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# New Fulton elections chief vows to improve process

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Barry Garner has his work cut out for him.

As Fulton County's new elections chief, Garner knows the enduring image from last fall's historic presidential election was the county's election staff huddled in a warehouse for a week after the vote poring over absentee and provisional ballots.

He knows Fulton's long and well-earned reputation for always being last to count its votes no matter the election or how many votes need to be counted. And, the reputation of Fulton's squabbling elections board is legendary.

"We are not going to be the laughingstock of the election community anymore," Garner said. "I guarantee you that. We will turn this thing round."

When Garner, 41, began his new job three weeks ago, he became Fulton's first elections chief in 30 months. Garner was chosen only after a half dozen earlier candidates either rejected the job or failed to work out for various reasons.

His own hiring as Fulton elections chief was so controversial among the elections board that one board member yelled "I'll break your neck" at another during debate over his selection. Video of the brouhaha ended up on Youtube.com.

The board has two members appointed by the Republican Party, matched by two appointed Democrats. The fifth member is selected by the commission chairman, who is also a Democrat. The set up can lead to some serious conflict.

"He's going to have his challenges with all that partisan bickering," said Commissioner Bill Edwards. "This north/south, Democrat/Republican thing is going to take us all to the grave."

Garner said he had no intention of joining the partisan arguments. He said he planned simply to organize and administer elections and leave the politics to the politicians. Garner said he'd carry out whatever directive a majority of the board agree to.

Even without that, Garner's still going to have plenty of challenges ahead.

The department's recent election performance has been so shabby that it has suffered through a series of charges before the Secretary of State's Office. The issues have covered everything from handling of ballots to administering elections.

Secretary of State Karen Handel, a former Fulton commission chairman, said she's eager to see the Fulton elections fix the issues that have plagued it for years.

"There's obviously going to be a challenge for (Garner)," Handel said. "We want to ensure they make progress so that everything can go smoothly in November."

After more than two weeks in his new job, Garner said he'd run a couple of mock elections and was beginning to understand how to improve performance here. He said Fulton would need to upgrade technology and he'd be making a recommendation for new equipment later this year.

For instance, he noted Fulton has more than 650,000 registered voters and 350 polling sites where votes are tabulated by computers but only four locations to get all those numbers entered in the system. That, he said, causes a huge logjam and delays counting.

And, he's got the benefit of a restart on the elections board, which recently welcomed two new Republicans and one new Democrat.

Chair Rod Edmond, a lawyer, said the change has breathed new air into the organization.

"Everybody is on an upbeat," Edmond said. "We are of a mindset of identifying the problems and addressing them. Everybody is looking forward to working together."

Fulton does have precedent for Garner to follow. The county's library system suffered through years of turmoil and infighting, which culminated in a \$25 million discrimination judgment against management.

Eventually, the board was revamped through legislation and a new director, John Szabo, brought in. Ever since the system has stopped generating headlines. In fact last year voters approved the largest library bond in state history at \$275 million.

Garner relocated his wife and two young children from Miami, where he'd served as deputy election superintendent for two years, to Alpharetta to take the job in Fulton. He said he'd researched all of the issues before accepting the job.

But, just in case, he's renting, not buying just yet.