

Marion Co. returns 40 percent of mail ballots

County is known to have high return rate

BY DANIELLE KUEHNEL

The Stayton Mail

May 24

Residents from all parts of Marion County voted in Oregon's primary election last Tuesday.

The closed primaries — residents vote only for candidates in their own party — gathered approximately 40-percent ballot-return rate in Marion County.

“Marion County usually has a little higher return rate than the rest of the state,” said Marion County Clerk Bill Burgess. “And the state usually has more ballot returns than other states.”

A 40-percent turnout, although an impressive number in comparison to other voting districts, was still a disappointingly low percentage for Burgess.

“We had about a 90-percent turnout for the last presidential election,” said Burgess. “Oregon is one of the top five states for voting turnout, and Marion County is generally higher than most other counties.”

“The turnout is what counts. I would certainly liked to have seen a better turnout,” he said. “Historically, for gubernatorial primaries, though, it wasn't too bad.”

But, according to Elections Supervisor Sharon Ricks, several factors are responsible for the fluctuation of voter turnout.

“What determines turnout is what's on the ballot,” said Ricks. “There's nothing really predictable, though. What generates participation is what is on the ballot, as far as sparking voter interest.”

She explained that 2004's election gathered so many votes because people were voting for the president. For May 12's primary elections, people voted to elect gubernatorial candidates, thus harvesting a slightly higher number than non-gubernatorial primary election years.

“It's tradition to vote in Marion County,” she said. “That's another reason we get a higher ballot-return rate.”

“And young people today, from ages 18 to 34, represent the largest number of citizens, yet we have the lowest number of them registered, and we get the least amount of ballots from them,” said Ricks. “They don't realize what we could do if they all voted. People

over 50 years old vote the most; they're the ones making the decisions for this country and state. Young people in America don't know that they can make a difference."

Another possible reason for Oregon and Marion County's higher percentage of ballot returns may also be attributed to the fact that the state allows mail-in voting, a tradition that began in Linn County in the early '80s and went statewide in 1998, said Ricks.

"Vote-by-Mail encourages voting," said Ricks. "People have time to think about it, and it's a constant reminder in front of them if they've saved their ballot."

Marion County residents voted on several categories, nominating candidates for governor, state senators and representatives, Supreme Court judges, county commissioners and assessors, among other positions.

While voting for governor, state senators and representatives and county commissioners are partisan and will therefore automatically be voted upon in November's finalist election, the race for county assessor is not partisan and had the potential to not be on the ballot again in November. However, said Burgess, since none of the Marion County Assessor candidates received at least 50 percent of the necessary votes for election, the top-two vote-yielding candidates – Richard K. Kreitzer and Douglas Schmidt – will also be featured on November's ballot.

As of last Friday, Burgess said that an estimated 59,000 Marion County ballots had been picked up. While these votes do not constitute the final count for elections, not much change is anticipated from last week's results.

"We have 20 days after the election closed to get the final count," said Burgess. "We have more ballots to count, and there are discrepancies on some signatures, so we give people the chance to come in and verify them."

After ballots are received, an elections staff begins to process them.

"A lot of people don't realize that there's an elections staff," said Ricks. "While machines can count votes, signatures are digitized and dealt with individually by hand. We have a lot of dedicated people working on the election."

As of last Thursday, most ballots had been counted, and preliminary results had been released. In November, citizens in the 17th District can expect to vote on Jeff Kropf (R) and Dan Thackaberry (D) for State Representative; the 18th District will vote on Mac Sumner (R) and Jim Gilbert (D) for State Representative; the 19th District will vote on Kevin Cameron (R) and Brian Grisham (D) for State Representative; the 23rd District will vote on Brian Boquist (R) and Jason Brown (D) for State Representative; the 25th District will vote on Kim Thatcher (R) and Charles E. Lee (D) for State Representative; and all of Marion County will vote on Richard K. Kreitzer and Douglas Schmidt for Marion County Assessor.

“I think the vote went very smoothly,” said Ricks. “There weren’t any registered complaints.”

While the elections department is no longer accepting primary-election ballots, citizens will have a chance to vote for the finalists in the general election this coming November.