

Montgomery, Md. Officials Trade Barbs

Equipment Delays, Insufficient Testing Added to Poll Woes

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A week after Montgomery County's voting system broke down, top election officials acknowledged yesterday that they have no way of communicating quickly with many of the county's 238 polling places in an emergency.

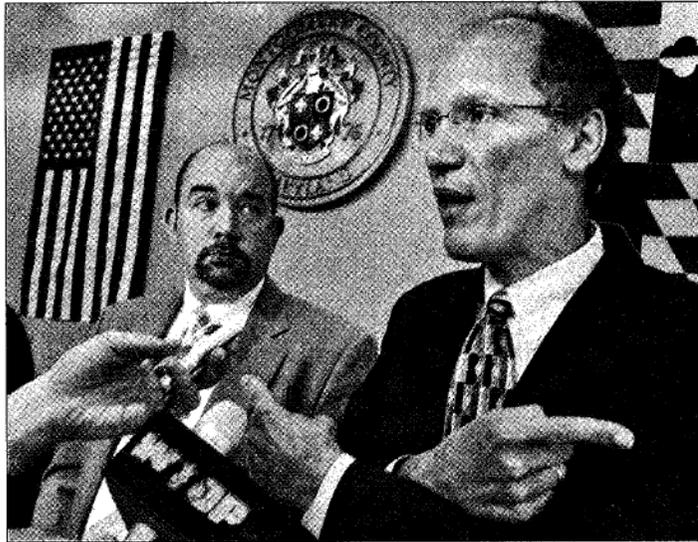
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But they blamed the state for adding to local mistakes with a flood of last-minute changes and delays before the primary elections.

"We made the error, but our directions and what the state provided us was late, later and later," said Nancy Dacek, the county Board of Elections president. "It is impossible to get entirely ready for any election if you don't have the machines until two weeks before the election or three days before the election."

State Board of Elections administrator Linda H. Lamone defended her office in an interview yesterday, saying any delays were caused by legal and bureaucratic factors beyond her control. "We were not simply sitting around here waiting or doing nothing," she said.

And County Council members, who summoned Dacek to a hearing to explain how



BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

County Council member Tom Perez accused election officials of finger-pointing yesterday. Council President George L. Leventhal, left, has also criticized officials' handling of primary voting.

county officials bungled last Tuesday's election, expressed anger at what they called finger-pointing.

"We continue to have a situation where the county blames the state, the state blames the county and the victims are the voters," said council member Tom Perez (D-Silver Spring), his face reddening with frustration.

He spoke after the council hearing, called to investigate how election officials forgot to include plastic cards needed to operate electronic voting machines in packets sent to each polling place. Dacek and election director Margaret Jurgensen spoke briefly before

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County Council Hearing Highlights Problems at the Polls

leaving to spend the first of several days counting from 10,000 to 12,000 provisional paper ballots.

At the election board's headquarters in Rockville, officials crowded together in a room to inspect stacks of ballots by hand. As officials counted, candidates and campaign workers sat on folding chairs and watched.

Donna Edwards, whose race against U.S. Rep. Albert R. Wynn (D-Md.) could hinge on ballots in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, said the counting seemed to be going smoothly and fairly. Still, she said, the scene reminded her of the 2000 presidential election debacle in Florida.

"It's really frightening that here we are in 2006, and we've yet to get to the point where we have an elections process that we can have confidence in," she said.

By day's end yesterday, 937 ballots had been counted. Officials said that was not enough to determine the outcome of the undecided races.

In Prince George's County, criticism of technological glitches and human bumbling mounted yesterday as election officials began counting about 4,500 provisional ballots.

Voting was delayed last week in Montgomery after election officials failed to supply polling places with ATM-like cards needed to work the electronic machines. Because election officials lacked a system for delivering the cards quickly to polling

places, voters had to cast provisional ballots. When precincts ran out of the paper ballots, voters at some sites were told to come back later.

When a Circuit Court judge allowed the polls to remain open an additional hour, county election officials had no quick way to alert the precinct judges of the development.

After the council meeting, Jurgensen said the county has outfitted 171 precincts with phone lines. Most of the polling places that don't have dedicated lines are at private facilities, such as churches and synagogues.

In 2002, the county allocated cellphones to election judges, but she said that many election judges didn't know how to use them and that many cellphones didn't get reception in the precincts.

Over the weekend, Lamone demanded that Jurgensen detail by tomorrow what went wrong and submit a plan to avoid similar problems in November. Jurgensen responded yesterday that the "failure of [Lamone's] vision partly contributed to this."

Plans and policies for the election are typically set in place 30 to 45 days before an election, Jurgensen said. The weeks leading up to the election are largely for testing equipment and fine-tuning plans. But this time, local boards were inundated with new directives from the state that "impacted our ability to stay focused," she said.

The training manuals for the county's 3,400 election judges "arrived piecemeal"

from the state, in some cases as late as August. Lamone said the final chapters were delayed while the state office awaited a court ruling on the status of early voting.

Electronic poll books, which replaced the voting rolls that election judges use to check in voters, did not arrive until Aug. 14, Jurgensen said. Cables and other equipment needed to operate them didn't arrive until the week before the primaries.

Without time to test the poll books, county officials could not prepare election judges for potential problems. When the electronic devices crashed, many judges didn't know what to do, Jurgensen said.

Lamone said the poll books were delayed because their order could not be placed until the Board of Public Works signed off on the state contract.

After the primary voting chaos, County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) and Council President George L. Leventhal (D-At Large) called for the ouster of Dacek and Jurgensen, but Dacek opened her remarks yesterday by reiterating the three-member board's backing of Jurgensen.

She reminded the council that the board is in the process of hiring the Election Center, a nonprofit Texas organization of state election officials, to review its procedures before the November general election.

Council member Howard A. Denis (R-Potomac) questioned the ability of the Election Center to do an independent investigation, and critics said the group was allied with election officials and voting machine makers, such as Diebold Election

Systems, which supplied Maryland's machines.

Marjorie Roher, a spokeswoman for the local board, said that the consulting arm of the Election Center is "not affiliated with Diebold in any way" and that the study would review management — not equipment.

As election officials counted provisional ballots in neighboring Prince George's, state Senate candidate Bobby G. Henry, a lawyer and minister, filed a formal petition to the county's Board of Elections requesting a recount in his race against County Council member Douglas J.J. Peters (D-Bowie). The two were competing to fill a seat opened by the retirement of state Sen. Leo E. Green (D). Henry said if the petition is refused, he will consider filing a legal challenge.

Votes tallied last week showed Henry trailing Peters by more than 500 votes, about 3.8 percent. But a spokeswoman for Henry said various voting irregularities, including polls opening late and machines malfunctioning, could have affected the outcome.

Robert G. McGinley, the Prince George's Board of Elections attorney, said election workers would spend yesterday and today counting provisional ballots. All other questions, he said, could be examined only after workers finish counting paper ballots.

Staff writers Rosalind S. Helderman and Martin Weil contributed to this report.