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House Speaker: Recount gives Curtis victory by 20 votes

Election: Utah House speaker, two other candidates have their triumphs confirmed

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Formidable House Speaker Greg Curtis may be weaker, but he's still a winner.

Election officials needed just two hours Wednesday to complete a recount in three photo-finish races. And the victors are - the same. Unlike Salt Lake County's election canvass - during which some vote tallies careened wildly, reversing the outcome in two contests - Wednesday's recount offered little intrigue.

Curtis even picked up a vote in District 49 as the Republican speaker bested Democratic challenger Jay Seegmiller by 20 votes, not 19. In House District 45, the result remained exactly the same with GOP incumbent Mark Walker edging Democrat Laura Black by 18 votes. And, in the nonpartisan Jordan School Board No. 6 race, Tracy Cowdell topped incumbent Lynette Phillips. Cowdell gained a vote during the recount, winning by a total of 13.

Curtis survived, but his effectiveness may be impacted a bit, according to Kirk Jowers, director of the University of Utah's Hinckley Institute of Politics, who cites discontent over the speaker's push for a Sandy soccer stadium as the reason for the near-upset.

"He will have to focus a little more attention to his home district," Jowers said. "But with [future] redistricting . . . he'll make sure his district is protected a little better."

Still, Jowers notes, Curtis' mandate from fellow House members is unlikely to take a hit.

"The bottom line is he won. Like the [BYU] Cougars, it doesn't matter how it happens as long as you get the W."

With a computerized recount, Curtis didn't expect the outcome to change. Still, he is glad that the process is over.

"It has been a long election cycle," he said. "It is nice to have it finalized."

Curtis said Republicans did a poor job of promoting the increases in education funding they have provided during the past few years.

"From now on, I will make sure the accurate and truthful message comes out," he said, adding he will make more of an effort to talk to people in his Sandy district.

Seegmiller says that was his goal - to keep Curtis on his toes and in touch with his constituents.

"Anybody would be disappointed coming this close," he said. "But I ran the race I wanted to run. Maybe in two years we'll have a round three."

Each loser had requested a formal recount, which commenced Wednesday morning and was completed in about two hours.

All the ballots from new touch-screen voting machines mirrored the Election Night count, noted Jason Yocom, chief deputy clerk for Salt Lake County.

The small changes, he explained, occurred with the optical-scan paper ballots. Two ballots that may have been run through a reader simultaneously Nov. 7, for instance, would have been counted separately this time, Yocom said.

"That's how you can account for the one-vote swings."

The other possibility: As employees ran the paper ballots the second time, a machine may have listed an error, prompting the worker to accept or reject the ballot. That, Yocom said, also may have accounted for the slight variance.

An audit of the recount will begin today and wrap up by Friday at the latest. On Tuesday, the County Council will convene as the board of canvassers to recertify the tally.

Walker attributes his tight race to national disenchantment with Republicans and the efforts of Utah Democrats to get their supporters to the polls.

"It is nice to have it over with," Walker said. "I'm just happy to be the winner on this one."

He considers himself a moderate Republican who fits his swing Sandy-Midvale district, but Walker said the nail-biter election has taught him one thing.

"What I probably need to do is reach out a little bit more," he said.

Utah Democratic Party Chairman Wayne Holland cites the close contests as proof Sandy is changing - becoming a more fertile demographic for Democrats.

"Sandy is ready for some change and ready for some diversity," said Holland, noting the contests wouldn't have been close four years ago.

"Some of the comments I heard in Sandy. . . . The Republican leadership is about as popular as a root canal."

Ultimately, it was the Democrats who felt the pain of defeat.

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