

Facing write-in challenge for council, Branch steps up campaign

By Luke Broadwater, *The Baltimore Sun*, Oct. 24, 2011

City Councilman Warren Branch knows that the pavement in front of Lucinda Saunders' East Baltimore rowhouse is cracked and that the 75-year-old retiree can't afford a \$300 fine from the city.

Branch is familiar with her plight because he was in Saunders' neighborhood campaigning. He returned a few days later with a city inspector, and they quickly identified the cause of the crack — a water pipe beneath the sidewalk.

By the time they left, Branch had arranged not just for the elimination of the sidewalk fine, but also the halving of Saunders' errant water bill and the vetting of her taxes for missed credits. The councilman even offered to accompany Saunders to any future court dates for miscellaneous fines she might incur. "Allow me to go to court with you," Branch told her. "We work for you."

The unspoken message to Saunders was clear: Let it not be said that Warren Branch doesn't work hard for his constituents.

Running for re-election against a feisty write-in candidate, Branch acknowledges he has stepped up his efforts. The first-term 13th District councilman is campaigning hard for the Nov. 8 general election, going door-to-door throughout East Baltimore. As he meets constituents, he also takes the opportunity to try to resolve problems they may have with the city.

The 50-year-old former city inspector says he is uniquely qualified to do that. Because of his 23 years working for the Department of Public Works, Branch says he can respond to constituent complaints in ways his challenger could not. He says he knows whom to talk to at City Hall to get a citation nullified. He can identify a problem with a water bill just by looking at it.

"For me, it's all about constituent services," he says.

Still, Branch is hounded by criticism from backers of write-in candidate Shannon Sneed — who lost to Branch by 43 votes in the September primary — that he's unresponsive to community concerns. They also say he's a flip-flopper on key issues and not innovative or progressive enough to represent one of the city's most beleaguered districts, which stretches south from Belair-Edison through struggling neighborhoods around Johns Hopkins Hospital to Fayette Street.

"Come down to my office and volunteer for one day," he says of his critics. "They really don't know what I'm doing."

Branch has been less active legislatively than other first-term councilmen, such as 4th District Councilman Bill Henry and 11th District Councilman William H. Cole IV. They have achieved passage of two and three times the number of bills, respectively, that Branch has.

Branch asks constituents to be patient with him as he sets out his agenda, which he says will include hiring an independent budget analyst for the council who can scrutinize the mayor's proposals.

Even so, the first-term councilman says he's proud of his record and is running on it

"There are a lot of positive changes happening in East Baltimore," he says.

He says he fought former Mayor Sheila Dixon to prevent the closure of a fire company in East Baltimore, the Second Battalion Truck Company 15 on N. Montford Avenue. "She wanted to close it down. I fought very hard to make her keep it open," he says.

Branch also touts development in the community, including the razing of four blocks of blighted and abandoned houses that will be replaced with a new school, recreation center, library and auditorium — a planned development in which he says he was "very instrumental." He also says 300 new homes in East Baltimore have been converted from vacants, including 50 done through Habitat for Humanity, during his tenure.

Others, including former Councilman Vernon Crider, whom Branch defeated by 51 votes in 2007, say Branch can't take credit for the East Side renewal plans.

"Those things were already in the pipeline," says Crider, who is backing Sneed. "I saw blueprints of those things back in 2006 and 2007. If he hasn't set his agenda now, what is he doing? People should expect more."

Branch frustrated some City Council colleagues when he changed his mind on key legislation, including Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's bottle tax — which he eventually supported but at one point voted against — and Councilman Carl Stokes' failed property tax cut plan, which Branch initially co-sponsored, then rejected.

Branch says he was weighing competing concerns — layoffs of city workers versus higher taxes — as he struggled to decide what to do on the bottle tax. As for the property tax, he says he initially signed on to a plan without sufficiently considering it.

Meanwhile, the Sneed campaign continues to gain support not just from former candidates in the 13th District, but elsewhere. Abigail Breiseth, a runner-up in the 9th District race, and Odette Ramos, who lost in the 12th, are among them. Sneed attributes this to her responsiveness to community concerns.

"Having a candidate who doesn't show up, it speaks volumes," she says.

Questions have arisen about Branch's residency. He says he lives with his mother one day a week at the address he lists on campaign information — the same address listed by his brother, State Del. Talmadge Branch — and stays with his girlfriend and their three children the rest of the week at a different home in the district.

Branch proudly points out that he grew up in the district, in Madison-East End, a few blocks north of where Saunders lives. He went to Fort Worthington Elementary School in Berea. He now worships at New David Baptist Church there.

As he walked through Berea recently, Branch and supervising city inspector Melvin Ratajczak, who visited Saunders, were joined by another inspector, engineer Michael Donovan, of the city's transportation department. The trio went to the home of William and Myrtle Kelly, a retired couple married for 58 years.

Myrtle Kelly, 79, gave the councilman a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

"I've been knowing Warren since he was a boy," she says.

It was lightly raining and getting cold, and Branch gave the mother of his childhood classmate his suit jacket, which she draped around her shoulders. This caused a round of "awwws" from the inspectors and joking threats from her husband, William, 88.

Branch has brought the two inspectors here to evaluate the condition of the alley behind the Kellys' home, which they say is damaged, uneven and in need of resurfacing. The inspectors concluded that it's not so bad as to warrant immediate repaving, but if the Kellys can get 51 percent of their neighbors to sign on for the resurfacing, the city will make it happen.

Branch smiled and nodded, approvingly. He began to banter again jovially with the Kellys, who say they're glad to see the councilman out here. In an alley. In the wind and cold.

"Most people do a lot of complaining," Myrtle Kelly says. "But when the time comes to do something, they're not around. Warren's here. He's around."