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El Dorado, Placer board hopefuls forced into November runoffs

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Candidates for supervisor seats in El Dorado and Placer counties took a breather Wednesday to savor primary victories before resuming their race for election in November.

"This is not a sprint, it's a marathon," said John Knight, who emerged from Tuesday's election in a near dead heat with Harry Norris. They'll square off in a Nov. 4 runoff.

Norris, with 28.5 percent of the vote, led Knight by about half a percentage point in a four-way race for the District 1 seat, representing portions of El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park.

Norris serves on the El Dorado Irrigation District board, and Knight on the El Dorado Hills Fire District board and county Planning Commission.

Ray Nutting of Somerset came close to regaining the District 2 seat he held for eight years before being retired by term limits in 2000. He got nearly 47 percent of the vote, but that was short of the majority required to avoid a runoff.

Barbara Smiley of Shingle Springs, community volunteer coordinator for Marshall Medical Center, came in second with about 15 percent. But she led Shingle Springs resident Sam Teresi, a retired marketing representative for heavy-equipment firms, by just 84 votes, less than one percentage point.

With more than 6,000 absentee and about 450 provisional ballots still to be counted, Teresi said he still hopes to earn second place.

Norma Gray, the county's assistant registrar of voters, said the final tally probably won't be available for two weeks.

In Placer County, Jennifer Montgomery of Soda Springs forced incumbent Supervisor Bruce Kranz of Colfax into a runoff by gathering 41 percent of the vote. Kranz had 37 percent.

Another challenger, Robert Houston of Meadow Vista, had 22 percent, leaving the two runoff candidates seeking his endorsement for the Nov. 4 election. Houston said Wednesday both candidates had called him and he plans to meet with them.

"But it's too soon to even say whether I will endorse anyone or not," he said.

Kranz, noting that Houston is a fellow Republican, said his own campaign suffered because Houston split the Republican vote.

Montgomery, a Democrat, said she hopes to get Houston's supporters because she and Houston ran on similar issues.

The two challengers cited concerns over potential growth up the Interstate 80 corridor from Auburn to Lake Tahoe, and Kranz's history of accepting campaign contributions from developers.

Supervisory candidates often spend more than a year campaigning in primary and runoff elections.

Unlike many City Council races, in which the top vote-getter wins, the nonpartisan Board of Supervisor contests in California require a 50-percent-plus-one majority to avoid a runoff.

Darren Chesin, chief consultant to the state Senate Elections, Reapportionment and Constitutional Amendment Committee, said he didn't know the genesis of the majority requirement.

But Chesin said he prefers it to giving the victory to the person who receives the most votes.

In races decided by a plurality, he said, "Someone wins who most of the voters didn't want."

A plurality system also tends to favor the incumbent, he said.

An alternative to a runoff election is the instant runoff, in which voters indicate their first, second and third choices. The candidate who comes in last is eliminated and his or her votes are redistributed, until one candidate receives a majority.

Chesin said instant runoffs currently are allowed only in charter cities and counties.

With El Dorado County Supervisors Rusty Dupray and Helen Baumann unable to seek re-election because of term limits, the District 1 and 2 primaries drew a diverse group of candidates.

The four District 1 candidates were all well-known in the community. Former Supervisor Bob Dorr came in a close third with nearly 25 percent, followed by businesswoman Shiva Frentzen with 18 percent.

In District 2, Nutting outpolled five first-time candidates.

Nutting narrowly lost to Baumann in 2004. In the district that stretches across the south part of the county from El Dorado Hills to Kirkwood and Twin Bridges, he received strong support from the agricultural community.

Smiley acknowledged she has a ways to go to overcome Nutting. She said she will continue to stress community involvement in charting the county's future rather than leaving it to developers and outside interests.

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