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There's little sign of presidential placards in southern New Jersey

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Out there in the heat of political battle, at the height of the presidential campaign season, it seems something is missing.

"You used to see them on every yard, every street, everywhere," said Violet Mintess, a volunteer for the Barack Obama campaign.

"My own father keeps calling me," said state Sen. Bill Baroni, R-Middlesex, Mercer, chairman of the John McCain campaign in New Jersey. "But every time we get some in, they go right out."

What is this rarity? Old-fashioned yard signs - cheap to make and easy to put up, but apparently in short supply in southern New Jersey, at least for the presidential candidates. One enterprising Obama supporter in Linwood even went to the trouble of making one himself with just a blank white sign and a dab of paint.

When it comes to why, the answers vary - from union slowdowns to hurricane delays to even, if indirectly, John McCain himself. But the main reasons can be boiled down to two: strategy and money.

At the Atlantic County Democratic Headquarters in Egg Harbor Township, volunteer Mary Slomine said the scarcity comes partly from the top.

"A lot of people feel that signs don't vote," Slomine said. "When the state directors set up the budget, they felt the money would be better spent on field coordinators. I personally like signs, but we feel we're spending our time better by registering people to vote than trying to distribute signs."

That helps explain why the largest shipment yet, 1,000 signs, arrived only in the past few weeks.

"We ordered from the (online) DemStore, and we waited three weeks to get the signs," Slomine said. "We didn't open this headquarters until August 28, but in hindsight we should have ordered a thousand signs back in July. But there was no place to store them."

But now that they're here, why are there so few Obama-Biden signs peppering supporters' lawns? Volunteer Violet Mintess thinks she knows.

"The signs are for sale for five to 10 dollars," Mintess said. "They're putting those contributions toward the campaign. They didn't take the federal (matching funds), so they have to make money."

It's the first time a campaign has charged for signs, as far as Mintess can remember. But Slomine said John Kerry's 2004 campaign charged \$4 for signs and that Obama signs must be purchased and not given away in Cumberland and Cape May counties, as well.

At the Atlantic County Republican Headquarters on Fire Road - located in a former Lone Star Steakhouse

complete with paintings of cowboys on the walls - no one was willing to talk about signs. Unlike the Democrats, the Republican volunteers referred all comment to the person in charge, county chairman Keith Davis.

Davis paused when asked if McCain-Palin signs were "for sale."

"They're not being *sold*," he said. "There's a minimum suggested donation of \$5."

"If someone doesn't want to leave \$5, we're not going to stop them," Davis said. "There's a lot of new people coming in, and we're asking them for \$5 to help the cause of our get-out-the-vote effort."

They would get a shipment of "50 here, 100 there," he added. "But we made some calls and we got a shipment of a thousand. Anyone who wants them can come by our headquarters."

Notice how both county headquarters received the same number of signs in the latest shipment? Cape May County Republican Chairman David I. Von Savage helped explain why.

"Signs cost \$3.99 to \$1.15 depending on how you bundle them," Von Savage said, "and the maximum a non-federal committee like the Cape May County Republican Organization can spend per candidate for a federal campaign is \$1,000."

And who was it who pushed that limit through the U.S. Congress?

"It's the McCain-Feingold law," he said, referring to the legislation co-sponsored in 1997 by the Republican nominee. "That's the rub, but it cuts both ways. It's just ironic that McCain is one of the candidates. It has created some shortages, especially with the demand for McCain-Palin signs."

So if the latest batch of signs goes quickly, what is an Obama or McCain supporter to do? Slomine, for one, grabbed a couple of Obama signs in Pennsylvania when she worked there for the April primary - "From Philly back to Margate," she said - but as far as less legitimate sign-absconding, she's seen less this time than in 2004.

"One of the problems with the Kerry campaign is that there were a lot of signs stolen," Slomine said. "I haven't seen that this year - except one. The man had written his address inside the sign, so saw the sign two blocks away he knew it was his. He told (the thief), 'You can have the sign, I'm going to let you keep it. But if I find you doing this again ...'"

But do signs even matter?

"No," Sharon Schulman said bluntly. "Signs don't work."

The director of the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at Richard Stockton College said that other than municipal elections, "you don't win an election because of lawn signs. It really doesn't do much at all. ... There are far more effective uses of money."

Tell that to Mary Vasser, a former Obama organization fellow. Grabbing a number of Obama-Biden signs, she backed out the doors of the Democratic headquarters and headed toward the parking lot.

"I'm going to put my signs in my car," she said, "while they're still here."

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