

## Primary outcomes charge up November election

By GREG MARTIN STAFF WRITER

Both local Democratic and Republican party leaders said Wednesday they were happy with the results in Tuesday's primary races, because they threw in some curveballs they believe will give their respective candidates an edge.

And that means things should get exciting from now until the Nov. 2 general election, according to Rom Mattesich, chairman of the Charlotte County Democratic Executive Committee, and Bob Starr, chairman of both the Republican Executive Committee and the Charlotte County Commission.

However, the two leaders differ on how the results will play out.

Mattesich cited Republican candidate for U.S. Senate Marco Rubio's landslide victory over two fellow Republicans. Rubio received more than 1 million votes statewide in a race in which only 1.2 million Republicans voted.

Rubio's strong appeal means Gov. Charlie Crist, who is running as an independent, won't be able to "peel off" Republicans from Rubio, Mattesich theorized. And that gives U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, who won the Democratic nomination, a chance to beat Crist, according to Mattesich.

Meek garnered 57 percent to Naples billionaire investor Jeff Greene's 31 percent.

"It's going to be a wild threeway race," Mattesich said.

Starr, however, sees the race differently.

"I was real happy to see Mr. Meek become the (Democratic) candidate, because I think now Charlie's toast," Starr said. "Greene wouldn't have pulled Democrats from Crist."

Charlotte County voters turned out in higher numbers than normal for a midterm primary, said Paul Stamoulis, supervisor of elections. The turnout, in which 26,640 ballots were cast, amounts to 23 percent of the county's 116,047 registered voters.

The turnout was some 50 percent higher than the last midterm primary in 2006, when there were 18,062 ballots cast.

"People obviously had something on their minds, and they got a chance to express it," Stamoulis said.

The primary was the first to be held by Stamoulis, elected in 2008. It went smoothly, he said.

"It was really nice to see everything come together after two years of work, planning and training," he said. "We trained 550 poll workers, set up 37 (voting) locations for 80 precincts. It was like organizing a small army, and everybody did their job, and did it well."

The election will be certified after an audit of ballots in several randomly selected precincts today, he said.

Some 34 percent of the county's Republicans cast ballots, while only 19 percent of Democrats and 31 percent of nonpartisan voters turned out, records show.

Mattesich attributed the lower Democratic turnout to the fact only a few Democrats were in the primary.

As a result of the GOP primary in the race for governor, however, Mattesich now sees hope for Democratic nominee Alex Sink. That's because Rick Scott, the former CEO of Columbia/HCA, won the Republican nomination over state Attorney General Bill Mc-Collum. Mattesich pointed out Scott's former company paid the largest fine in U.S. history in a Medicare scam.

"If Scott is a potential for governor, that is going to scare a lot of people," Mattesich predicted.

Starr said his committee endorsed McCollum early in that race. Starr added he was "incensed" by the negative advertising campaign that Scott waged against McCollum.

But now that the primary is over, Starr said he will become a Scott supporter.

"I'm going to get a (Scott) bumper sticker for my car tomorrow," he said.

In local races, Mattesich now sees hope that Democratic nominee Jason Green, a DeSoto County planning staffer, can beat Port Charlotte plastic surgeon Chris Constance, even though Constance won the GOP nomination handily over Punta Gorda City Councilman Don McCormick.

According to Mattesich, Green has plans to bring "green" jobs to the county, while Constance is running merely "as a hobby."

But Republicans chose Constance over McCormick because of perceptions that McCormick had balked at proposals to put a Subway restaurant in downtown Punta Gorda and a 7-Eleven store in Punta Gorda Isles, Starr said.

McCormick didn't seem very "open for business," he added.

Both Starr and Mattesich said Republican Stephen Deutsch's victory over incumbent District 4 County Commissioner Dick Loftus represented a backlash against Loftus over his recent vote to fire former County Administrator Roger Baltz.

Both Starr and Mattesich acknowledged that the local Tea Party movement energized the Republican camp.

To Starr, that means the "Democrats are toast."

To Mattesich, however, it means local Democrats will have to focus harder on getting their candidates more exposure.

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