

Election Aftermath // Madeira Beach left to mend some rifts

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MADEIRA BEACH - One mayoral candidate sent out last-minute letters implying past wrongdoings by his opponent. The opposition claimed the accuser drank heavily.

Many observers called the race leading to Tuesday's election the dirtiest campaign this quiet beach city of about 5,000 has seen in years. But the name-calling and accusations spurred voter interest enough to create the largest election turnout in city history.

When the final votes were tallied late Tuesday night, 1,356 of the city's 2,678 registered voters had cast ballots and had given Hugh Lamont a 30-vote victory over Miller Newton in the mayor's race.

Now that the dust has settled, both sides agree that Lamont will face a difficult job of smoothing ruffled feathers.

"I think it will definitely be difficult for me, but I think we'll have to mend the fence and get back to doing the work we were elected to do," Lamont said. "I will assure the people, including those that did not vote for me, that I will work very hard to reunite this city and make it a better place to live."

It will not be easy.

When Lamont takes office April 5, he will preside over a commission that includes two incumbent commissioners - Arnold Alloway and Warren Sturgis - who supported Newton.

Part of the rift stems from a letter sent out by Lamont shortly before election day. It included newspaper articles about Newton's tenures as director of Straight Inc., a controversial drug-abuse program, and as Pasco County Circuit Court Clerk. The articles described a lawsuit filed by a man who claims he was held captive by Straight Inc. It also included an account about Newton's problems paying campaign bills.

Newton could not be contacted Wednesday. However, Sturgis said he still believes the mail-out was dirty politics.

"I just didn't care for the way he (Lamont) conducted his campaigning. It was very underhanded," Sturgis said.

Newton's supporters denounced the letter as a "smear campaign."

"I think it was really unfortunate that those on the other side chose to run a campaign based on personalities rather than the issues," said Paula McCormick, treasurer of a group that formed to support the incumbents.

The race had no incumbent because longtime mayor J. Kenneth Jacobsen decided not to run again.

Now that the elections are over, some observers believe tempers will cool.

"I think as soon as the emotions of the minute pass by, the city will get back to business as usual," said Larry Coleman, vice president of the Madeira Beach Taxpayers and Civic Association. "I think Hugh Lamont will be a steadying influence and make a good mayor."

Some anger was evident Tuesday night after the election results had been tallied.

"I feel sorry for this city," one disgruntled woman at City Hall said Tuesday night. "Wait until he starts conducting the meetings drunk."

Lamont said there had been several false allegations during the campaign that he drank heavily. ``They'd been telling people I was in an alcoholic treatment place, and I've never been near one,`` he said.

The hot political issue - the city's controversial purchase last year of a \$650,000 parcel in John's Pass Village - helped bring voters to the polls, but it had little impact upon the election results.

Incumbent commissioners Alloway and Sturgis, who were members of the board that voted for the purchase of the Gulf Beach-Seminole Board of Realtors property, defeated challengers Paul T. O'Connor and Alan R. DiSesa.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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