



PRESS-REGISTER

Questions arise about Washington County absentee ballots

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Staff Reporters

CHATOM -- Fifty-seven absentee ballots were sent to a Washington County woman's mobile home and a nearby restaurant, according to Probate Court records, raising questions about the ballots' validity in Tuesday's runoff election.

Retiring Sheriff William Wheat, whose office was in charge of distributing the election's absentee ballots, said he was not concerned that 28 ballots were sent to Billie Barnes' mobile home and another 29 to Billie Burger Cafe, both of which displayed signs Tuesday supporting one of the sheriff candidates.

"It don't raise no suspicions to me," Wheat said.

However, both candidates in the sheriff's race, as well as a lawyer with the Alabama secretary of state's office, said Tuesday that they found it suspicious that so many ballots were sent to two addresses.

"Sure it (looks suspicious)," said Mike Barnett, the candidate for sheriff whose signs were on Barnes' property. Barnett added: "There's more than one race on the ticket."

Barnett, McIntosh's police chief, lost Tuesday's election to Richard Stringer, a retired Chatom police officer. Wheat, who is retiring after three decades, hadn't publicly endorsed either Democratic candidate.

Adam Bourne, elections lawyer for the Alabama secretary of state's office, said absentee ballots can only be sent to a person's primary address or where a person regularly receives mail. It is not legal to have the ballots sent anywhere else, he said.

A restaurant receiving one absentee ballot might raise suspicions, Bourne said, let alone a restaurant receiving 29 ballots. If there was any fraud with the absentee ballots, it could result in imprisonment of one to two years and a fine of \$500-\$2,000, he said.

Of the 57 ballots sent to trailer and restaurant on Barnes Reed Road, 27 of the voters showed up in the Board of Registrars records under addresses elsewhere in the county.

No one answered the door Tuesday at Billie Burger Cafe or the home of Billie Barnes. In the restaurant's window and in Barnes' front yard were signs supporting Barnett's bid for sheriff.

Neighbors and Stringer said Barnes owns the restaurant as well as the mobile home.

Barnett said he was unaware of the unusual ballot situation, but he hopes it is looked into thoroughly.

"We'll have to wait until the election is done, and then we'll sit down and figure out what happened," Barnett said. "We'll see if there are problems, we'll see if there are any issues, we'll get everything taken care of fairly."

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Stringer said he is disappointed in the county for not taking the issue more seriously.

"We're trying to get crooked politics out of Washington County," he said.

Barnett sat inside the sheriff's office as he waited to hear election results. Stringer listened to the results pumped out of an public address system while sitting in an alleyway across the street.

Though Stringer won the election, according to unofficial results, Barnett actually led the absentee vote 260 to 144.

After questions by the Press-Register, Wheat said he will have the district attorney look into the ballot mailings, but he said he still didn't find it suspicious.

"But y'all do, so..." Wheat said.

Members of the sheriff's office were put in charge of the absentee ballots in Washington County by the probate judge because the probate judge's office itself was up for election Tuesday.

In that race, Charles Singleton squeaked out a narrow victory over incumbent Probate Judge John Henry Armstrong.

Hilton Robbins defeated Nick Giles for the District 4 County Commission seat. Clatis Becton defeated Lonnie R. Guy for the Board of Education District 5 seat.

In Choctaw County, James Lovette, a former chief deputy won a decisive victory over Lee Henry McGrew, ending what had started as a six-way race set off when Sheriff Don Lolley announced his decision to retire.

Sharon Shepherd defeated Vernon Underwood for the at-large Board of Education seat.

In Conecuh County, incumbent Sheriff Tracy Hawsey was narrowly defeated by former Sheriff Edwin Booker. Meanwhile, incumbent Circuit Clerk George Hendrix lost to challenger David Jackson.

None of the Democratic runoff candidates in Choctaw, Conecuh and Washington counties will face Republican opposition in November's general election.

(Staff Reporters Roy Hoffman and Eddie Curran contributed to this report.)

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