

Wednesday, Oct. 7, 2009 By ALAN BRODY, Staff writer

ANNAPOLIS — A technical change in state law has tightened the timeline for the procurement of new optical-scan voting machines that will be used statewide for the first time in next year's elections.

But officials say the modification could even save the state money and is unlikely to cause problems with implementing the new system on time.

The General Assembly this year clarified language initially intended to provide the most reliable ballot-marking system for use by voters with disabilities. Because no such devices met the certification standards outlined in the law, the legislature had to scrap that provision for the 2010 elections and instead allow the use of touch-screen voting machines that have been both praised for their ease of use and criticized for their inability to produce a paper trail.

As a result, the state elections board decided to rebid a contract for the optical-scan voting system in the hopes that it would generate more competition from vendors who could not provide the ballot-marking device, said Ross Goldstein, deputy director of the board.

Bids were received in August and are being evaluated before being brought to the Board of Public Works for approval by late this year or early next year, Goldstein said. The new machines will be financed through a capital lease and is expected to cost around \$12 million.

"As long as there's no other delays or surprises or issues, we're on schedule to get this done on time," he said, noting that the acquisition would ideally take place about a year before the election.

The winning bidder would supply roughly 2,100 optical-scan units, enough for at least one at every polling place and spare devices in case of malfunctions.

The initial shipment of optical scanners should arrive within a few weeks after the contract is approved and will enable testing and training to begin, Goldstein said.

With the new system, which was used in 19 Maryland counties before the arrival of the touch-screen machines, voters will mark their selections in a private booth and feed their ballots through an optical scanner, which can tally the results.

Any voter can request to use a touch-screen unit because elections officials can not discriminate on the basis of disability.

Even though the touch-screen machines will no longer be the primary voting system, Goldstein said the state board still has confidence in their reliability, despite the lack of paper receipts.

The state is reducing its inventory of roughly 20,000 electronic machines by about 75 percent. Unused units will be put in storage to ensure the optical scanners run smoothly and eventually will be sold or recycled, Goldstein said.

"This isn't the type of thing you can just toss in the garbage," he mused.

The touch-screen machines, which cost \$80 million, were first used in 2002 in Montgomery, Prince George's, Allegany and Dorchester counties. They were used in every jurisdiction in 2004 except Baltimore city, which started in 2006.