

**Activists seek new voters in Kent, Auburn neighborhoods**

2004-03-21

by Mike Archbold  
Journal Reporter  
King County Journal

AUBURN -- Poverty activists are beginning a concerted effort in a number of Auburn and Kent neighborhoods to encourage the politically disengaged to vote.

Members of the Statewide Poverty Action Network gathered early Saturday at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in northeast Auburn for a training session before heading out in four-person teams to knock on doors.

The goal, according to project organizers, is to doorbell 14,000 homes and register 1,790 new voters by November's general election in 31 precincts in the 47th and 31st legislative districts.

That many new voters in the two districts, which swing between electing Republicans and Democrats, could make a real difference in legislative races where winners and losers can be separated by a few hundred voters.

The drive will continue every Saturday until the election.

Residents also will be asked to sign a petition asking for a change in how lawmakers vote on three issues that affect low-wage workers: income assistance, health care and state tuition.

This year's presidential race traditionally increases voter interest. Washington also has a statewide U.S. Senate race and two open U.S House seats, including the Eighth District, which touches Auburn and Kent.

The voter drive, however, isn't pushing one candidate or political party over another, say organizers. ``It is a nonpartisan effort,' ' said Aiko Schaefer, executive director of the Seattle-based organization. Formed in 1996 in the wake of

welfare reform, the network counts 5,000 members and agencies statewide.

The voter registration effort is to encourage low-wage workers to participate more in political processes that have a direct impact on their lives, she said. Team members will have voter registration forms for people to fill out and will mail them for new voters.

``This is the first time we are going door to door talking to nonvoters,'' said Julie Watts, communications director for the network. ``We will be educating them about the upcoming elections, what day to vote, and giving them information.''

The project coincides with the 40th anniversary of President Johnson declaring his War on Poverty in March 1964. Watts said they don't believe lawmakers have made ending poverty a real priority.

``Part of the reason for that is that low-income residents don't vote in the same numbers as high-income residents,'' she said. ``Our idea is to engage these people who feel alienated from the (political) debate.''

A U.S. Census Bureau analysis of the 2000 election showed that the voting rate among families with incomes of \$50,000 or more was 72 percent, compared with 38 percent for people with incomes under \$10,000.

The 47th and 31st legislative districts were not chosen randomly, Watts said.

Auburn and Kent contain high numbers of people living on low incomes, according to an analysis by Lopez & Cheung, a data-consulting firm.

For 2001, she said, the state Department of Social and Health Services reported that 18.7 percent of the population in the 47th District and 19.1 percent in the 31st District were using social services.

The 2003 King County Annual Growth Report found that Auburn has 5,092 people, or 12.8 percent of the population, living below the poverty level. Auburn also has King County's second-lowest per capita income, \$19,630.

Voter turnout in the two districts also followed national trends. In many precincts turnout in 2002 was below 35 percent.

``This is a pilot project,' ' Schaefer said. ``Our hope is to better understand how to get people more involved. Our long-term goal is to replicate this project statewide.' '

She explained that a survey of low-wage workers last summer, as well as direct conversations asking them why they don't vote, helped plan the door-to-door campaign in the Auburn-Kent area.

The most common reasons for not voting were that people didn't think their votes would make a difference, or they didn't feel they had enough information about candidates, Watts said.

In addition to registering voters, the committee plans to develop candidate forums in the two districts.

Both major parties are active in voter registration drives

By Mike Archbold