

Early voting starts today

More voters to avoid crowds

By JOSH SALMAN STAFF WRITER

When Jason Green arrives at the Historic Courthouse in downtown Punta Gorda today, he plans to cast the first of what he hopes will become many votes in his quest to become the next Charlotte County commissioner.

"At least it won't be a shutout," Green said with a smile.

Green is just one of hundreds of area residents expected to make their way to election offices, libraries and government buildings across Southwest Florida for the first day of early voting. While Green's plans are centered on the opportunity to pencil-in his own name, voters throughout the Sun Coast will follow suit with hopes of saving time and beating the crowds.

A growing number of Southwest Florida voters are casting their votes weeks before election day through both the vote-by-mail and early voting initiatives. If the trend holds up, candidates predict several races in the general election could be decided before voters ever head to the polls Nov. 2 — entirely changing the way their campaigns are waged.

"Well, more than half of the votes will be in by election day," Charlotte County Supervisor of Elections Paul Stamoulis said. "People like the convenience of not having to go wait in line. It's just so much quicker and easier. Is it the way of the future? Who knows?"

Early voting begins today in both Charlotte and Sarasota counties, and will run through Oct. 31 at nine locations scattered between the two counties. Nearly 50,000 absentee ballots have also been mailed as of Friday.

In the 2008 general election, more than two-thirds of all Sun Coast voters cast their ballots before election day compared with about 50 percent in 2006 and 40 percent in 2004, Stamoulis said. He predicts those numbers will continue to grow in each coming election.

Because of low-voter turnout, that tally unexpectedly dipped to 41 percent in Sarasota and 60 percent in Charlotte for the August primaries. But officials anticipate a strong rebound this time.

The gubernatorial general election historically draws a higher turnout than the primaries, but fewer residents vote in presidential off-years. Weather also plays a large role in voter turnouts.

"People have a tendency to think electing the president is most important, but electing local officials probably has a bigger impact on their daily lives," Sarasota County Supervisor of Elections Kathy Dent said. "People don't think that way, so they don't tend to vote in (gubernatorial elections)."

Dent said absentee voting can save local governments as much as \$5 for each ballot cast over traditional elections. But early voting is the most expensive method due to the specialized polls and added staff time.

The new trend also costs more for candidates, who have to begin campaigning months earlier and send mailers to long-distance voters who request absentee ballots. It also gives candidates less time to defend last-minute attacks from their opponents.

"The election window has expanded about 30 days, and you have to campaign a little harder," said Rep. Ken Roberson, a Republican running for re-election in District 71, which includes portions of Charlotte, Sarasota and Lee counties. "It's a convenient way to vote, and more and more people are doing it."

Early voting is also expected to play a large role in Florida's U.S. Senate, governor and attorney general races. In the August primaries, attorney general and gubernatorial candidate Bill McCollum reportedly outgained fellow Republican Rick Scott on election day, but Scott won the race due to his success collecting absentee and early votes, according to the Florida Division of Elections.

Local poll workers will begin tabulating numbers from absentee and early voting before election day, but the results can't be released until all votes have been counted. The deadline for requesting an absentee ballot by mail is Oct. 28.

“During the last five years, early voting and absentee (voting) have become an integral part of the system,” said Charlotte County Commission Chairman Bob Starr, who is also the chairman of the local Republican committee. “If you don’t get the early votes, you probably won’t win, so you really have to emphasize that. Our party does target and chase those voters.”

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Poll worker Diane Verdon tests the earling voting polls at the Historic Courthouse in downtown Punta Gorda. Early voting begins today and will run through Oct. 31.

Poll workers train for the elections during a class at the Historic Courthouse in downtown Punta Gorda. Early voting begins today and will run through Oct. 31.

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