

Dorf may seek city council vote recount

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By Neal Ross

In what may be the closest election in Sonoma County history, Sonoma voters have elected incumbents Al Mazza and Larry Barnett, and challenger Ken Brown, to fill three vacant City Council seats -- with one vote apiece separating Barnett, Brown and defeated incumbent Dick Dorf.

But Dorf said yesterday that in light of the "virtual tie" between the bottom three contenders, "The reality is, I'm considering a recount."

Reading from a written statement, Dorf said he was "immensely and eternally grateful" to those who voted for him, and "grateful to the other candidates for ... a fair and thoughtful election."

Citing a responsibility toward his supporters to make sure the results are accurate, as well as "to all the citizens that this election not be needlessly prolonged ... as the candidate, I must decide a course of action with the interests of all in mind," he said.

Asked if he was leaning more toward one or another course of action, Dorf said he needed to sleep on the matter.

"I always feel that a decision is better made overnight ... I think some clarity will emerge (Tuesday)," he said. "My supporters are urging me to talk to the county clerk, and determine the steps they've taken. I have to weigh all that ... (but) all my supporters say it's my call, so I'm taking it as my call."

The final vote tallies, released Friday by the county Registrar of Voters, are as follows: Mazza, 2,092 (20.8 percent); Barnett, 2,024 (20.1 percent); Brown, 2,023 (20.1 percent); Dorf, 2,022 (20.1 percent).

Challengers Wylie Hartman and Sam DiGiacomo respectively received 1,246 and 572 votes (12.4 and 5.7 percent). Sonoma Valley High senior Joe Chretien, an official write-in candidate, netted only 69 votes.

"It's not the first one-vote race in this county, but to the best of my knowledge, this is the first time we've had three candidates (involved)," assistant registrar Janice Atkinson said Friday morning. "That was part of the reason we took so long on the canvass. We've actually looked at every single card, and separated out all of the cards and made sure they were clean."

Though only required by law to hand-tally one precinct, Atkinson said election workers -- on their own initiative -- also hand-tallied all of the 1,512 absentee ballots as well as re-counting all ballots three times by machine.

According to County Clerk Eeve Lewis, the deadline by which a candidate or any registered voter can file for a recount is five days after the election's certification, which in this case means 5 p.m. tomorrow -- with the process beginning within the following seven days.

The request must be filed in writing and include a deposit -- paid for by the requesting party, not by public funds -- covering the estimated costs for the first day's work, which Lewis figured to be a maximum of \$641.57 if counted by machine or \$714 if by hand -- with a subsequent \$612 daily charge for the latter.

Ballots would be recounted by polling place workers from the area in question, and would take a half-day by machine or "a couple of days" by hand, Lewis said.

If the result changes, the party involved gets his money back and the election is re-certified with the new totals. If the numbers change but the result doesn't -- "No certification, no refund," Lewis said.

Initial returns had Mazza in first place and Brown in second, with Dorf trailing by five votes and Barnett behind Dorf by 20. Brown -- whose first council bid in 1996 ended with a 153-vote defeat -- said Friday that the results were well worth his 17-day, pins-and-needles wait.

"Absolutely," Brown said, laughing. "With four exclamation points ... I let out a tremendous whoop in the office, and called my wife and my mother ... It reaffirms that every vote counts, and 'it's not over until it's over.' "

But, he added yesterday, "Dick certainly has the right to ask for a recount ... It's completely and totally understandable."

Barnett echoed Brown's statements Friday, saying, "Now everybody in town can say, 'It was me -- it was my vote that put him over the top.'" But he said Monday that, in terms of Dorf's recount decision, "It's his prerogative. I think if I were in his place, I wouldn't, considering the tension that attended the long wait for results."

Mazza, while expressing his own astonishment at the one-vote separation, tentatively agreed. "Since Dick is number four, it's up to him. And if he feels comfortable with the count, that's fine; if not, he probably should go ahead with (a recount). ... A lot of people put a lot of effort into his campaign."