

Campaigns see final stretch as polls gear up

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER

After nearly a year of campaigning, candidates across Southwest Florida have their eyes on the finish line — with the final stretch of the 2010 political races to be decided today. Thousands of Sun Coast voters will head to polling locations throughout the area to cast their votes in the 2010 gubernatorial general election. Sometime tonight, the race between Rick Scott and Alex Sink to become the state's next governor will be decided. Anxious voters will see if Charlie Crist's decision to run as an independent proves to be a good one, as he looks to outpace GOP favorite Marco Rubio. And several area incumbents will find out if they need to begin looking for a new job.

Candidates have dubbed this election one that could shift power in Florida for years to come,

and local officials said the reaction can be seen in the early voting and absentee numbers, which already surpass the total vote count from the August primaries in both Sarasota and Charlotte counties. Officials also expect a strong turnout today.

"It's been a great election year so far," Charlotte County Supervisor of Elections Paul Stamoulis said. "I think people have something on their minds, and soon we're going to find out what it is."

Charlotte County had a total early voting turnout of 17,505 this election, with another 18,069 absentee ballots returned as of Monday — a total of 35,574 ballots cast so far. Those figures surpass the 26,640 total vote count from the August primary, and represent more votes than were cast in person on election day in 2008. The 2006 gubernatorial general election drew 55,774 total votes, and Stamoulis predicts those numbers will be much higher this mid-term.

More than 86,000 Charlotte residents cast a votes in the 2008 general election — historically more residents vote in presidential years.

In Sarasota, 38,274 residents participated in early voting this election, and 26,553 absentee ballots were mailed back. Like Charlotte, those totals exceed the number of votes cast in August. The county had 208,683 total votes in the 2008 general election and 142,532 in 2006.

Sarasota County Supervisor of Elections Kathy Dent said election day turnout is driven largely by voter enthusiasm. Weather also plays a significant role, and when it's wet, more voters are inclined to stay home. Today's forecast calls for partly cloudy skies with a 20 percent chance of rain, according to the National Weather Service.

"We have about 25 percent (voter turnout) now, and I think we will get another 25 percent (today)," Dent said. "If it rains, it definitely keeps people away, and I have also heard because of the length of the ballot this year, a lot of people have remained hesitant."

Polls will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. To cut down on wait times this year, more than 2,000 workers and volunteers have been hired to man the 193 polling locations in the two counties. Voters must bring a photo ID to the polls and can vote only at their assigned precinct, which can be found on the county's supervisor of election's website.

"Running a campaign and being a candidate gives you more appreciation for voting," said Jason Green, a Democrat running for the Charlotte County Commission District 2 seat. "I believe in voting, and I believe in the process. It's always good to see people excited and willing to turn out. This is my first time going through this, but I'm really proud of where we are and what we have done. We have been working really hard, and it won't stop until the polls close."

Some of the notable local races include Green contesting Republican Christopher Constance in District 2. Stephen R. Deutsch, who trumped Commissioner Dick Loftus in August, will win the Charlotte County Commission District 4 race by default because no challengers are running in the general election.

Joseph Barbetta is vying to maintain his Sarasota County Commission District 2 seat over independent Cathy Antunes, while fellow Republican incumbent Nora Patterson faces Democrat Mark Hawkins in District 4.

"I think the voters know what I support," Patterson said. "People understand what the issues are, and right now the biggest issue is the local economy. Voters are looking for someone they can trust in this difficult time."

Rep. Ken Roberson will take on first-time Democratic challenger Andrew Saltman for the Florida House of Representatives District 71 seat in a battle of polar opposites — from their 33-year age gap to their policies. U.S. Congressman Tom Rooney is also up for re-election in Florida District 16 against Democrat Jim Horn and write-in William Dean.

Republican officials say early and absentee voting typically favors Democrats, with Republicans more apt to wait until Nov. 2. They hope that trend doesn't hold true this year, given the uptick in early voting numbers.

"Normally Democrats are favored in early voting, but Republicans are charged this year," Charlotte County Commissioner Robert Skidmore said. "We have never seen numbers like this."

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Election day is here



SUN PHOTO BY JOSH SALMAN, jsalman@sun-herald.com Today will mark the final stretch for candidates across the state campaigning for public office, when thousands of Sun Coast voters head to polling locations to vote in the 2010 election.