

Absentee voters become election key

BY WAYNE PEAL
STAFF WRITER

A lot of key ballots will have been cast — maybe a few elections already decided — before voters even go to the polls in the Tuesday, Aug. 4, primary.

Absentee voters are becoming an increasingly important voting bloc, one eagerly courted by candidates. "We don't have any figures, but I sense they're growing," said Oakland County elections director Janet Stickley.

Reasons vary. Some, especially this primary season, are on vacation. Others are among that growing number of Americans with a home-to-job commute of one hour or longer.

Many, however, are seniors. And seniors hold special electoral power in Michigan.

Any state resident age 60 and over can apply for an absentee ballot just by virtue of their age.

They don't even have to be in Michigan to vote.

"We have a lot of seniors voting absentee," Southfield clerk Mary

Bonner said. "We'll get a lot of ballots mailed in from Florida and some from Arizona too."

More than 5,600 absentee ballots were taken out, Bonner said.

Some communities, like Rochester Hills, even keep permanent record of senior absentee voters and mail them their applications. "We've been doing this for a long time, probably back to the early 1980s," said city clerk Keith Sawdon, who mailed out more than 3,000 applications.

In Birmingham, where 800 absentee ballots were distributed, absentee voters will make up about 5 percent of the total electorate, elections clerk Nancy Weiss said.

But their impact is greater than that. With campaign costs rising, candidates for all offices — from U.S. House to city commission — are targeting absentee voters.

"An absentee voter is someone you can virtually be assured will vote," U.S. Congressional candidate David Hongman said. "I know they were important in my races for the state House and Senate."

"I wouldn't ignore them — ever," said county commission candidate Sue Ann Douglas, a four-time Rochester councilwoman. "It's an extremely important vote, especially in a primary."

State standards aren't exactly strict. People only need to expect to be out of their hometown, for business or pleasure, to apply for an absentee ballot. Handicapped people, election precinct workers, those who must stay away from the polls for religious reasons, and those awaiting arraignment or trial, may also vote absentee.

The increasing importance of absentee voters is one reason campaign signs seem to be coming out earlier and earlier each election year.

In some special elections, with only one race or ballot proposal to be decided, half or more of all voters have already cast ballots by election day.

Ironically, Oakland County absentee voters will be voting a little later this primary season.

In many communities, ballots

■ 'We don't have any figures, but I sense they're (absentee voters) growing.'

Janet Stickley
Oakland County elections director

went out later than usual.

"We're told it was a delay at the printer," Farmington Hills clerk Kathryn Dorman said.

The delay becomes an issue if it violates federally-mandated deadlines for sending ballots to overseas U.S. military personnel. "If that's the case, there's probably going to be a consent judgment issued regarding those ballots," state elections bureau spokesman Brad Wittman said.

Will some races be decided by delayed overseas ballots? Not likely, officials said.

Will absentee ballots continue to grow in importance? Probably so. "People are always looking for ways to increase the vote," Hunigman said. "Who knows, maybe someday we'll all be voting by mail."

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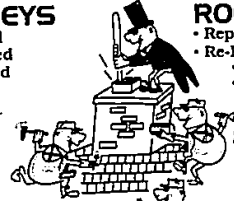
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It'll be a busy primary night for Oakland's elections staff

BY WAYNE PEAL
STAFF WRITER

Tucked away inside the county courthouse, the Oakland County Elections office doesn't usually draw much attention.

But several times a year, people line up elbow-to-elbow outside elections director Janet Stickley's door. Tuesday, Aug. 4 will be one of those nights.

"We're going to be pretty busy," she said.

That night, Stickley and her five assistants will record the results of primary races for four U.S. House seats, 13 seats in the state Legisla-

ture, 25 county commission races and board seats and ballot proposals in the county's 21 townships.

If past practice is any indication, they'll also handle phone calls from a dozen or so reporters and make a few pizzas — mostly ordering out for pizza and other goodies.

"You've got to have food just to keep you going," Stickley said.

Long after Bill Bonds, Mort Crim and other have signed off the air, Stickley and her assistants will still be tabulating votes.

Given primaries' traditionally low turnout, it could be a short

night. But Stickley isn't counting on it.

"I remember one election when we had to wait until four the next day just to get Southfield's returns, but I don't expect it to be that late this time," she said.

That begs the question — who are the first and last communities to report?

"Keego Harbor is usually the first," Stickley said. "They're a small city and they're not too far from our office."

And the worst? Stickley laughs. "I'd rather not point any fingers."

County receives United Way health care grant

Oakland County has received a \$35,246 grant from United Way of Southeastern Michigan to provide health promotion and risk reduction services to low income and minority groups.

Health screening will be conducted at community and county health division sites. Screening includes computerized health risk appraisal, cholesterol testing, height, weight and blood pressure measurements.

Follow-up services are also provided.

The one-year grant was made possible by funds provided to United Way by the former Comprehensive Health Planning Council of Southeastern Michigan.

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