

Montgomery Co. race to unseat judges is on

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The race to unseat some of the six incumbent Montgomery County Circuit Court judges who are up for election officially has begun.

On Friday, Gaithersburg attorney James F. Shalleck said he had registered to run in the November election.

Calling his filing the first time since 1986 that anyone has challenged an incumbent judge in the county, Shalleck said his candidacy, which he has discussed openly since last summer, is being well received.

"The farther you get from the courthouse, the more it is well perceived as the proper thing to do," Shalleck said. "Of course, I'm not very popular in the courthouse."

Shalleck is the first candidate to formally announce plans to challenge the incumbent or "sitting judges," but others have said they are planning to enter the fray.

All six incumbents have registered, said Bethesda attorney Rebecca L.N. Strandberg, co-chair of the Committee to Retain the Sitting Judges.

Strandberg said the "sitting judge principle" was endorsed by the Montgomery County Republican and Democratic central committees, and the Maryland State Bar Association has endorsed five of the incumbents. Strandberg said she expects the MSBA to endorse the newest sitting judge, Judge Joseph A. Dugan Jr., who was invested

only about three weeks ago.

The filing deadline is July 1, Strandberg said.

Thomas R. Eldridge, until recently a prosecutor in the Montgomery County State's Attorney Office, and Stephen N. Abrams, a member of the board of education, have said they will challenge the incumbents. Eldridge

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said on Friday that he plans to file "within the next couple of weeks."

Eldridge, like Shalleck, said he has found voters "receptive to the notion" of popular elections for judges.

Voters do not like the current "closed door" process whereby the governor appoints judges who then run as incumbents, he said.

Abrams and some of the incumbent judges did not return a reporter's calls by press time.

Shalleck, twice an unsuccessful Republican candidate for Montgomery County State's Attorney, has long endorsed the popular election of judges.

Eldridge, no relation to Court of Appeals Judge John C. Eldridge, said that judges are in disfavor with the public.

One example that is being widely discussed arose with a decision by a judge who is not up for election this year. Montgomery County Circuit Judge Durke G. Thompson overturned part of a jury's verdict in a second-degree rape conviction in a case because Thompson thought some key testimony in the case was false.