

March 9, 2005

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ELECTIONS IN WASHINGTON ARE FAIR, OPEN AND TRANSPARENT

In our role as the Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap County Auditors we have had many of the same experiences and issues as were experienced in King County when we conducted the November 2004 General Election, including the subsequent machine and hand recount. Much of the rhetoric that has been launched King County's way has been driven by those interested in a particular political outcome as opposed to a rational assessment of the processes and procedures in place and in use in all counties in the state of Washington.

In order to fully understand what has been written on the state of elections in Washington, and to separate fact from fiction it is important to know how elections are carried out in context of who, what, where and when.

The context is this: U.S. citizens have the right to register to vote if they are 18 years or older and not denied their rights as a result of a felony conviction. As you know, voters must sign an oath declaring these facts. Voter registrations must be taken on face value, i.e., no election official is authorized to do background checks on voters. Voter registrations are a moving target and must be constantly updated to reflect if a person moves, changes their name, has a signature change, if a person dies, or commits a felony. A voter's signature is the key identifier for each voter. Voter Registration data bases are constantly being updated with current voter information gleaned from various sources, including the voter.

It is important to assess how we as elections administrators did our job during this election cycle based on the laws, rules and regulations and administrative procedures in place at the time as opposed to how we might want those same procedures and processes to be administered today. It is clear that we also learned where the process has some shortcomings or lacks clarity. It is our intention to work with the Secretary of State's Office and the state legislature and all other interested parties to address those issues and make improvements wherever we can with the resources and tools available to do so.

Much has been made about the process for duplicating and/or enhancing optical scan ballots. The fact of the matter is there were, and still are, Washington Administrative Code Rules in place issued by the Secretary of State's Office that outline under what circumstances a ballot can be enhanced or duplicated. The current rules give the option to the election officials, so it is possible to have one county decide to enhance a ballot and another to decide to duplicate that same type of ballot, and as long as the guidelines are followed for when and how each procedure is implemented, both counties are right.

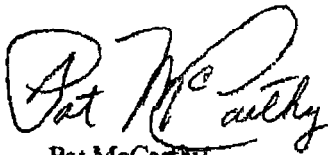
Now, after the fact, to argue that no ballots should have been enhanced is wrong and irrelevant as long as the procedures and rules for enhancing ballots were followed. The same analysis applies to the issue of felons voting. The process in place may well be flawed, but all elections officials followed that process. Unfortunately that has lead to the fact that some convicted felons have registered to vote and in fact voted. That happened in each of our counties, not because we failed in our duty, but because the systems are not yet in place to give us the ability to know at all times whether or not a person registered to vote is a convicted felon.

Finally, to hold the elections process accountable to an audit process that is irrelevant to the issue of valid ballots being cast by eligible voters is a clear case of Monday morning quarterbacking. The intense scrutiny and audit processes that ensure that only eligible voters are voting absentee or provisional ballots or that there are ballots at the polling places in the ballot boxes equal to the number of persons who signed in the poll books is not the same during the administrative act of providing a notation in the voter registration system that a voter voted at a particular election. One is critical to ensuring the integrity of the election while the giving of credit for voting process is for pure administrative post election purposes, totally unrelated to the legitimacy or eligibility of a voter to cast a ballot in any particular election.

Because of the high level of scrutiny directed King County's way regarding this election a review of the recently concluded general election and machine and hand recount in the Governor's race was conducted. That report is entitled "King County 2004 Elections Report". It identifies in great detail and openness the areas that went well and the areas that need improvement. We have all read that report and the conclusions reached in the report about what went well and what needs improvement apply equally to each of us as well. However, it is important to note that in the report there are many references to observations made by party observers, attorneys in their legal briefs and judges in their rulings from the bench in the various legal challenges during this recount process, that are all consistent in their acknowledgement of the openness, fairness, and transparency of the process as carried out by King County. As fellow elections officials in the central Puget Sound area we strongly agree with those assessments.

Where do we go from here?

This election has identified areas in need of improvement, not because the processes and procedures in place failed, but because the election for Governor was the closest election for any Governor any where in the history of Governor elections in the whole country. So, the appropriate response is to work with the interested parties, the legislature, the Secretary of State, the media and the voters to make the process better. That is exactly what we are doing. The three of us, as well as the Director of Records, Elections and Licensing Services in King County, are committed to improving the elections and voter registration systems in the state of Washington. It is our goal to accomplish this by working in partnership with the political parties, the state legislature, the county legislative bodies, the media, each other and the citizens and voters of our counties. Together we will make elections and voter registration processes and procedures the best they can be so that Washington will continue to be seen as a leader in the country of open, fair and transparent elections.



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