

Political Update

By Nina Albano Vidmer

In the March 2006 Primary Election, Illinois will join with 24 other states that allow for early voting. Last summer, the governor signed a bill that will allow residents to vote in person at designated locations before Election Day. Under the bill, early voting will begin 22 days prior to the election and end the Thursday before. For the March 2006 Primary Election, registered voters will be able to vote as early as February 27. Early voters will not have to provide a reason or excuse when voting before election day, however they will have to provide identification. Also new this primary is "grace period" voting. Previously, Illinois voters could not register to vote within 28 days of an election. Now, a resident may register up to 14 days prior to an election only if he or she also votes through early voting at the time of registration. For example, if a resident were to register 15 days prior to Election Day, he must register and vote at the same time. Early voters may vote county wide and not just in their precinct, as they must during election day.

Early voting differs from absentee voting, in which a resident must meet one of the following criteria: is physically incapable; out of the county on Election Day; a college student away at school; has election duties; or is a sequestered juror. Absentee voting begins 40 days before election day and concludes the Monday before; absentee voters are not required to show proof of identity.

Concerns about rising energy costs have prompted Illinois lawmakers to sponsor a fiscally responsible legislative proposal to assist families and business as they prepare for the winter months ahead. Senate Majority Leader Debbie DeFrancesco Halvorson supports a new initiative that will help to provide assistance with the high cost of heating this winter. The proposal:

- Expands the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) by providing an additional \$9.2 million for low income energy assistance helping some 18,000 additional families. Those funds, already in the state's budget, would have remained in the state's General Revenue Fund without this legislation.
- Creates a state sales tax holiday from January 1 – 31 on energy-efficient products and home weatherization products used on homes and other residential structures. During this period, the sales tax will be reduced from 6.25 percent to 1 percent. Items that would be eligible for the sales tax holiday include items with Energy Star logo, such as windows, doors, skylights, insulation, roof products, residential lamps and lights, transformers compact fluorescent light bulbs, energy saving light bulbs, programmable thermostats, ceiling fans, water heaters, heating and cooling equipment, and appliances.
- Creates a Power for Jobs income tax credit that will allow the Dept. of Commerce and Economic Opportunity (DCEO) to provide energy assistance to businesses creating or retaining jobs in Illinois, by giving them a tax credit for up to 10 percent of their energy costs.

Calling it important to make sure that no child is denied access to quality health care, State Rep. Angelo "Skip" Saviano is announcing his support for "All Kids," a new program that guarantees healthcare for every child in Illinois. According to Rep.

Saviano, there are currently 253,000 uninsured children in Illinois. Saviano says that those uninsured are at a risk of receiving improper health care. The Dept. of Health and Family Services estimates that in the first year alone, 50,000 children will enroll in the all New Kids program.

House Small Business Committee Chairman Don Manzullo says that government plans to require passports or another federal identification card to demonstrate citizenship to enter the United States by land from Canada by 2008 are costly, complex and may hamper trade and tourism between the two countries. Congressman Manzullo, who chaired a full committee hearing, says he agrees that the United States needs to increase border security with Canada and Mexico to keep terrorists out of our country. The U.S. Dept. of State and Homeland Security have proposed the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative Initiative to implement tougher border security measures mandated by Congress last year. Requiring passports or yet another ID card may go too far though, says Manzullo.

This column is written by Nina Albano Vidmer, executive director of the Italian American Political Coalition. To submit information, please fax to 708-401-0360 by the first of each month for consideration in the following month's issue.