots. The city may

need to improve the infrastructure around Pimlico to prepare for an influx of gamblers, and nearby residents could be affected by the traffic. Some slots advocates have even suggested looking to places beyond the tracks, such as the Inner Harbor.

Aaron Meisner, who is vice president of the Mount Washington Improvement Association but who also leads an anti-slots initiative, said he hopes the next mayor puts up a fight against gambling altogether.

"If the city leadership isn't out front saying things like, 'We don't need another predator, we've got enough addictions, let's solve some of our problems first,' then the silence is read in Annapolis as stick it in Pimlico," Meisner said. "There is an important role in the debate for the leadership in city government."

In the near-term, successful candidates will finalize contracts with the city's public safety unions, choose a police commissioner and other agency heads, and begin to enforce the smoking ban that goes into effect Feb. 1.

More systemic problems include the huge number of city-owned vacant properties and the growing drain city retirement benefits might have on the budget.

Already under way is a competition with area jurisdictions to attract new military families moving into the region through base realignment. While Baltimore's newly elected officials will be able to promote the possibilities offered by the city — including potential new developments intended to replace vast swaths of abandoned housing — they must also allay these families' concerns about such things as the troubled public school system and safety on the streets.

Donald F. Norris, a professor and chairman of the public policy department at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, noted that there are even more fundamental issues leaders must consider dealing with, including poverty and population loss.

The poverty rate for individuals in Baltimore is nearly 23 percent, and for families nearly 19 percent, almost double the national

average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's most recent American Community Survey. The underlying problem of poverty contributes to crime and failing schools.

Maryland's median household income of \$65,144 was reported by the bureau last month to be the highest in the nation — though the city's median income was far lower, only \$36,031.

"As long as the city is essentially Maryland's warehouse for the poor and the poor are highly concentrated ... in the city, then these social pathologies are going to continue," Norris said. "Nobody talks about that."

Norris, who teaches urban policy, also said city leadership must work to stem Baltimore's population loss — a drop-off of 85,000 from 1990 to 2000. Though the decline appears to be slowing — the city's population dropped nearly 20,000 between 2000 and 2006 — it is still an issue.

"What the mayor of Baltimore will face in the next four years, eight years or 20 years is more of the same that we've seen. And I think it's going to take a very strong mayor who is willing to exert a lot of influence, use [her or his] power to get in there, shake things up and make changes," Norris said. "But if it's business as usual than there's no reason to believe that any change will occur."

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BALTIMORE'S PRIMARY ELECTION

Polls will be open Tuesday from
7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

To find your polling location, call
Baltimore's Board of Elections at
410-396-5550 or go to

[www.elections.state.md.us/
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