

With no primary challengers, 11th District's William Cole braces for the general election

by Van Smith, *City Paper*, July 29, 2011

On July 29, City Councilmember William Cole (D-11th District) was caught off-guard by a reporter asking about his re-election. Though his seat is uncontested in the Sept. 13 Democratic primary, he was under the impression he only faced one challenger in the Nov. 8 general election: Libertarian Douglas McNeil. In fact, Baltimore City Republican Central Committee Chairman Duane Shelton also entered the race. "That's new," Cole said, adding that, "I'm planning on running a full general campaign."

In Baltimore, where nearly 80 percent of the registered voters are Democrats, primary elections are where the action is—especially during city races, when local offices are the only ones on the ballot. The general election, on the other hand, typically sees much lower voter-participation rates; in the 2007 city elections, less than half as many voters went to the polls for the general election than did for the primary. The general, in other words, is historically an irrelevant afterthought in Baltimore.

But in Cole's redrawn 11th District, where Locust Point and South Baltimore were added in place of precincts in West Baltimore and north of North Avenue, Republican-leaning voters appear to be more prevalent than one generally sees in Baltimore. In last fall's gubernatorial election, for instance, the precincts in the 11th District delivered 2,807 votes to Republican candidate Robert Ehrlich—a couple hundred more than the 2,592 votes that Cole got in 2007's 11th District general election. About 1,900 of those Ehrlich votes came from the district's new precincts in Locust Point and South Baltimore.

Cole, who is wrapping up his first term as a councilmember, acknowledges that the new 11th District has a significant Republican presence. But he emphasizes that voters in Locust Point and South Baltimore know him well. Not only did he represent them as an appointed state delegate to the Maryland General Assembly from 1999 to 2002, but, since becoming a councilmember in 2007, he says he has "worked very cooperatively and collaboratively" with 10th District Councilmember Edward Reisinger (D) to serve those communities as well.

In the rest of the district too, Cole says he's a known quantity, having handled "thousands of constituent-service requests" over the last four years and worked on high-profile legislation, such as ethics reform.

Nonetheless, an analysis of recent voting patterns in the 11th District's 25 precincts raises the possibility that Shelton—who did not respond to *City Paper's* numerous attempts to reach him for this article—has the potential to give Cole a run for his money.

In 2007, when Shelton ran in the 10th District, he lost 1,644 to 506 to Reisinger. In the eight Locust Point and South Baltimore precincts that are now in the 11th District,

though, Shelton got 277 votes—more than half of his total. Though Shelton’s name is untested in the 11th District’s remaining 17 precincts, which run from the Inner Harbor to North Avenue between Charles Street and Fremont Avenue, 904 voters there supported Ehrlich last fall—not as many as the 1,900 Ehrlich voters in Locust Point and South Baltimore, but still a substantial sum.

Thus, should Shelton activate his 2007 Locust Point/South Baltimore base, augment it with Ehrlich voters from last fall, and make inroads with the rest of the district’s Republican-leaning voters, he could stage an impressive electoral showing. Last fall, his campaign committee carried a bank balance of \$408 and was \$500 in debt, so he’ll need to kick his fundraising operation into gear to underwrite the effort.

McNeil, the Libertarian, says the new 11th District is “one of the more Republican districts in Baltimore.” He intended to capitalize on this, saying the district’s Republicans “may want to vote for a Libertarian.” But now that there’s a Republican running too, “we’ll see how I do,” he says, adding that “I am certainly the underdog in this race.”