

Loser turns winner in constable recount

Other Stone County outcomes stand

Problems with vote tallies in the May 20 primary in Stone County led to a recount that changed the outcome of one local race, officials said Tuesday.

The Stone County Election Commission conducted the recount Friday after determining that dozens of electronic ballots in two precincts and 15 paper ballots in another precinct were not counted on election night, commission Chairman Robert Turner said.

The recount changed the results in the constable's race in Richwoods Township, making Bill Hammon the winner over Afton Fletcher. The new count shows Hammon with 52 votes and Fletcher with 45 votes.

Unofficial returns on election night had Fletcher ahead by two votes, 23-21.

Turner said election workers closing out voting machines in two precincts on election night didn't record the electronically cast ballots on master disks used to tabulate results countywide. The information was stored on different disks by mistake, he said.

Stone County Clerk Donna Wilson said the vote count was delayed on election night because an election worker paid by the commission to operate vote-tabulating software didn't arrive until 8:20 p.m., nearly an hour after the polls closed.

"And it took her awhile to set up her equipment," said Wilson, who declined to name the worker.

The county clerk said the delay "was very frustrating" and might have contributed to the failure to recognize problems.

Turner said the worker Wilson referred to is his daughter, Debra Van Evera.

But Turner said his daughter wasn't late for work on election night, didn't delay the vote count and couldn't have caught the tabulation errors.

"She started to work in there at 8:20. It

wouldn't have made a whole lot of difference if she came in at 7:30 or 8:30."

Wilson said a candidate for justice of the peace was the first to tell her on election night that the partial vote total didn't jibe with the corresponding precinct-by-precinct tallies.

Turner said the electronic ballot error is "fairly common" with the voting system used in Arkansas. The commission plans to attempt to avoid similar problems in the future by verifying electronic vote counts against paper printouts from each voting machine.

As for the 15 missing paper ballots, the box containing the ballots ended up in a storage room for election equipment near the clerk's office, he said.

Turner, who has led the election commission for 17 years, said he was much more disturbed by the misplaced ballot box than about the electronic ballot error.

"To say the least, it was embarrassing," he said.

The overall recount didn't change the winners in the other races on the ballot in Stone County.

Complete and official returns showed 1,358 ballots were cast countywide. The erroneous total on election night was 1,291 votes.

Here are corrected results for the other races in Stone County:

JUSTICE OF THE PEACE

District 2

| | |
|---------------------|-----|
| Larry Gammill | 159 |
| Glen Anderson | 141 |

District 5

| | |
|-----------------------|-----|
| Michael Stewart | 111 |
| Joey Sutton..... | 70 |

District 9

| | |
|--------------------------|----|
| Truman Bullard | 85 |
| Ricky Shuttleworth | 33 |
| Rick Hodges..... | 49 |

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I edited this story on the rim and wrote the headline and deck during my second week at the Democrat-Gazette.

Originally, instead of saying "dozens of electronic ballots" in the second paragraph, it included a specific number. However, when you ran the math in the second-to-last paragraph, those numbers didn't add up. Because the election commission didn't have any more specific numbers, the state desk editor decided to go with "dozens of."

My first night at the paper was also the state's primary and non-partisan general election, so I had to jump right into editing a heavy dose of local copy.