

Three-fourths of voting machines to be used again on Nov. 2

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — Despite the distribution of more than \$1.3 billion to 42 states to correct faulty voting machines and make other improvements for next month's presidential election, approximately 75 percent of voters will use the same machines they used four years ago, a development that worries the chairman of the federal commission overseeing balloting changes.

"In one sense, by Washington standards, we have moved rather quickly when we talk about the things we've done," says DeForest B. Soaries, Jr., chairman of the bipartisan Election Assistance Commission. "But [given] people's expectations — and, more importantly, the need to guarantee fair elections — I think we probably have moved more slowly than need demands... I don't think enough of that has happened this year."

Soaries, a Black Republican, was appointed to the post last year by President Bush. He says, "It's been a very challenging start up. I'm proud of the things that we've accomplished this year. But this year was '04. And I think people's expectations were

that more things would happen, since the last election was four years ago."

The four-member Election Assistance Commission (EAC) was created by the Help America Vote Act, passed two years ago by Congress. The commission's responsibility is to oversee the distribution of the \$3 billion allocated for new voting machines and election improvements as well as establish federal standards for voting machines.

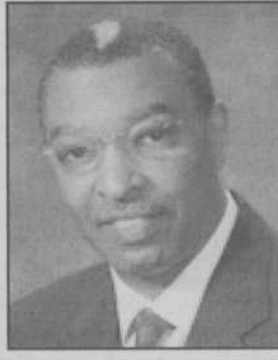
Selecting and confirming the commissioners went so slowly that most states didn't receive their funds until this year. And standards for new voting machines won't be in place until 2005, says Soaries, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Somerset, N.J.

The law required that a bipartisan commission be established. The Democratic and Republican leaders in the House and Senate were to submit names to the White House for President Bush to make appointments. "And they just didn't do it in a timely fashion. Neither side. They were both slow," Soaries says.

After being appointed, the nominees underwent FBI background checks that took four months. By that time, it

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was late spring of 2003, delaying the confirmations until after the summer recess.

"It created some problems," says Soaries. "The law assumed in '02 that our commission would be in place within six months. But by April 2003, the commission was still not in place. "[We] did not start our work until January of '04," he says.

Some money was distributed to the states in 2003 by the General Services Administration. But the bulk of the \$1.3 billion was distributed over the past four months — too late for most states to replace or alter their voting equipment. More than \$1 billion remains unspent by the commission. The total allocation was \$3 billion for 2003 and 2004 fiscal budgets. Congress has not allocated any funds for 2005 because previously allocated funds have

yet to be spent.

Alaska, Arizona, New York, Oklahoma, Illinois, Hawaii, South Dakota and Utah are the only states that have not received funding. Commission officials say that's because the states have not applied or failed to prove they need the federal funds.

In addition to purchasing equipment, the funds can go toward poll-worker training, voter education or other activities designed to enhance the voting process.

For example, Florida has gotten rid of its controversial punch card ballots that caused problems during the 2000 recount.

Even the new machines may create problems.

"What it means is that 25 percent of the country will

vote on brand new equipment, equipment that they've never seen before," Soaries explains. "The challenge there, of course, is to make sure that these people in these districts are familiar with the equipment before Election Day to assure that they don't walk in for the first time and see a machine that is so different or so confusing that it hinders their right to vote."

Florida, Nevada and Georgia have allowed the public to practice on their machines.

"I don't think we can do enough to make sure that people aren't shocked when they come to the polling place in November and see — for the first time — equipment that confuses them," Soaries says. "The 75 percent who will vote on the same machines, we want to make sure they don't have some of the problems that they had in 2000. We've sent a document to every election official in the country giving them examples of how to get it right."

Although more than a million ballots are believed to have been lost in the 2000 Election, it is still unknown whether one machine works better than another.

"No one ever collected that data," Soaries says. "For the first time in history, we will, on Election Day, collect data about what's happening with voting equipment. How often does any particular type of machine break down? Where do we have problems and how many who use that type of equipment have problems?"

Soaries says the commission will also be counting the number of people who vote, which is also something that he says has never been done before. He says state election directors will be asking local election officials to give them the numbers of everyone who votes on Nov. 2.

"Counting will indicate if something is wrong," he says. "If certain neighborhoods had significantly lower numbers voting for president than for the senate, that gives you some sense that there's something further that needs to be investigated. You can look for fraud, you can look for glitches in equipment, you can look for intimidation, you can look for any number of things. But if you don't have the data, then you don't even know to look."

Jakes

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Raisin in the Sun' didn't become what it was because we had jokesters on stage. I think that to be able to see opportunities for our actors, to explore the full range of emotions again without having to be stand-up comedians, is going to be exciting and refreshing. I'm very proud of it, to be honest with you. I'm amazed at how people from all walks of life seem to get it. They seem to understand why we did the film, and how important and how powerful it is. It has provoked amazing conversations."

KW: I found the film to be such a breath of fresh air after insulting blaxploitation flicks like "Soul Plane" and "The Cookout."

BJ: "Ours is a compelling story, a provocative story, and it doesn't have to survive off of cheap jokes where we make fun of ourselves in a satirical way."

KW: How did you adapt the story to the screen?

BJ: "Reuben Cannon [the producer] and I worked on it together. I think the whole perspective of the story and the intensity of the characters are a result of my years of counseling. The quality of actors that we were able to cast, and the wisdom of submitting it to a film festival rather than going straight to video was his expertise. And then, since winning the festival, it's gained momentum."

KW: Not bad for an independent film that wasn't even planning a theatrical release.

BJ: "It may not have had a major budget, but it has a major story, advocating for the silent voices of children who are abused,

even far beyond the African-American community. It's addressing a human issue."

KW: How did you enjoy acting?

BJ: "This was really my first time acting, so I found it a bit intimidating. I loved it. It was so different from what I normally do, but I don't think I'm going to give up my day job."

KW: How was it working with Kimberly Elise? This looks like the breakout role that will get her the recognition she deserves.

BJ: "This was her first chance to be in a lead role. She's very deserving. She's got chops. You almost have to be in a room with Kimberly to see how incredible she is. To me, it was just amazing to see her turn into Michelle. She can turn on emotion of any intensity necessary, at will. She was so much like an abuse victim, that I didn't really feel like I was acting."

KW: What do you think of the comparisons being made between this film and "Dead Man Walking"?

BJ: "Wow, I haven't thought of that before. I don't know how to compare the two. I can say that I've been on Death Row and literally counseled people waiting to be executed. For me, again, art is imitating life."

KW: And do you think it's an accurate representation of life?

BJ: "Absolutely. What I love most about the film is that it doesn't give gratuitous, cookie-cutter solutions, where everybody sings, claps their hands, and everything's OK, because we're generally working with people who are more complicated than that. Healing is a process.

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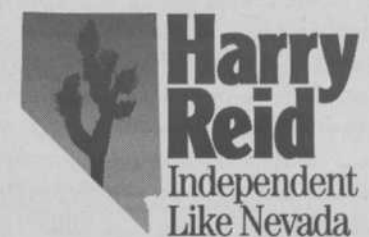
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