

## The election of 2011 in Baltimore City will go down to the wire

Written by R.B. Jones

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The election of 2011 in Baltimore City will go down to the wire. Usually in this overwhelmingly Democratic city, the winners of the Democratic Primary are assured a general election win. Republicans still exist in the city, but not enough to put up a substantial general election fight. This year might be the one where write-in democracy takes a strong stride forward. At least three candidates, who lost in the Democratic Primary, are running write-in campaigns. Shannon Sneed in the 13th District, Michael Johnson in the 9th District and Councilwoman Belinda Conaway in the 7th District are running write-in campaigns.

Write-in campaigns are difficult undertakings. The voter has to do more than press a button to register his or her choice. Now, voters have to type in the candidate's name in the space allotted for write-in choices and then the voter must press a button to register the vote. On old voting machines the voter had to open a slot and write in the candidate's name. The rules used to be so strict that unless the voter wrote the candidate's name in exactly right the vote would be discounted. More recent rules are more lenient and typing the name in does not have to be exact as long as the intent of the voter is apparent.

Up to the present time the most effective write-in campaign ever run in Baltimore City was the 1974 write-in campaign by Milton Allen in 1974. Allen was elected the first African-American states attorney for Baltimore City in 1970. Despite having an outstanding record in that office, Allen was defeated by William Swisher in the Democratic Primary through an appeal to racial fears and prejudice. Swisher used code words in his television ads such as "This city is a jungle!" Another ad featured a white woman on a foggy night appearing threatened by some street thug stalking her when William Swisher emerges to protect her. At that time there was a slim black majority in Baltimore City although the voting ratio was nearly evenly split between

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black and white.

When Swisher won the primary, Milton Allen and his supporters launched a well funded and organized write-in campaign that garnered 50,000 votes in an unsuccessful but heroic effort. One could only wonder how many Allen votes were thrown out under the strict write-in rules. If the current rules had applied, then Allen might have won in 1974. Write-in campaigns resemble crusade more so than conventional political campaigns. I have personally used the write in aspect of voting for decades. I made up my mind to never vote for candidates that I did not agree with on a minimum number of issues. I do not vote for the lesser of two evils because using that logic results in nothing more than supporting evil time after time. I have written in candidates for every office from president of the United States on down the ballot. I have written my name in slots constantly through the years and never regretted it one time. It makes no sense to me to vote for people who oppose my political positions.

The write-in campaigns in the city stem from various causes. In the 13th District, Shannon Sneed lost to Councilman

Warren Branch by a very slim margin that was finalized when the absentee ballots were counted. Michael Johnson who lost in the Democratic Primary to appointed Councilman William "Pete" Welch is running a write-in because he believes that he has a better chance of winning with a write-in campaign as

opposed to being one of nine candidates in the primary. The write-in campaign of Councilwoman Belinda Conaway is a result of widespread requests from people in the district who urged her to run a write-in campaign.

Her defeat in the primary was orchestrated by high ranking members of the Democratic Party. Gov. Martin O'Malley made calls and organized financial support for the primary winner Nick Moseby along with Congressman Elijah Cummings, Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and other state and federal elected officials who supported a campaign that was long on negative accusations and very short on information about why one should vote for Mosby. His theme was that he would work well with Mayor Rawlings-Blake.

Mosby's mailers inferred that the

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incumbent councilperson was a tax cheat and one implied that she was going to be imprisoned by the IRS— he used the agency's logo on his mailer. Many residents of the district were offended by the tone of his campaign and the interference from outside forces in the primary contest against an incumbent who had worked hard in constituent service.

Councilwoman Conaway has stood up to the administration on a number of

issues and many residents of the 7th District want to continue to have independent representation.

It will be interesting to see what happens in the write-in campaigns this year. They represent the last chance at democratic processes. They require extraordinary measures from the voter, but they also provide candidates with reservoirs of support a final opportunity to be elected outside the restraints of party primaries.