



August 17, 2007

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## Council prexy hopefuls debate

Thursday, August 16, 2007

By Sean Yoes  
 AFRO Staff Writer

With less than a month before citywide primary elections on Sept. 11, candidates for various offices are scrambling around the city participating in forums hoping to woo voters. Earlier this week the Maryland Unified Licensees Beverage Association (MULBA) held a forum and reception for the candidates vying for the office of City Council President.

Current Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and Fourth District Councilman Ken Harris sat side by side fielding questions and sharing their views for the future of Baltimore at a packed Club International in West Baltimore.

"We have to be very clear about how we're going to grow our city," said Rawlings-Blake when a question about Baltimore's ubiquitous 40,000 vacant houses was asked. "It's about blight elimination, but it's about shoring up our strong communities as well. That's how you spread the progress of the city," she said.

Harris advocates a plan to get the bulk of those 40,000 houses back on the tax rolls and use the revenue to help reduce property taxes, which are the highest of any jurisdiction in the state. Harris added, "The same thing we do Downtown we can do uptown. When we do payment in lieu of taxes to attract businesses, I don't see why we can't do that in our neighborhoods to attract residents."

Both candidates explained they were in favor of an elected school board when the question was asked.

"I'm in favor of a partially elected school board, but...my focus is to make sure that the money in the school system goes to educating our kids and not North Avenue," said Rawlings-Blake.

*"The same thing we do Downtown we can do uptown."*

Harris lamented the fact that 16,000 students out of the 88,000 in the Baltimore City Public Schools missed 20 days or more of school, which he says is the third worst rate of public school absenteeism of major cities in the country. Harris added, "I'm 100 percent for an elected school board. People will be more concerned about being re-elected by the city of Baltimore than being appointed by a mayor or governor."

"We know about what works, so we have to do more of it and less of what mires our children and our teachers down," added Rawlings-Blake.

Several veterans of Baltimore's political scene attended the MULBA forum including, 9th District Councilwoman Agnes Welch, former council member and current 44th District Del. Melvin Stukes, as well as former 44th District senator and current talk radio titan Larry Young.


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"You could clearly see the different philosophies each candidate espoused," said Sharon Williams the forum's coordinator. "Overall I think those who were in attendance could tell how each candidate would handle certain situations if they ascended to the position," she added.

One issue sure to generate copious debate as the 2008 General Assembly approaches is slots legislation and its impact on Baltimore and specifically the club and bar owners that make up MULBA's membership.

"I don't support slots, but if it is the will of the city I would not block that will," said Harris. "But, if we do get slots, we do what Maynard Jackson did in Atlanta-we put a contract in writing and put in it an expectation of what we want...to hold people accountable," added Harris.

"Until I'm convinced there is a direct impact for growth and sustainability I'm not thinking about it (slots). But, the conversation is too narrow," said Rawlings-Blake. "We have to think more broadly about it, one area like a racetrack shouldn't benefit alone."

The third candidate for Council President, Michael Sarbanes advised forum sponsors prior to the event that he would arrive late and showed up after the discussion had formally ended. But, Sarbanes, executive director of the Citizens Planning Housing Association did briefly discuss his views on the issues of crime, vacant houses and jobs for the audience that remained.

*MULBA is sponsoring a forum for the various city council seats and Comptroller Joan Pratt who is running unopposed on Aug. 22, from 5 to 8 p.m. at MELBA's Place, 3126 Greenmount Ave. The organization will also host a forum and reception for mayoral candidates Aug. 29, at the Latin Palace, 509 S. Broadway from 5 to 8 p.m.*

*The League of Women Voters is holding a forum for City Council president candidates on Aug. 21 and for mayoral candidates on Aug. 28, both at 7 p.m. at Central Library, 400 Cathedral St.*

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