Low turnout makes elections expensive

Some South Florida towns way above average

By Anthony Man, Sun Sentinel

11:26 AM EST, March 10, 2011

Except for a few pockets of participation — mainly in small, upscale communities along the coast — turnout for Tuesday's elections ranged from awful to abysmal.

And they'll pay for it.

In Broward, just 10.5 percent of eligible voters turned out in the county's eight elections. In Palm Beach County, turnout was just 12.3 percent across 19 elections.

That produced some eye-popping costs. Most notable this week: Miramar, where 4.5 percent of eligible voters cast ballots in the city's mayor's race — the lowest voter turnout in Broward and Palm Beach counties.

Only 2,920 votes were cast in the mayor's race by the city's 65,227 eligible voters. Based on estimated election costs, that works out to a stunning $46.95 per vote.

In Boynton Beach two city commission races attracted just 978 votes, for a turnout of about 7.4 percent. With a budgeted cost of $44,000 for the election, that's $44.99 each.

The problem is, elections officials have to prepare as if everyone is going to vote. That means printing ballots, opening polling places and hiring staff in case there's a rare, unexpected surge. The result, Palm Beach County Elections Supervisor Susan Bucher said: "[Taxpayers] kind of pay the bill whether they come out and vote or not."

Most cities didn't hit the high cost per vote of Boynton Beach and Miramar.

In Boca Raton, where 4,572 votes were cast for mayor — a turnout of about 7.8 percent of registered voters — the cost per vote was about $21.90. In Plantation, where 8,325 votes were cast for mayor — a turnout of about 14.7 percent — the cost per vote was $20.07.

By contrast, the elections were a bargain in the two communities that were the voting champions in Tuesday's election.

Broward Supervisor of Elections Brenda Snipes said tiny Hillsboro Beach had 464 voters. That works out to a best in Broward turnout of 27.4 percent. With only one precinct in the tiny town, which straddles 3 miles of State Road A1A, each vote cast cost $9.23.
Palm Beach County's top turnout town, Manalapan, fared almost as well. The 221 people who voted account for 61 percent of the town's registered voters, bringing the per-vote cost down to about $11.31.

Supervisors of Elections Offices in Broward and Palm Beach counties didn't have computer runs Wednesday showing the total numbers of voters in each community. To estimate turnout and cost per vote, the number of votes cast in a city's biggest election was used, along with the most recent available voter registration information, and cost estimates from elections offices and municipal governments.

Turnout varies so much, said Ronald Feinman, who teaches history, government, and politics at Broward College and Florida Atlantic University, that "it's almost like a split personality we have in this part of the state."

Miramar often has some of the lowest voter turnouts — 6.6 percent in 2009. Manalapan often has high turnouts — 58.9 percent in 2010.

"It's wonderful, isn't it," said Lisa Petersen, the town clerk. She attributed the high voter participation to civic interest. "People care about the town. There's not really any huge issues facing us today, other than what every other city is facing."

Turnout is usually higher when there's controversy or a heated campaign, and lower without it, said Mitch Ceasar, chairman of the Broward Democratic Party, and Sid Dinerstein, chairman of the Palm Beach County Republican Party.

"Voter turnout rises with unrest," Ceasar said.

Miramar Mayor Lori Moseley was expected to easily win re-election — which she did, with 59 percent of the vote. The same was true in Boca Raton, where Mayor Susan Whelchel won re-election with 85 percent.

One of the hottest races in Broward was the Plantation mayor's contest, where Republicans hoped to install Councilman Jerry Fadgen in the office and Democrats backed Councilwoman Diane Veltri Bendekovic, who won. Turnout was 14.7 percent.

And turnout was above average in West Palm Beach at 15.8 percent and Riviera Beach at 25 percent, which Dinerstein said had two of Palm Beach County's hottest mayor's races. Each vote cast cost $11.38 in West Palm Beach. Figures weren't immediately available for Riviera Beach.

Other factors also may have played a part in the low turnout. Peoples' lives are especially stressed, something Snipes said may make voting a lower priority. "If I don't have a job or have two jobs or a house that's in foreclosure, maybe those are things that take their attention from voting."

Pembroke Pines Commissioner Angelo Castillo, whose city has March elections but had none on Tuesday, said there may be a more simple explanation for low turnouts.
"It could well be that they were satisfied," he said. "Some folks don't go because they feel what we have is OK."