

More votes to be counted

Natalie Jacewicz, For The Salinas Californian 12:47 p.m. PST November 4, 2015



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In one of the lowest voter turnouts in recent Monterey County history, three local elections remain tied and won't be decided until next week, officials said Wednesday.

In Salinas, the race for one of the seats on the Salinas Union High School District Board of Trustees remains tied between Incumbent Carlos Rubio and challenger John Fickas in Trustee Area 1 (north Salinas).

Tuesday's election attracted 11,163 voters or 11.88 percent of the 93,961 voters eligible to vote in 14 school board, three special district and two city tax measure elections. The turnout is the lowest on record for the past several local elections which ranged from 21 percent to 30 percent since 2009.

Though candidates and their supporters gathered Tuesday night with baited breath to monitor vote tallies, the ballots are still trickling in. The stream will continue for the rest of the week, with results to be announced Monday after 5 p.m.

"We have 7,150 ballots left to count," said Gina Martinez, assistant registrar for Monterey County Elections Department. That number will likely change, she said, thanks to a recent law that counts mail-in ballots postmarked by November 3, so long as they are received by Friday.

The department has not yet divided those 7,150 votes by precinct, so the impact may vary from one race to the next. Sorting the ballots only begins the time-consuming process of counting votes, according to Martinez.

"There's a whole process that must be followed to comply with law in order to even open those vote-by-mail ballots," she said.

The department scans the sorted ballots and check signatures against those in their system. They also verify voter information for each ballot. Then counters open and extract the ballot and begin tabulating.

In addition to mail-in ballots, provisional ballots pile on the heap of votes to be verified. If poll workers cannot determine a voter's eligibility at the polling station, the voter fills out a provisional ballot. Later, the election department investigates the person's eligibility to ensure the vote can be counted. Mail-in voters who lose their mail-in ballots and instead vote in person fall into this category.

These final counts carry important implications for tied races, like that between Rubio and Fickas, who each received 447 votes in Trustee Area 1. Ron Eastwood and Cathy McDougall are also tied, each winning 66 votes in Spreckels Community Services District. Eastwood also tied with Jill Kramm, who received 58 votes in Sprekels Memorial District.

County Registrar Claudio Valenzuela said that he's seen a couple of initial ties before, but he doubts that ties will continue as ballots continue to be counted.

"I've been here 15 years, and I don't remember any ties at the end," he said.

If exact draws do occur on Monday, runoffs may follow, or candidates may resolve the tie "by lot" — with a flip of a coin or drawing straws.

Martinez suggested that the new tallies could affect more than just tied races.

"Numbers change all the time, and it just depends where these votes are coming from and who put them in."

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