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From the Baltimore Sun

From Saturday's Sun

Senate OKs paper-trail votes

Measure would require new voting machines, system by 2010, but cost of scanner equipment may prove an inhibiting factor

By Melissa Harris
Sun Reporter

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The Maryland Senate unanimously approved a bill Friday that would require the state to scrap its \$65 million electronic-voting system and switch to new machines that have a paper record.

If the bill wins final approval and is signed by the governor, voters would not use the new optical-scan equipment until the 2010 election. The measure is contingent on state funding, and the new system is projected to cost \$18 million to \$20 million.

For Maryland officials, the move would mark the second time in five years that the state has overhauled its voter system.

After the 2000 Florida voting dispute prompted Congress to push states away from "butterfly" and punch-card ballots, Maryland was among the first states to move to a paperless, electronic system. But computer scientists soon concluded hackers could sabotage some of the new systems in ways that were almost impossible to detect.

Glitches and delays in last September's primary prompted then-Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. to call on voters to cast absentee ballots in the November election.

"What's happened is ground-breaking," said John Schneider of the Maryland Election Integrity Coalition, one of the groups backing the legislation. "After an effort going on three or four years, things finally came together in a rush." <

The Senate's approval of so-called paper-trail legislation shocked many delegates, who expected senators to again derail their efforts to address reports of design and security flaws in the state's high-tech equipment.

The House of Delegates unanimously passed its version of the bill last month for the second consecutive year,

but senators had referred the bill back to a committee.

"I had written [the bill] off," said Del. Sheila E. Hixson, chairwoman of the House Ways & Means Committee. "The good news is that this bill won't take effect until 2010, so we have time" to work out differences.

She said she likely would recommend that the House approve the Senate-based measure, avoiding a conference committee, and that differences be worked out next year when funding is considered.

Sasha Leonhardt, a spokesman for Gov. Martin O'Malley, said he has not taken a position on the bill.

The state's current voting machines, made by Diebold Election Systems Inc., operate much like ATMs. Voters touch a computer screen to make their choices, and the results are stored on the machine's hard drive and a removable card.

Once the polls close, election workers transport the cards to local election offices, where computers tally the results.

Surveys have shown that voters like the simplicity of the current equipment's use and design, as well as the ability to enlarge the print on the screen and easily offer ballots in Spanish.

But concerns about the system's security have prompted both Congress and the federal agency responsible for crafting national election standards to reconsider the use of so-called "paperless" systems. Both bodies are currently weighing stricter regulations and may act this year.

If Maryland's legislation passes, counties would most likely rely on optical-scan machines, which some localities used before. These machines also are used to tally absentee ballots in Maryland.

Voters mark their choices by filling in ovals or completing a broken arrow on a paper ballot and then feeding the ballot into a computer. The ballots are saved in the event of a recount.

More Americans cast votes using optical-scan machines than any other mode of voting, said Kimball Brace, president of Election Data Services, a Washington group that researches voting trends.

Both versions of the paper-trail legislation would require audits of the new system. The Senate version would allow state election officials to determine how those audits would be conducted, while the House version spells out the procedures in detail.

The two bills also differ in how they ensure that visually impaired and other disabled voter have the ability to case ballots without assistance. House lawmakers crafted precise language with the assistance of members of the disabled community; the Senate version is more general.

The state's current electronic system allows visually impaired people to vote in private and without assistance.

But cost is the most important concern.

The state faces a budget shortfall of approximately \$1.5 billion starting next fiscal year. If the state switches to new equipment, Maryland would likely pay for the optical-scan machines, while local and state elections officials pay off the current equipment.

Ross Goldstein, deputy director of the State Board of Elections, said Friday that his agency and Maryland's counties still owe the State Treasury \$33 million for the current voting machines, which debuted in Maryland in 2002 but were not used in Baltimore until last year.

"This bill would not only secure our elections, but would also significantly reduce the expense of operating them, which is critical with our current budget deficit," said Shelley Fudge, co-director of SAVEourVotes, an election reform group.

In another matter, the state Senate rejected public financing of legislative campaigns Friday night on a narrow vote, effectively killing the measure for the year.

Despite support in the House, senators were skeptical of the measure, saying it would cost the state too much at a time when it is facing a budget crisis.

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