

Early voting begins to shape Florida election outcomes

By TERRY O'CONNOR toco@breezenewspapers.com

POSTED: October 4, 2010

Photos



Ginger Watkins, Seat I GIBA candidate

It has yet to become the favored mode of casting a ballot but early voting is definitely catching on in Florida.

Charlotte County Supervisor of Elections Paul Stamoulis said 11,969 Charlotte County voters mailed their primary ballots, another 10,565 walked up on Election Day and 4,106 votes were cast early at one of three Charlotte County locations.

"I think it's a good thing," Stamoulis said. "It's the third leg of the stool where we offer vote by mail, early voting and Election Day. We try to make it as easy as possible."

Florida's elections in Florida now hinge on early voting - 45 percent of votes cast in the Republican primary came in before Election Day. And this is technology that's only come into play in three election cycles.

Early voting by mail also helps campaigns target undecided voters because absentee ballot requests are public record. Any time you request an absentee ballot, expect a flurry of campaign literature to follow.

Early voting in person is offered from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays and 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. weekends for 14 days from Oct. 18 to Oct. 31 for this general election.

"They love it," said Lee County Supervisor of Elections Sharon Harrington. "I think if I stopped it I would get lynched. They are voting on their time - not ours."

Gasparilla Island voters have the usual countywide elections to help decide as well as their own - two open seats on the Gasparilla Island Bridge Authority Board.

Jim Cooper, GIBA executive director, said he's become a fan of early voting.

"Early voting is so easy here in Florida," Cooper said. "There's no waiting in line. I do vote early. I absolutely do. I'm not going to go out on Election Day and stand in line."

Harrington said there would be no repeat of the problems that bedeviled the primary election where mail-in voters often had to resend ballots because they had been returned by the U.S. Post Office.

"We'd better not have a problem because I will be killing someone at the Post Office," Harrington said. She said the problem was caused because the bar code underneath the voter information on the return envelope was also on the envelope for the initial mailing to the voter, which caused the mail to loop back and forth between voter and Post Office.

"This time the address will be on the return envelope," she said. "There will be no bar code for the voter on return envelope."