

More ballots by mail

Sabaugh hopes to promote absentee voting

By Chad Selwski
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Claiming that absentee voting took a dive in Tuesday's presidential primary, Macomb County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh is pushing for a mass mailing of absentee ballot applications to all seniors in the upcoming November presidential election.

A recent court ruling in a Detroit case prompted most Michigan clerks to stop the practice of mailing "unsolicited" applications prior to Tuesday's vote. But Sabaugh, relying on a separate court decision, seeks to revive the system she put into place in 2006 when all Macomb voters age 60 or older received ballot applications.

Sabaugh has urged every city and township to authorize universal mailings. Those that don't may see the county clerk step in and send applications from her Mount Clemens office.

"The city councils of Auburn Hills, Birmingham, Farmington Hills, Oak Park and Troy last November passed resolutions authorizing their local clerks to



Macomb Daily staff photo by Ray J. Skowronek

Karen Good and Janet Toombs, both of Clinton Township, discuss absentee voting with Macomb County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh, right.

mail AV applications to all seniors," Sabaugh wrote in a letter to the Macomb clerks. "This means Oakland County seniors will have a voting advantage over your municipality's seniors, unless action is taken to provide an equal opportunity."

Sabaugh said the universal system she proposes would boost turnout and subsequently boost Macomb County's political clout in the presidential election.

If Sabaugh succeeds in restoring the previous system, that would please Donna Card, who was unable to vote on Tuesday. Card, 81, has automatically received an AV (absentee voter)

application prior to each election for the past 12 years.

But, because of the court ruling against Detroit, clerks were told that only voters who request a ballot can vote absentee. Card was unaware of the change until it was too late and missed her chance to vote in the presidential contest.

"I wonder about the necessity of this change," she said. The old system "was certainly helpful, because I'm partially disabled."

The number of absentee votes cast in Macomb County in Tuesday's primary was 40,042, a nearly 9 percent drop compared to the 43,726 AV votes cast in the

August 2006 primary. Election officials say the number should have risen for the January primary due to the number of voters hoping to avoid a trip to the polls in cold, wintry weather.

On Monday, Romeo became the first Macomb County community to adopt a resolution in favor of mailing ballot applications to all seniors. Next Tuesday, Roseville could become the second.

The October ruling by the Michigan Court of Appeals in the Detroit case said that local clerks can only send applications to voters who request an AV ballot. But Ma-

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comb County Circuit Judge David Viviano ruled last July in a separate case that blanket mailings are appropriate when the local governing body, such as a city council, approves it.

The Viviano ruling, in response to a lawsuit filed by the Republican Party against Sabaugh, was appealed and a decision is pending. Sabaugh believes Viviano's decision gives Macomb communities the authority to proceed.

Meanwhile, in Oakland County, where countywide mass mailings had been the norm, the five cities cited in Sabaugh's Jan. 8 letter defied the court ruling in the Detroit case.

In Clinton Township, Clerk Dennis Tomlinson blames the

by-request-only approach to AV ballots for a surprising drop in absentee voting Tuesday in his community.

"The comparison shows that absolutely, no question, more people would have voted if we would have used the same system that we used in our township for the past 28 years," Tomlinson said.

Clinton, the largest township in Michigan, recorded 3,056 absentee ballots in the presidential primary, or 23 percent of all votes cast. In the August 2006 primary, when gubernatorial candidates topped the ticket, 7,853 AV ballots were cast in Clinton, representing 50 percent of the total vote.

Tomlinson supports Sabaugh's move toward a universal, countywide system of mass

mailings and in the coming weeks will ask his township board to participate.

Clinton was one of 13 Macomb cities and townships that previously sent unsolicited applications. When Sabaugh stepped up in 2006 and sent a mass mailing of 50,000 applications in the other 11 communities, she said the result was a 7,700-vote boost in turnout.

Yet, critics said the result was confusion because some of those 11 communities maintained a so-called "permanent AV list" of those voters who wanted an application sent before each election.

One community that maintained such a list for decades, Roseville, will consider on Tuesday endorsing Sabaugh's effort for a universal approach. City Clerk Richard Steenland has recommended that city council ap-

prove a resolution similar to the one passed in Romeo.

Sabaugh will appear before the county Board of Commissioners on Tuesday seeking approval to conduct mass mailings in the May, August and November elections in any city or township where the local officials decline.

Sabaugh's move, however, remains at odds with the Michigan Secretary of State's Office. The Secretary of State's Bureau of Elections has said the Detroit ruling bans mass mailings. In addition, state election officials

have said state law does not give county clerks the authority to conduct such mailings.