BREAKING NEWS: Montana GOP drops voter registration challenges

By MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS - Montana Republicans on Tuesday abandoned their challenge to almost 6,000 voter registrations in key Democratic counties, after election officials said they would reject thousands of the challenges as invalid.

Republicans had notified seven counties last week that they were challenging the registrations of 5,977 voters whose addresses did not match a U.S. Postal Service database. Party leaders said they were trying to guard against voter fraud.

The maneuver - just weeks before the November election - drew criticism from state and county election officials who had to investigate the claims. Nonpartisan voter rights groups said there was no proof of fraud in the state and said the GOP effort was partisan-driven.

Challenged voters could have been forced to reregister or submit an affidavit proving their current address.

In a letter sent Tuesday to election officials in seven counties, Montana Republican Party executive director Jacob Eaton said he was withdrawing the challenges and would be issuing no more. A copy of the letter was provided to the Associated Press.

“My intent was to ensure that voters are properly registered and that Montanans would have the utmost faith in the integrity of our elections process,” Eaton wrote. “Nevertheless, because of the unintended consequences that have been reported, I will not file any other elector challenges.”

Montana Democrats had sued the GOP on Monday in U.S. District Court in Missoula, claiming the effort was a thinly veiled bid to suppress votes in key Democratic districts. Party officials said whether that lawsuit would be dropped had not been decided, but said the Republican decision to abandon its effort was the right move.

“This affirms what we’ve been saying for some time, that this was a desperate attempt to take away the rights of voters,” said Democratic Party spokesman Kevin O’Brien.

Secretary of State Brad Johnson, a Republican, told county election officials on Monday not to send any letters to voters informing them of the challenges until the lawsuit was resolved. Only 255 letters informing voters in two counties had been sent.
That’s fewer than the 360 letters Johnson’s office previously reported had been sent, a figure his spokesman said was based on faulty information.

Of the remaining challenges, county election officials had rejected at least 2,300 that involved voters who had recently moved within a county and were still eligible to vote in their old district.

The GOP challenges in Montana followed similar attempts by party officials in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere in recent months to remove voters from registration rolls or block late registrations.

Craig Wilson, a political analyst at Montana State University-Billings, said the attempt in Montana backfired as Democrats capitalized on worries that legitimate voters would be denied the chance to vote.

“The amount of negative publicity this has attracted was an unintended consequence for the (Republican) party,” Wilson said, in an interview prior to the GOP’s announcement that it was ending its challenges.