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Electronic Ballot Backup Clears Md. House

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Voters in Maryland would have their electronic ballots backed up by a paper record under legislation that unanimously cleared the House of Delegates yesterday, one of several efforts underway in the General Assembly to change the way elections are run.

But like many proposals in the legislature this year, the move to create a paper trail system could fall victim to a lack of funding because of a looming budget shortfall that's putting a crimp in new spending.

Maryland would join 27 states that require paper receipts, amid concerns that the touch-screen machines now used across the country can't be verified for accuracy or checked in case of a recount. The House bill would not require paper records in time for next year's presidential election and allocates no funds to put a system in place.

The bill's lead House sponsor said lawmakers felt compelled to pass something this year to give voters more confidence in the system and increase turnout.

"If people are not going to vote because they don't trust the machines, that's not in the state's best interest or the voters' interest," said Del. Sheila E. Hixson (D-Montgomery), chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. "We feel we've given the Board of Elections enough time to do this."

The bill directs state election officials to make paper voting records available by the next election for governor, in 2010. If Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) has not set aside up to $20 million in the state budget by the next fiscal year to fund the new system -- a sum that must be matched by local governments -- the mandate will dissolve.

The Virginia General Assembly recently approved legislation that requires local election boards to replace touch-screen machines as they wear out with machines capable of producing paper receipts. The changes are expected to take a decade to complete.

In Maryland, the Senate is considering a companion measure to the House action. Senate President Thomas Mike V. Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) called it a "positive step" that is likely to pass but said the bill would have few teeth without funding. The governor also supports paper trail legislation, spokesman Rick Abbruzzese said. "The question is how quickly we can move forward."

Paper records, which also are gaining momentum in Congress with strong support by the new Democratic majority, are one of several legislative remedies the General Assembly is pursuing to address long lines and faulty voting machines during last year's primary and general elections. A bill to amend the state Constitution to allow voters to cast ballots two weeks before Election Day passed both chambers last month and has support from the governor. And the legislature is likely to approve a plan to move the state's presidential

primaries up from March 4 up to Feb. 12 next year to give voters a bigger voice in crowning a presidential nominee.

The switch to paper receipts, pushed heavily by voting-rights groups, is likely to make the 18,810 touch-screen machines now used in the state obsolete.

A newer version of these machines would at least produce a continuous roll of paper, but not an individual receipt for each ballot. Without a system of single receipts, a voter's privacy could be compromised, election officials said. The state probably would need to switch to an optical scan system -- which was in place in 19 counties before 2000 -- that produces an individual receipt for each vote.

The state already has paid $52 million for touch-screen machines since 2002, when they were introduced throughout the country after the disputed 2000 presidential election. And election officials are on track to spend a total of $115 million through fiscal 2009 for the machines, technical support, ballot printing and project management.

Even with the switch, the state would still be on the hook for $33.5 million in financing costs for the touch-screen system, election officials said yesterday.

Voting rights advocates said the cost is worth it.

"Voter confidence in the process, if not priceless, is worth a lot," said Rob Richie, executive director of FairVote.

Election officials said they believe the current system works.

"We've done a lot of work to make sure the system we have now is secure and reliable," said Ross Goldstein, the deputy election administrator. "But we understand that policymakers are interested in making a change."

In Montgomery County, Board of Elections spokesman Majorie Roher said a paper trail would not address last year's Election Day chaos, which was caused largely by human error.

Staff writers Ovetta Wiggins and Tim Craig contributed to this report.

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