

What Went Wrong?

Almanac
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BY MARY VAUSE
THE ALMANAC

A human error within the Montgomery County Board of Elections caused voting in the primary election to begin late at all 238 precincts across the county, in some cases disenfranchising morning commuters who were unable to return to the polls later in the day.

Montgomery County executive Doug Duncan (D) sent a letter to Gov. Robert Ehrlich (R) calling for the removal of Nancy Dacek, chief of the Montgomery County Board of Elections, and for the firing of election director Margaret Jurgensen.

Council president George Leventhal has

also called on both women to resign.

THE MISTAKES by the Board of Elections have angered politicians, a few still waiting on tallies of provisional vote counts to determine the final outcome in their primaries.

In the House of Delegates Democratic primary in district 16, challenger Regina "Reggie" Oldak trailed incumbent Marilyn Goldwater by less than 2 percentage points, or about 750 votes, prior to the provisional vote count.

"I'm absolutely appalled that there were these problems," said Oldak. "I think we need to pay a lot of attention to this whole system before the general [election]. We

Board of Elections officials emphasize state problems during Council testimony.

need to have a full investigation to make sure this doesn't happen again." District 16 includes Bethesda and parts of Potomac.

Close races in a problem-filled election

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Volunteer at the Polls

Democrats interested in volunteering at the polls should call 240-777-8570 or e-mail Democrats@montgomerycountymd.gov. Republicans and all others should call 240-777-8575 or e-mail Republicans@montgomerycountymd.gov.

Available volunteer positions include check-in judges, who greet and identify voters; and chief judges, who oversee the entire operation.

Emergency Plan Lacking

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raise the specter of lawsuits, though Oldak said she would not pursue legal action.

"I will accept whatever results we get once the provisional ballots are counted, and I am supporting whoever wins on the Democratic ticket for every race," she said.

Del. Brian Feldman (D-15) is an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University who teaches state politics. He said that the voting troubles demonstrate the need for a paper trail for the general election, and he wants the responsible party at the Board of Elections to be fired.

"In the mission and role and function of the Board of Elections, there is no other more important job than to get it right on election day, and that clearly didn't happen. Someone needs to be held accountable and probably lose their job. Who that is I'm not prepared to say until I see more of the facts."

Councilmember Howie Denis (R-1) called the voting debacle "a black eye for Montgomery County." After cataloguing the Board's errors on primary election day, such as forgetting to distribute voter cards and not having enough provisional ballots, Denis added his voice to the call for Dacek and Jurgensen's resignations.

"There needs to a house cleaning at the election board in a hurry to make sure we don't have the problems we experienced," he said. "I was an election observer in a foreign country, and I think the elections I witnessed in Nepal and Ukraine were better run than our elections in Montgomery County last week."

just resolve our own issues here in the county."

In her opening remarks, Dacek said that the Election Center in Houston, Tex., which headquarters the National Association of Election Officials, will conduct an audit of the Montgomery County Board of Elections.

"Very definitely we as all of you were stunned and upset by what happened. ... But the basic issue here was human error," said Dacek, a former County Councilmember who represented district 2 as a Republican for three terms until losing re-election to Councilmember Mike Knapp in 2002. "We regret that, but it was human error, and that error will never happen again. You may be sure of that." Dacek's district included Potomac for 10 years before the 2000 redistricting.

DACEK SAID that the Board's focus before the November election will be to create a more comprehensive emergency management plan that allows immediate communication with all 238 precincts. She also cited the need for a distribution system to deliver materials to all precincts as quickly as possible in case of emergency.

"We always have plan A and plan B, but we don't have an emergency management plan that includes something as catastrophic" as what happened on the primary election, she said.

Dacek also pointed to problems at the state level that further complicated voting in the primary election.

"We're not blaming anybody — we made the error," she said. "But our directions and what the state provided us was late, later and later. It's entirely impossible to get

COUNCILMEMBER Marilyn Praisner (D-4), who chairs the management and fiscal policy committee, convened a meeting on Monday morning to bring Dacek and Jurgensen before the Council.

"I thought it was important to hear from them what went wrong on Tuesday and what they have identified as remedies we can put in place so we can all be assured that on Tuesday, Nov. 7, we will have a reliable, accurate and fair election," she said at the opening of the briefing.

The meeting began at 9 a.m. and ended promptly thirty minutes later so that Dacek and Jurgensen could return to their offices by 10 a.m. to oversee the counting of the 10,000-12,000 provisional ballots that were cast amid voting problems on the morning of the primary election.

Since their testimony lasted for most of the 30-minute briefing, the Board of Elections officials were able to avoid a question and answer session from the Councilmembers.

Denis said that he found Dacek and Jurgensen's testimony "unhelpful." He said they should have stayed longer to field questions.

"We've given the election board everything they asked for, and ... all of those [problems] were foreseeable," said Denis. "I saw a lot of finger pointing to the state. I think we've got to get away from that and

ready for any election when you don't have the machines until two weeks before the election, or three days before the election."

Jurgensen said that the Board "had to plan for four elections" because of last-minute changes regarding the early voting law being struck down, as well as a new electronic system for listing registered voters. She added that the training manual for election judges arrived late from the state and that voting machines arrived too late to train election volunteers effectively. The Board of Elections did not receive the new electronic poll books and printers from the state until late in August, she said.

"To train 3,000 election judges, you need to have that material in hand when the trainers are being prepared to train in June," said Jurgensen. "We received the materials in later June and July ... and that was because we insisted that we receive the manuals."

Prior to the Nov. 7 election, the Board of Elections needs to recruit additional judges and poll volunteers, locate space to train them in, obtain additional software in order to print sample ballots, work out kinks in the electronic poll books, and coordinate with the state for more timely delivery of election materials.

The management and fiscal policy committee will meet one or two more times for progress updates before the November elec-