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Cascading errors shake voter confidence

By David Postman

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King County's elections director conceded yesterday that major mistakes in the count of the governor's race have made voters suspicious and likely weakened some of what he's tried to do since coming in after the division's last poor showing.

"I do think that this situation has shaken voter confidence in King County," Dean Logan said in an interview. "And that's disheartening to me because I think that not just myself, but organizationally, we've just worked extremely hard to rebuild that level of trust.

"I just feel awful about that situation."

Logan has been at the center of controversy through the count in the race between Republican Gov. Elect Dino Rossi and Democrat Christine Gregoire.

It's the closest race in state history and counting problems, legal disputes and human errors in King County get special attention because it is the largest county and a Democratic stronghold that has consistently been a rich vein of votes for Gregoire.

Angry Rossi supporters have filled the airwaves of talk radio and e-mailed reporters with comparisons between Seattle and the corruption of the Richard J. Daley regime in Chicago in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, or the current problems in Ukraine.

Yesterday, the county canvassing board voted to allow signature verification on 573 ballots that officials said had been improperly rejected. The problem was discovered Sunday, when King County Council Chairman Larry Phillips saw his name on the list of disqualified ballots.

On the heels of that embarrassment, county election workers Tuesday found 22 ballots left sitting in counting machines. Because of the potential for those ballots to help Gregoire, Republicans were quick to pounce and escalate the rhetoric.

Monday, state party Chairman Chris Vance said of the 573 ballots: "It's either gross incompetence or vote fraud." Tuesday, he upped that to: "There is no way to tell if they are colossally incompetent or totally corrupt."

Vance has offered no evidence of corruption or made any specific allegations of fraud.

Logan said the rhetoric alone has an effect on public perceptions: "Those things contribute, just as making the error does, to breaking down people's trust and confidence in the process."

Logan, a Democrat overseeing elections in a predominantly Democratic county, has nevertheless been attacked and defended by both parties during the race.

In the days after the Nov. 2 election, Gregoire advisers complained that King County was too slow in counting, with media consultant Frank Greer saying there should be an investigation.

The Democratic Party sued Logan and the election division shortly after the election for refusing to release a list of names of people whose ballots were disqualified. The party won that suit and was able to find more votes for Gregoire.

Logan also was named in the Democrats' suit to the state Supreme Court, dismissed this week, where the party alleged he and other auditors chose "expediency over accuracy and equality" in counting votes in the governor's race.

Attorneys for Rossi and the Republican Party were on the same side as Logan's attorney in the Supreme Court case.

Republicans defended Logan, with Vance often citing Logan's position that a hand recount was not as accurate as the completed machine recount.

Now that an error in Logan's division might boost Gregoire, Republicans attacked him for incompetence and worse.

Gregoire spokesman Morton Brilliant counseled against shouting fraud at the discovery of errors, saying, "We're human beings. We make mistakes and what's important is that the mistakes be corrected."

King County Executive Ron Sims fully supports Logan, said Sims spokeswoman Carolyn Duncan.

Some enthusiastic backers of Logan share his worry, though, that recent problems are eroding public confidence in the county's system for counting votes.

"We've got egg all over our face here," said AJ Culver. He's the Republican former mayor of Issaquah who served as chairman of a bipartisan commission that reviewed problems in the county election division after problems in the 2002 election. King County hired Logan late last year to fix the problems and rebuild the department.

"The rest of the country laughed at Florida, we all saw pictures of people holding up punch cards in the air and they said, 'Well, what do you expect about Florida? They've got more flimflam men and bunco groups than other place in the United States.'

"Then you come to the Northwest, where everything is always good, and here we've got this screwed up election. It's just terrible."

Culver said he has not lost confidence in the county election system. "But," he said, "with dozens and dozens of people I talk to, confidence has dropped big time."

Secretary of State Sam Reed, Logan's former boss and still a fan, defended King County in recent weeks. But yesterday he said he was deeply concerned about what he termed serious problems.

"I think unfortunately it reflects the fact that this is a county that has had some real problems with its election operations for years," Reed said. "The problems in King County aren't problems of lack of good policy or lack of guidelines. It's a problem with execution."

Yesterday, Reed watched the King County Canvassing Board deal with hundreds of questioned ballots. He was joined by two members of the United States Election Assistance Commission, Paul DeGregorio and Ray Martinez.

The commission was created after the controversy of the 2000 presidential-election count in Florida and serves as a clearinghouse of information and guidance for elections.

DeGregorio, a former local election official in Missouri who has observed elections around the world, said some mistakes are inevitable, particularly in close elections.

"But even if it's an honest mistake, as people might call it, it does undermine the system," DeGregorio said. "It does call into question what is going on in this process."

The good news, he said, is that close elections make the public more aware of the system, and that can lead to improvements, as it did after 2000.

The embattled Logan hopes that admitting the errors and trying to fix the problem, even at this late date, will help calm voters' fears.

"It is more important that the errors get corrected than we save face," he said.

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