

Contra Costa supervisors DA selection would be first African-American, woman in office history

By NATE GARTRELL | ngartrell@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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MARTINEZ — Three months after the Contra Costa District Attorney resigned in disgrace, supervisors have selected his replacement: retired Superior Court Judge Diana Becton.

Becton, when she's sworn in this coming Monday, will be both the first African-American and first woman to hold the office, in its roughly 160-year history. Becton came under fire after she admitted plagiarizing parts of her application, though she also received vocal community support, especially in Richmond, where she's been actively involved in criminal justice issues outside of her work for years.

"I'm grateful that the board of supervisors has put their trust in me, and I'm grateful to all the people who've come out to support me," Becton said after the decision. "I will work and do my best to serve the people of Contra Costa County in a way that treats everyone fairly."

She declined to comment further.

Supervisors had been seeking an interim replacement for ex-DA Mark Peterson since he resigned in June. The same day of his resignation, Peterson was charged with grand theft and 12 counts of perjury, for illegally spending \$66,000 in campaign cash on personal expenses. He pleaded no contest to perjury and was sentenced to three years probation.

A dozen applicants sought to replace him, and supervisors had narrowed the field to five: Becton, senior deputy Contra Costa district attorney Paul Graves, assistant Contra Costa district attorney Tom Kensok, supervising Santa Clara district attorney Patrick Vanier, and Judge Danielle Douglas.

The five attended several community forums where they were questioned on criminal justice reform issues.

On Tuesday, supervisors appeared split between Graves and Becton, with John Gioia and Diane Burgis voicing support for Becton and Candace Anderson and Vice Chair Karen

Mitchoff supporting Graves, who had received widespread support from police and prosecutors in the county. It all came down to Glover.

“I heard the need for change, a voice that was much different from those we’ve heard in the past,” Glover said, before indicating his support for Becton.

Becton, in her remarks before Tuesday’s vote, has spoke about bail reform, reducing recidivism, bridging gaps between law enforcement and folks in the community who are distrustful of police, and serving as an example to help minority communities feel less disenfranchised. Several community activists who work in the county’s racial justice coalition and other community-based groups have spoken on her behalf.

Deputy district attorney Aron DeFerrari — the president of the DA association that endorsed Graves — appeared dejected after the decision, and read a brief statement saying attorneys were ready to work with Becton to keep the community safe until voters decide on a permanent replacement.

Becton’s interim term is scheduled to end in 2019. But she’s up for re-election in June 2018, and she already has two opponents; Both Graves and Vanier have declared they’re running for DA next year.

Ironically, Contra Costa Sheriff David Livingston — during the public comment period of the meeting — asked supervisors point blank not to consider either Becton or Kensok, who both admitted to copying and pasting sections of their written application without attribution. Becton copied and pasted at least eight sections of other peoples’ work, including an op-ed co-authored by Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA) without attribution.

“Any applicant to the county who conducted themselves that way would be removed from the process of selection,” Livingston said. “It’s offensive to the process and it’s offensive to law enforcement.”

Livingston’s remarks were met with hisses and boos. The next speaker, a Richmond Cease Fire coordinator named Darnell Jones, turned to Livingston and said, “I’m not going to let someone who helped destroy our communities talk about one of my sisters.” His remarks were met with raucous applause.

Becton addressed her plagiarism during her statement, saying she wasn’t trying to deceive anyone into thinking the work was hers, and that she’d spoken to one of Harris’ staff members who assured her Harris didn’t mind she’d used her work. Becton admitted, though, that she should have used quotation marks.

“I own that mistake. I won’t hide from it,” Becton said. Earlier in her remarks, though, she criticized the culture of the DA’s office, saying that if you have a situation, “where people with get away with little things, it lowers the standards for everyone.”