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GROUPS URGE SENATE TO PASS NEW PAPER TRAIL BILL Urge House to Enact Before Session Ends

After "recommitting" the bill last week, the Senate Education, Health and Environmental Affairs (EHEA) Committee successfully submitted a newly amended paper trail bill to the Senate Thursday. The new SB392 is likely to pass the full Senate today.

These new amendments remove the possibility of the State Board of Election certifying an electronic verification system, a move that election integrity activists see as critical. "We could not allow the previous bill to go forward with that option," said Shazia Anwar, Director of TrueVoteMD, an election integrity group with over 3000 members statewide. "We can live with these amendments."

The new amendments ensure that any new voting system certified for use must include a voter verified paper record. These changes would require an optically scannable paper ballot marked by hand or with the help of an assistive marking device.

"We are delighted that the Senate is now listening to the two-thirds of Maryland voters who want a paper trail when they vote," said Shelley Fudge, Co-director of SAVEourVotes. "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. Studies have shown that operating costs for optical scanning equipment are 30% to 40% lower than for our current touchscreen machines."

Both groups had urged passage of HB18 as amended, which passed the House unanimously on March 18 and crossed over before the deadline, because it contained three essential components: 1) required voter verifiability; 2) made the paper ballot the official vote record for audits and recounts; 3) required mandatory audits of election results to confirm accuracy.

"We hope the House of Delegates quickly resolves the discrepancies between SB392 and HB18 if the Senate bill passes today," said Ms. Anwar. "Maryland needs this legislation in place if the Governor has to find a way to fund it in time for 2010."

Both groups stressed that both HB18 and the current SB392 reflect a significant but acceptable compromise between the legislature, concerned about a growing fiscal deficit, and election integrity activists. The compromise includes delaying new system implementation until 2010 (instead of in time for the 2008 Presidential election) and making implementation null and void unless funded in the Governor's budget next year.

"With only three days left in this session, there are still many hoops that this legislation must go through in order for the bill to reach the Governor's desk for his signature," said Ms. Anwar in a statement to the group's members. "We urge all citizens concerned about protecting our voting rights to tell their legislators to support the current paper trail bills."

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