

Charlotte County voters stand tall

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In May, Gov. Rick Scott signed into law sweeping changes to streamline voting procedures in Florida after once again, in 2012, extensive Election Day breakdowns focused a negative national spotlight on the state.

The legislation was intended to end problems by adding days, hours and voting locations, after a lengthy ballot, hours-long waits and extended voting hours into the night stirred voter exasperation throughout the state, along with national ridicule.

But the legislation will have little impact on Charlotte County, according to Supervisor of Elections Paul A.

Stamoulis — simply because there were few, if any, problems in the county. “We basically had a trouble-free election,” he said.

“There were no complaints (of long lines) that I’m aware of,” he said, and that, according to a study by Dartmouth College and the University of Florida, Charlotte County was one of just 11 counties (of 67) in Florida, and the second largest, that didn’t have to extend voting hours on Election Day.

One of the keys, Stamoulis said, was that 71 percent of the county’s voters cast either mail or early voting ballots, leaving his staff ample time to assist the 29 percent of voters who actually came to the polls on election day at

the county’s 35 voting locations.

According to state statistics, Charlotte County tied with Martin County with the most electors voting by mail, at 39 percent (excluding Pinellas and Hillsborough counties, with scarce early voting locations, limiting early voting to almost totally by mail).

Additionally, 31.3 percent of Charlotte County voters took advantage of early voting locations in Punta Gorda, Port Charlotte and Englewood, bringing the pre-election total to more than 71 percent.

“The secret,” Stamoulis said, “is that the easier you make it to vote, the more they vote.” Plus, the fact that, “Charlotte County voters tend to take their voting

responsibility very, very seriously.”

One statistic that bears both out, he said, is that 49,700 of 58,700 registered voters age 61 and older voted, for an astounding 84 percent turnout.

“I’m proud of them,” he said.

On the other end of the scale were voters 18 to 25, with a 42.5 percent turnout. “There’s more to be done here,” Stamoulis said, adding that he plans to increase elections personnel visits to high schools to assist teachers in imparting the values of citizenship and voting responsibility to students.

Nevertheless, he said, in 2012, the Charlotte County turnout at 74.2 percent was almost 2 percent above the

Florida average, and far above the national turnout of 57.5 percent.

Stamoulis said he expects voting by mail to continue to increase substantially, since there are four easy ways to do it, including securing ballots online at www.charlottevotes.com; or at the elections office (226 Taylor St., Punta Gorda); by phone (941-833-5400); or by mail (Supervisor of Elections, 226 Taylor St., Punta Gorda, FL 33950). Votes can be cast up to 35 days prior to the election.

Another key to election order in Charlotte County, Stamoulis said, is extensive training, ongoing education and planning by his “excellent” 11-person staff and part-time staff, including outstanding students

recruited from area high schools. “They all make it work,” he said.

Also in line for accolades is the Charlotte County school district, which provides nine voting locations and, he believes, is the only school district in the state that also closes on Election Day to aid in the voting process.

“I can’t thank them enough,” he said.

As for changes in Charlotte County under the new Florida voting legislation, set to take effect Jan. 1, 2014? Well, not too much change appears to be necessary in the county, he said, other than expanding early voting days from eight to 14.

“Whatever the Legislature offers,” he said, “I will match them.”