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Monday, January 5, 2009

## Mayor race centers on integrity claims

With little else dividing them, Detroit candidates hope that strength of character will win votes.

Darren A. Nichols / The Detroit News

**DETROIT** -- Don't give Marcus Harris more rhetoric about restoring neighborhoods, reforming schools or fixing the budget. For the Detroit voter, one issue is paramount: character.

"It's clear we need to restore a sense of integrity and to some measure credibility," said Harris, 31, who recently attended an event for businessman Dave Bing at Seldom Blues. "Unfortunately, we lost that with Kwame's tenure in office. He disappointed a lot of Detroiters and a lot of people who believed in him."

"Integrity" has been a buzzword in the primary, in large part because of the years and months of controversy that preceded Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick's resignation in September. Now jailed for his role in a text-message scandal, Kilpatrick drew accusations of using the job as a personal fiefdom, racking up \$286,000 on city credit cards and using a city-owned Lincoln Navigator for his wife.

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Most of the 15 candidates in the Feb. 24 primary agree on major issues including blight, the city's deficit and need to cut crime, making the race -- thus far -- a referendum on character.

"It may very well turn out to be the most important issue with the economy being right on its tail," said Michael Bernacchi, a marketing professor at the University of Detroit Mercy who also studies city politics. "(Integrity) may be the issue that gives everybody the chance to speak with great meaning and with honesty on how Detroit is going to solve its budget woes with no easy answer. It forces everybody into the same discussion."

On the campaign trail, some city residents are telling candidates they need a leader they can trust and more openness in City Hall. At a recent forum, a woman asked whether candidates had enough gumption to remain corruption-free. Another held up the city charter and asked whether they would adhere to the oath of office, which includes language on ethical behavior.

"Detroiters can't afford to elect another dishonest person as mayor," resident Christopher White said. "A candidate can no longer tell us how they grew up poor, how much they love Jesus or they're running to save children. We need innovative solutions to fiscal challenges and a person who can best lay out a vision to move the city out of a state of paralysis."

### Other skill sets needed

Character looms large in almost every campaign -- local or national -- but it's taken on such prominence in the first election after Kilpatrick that candidate Warren Evans said it's become practically meaningless. The Wayne County sheriff said his focus is on highlighting his managerial skills to fix the city.

"Integrity is not going to fix the problems for Detroit," Evans said. "There are other skills sets that are needed to go with that integrity to right the ship."

Mayor Kenneth Cockrel Jr. set the tone, defining himself as anti-Kilpatrick in his first few days in office by deciding not to live in the Manoogian Mansion, eschewing a Navigator and traveling with fewer bodyguards. He also launched an investigation into the transfer of former mayoral appointees into permanent civil service jobs and tapped Saul Green and Joseph Harris to his Cabinet. Both have reputations as squeaky-clean reformers.

"People definitely want change," Cockrel said. "To subject them to more of the same wouldn't do anybody any good. That's something we can't afford any more of. (Integrity) has got to be more than trotting out some gimmick. I'm seeking to do the job the way it's been done, an open and transparent government."

Bing seized the issue in December, disclosing his personal finances and challenging his competitors to do the same. He has also said he would donate his \$176,000 mayoral salary to the Police Department and is trying to get rid of his interest in a riverfront condominium project because it would be financed by \$11 million in loans from two Detroit pension funds. It hasn't happened yet because only 28 of the 98 units have been reserved with cash deposits.

"It was important that I did this because I didn't have anything to hide," Bing said. "I'm not saying anybody else does, but if we can get that out in front of the public, (then) everybody understands that nobody has skeletons in their closets or hidden interests in Detroit. That's what voters really want to see right now as

they pick the next mayor."

### 'No shade of gray'

But former Deputy Mayor Freman Hendrix calls the disclosure "a weapon of mass distraction" intended to divert voters from Bing's inexperience and lack of answers on cutting the deficit and crime.

Hendrix is calling for Bing and others to release all finances, including loans, pension fund investments into candidates' businesses and the status of those deals.

He's also questioned the ethics of Cockrel, who signed an affidavit to run for office stating he owed no campaign fines when he owed \$42,000. Hendrix has said he is willing to disclose his finances.

"People are going to have differences in philosophy and policy, but there can be no shade of gray in honesty, ethics, integrity and accountability. Either you've got it or you don't," Hendrix said.

"Not just in the campaign, but any person talking about succeeding the former mayor and (now) some of the questionable activities that seem to be emerging with the interim mayor. It's a huge issue."

The Rev. Nicholas Hood III, who is making his second mayoral bid, has placed bus ads with the theme: "Integrity we can trust, service you can see."

He has called for the mayor and City Council to abstain in approving contracts involving family members, implement a policy forbidding nepotism in hiring practices and forbid appointees to work for contractors after leaving the city.

"What we need now more than anything else is the trust of the people," Hood said. "What I'm looking for (is) what a person is willing to employ in terms of public policy that can permeate all down the ladder of city government."

### Voters want more

Kilpatrick's former general counsel, Sharon McPhail, is distancing herself from the excesses of the era.

McPhail is making integrity the focus of her campaign, noting that she has not been implicated in a federal investigation of City Hall that could end early this year in the indictments of numerous current and former city officials.

"I'm the only one not under investigation," McPhail said.

"The system of justice has really taken some hits and that's not comforting to voters. You're talking about a governor (Rod Blagojevich of Illinois) being accused of selling a Senate seat. It's always been an underlying theme, but the events of the last year have caused more voters to ask about it."

State Rep. Coleman A. Young did not return phone messages seeking comment, but has promised to change the culture of City Hall.

Other candidates, including Stanley Christmas, Duane Montgomery, Joe Holt, D. Etta Wilcoxon and Jerroll Sanders, have picked up the theme, saying voters can trust them because they're political outsiders.

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**Tuesday:** At 6:30 p.m., candidates are to respond to the people's agenda during the Call 'Em Out group's forum at Northwest Activities Center, 18100 Meyers, near Curtis.

**Wednesday:** At 8 p.m., state Rep. Coleman Young II, the Rev. Nicholas Hood III, Stanley M. Christmas and D. Etta Wilcoxon are scheduled to participate in the second WADL-TV 38 debate. It will be broadcast live.

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Detroit Mayoral Candidates Dave Bing, left, Mayor Kenneth Cockrel and Freman Hendrix appeared in the first televised debate of Detroit mayoral candidates at WADL-TV in Clinton Township on December 2. (Ricardo Thomas / The Detroit News)

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- Home
- Page One PDF
- Sports PDF
- Weather
- Horoscope
- Lottery
- Crossword
- Sudoku
- Contact Us
- Multimedia:**
- Photos/Video
- News Photos
- Autos Photos
- Audio Galleries
- Video
- Photo Store

**News:**

- Nation/World
- Politics/Govt.
- Elections
- Religion
- Local/State:**
- Metro/State
- Wayne
- Oakland
- Macomb
- Livingston
- Commuting
- Schools
- Michigan History
- Charlie LeDuff
- Obituaries
- Death Notices

**Autos:**

- Autos Insider
- Drive
- Joyrides
- Auto Shows
- Auto Reviews
- Auto Photos
- Autos Talk
- Test Drive blog
- Business:**
- Business News
- Personal
- Finance
- Stocks
- Technology

**Sports:**

- Sports
- Lions/NFL
- Pistons/NBA
- Red Wings/NHL
- Tigers/MLB
- Shock/WNBA
- MSU
- U-M
- More Colleges
- High Schools
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- Entertainment
- Music
- Calendar
- Movies
- Movie Finder
- TV Listings
- TV/Radio
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- Forums Index
- Lions Talk
- Wings Talk
- Pistons Talk
- Tigers Talk
- Ask Mike O'Hara
- Big Ten Talk
- News Talk
- Autos Talk
- Faith Talk
- Opinions:**
- Editorials
- Letter to Editor
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- Lifestyle
- Homestyle
- Food
- Recipe Finder
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