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Md. Voters' Choices Reflect Immigration Concerns

Errors Are Reported at the Rockville Polls

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Gaithersburg voters elected three new council members Tuesday, two of whom have expressed concerns about a day laborer center and one who ran on a platform more sympathetic to city's immigration population.

Cathy C. Drzyzgula, a member of the city's day laborer task force, and Jud Ashman, a schools activist, won seats on the five-member council, as did Ryan Spiegel, a lawyer backed by One Gaithersburg, a coalition including labor groups and the liberal advocacy group Progressive Maryland.

In Rockville, where Election Day was marred by election machine glitches, City Council member Susan Hoffman won the mayor's race by a wide margin, defeating activists Mark Pierzchala and Drew Powell. In the City Council races, incumbents Phyllis Marcuccio and Anne M. Robbins won reelection while Bob Dorsey lost his seat. Newcomers John Britton and Piotr "Peter" Gajewski won spots on the four-member council.

In Bowie, Mayor G. Frederick Robinson easily won another term and three incumbent council members held onto their seats, while District 2 council member Kevin M. Conroy lost his reelection bid. New members are Geraldine Valentino-Smith in an at-large seat, Diane M. Polangin in District 2 and Isaac C. Truth in District 4.

Returns from College Park showed Patrick L. Wojahn and Jonathan Molinatto winning open seats in District 1, while the three-way race in District 2 remained too close to call. Three incumbents, Stephanie Stulich in District 3 and Mary C. Cook and Karen E. Hampton in District 4, won uncontested races, and newcomer Mark Cook took the second District 3 seat. Mayor Stephen A. Brayman faced no opposition.

In Greenbelt, voters reelected five City Council members: Judith F. Davis, Rodney M. Roberts, Konrad E. Herling, Edward V.J. Putens and Leta M. Mach.

Takoma Park had only one competitive race, an open seat won by Dan Robinson in Ward 3. Incumbents Colleen Clay, Terry Seamans, Reuben Snipper and Doug Barry will return to the council, along with a new member from Ward 1, Josh Wright. Bruce R. Williams ran uncontested for mayor.

Rockville's voting was complicated by a glitch. Thousands of residents who had not yet voted were mistakenly listed as having already cast absentee ballots because of a state database problem. Elections officials said most people had no trouble casting ballots on touch-screen machines, but the database error that affected some raised concerns among candidates about residents voting more than once. Voters who told poll workers that they had not cast absentee ballots were allowed to vote on the machines, and election officials said they would check to make sure there was no double voting.

The State Board of Elections, which prepares the voter database, took the blame for the problem, which affected about 11 percent of Rockville's 29,000 registered voters.

"It was our mistake, and we'll review our procedures to make sure this type of mistake doesn't happen again," said Ross Goldstein, deputy administrator for the State Board of Elections.

The confusion at polling places revived memories of widespread problems that marred the September 2006 primary. In that

election, human error and technical glitches led to long lines and some voters being turned away from polls throughout Montgomery County.

The Rockville race for mayor this year was particularly hotly contested, as three candidates competed to replace three-term Mayor Larry Giammo.

"Here we go again," Powell said of the voting problems. "A lot of people have been working very hard in this election, and to have people's votes not count or be counted twice is unacceptable."

City Clerk Claire Funkhouser, who administers Rockville's elections, said the problem was discovered within minutes after the polls opened at 7 a.m., and election judges were instructed to use a backup voting system. In a few cases, she said, voters en route to work may have opted not to wait.

The state's list inadvertently marked as absentee the names of voters with a home address that begins with the number 5. Election judges kept track of those who showed up to vote in handwritten lists. And to ensure that voters only cast one ballot, election officials said they planned to compare the list to the names of those who actually cast absentee ballots.

"If someone were to take advantage of the system and vote twice, we will have a record of that, and there will be an investigation," Funkhouser said. "We're trying to make sure that that doesn't occur, but the onus is on the voter to vote legally."

Eleven candidates ran for four at-large seats on the Rockville City Council. Many residents considered the race one of the city's most divisive in recent memory. Giammo urged voters to oust the incumbents, in part because he and Hoffmann had battled with them over the city's trash pickup schedule.

In the Bowie election, mayoral candidate D. Michael Lyles, a council member and Defense Department lawyer, questioned posting Bowie police officers at the polls. Lyles mounted an aggressive challenge to Robinson, raising more than twice as much as the retired Prince George's police officer for his run. But Robinson won resoundingly.

Lyles was originally opposed to creating the town police department, while Robinson supported it. Though Lyles said he now favors making the department as strong as possible, he alleged that the police presence at polls served as a campaign poster for the incumbent, likening it to having a "PR campaign" greeting residents.

Robinson dismissed the allegation as "Election Day stuff," noting he played no role in deciding to deploy the force. Bowie City Clerk Pamela A. Fleming said city police attend all major events.

In Gaithersburg, seven candidates battled for three seats on the five-member council, in an election that touched on the emotional immigration debate. For three years, Gaithersburg was roiled by controversy over where to place a day labor center. Ultimately, Montgomery County stepped in and opened the center just outside the city boundaries.

The One Gaithersburg coalition endorsed three candidates for council who said they wanted to make the council reflect the city's growing diversity. Those candidates were Ahmed Ali, a U.S. Navy veteran born in Bangladesh; Carlos Solis, a 20-year resident originally from Ecuador; and Spiegel, a lawyer who has run for delegate.

The candidates also received support from Montgomery County Executive Isiah Leggett (D). Meanwhile, longtime Mayor Sidney A. Katz, who was not up for election, endorsed Spiegel, Ashman, a schools activist, and Drzyzgula. Also in the race were Shawn Ali and Wilson Lee Faris.

In Greenbelt, seven candidates competed for five at-large spots on the City Council. The council selects the mayor and mayor pro tem, positions that traditionally have gone to the top two vote-getters.

In the city's District 2, Stacey S. Baca, a stay-at-home mother, challenged incumbents Robert T. Catlin and John E. Perry for one of two open seats on the City Council. The vote count was so close that city officials will wait to count absentee ballots before declaring a winner.

Staff writers Hamil R. Harris, Steve Hendrix and Michael Tunison contributed to this report.

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