

TESTIMONY: TO THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA CITY COUNCIL
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS AND THE ENVIRONMENT,
CHAIRPERSON, COUNCIL MEMBER MARY CHEH
RE: DC BOARD OF ELECTIONS AND ETHICS (BOEE)
FROM: SALLY MACDONALD,
SECRETARY, THE FEDERATION OF CITIZENS ASSOCIATIONS
REPRESENTING THE FEDERATION
9 MARCH 2010

My name is Sally MacDonald. As its Secretary, I am here on behalf of the Federation of Citizens' Associations, which on March 5 celebrated its 100th anniversary.

On Election Night, 2008, I was part of an invited group, from respected volunteer organizations, to observe the vote-count at the DC Board of Elections and Ethics. With that experience, I have three strong recommendations about OBSERVERS, THE PROCESS, and PARTICIPATION.

1. OBSERVERS MUST BE ALLOWED TO WATCH AND VERIFY THE COUNTING PROCESS.

In other countries, vote-counts are not valid without community observers. 2008 was the first time the BOEE agreed to have two Election Night observers each, from groups such as the NAACP, ABA, Trial Lawyers Association, two Federations (of Citizens Associations and of Civic Associations), DC Watch, etc. When we invited observers arrived, the BOEE refused entry, and kept us on the ground floor, surrounded by Police. In a DC public relations disaster, our police-cordoned group included, by chance, members of the local, national and international Press, political party watchers, and visiting officials from Great Britain; we all shared our concerns about BOEE's operations and intentions. Eventually, after pressure, some were released to see the vote-count.

The BOEE should welcome such community observers, who should have a background briefing, access to see the counting floor, and a staff member available for questions. (Our background briefing was from local reporters, inside our Police "compound".)

As a now-experienced observer, I stand ready to serve again, if needed.

2. THE VOTE-COUNT PROCESS MUST BE WELL-PLANNED, ORGANIZED AND IMPLEMENTED; PROPER BALLOTS SHOULD BE ISSUED; VOTERS SHOULD BE VERIFIED; ALL VOTES SHOULD BE COUNTED ON ELECTION NIGHT.

These are obvious statements, but we saw and heard the contrary.

Too much extra staff crowded in for the vote-count, with little work-space left. While some staff worked well, others were chatting, laughing, sharing dinners and elaborate home-made cakes, and leaving work undone. Example: a room was filled, floor to ceiling, with big empty cardboard ballot boxes; the ballots were left outside, in wide-open vinyl-like carrying cases, lining the floor of a hallway the length of the building, while the staff socialized...sitting on the empty boxes.

At Midnight, with the national count finished, DC's was still unannounced. Obviously, better planning is needed, with precise organization, staff training, rehearsals, and attention to staffing numbers, logistics and sequential movement of people, boxes and ballots.

"Event-planners" in Washington consider these factors for social and charity events; The DC vote-count rates the same attention to detail as a charity event.

We have heard testimony that some ANC ballots were either not given at all, or given to the wrong voters.

Concerns have also been expressed about lack of cross-checking of absentee voters, who could then re-appear on Election Day to vote a second time.

In addition, absentee voters, with their special effort to vote, likely have no idea that their votes - including those sitting in the BOEE office - are not counted until ten days after the election. Absentee votes, as all votes in the BOEE's hands, should be counted on Election Night. Why vote at all, if not to be a part of the election decision?

3. THE BOEE CHAIRMAN AND BOARD MEMBERS SHOULD PARTICIPATE FULLY IN DC'S VOTE-COUNT ON ELECTION NIGHT.

Again, an obvious statement, that we saw not to be true.

We were told that the Board sequesters themselves in the locked Boardroom, with food, drinks and TV, to watch the NATIONAL vote-count. What we observed would support that. They were not seen circulating or observing the DC vote-count, nor seen making any efforts to organize any staff work. They were not with us to see the open cases of ballots along the outer hallway floor.

I was told that even you had trouble finding the Board, around Midnight, after concerns of no DC count. I was told that by the journalist who led you - followed by agitated staff - to seek out that locked back Boardroom door.

Should not Election Night be a busy working time for the Board of Elections? Is not the DC vote-count a crucial part of their duty?

We can only ask, if not compel, the Board to come out of the Boardroom on Election Night.

DC residents expect anyone appointed by the Mayor to the Board to have the experience, background, ability, energy and interest to be able to plan, organize, monitor, implement, and work to improve our vital election process!

We citizens were there, past Midnight, actively observing the vote-count; one should expect the Board to do the same.

Thank you for the opportunity of appearing today.

Thank you, Council Member Cheh and your staff, for your dedication to improving DC's Election processes, from registration to the counting of the votes.

Sally MacDonald
Secretary, Federation of Citizens' Associations
202-797-8467