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Funding set for vote with 'paper trail'

Md. budget has $6.8 million for new optical-scan system

By Laura Smitherman

Sun reporter

January 18, 2008

After years of protests that the touch-screen voting machines that it bought in the wake of the 2000 Florida election debacle are unreliable and susceptible to tampering, Maryland will abandon the system and replace it with devices that allow for a manual recount.

Gov. Martin O'Malley has proposed $6.8 million to buy new optical-scan machines, which read paper ballots filled in by voters with pencil or pen. They will not be available for use until 2010 - too late for the presidential primary or general election this year.

Election reform advocates hailed the move, saying voters have no guarantee that their ballots would be properly counted by the state's current ATM-style machines, which were manufactured by Diebold Inc.

"Our machines can easily be rigged in ways that are undetectable," said Robert Ferraro of SAVE our Votes, a nonpartisan group. "We were anxiously waiting to see if the governor put the money in his budget, and he did, so we are very pleased. Otherwise, we would have been stuck with a paperless system."

Maryland was among the first states to move to a paperless, electronic system after the voting dispute in Florida during the 2000 election, which prompted Congress to push states away from "butterfly" and punch-card ballots. But then fresh concerns were raised about the touch-screen electronic systems that are easier for voters to use but that computer scientists have warned could be tampered with or hacked.

Officials in Maryland started rolling out the $65 million electronic-voting system in 2002. Diebold had to replace parts in voting machines that were used in the 2004 election because of glitches in the "motherboard," the main circuit board, that could cause the machines to freeze. The company insisted that no votes were lost because of the problem.

The new system involves optical scans of paper ballots and would cost roughly $20 million. O'Malley would set aside $3.4 million in state money to buy, install and manage the system, an amount that would be matched by localities. The remaining cost of the system would be covered by funding in future budgets.

The legislature approved and O'Malley signed a measure last year to replace the machines, but the changeover was contingent on the governor including funds for it in his budget proposal.

"One of the government's primary responsibilities is to ensure the integrity of our voting process and our elections, and the governor has provided funds in his budget to do that," O'Malley spokesman Rick Abbruzzese said.

The legislature must decide whether to keep funds for the machines in the budget, but the new system has widespread support in the General Assembly. Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller previously raised concerns about costs in light of deficits and the fact that the state was still paying for the old system, but yesterday he said he's "confident" the funding will be approved.

"The governor is trying to respond to the needs of the state as much as possible, and we need to have confidence in our voting machines," said Miller, who represents Calvert and Prince George's counties. "A lot of people asked for a paper trail, and the governor is going to give it to them."

Proponents say that paper-trail systems ensure votes are recorded and provide a means for independent recounts. Other states have made the switch from electronic machines recently. Florida plans to have optical scanners in place before the November election. California and Ohio have enacted restrictions on the use of touch-screen voting machines.

Maryland experienced problems at polling stations statewide during the 2006 primary election, although those difficulties stemmed from election workers not showing up and malfunctioning "e-poll books," new devices used to check in voters. The e-poll books crashed after election judges checked in every 43rd voter, creating long lines at precincts across the state.

Election-reform advocates raised concerns yesterday about Diebold contracting with the former chairman of Maryland's Republican Party to transport the current machines from warehouses to the polls in the primary and general election this year. The contract is with Office Movers, a subsidiary of the Elkridge-based Kane Co., a company owned by John M. Kane.

Kane served as party chairman for four years through 2006, and he is on the statewide steering committee for Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. His wife, Mary, was appointed by Republican former Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. as secretary of state and is a delegate on the primary ballot for Romney rival Rudolph W. Giuliani. Kane's contract was first reported by Wired magazine.

Kevin Zeese, executive director of TrueVoteMD.org, which has advocated for paper ballots, said the contract opens the possibility for tampering. "If the new paper-based voting system with optical-scan machines counting votes were in place, this would not be an issue," he said.

Kane denied any conflict of interest. He said his company has a large fleet of trucks that can deliver the voting machines in the short time frame allotted and has made such deliveries for nearly four decades in Maryland, the District of Columbia and surrounding states. He said the machines are sealed and "tamper-proof."

"To say that this isn't a conspiracy theory is to say that Jeffrey Dahmer only had an eating disorder," Kane said. "There are groups who don't like the current machines, and I'm just getting stuck in the wind tunnel."

laura.smitherman@baltsun.com

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