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## Feds sign off on St. Louis' elections ability

By Jim Suhr

Associated Press

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ST. LOUIS (AP) -- Satisfied the city sufficiently can hold smooth elections, the federal government has lifted a consent decree that laid out steps to prevent the kind of chaos that ruled at local polls in 2000, the city said Thursday.

The U.S. Justice Department and the city's Board of Election Commissioners reached the decree in August 2002, concluding that hundreds -- perhaps thousands -- of would-be voters were unable to vote in the 2000 general election because of insufficient staff and lack of equipment needed to quickly verify their eligibility.

The troubles that day prompted Democratic lawsuits that -- for a while -- kept the voting going after the scheduled cutoff. Mayor Francis Slay later labeled the mess a "national embarrassment."

But since then, elections in St. Louis -- though some were federally monitored -- by most accounts produced only minor glitches, prompting the Justice Department to declare that the city and its elections board have "substantially complied" with the consent decree.

"Based on the progress achieved by the city and Board of Election Commissioners, we believe that further court supervision is not needed at this time," with no need to extend the consent decree past last month's expiration date, the Justice Department's Chris Herren said in a letter dated last Friday to the election board's attorney.

Slay and Derio Gambaro, a Democrat who since January 2003 has headed the election board, publicly cheered the news Thursday.

"Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of democracy," Slay, seeking re-election in April to a second four-year term, said during a City Hall news conference. "That's why improving the St. Louis election board has been a high priority of mine."

To Slay, the Justice Department's letting the consent decree expire "recognizes the progress that we made."

"As a mayor, I'm proud," he said.

Since 2000, the election board has been revamped with all new commissioners. And under the consent decree, the city during last November's elections had technology it didn't have in 2000 -- 140 handheld computers at the polls, each loaded with names and specifics of more than 200,000 registered voters and some 60,000 inactive ones. The city had just 20 of the handheld computers during last August's primaries and said they worked "fabulously."

On Nov. 2, each of the city's 131 polling sites also had at least one cellular telephone to help swiftly process voters and help route those in the wrong place to their correct polling locations.

Herren, an attorney in the voting section of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, said such improvements "have significantly enhanced" the ability of election judges to efficiently process voters, determine eligibility

and direct voters to **proper** polling sites, **among other things**.

Now, **St. Louis** looks to "take what we have and enhance it," said **Gambaro**, the election **chief**.

Elections in **November** were overseen by federal monitors and other observers, including a **handful** of international ones organized by **Global Exchange**, a **San Francisco** human-rights group that **later reported** that polling in **St. Louis** went **smoothly**.

**Slay** credited better organized and trained poll workers, as well as the handheld **computers** used by poll **workers**.

**Rep. William Lacy Clay**, a **St. Louis Democrat** who was a plaintiff in the litigation that extended poll hours in the **November 2000** election for a **while**, has called the city's performance four years later "100 percent better."

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On the Net:

Board of Election Commissioners:  
<http://stlouis.missouri.org/citygov/electionbd>

Justice Department's Voting Section: <http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/voting>

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