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Republican throws hat into ring

Engineer will vie for seat in council's heavily Democratic 4th District

03/02/06

By Andrei Blakely

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Republican Tom D'Asto joined the race for the Howard County Council's 4th District seat Feb. 26, entering what likely will be a tough fight for votes in the heavily Democratic district.

D'Asto, 40, a Clarksville resident, has never run for or held a public office.

The 4th District, which includes the West Columbia, Clarksville, Fulton and Highland areas, has elected a Democrat to the County Council in each election dating back to 1986.

The seat is now held by Democrat Kenneth Ulman, who is vacating the seat to run for county executive.

A mechanical engineer, D'Asto believes he understands the diversity of needs held by residents throughout his district.

In Columbia, for example, he says residents are concerned about redevelopment, while in other locations people are concerned with increases in property and income tax rates, D'Asto said.

"It depends where you are," D'Asto said. "I really believe the voters will understand that I'm a hard-working person. I'm not looking for a career change or a pay raise. This is just something that I want to do."

D'Asto is still developing an official platform, but preliminarily he is concerned about the government overspending, rapid land development and the need for adequate services for senior citizens.



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D'Asto thinks the process of deciding a new master plan for Town Center, which began with a public meeting called a charrette in October, is politically motivated and could have been done three years ago instead of during the current election year.

So far, D'Asto is the only Republican running for the seat. On the Democratic side, school board member Mary Kay Sigaty and Joshua Feldmark, a member of the Columbia Association's board of directors, have already entered the race.

The primary election will be held Sept. 12, with the General Election following on Nov. 7.

Democrats are confident

D'Asto's Democratic opponents think the political newcomer has a tough task ahead of him in the Democratic-dominated District 4.

Tony McGuffin, the acting chairman of the Howard County Democratic Party, is confident that his party will carry the district in the November election.

"That district is usually pretty safe for us," McGuffin said. "So we always welcome the debate. We do have clear majorities in Columbia."

Sigaty agrees.

"I have met him," Sigaty said. "He's a very nice man. I wish him luck. It is not an easy task that he is taking on for himself in a heavily Democratic district."

"I honestly don't know him at all," Feldmark said. "I don't have any preconceived opinion of him. I'm sure he's a decent guy."

Brian Harlin, chairman of the Howard County Republican Party, could not be reached for comment.

D'Asto has lived in Howard County for about 18 years. He grew up in Gary, Ind. and attended Purdue University. He later received a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University.

He has worked for the past 18 years at Beltsville-based Swales Aerospace, a firm that handles contracts for NASA.

At Swales, D'Asto has helped refurbish the Hubble telescope, the space-based telescope which was launched in 1990.

He lives in Clarksville with his wife Jennifer, a public school teacher, and three children, Tony, 11, Nick, 10, and Gina, 8.

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