Broward recheck finds about 200 untallied votes

BY ERIKA BOLSTAD
ebolstad@herald.com

Broward County election workers double-checking the machines used in Tuesday's primary found an estimated 200 votes that weren't counted Tuesday.

Of those votes, election workers said 137 were cast by voters in the 32X precinct in Pembroke Pines, where Supervisor of Elections Miriam Oliphant personally delivered the needed equipment to start the touch-screen machines around 11 a.m. Tuesday.

The precinct was among 247 that Janet Reno's gubernatorial campaign had asked the county to review either because turnout was unexpectedly low or because no votes were recorded. It's unclear how many of the "found" votes in Broward will be tallied for Reno.

Broward election officials refused to be more specific about the number of precincts reviewed or the number of votes discovered. They said they won't release that information until Tuesday, when they will retabulate all results for the county's three-member canvassing board.

"We won't release any data or any information until the process they're going through is complete," said Rick Riley, a spokesman for Oliphant.

CHECKING TAPES

The process is not likely to finish until today. Broward officials found the additional votes when they checked for irregularities while reviewing close-out tapes for all 769 precincts.

Election workers checked the tapes for the number of machines that were closed out at each polling place. If that number didn't match the number of machines delivered to the precinct or they noticed other irregularities, election workers flagged the precinct for additional scrutiny.

The process flagged more than 10 percent of the county's precincts for further review, said Bruce Eldridge, assistant supervisor of technical services.

"The problem in Miami really caused us to look deeper into this," Eldridge said.

WRONG CARTRIDGE
Election workers then retrieved the plastic shoe box-size containers that hold the cartridges used in the questionable precincts. In many cases, they found that poll workers failed to use a master cartridge to start the machines in the morning and shut them down at night.

Instead, workers used the "slave" cartridges which were to be used to activate machines for individual voters.

In those cases where the wrong cartridge was used to shut down machines and tally the final vote, votes had to be retrieved from the hard drives of the machines they were cast on.

All but a handful of those machines were retrieved Saturday and Sunday. Some machines were unavailable because they were locked up in schools and other polling places.

Typically, election equipment isn't picked up immediately after the election. The touch-screen machines are stored in hard plastic cases until they're retrieved by a trucking company the county hires to pick up the equipment.

Election officials would not say how many Broward precincts were reviewed over the weekend or how many machines had to be retrieved from polling places.

Unlike in Miami-Dade -- where election officials were forthcoming about the votes they retrieved throughout the day -- Broward's review process was largely secretive.

Oliphant's deputy supervisor, former Miami city clerk Walter Foeman, would answer few questions. Her spokesman, Riley, did not appear at the warehouse, either.

**INFORMATION SCARCE**

The only information came when reporters pressed workers as they left the main counting room in the warehouse. Workers were equally tight-lipped with monitors from Bill McBride's campaign and the state Republican Party.

On Sunday, some election workers were sent home midafternoon, but about 15 remained until they shut down for the evening at 5:30 p.m. No one is being paid overtime, one employee said. Instead, they are expected to take compensatory time after the election for the long hours they've put in the past several weeks.

"Too many hands, too many jobs, all the same job," said one worker, throwing up her hands in frustration as she walked through the warehouse Sunday afternoon. "I've been in this organization 15 years, and I've never seen such a fiasco."

Although Oliphant's employees toiled over the weekend, the embattled elections supervisor never visited the warehouse where about 24 people -- including her top lieutenants -- worked Saturday and Sunday.

Herald Capital Bureau chief Peter Wallsten contributed to this report.