

Jay Fant wins by mere 2 votes in District 15 recount, proof as mantra goes, that 'your vote counts'

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Jay Fant, with wife Lauren and their children showed up at his campaign headquarters in Ortega a little after 10 p.m. to address his waiting supporters. Jay Fant and Paul Renner were in a tight primary race for the Republican District 15 Florida House of Representatives seat Tuesday evening, August 26, 2014 as election results were tabulated. Fant won the election after a recount.

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In the Fant-Renner race, the canvassing board is examining 143 ballots. The canvassing board is comprised of Duval County Supervisor of Elections Jerry Holland (pictured standing), City Councilman Doyle Carter, and Duval County Judge Ron Higbee.

When the dust settled Friday on the political drama of an all-day election recount, the result of the cliffhanger race between Jay Fant and Paul Renner boiled down to this.

In a primary election that most people sat out, Fant won because two more people voted for him than Renner among those who did make their voices known at the ballot box.

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Fant emerged victorious with 5,962 votes in the Florida House District 15 contest. Renner finished agonizingly close with 5,960 votes, the closest local election that Duval County Supervisor of Elections Jerry Holland could remember.

If that didn't drive home the meaning of the mantra that every vote counts, there also was a neck-and-neck contest for the Duval County School Board District 2.

After a recount in that race, Sam Hall finished a mere four votes ahead of Theresa Graham. He therefore finished second in the multi-candidate field and will move on to a runoff election against Scott Shine, the top vote-getter.

Fant won the Republican Party nomination for House District 15, which covers Jacksonville's Westside. No Democrats filed for the seat, so Fant will be the favorite to win in November against two write-in candidates.

"This is without a doubt the closest race I've ever been in," said Fant campaign spokesman Brett Doster, who joined dozens of others who watched the recount Friday at Election Central.

"I hope to never go through it again, but it's a reminder that every vote counts, and for people who did get out of their offices and homes to cast votes, this will be a reminder for them to do it again in the future."

Fant had a three-vote lead in the first round of vote-counting, and the results remained the same after a machine recount of ballots Friday morning.

Because the race was so close, Florida election law required the Duval County Election Canvassing Board to then eyeball 143 ballots that didn't register a vote for either candidate during the machine count.

It's typical for voters to skip some races on their ballots, but the visual inspection is aimed at catching cases where voters marked their choices without filling in the oval-shaped bubbles next to candidates' names.

During Friday's recount, when the canvassing board came across a ballot on which a voter wrote "X" near candidate names, the room of spectators snapped to attention.

Lawyers representing both campaigns jumped from their seats and read portions of Florida statutes like pastors reciting Scripture. The canvassing board — Holland, City Councilman Doyle Carter, and Duval County Judge Ron Higbee — decided the voter intended his "X" to be a vote for Renner, which narrowed Fant's lead to two votes.

That ended up being the margin of victory.

"We're very excited to win with a two-vote landslide today," a relieved Doster told reporters after the vote total was finalized.

In the Duval County School Board race, Hall finished with 2,449 votes and Graham had 2,445 votes. Hall picked up one additional vote during the machine recount of ballots.

Neither Fant nor Renner — who were making their first runs for political office — watched the recount in person.

"I want to congratulate Jay Fant on winning a hard-fought campaign and wish him every success in the state Legislature," Renner said in a statement issued after the recount finished.

He added, "Having grown up in Jacksonville and spent years in public service, both as a Naval officer and a criminal prosecutor, I will continue to look for opportunities to serve our great community."

Fant issued a statement extending his "full and heartfelt congratulations to Paul Renner for a race well-fought. This was a tough race in which we agreed more than we disagreed, and I want to continue to work with Paul on the priorities that we share, which include the well-being of Florida's economy and resistance to so much of the Obama agenda."

Holland said he's doubtful the closeness of the race will motivate voters to get to the polls in future elections. Primary elections always have lower voter turnout.

"Unfortunately, normally only candidates remember the close races," Holland said, noting he still has painful memories of his first campaign when he lost a City Council race by 46 votes.

"You'll never forget those," he said, "and what you could have done and the things you wish you had done."

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