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Thirteen more votes may be illegal

Senate Republican gets data on Dist. 29 from private eye

By Marc Perrusquia
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Days after a federal judge put up a roadblock, Senate Republicans are moving forward to void the Dist. 29 election -- armed this time with new allegations of 13 illegal votes.

Senate majority leader Ron Ramsey, R-Blountville, said Monday he's received details compiled by a private investigator on 13 people who don't live in the district but voted in the election won by Ophelia Ford.

One of the 13 is Ford's nephew.

The 13 votes being scrutinized don't include several already deemed illegal by a Senate committee, including four cast by felons and two in the name of dead voters.

Weighing voting-irregularity allegations by Republican Terry Roland, who lost to Ford, a Democrat -- by just 13 votes -- the Senate voted last month to void the election.

But before the Senate took a final vote, U.S. District Court Judge Bernice Donald ruled senators must take care not to invalidate ballots without first giving voters an opportunity to be heard.

Given that, Ramsey says he expects to hold a hearing as early as next week, when a Senate committee would consider evidence regarding the 13 voters identified by an investigator working for Roland's campaign.

"We want court-permissible evidence," Ramsey said.

That could involve getting affidavits from those voters or calling them before the committee to testify.

"If we have to subpoena them, we have to subpoena them," he said.

Ford lawyer David Cocke, however, said he doesn't think Donald's ruling would allow such a hearing without first developing uniform standards for disqualifying votes to apply to all of Tennessee's 95 counties.

"You can't just retroactively and selectively enforce residency requirements," Cocke said.

Ramsey said he was in Memphis on Friday attending the Shelby County GOP's Lincoln Day gala when attorney John Ryder handed him a binder with details on the 13 voters.

The binder includes copies of property records, vehicle registration information and notes from interviews intended to document that the 13 live outside Dist. 29.

One of the 13 is Ford's nephew, Sir Isaac Ford, 31, whose registered voting address is 12 South Parkway West -- the business address of the Ford Funeral Home. Property records show he and his father, Harold Ford Sr., bought a \$311,000 house in 2001 in East Memphis, miles outside Dist. 29.

Sir Isaac Ford answered the phone at the home Monday and told a reporter he had no comment.

Another on the list is Jennings Bernard, 53, a radio talk show host who bought a home in 1992 in Parkway Village, also miles outside Dist. 29. Bernard told The Commercial Appeal in December that his heart remains inside the district in North Memphis, where he grew up.

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