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Gilliard defeats Middleton to win Democratic runoff

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BY ROBERT BEHRE
 The Post and Courier

Charleston City Councilman Wendell Gilliard cruised past Iraq war veteran Clay Middleton by a 5-4 ratio Tuesday to win the Democratic runoff for the District 111 state House seat.

Gilliard won about 56 percent of the vote, according to the unofficial results, and that virtually guarantees he will succeed retiring Rep. Floyd Breeland. No Republican filed for the seat.

Gilliard greeted supporters Tuesday night inside Huger's restaurant on Upper King Street and chalked up his success to his experience in the public eye, first as a union leader and then as a councilman. "I plan to make myself visible in 111," he said. "I don't plan to go up there (to Columbia) and get lost, by no means."

Middleton called Gilliard to congratulate him. Middleton said he also talked with his boss, U.S. Rep. and House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, who noted that he also lost his first bids for office.

"I'm not going to let this define the rest of my life," Middleton said. "Folks would ask, 'Clay, what happened?' Well, we just didn't get enough votes. We'll regroup and go back to work first thing in the morning and go back to what we have been doing: serving people."

Middleton, 26, was backed by Clyburn and Breeland, but that wasn't enough to counter a councilman who has held office since 1998.

Gilliard, 53, noted his accomplishments included shutting down an adult bookstore next to the Maryville neighborhood in West Ashley, improving the pay of city workers and starting Project Cool Breeze, which distributes air conditioners to low-income families.

Both candidates vowed to help improve public education and assist senior citizens. One thing they disagreed about was whether to debate. Middleton criticized Gilliard for ducking a debate invitation from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, but Gilliard said voters would rather he go door to door.

Tuesday's outcome was similar to the results in the three-way June 10 primary, in which Gilliard won 46 percent of the vote compared with 38 percent for Middleton. Former Charleston City Councilman Maurice Washington received 16 percent in that contest, not enough to make the runoff.

The candidates spent much of the day trying to turn out their supporters, and the 13 percent turnout was about two-thirds as many who went to the polls on June 10. Gilliard said he will continue to serve on City Council through the end of the year, and a special election will be held to fill his District 6 council seat early next year.

Reach Robert Behre at 937-5771 or at rbehre@postandcourier.com.

House District 111

Wendell G. Gilliard 1,190

Clay N. Middleton 923

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