

Troops may miss vote

Earlier primary makes getting ballots overseas and back a challenge

By Chad Selweski
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

With preparations for the Jan. 15 presidential primary election off to a late start, officials worry that some U.S. troops from Michigan stationed in Iraq

and other overseas military installations may not be able to cast a ballot.

Because of prolonged political wrangling in the Legislature, clerks are already behind schedule in printing ballots, which will delay the sending of absentee ballots overseas. Until Tuesday

afternoon, it still wasn't clear how many Democratic candidates' names would appear on the January ballot.

"It probably means that a lot of those (military) ballots won't get back to us in time to count," said St. Clair Shores City Clerk Mary Kotowski. "We

will do everything we can ... but it's going to be a real tight fit."

For clerks, the typical turnaround time for mailing and receiving back an overseas ballot is about 30 days. But in

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this presidential primary, absentee voters must be contacted by mail twice, once with a form asking whether they want a Republican or Democratic ballot, and a second time when the actual ballot is sent.

E-mails and faxes could shorten the two-step process but Roger Cardamone, chief elections clerk for Macomb County, worries that some troops in combat situations in Iraq and Afghanistan may not have access to those technologies.

"If they don't get contacted and get that form back quickly, then they're disenfranchised — they're not voting. That's the tragedy here," Cardamone said.

The Secretary of State's Office sent clerks the ballot selection forms last Wednesday and it appears that

many local clerks mailed them out Monday and Tuesday.

Kelly Chesney, a spokeswoman for Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land, said state election officials are confident that, with the assistance of e-mails and faxes that will "expedite the process," all overseas ballots will be sent and returned in time to be counted.

Shelby Township Clerk Terri Kowal agrees that electronic communications may save the day, but she's irritated that the Legislature put clerks in such a tight spot.

"I think it's very, very disheartening. It shows that this Legislature is unable to make decisions, one way or another," said Kowal, past president of the Michigan Association of Municipal Clerks.

After spending months contemplating potential changes to the presidential primary

process, the state House and Senate could not reach agreement and essentially gave up Tuesday. As a result, the four Democrats who withdrew their names from the Michigan ballot — Barack Obama, John Edwards, Joe Biden and Bill Richardson — will remain out of the January vote.

The pending legislation would have restored the four names even though the four Democrats have vowed not to participate in the Michigan election because its Jan. 15 spot on the calendar violates Democratic Party rules. The primary election also withstood a court challenge.

County Clerk Carmella Sabaugh said the legislative "mess" has put the process behind schedule, but she believes the election will go on without a hitch, and without local absentee ballots going out late.

"We're hoping to get the ballots printed this weekend. I would think we can get the ballots to the local clerks by the middle of next week," Sabaugh said.

The next few weeks have clerks scrambling with the pre-election jobs of proofing, programming voting machines, testing voting machines and handling absentee voting applications and ballots.

The compressed process is a sharp departure from standard practice. In St. Clair Shores, ballots for last fall's city elections were sent to overseas voters — military members and those living temporarily outside the country — a full seven weeks in advance.

"We normally gear up early," Kotowski said. "So, what we normally do in 12 weeks we're now doing in five."