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Software firm takes blame for election-night glitches in Palm Beach County

By Sally Appgar
South Florida Sun-Sentinel
Posted March 16 2007

West Palm Beach – For the first 36 hours after being told that he had lost the mayor's race, Al Zucaro sorted through election results, rumors of inconsistencies and even a few random conspiracy theories.

But in the end, he concluded: "The election results are accurate, and I lost fair and square."

Early Thursday afternoon, Zucaro called Mayor Lois Frankel to congratulate her.

"We had a friendly talk. We're putting the campaign and the acrimony behind us," Frankel said in a light and breezy voice that had dulled in the final days of what she called a "brutal" campaign.

On election night, the results were not so clear.

The same Palm Beach County office of elections that brought America the botched 2000 presidential election with its "torn" and "hanging" paper chads, on Tuesday bungled results on its \$241,000 Web site. Supervisor of Elections Arthur Anderson, who was hired to fix the mess with elections, said it was not his staff's fault but rather the error of SOE Software of Tampa, which created the software that operates the Web site.

SOE Chief Executive Officer Mark Fratello took full blame for the electronic foul-up election night, citing "human error" rather than a problem with his fledgling company's software.

For Zucaro and his supporters, the digital flub meant he savored about 10 minutes toasting victory over Frankel with 58 percent of the vote to her 41 percent before being declared the loser by the same ratio.

On election night, Frankel set up her victory party at Roxy's nightclub, a block up Clematis Street from Zucaro's party at Noble's, a sprawling neighborhood bar. Once the questionable returns came in, reporters spent the rest of the night tromping between the two camps as they warred over results.

Finally conceding that the numbers were accurate, Zucaro said: "Why is it that we can't get through a simple election without the incredible level of incompetence that has been demonstrated over and over again?"

While Anderson takes the heat for election night and Zucaro returns to being an immigration attorney, Frankel has her eye on goals for the next four years.

Thursday, she said that many projects in store for the city "have been on the table for a while and we are just implementing them now."

Foremost, there is City Center, a \$154 million project to build a new City Hall, library, photographic center and parking garage on a blighted block of Clematis Street downtown.

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