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VOTING MACHINES

Dade studies switch to paper ballots

Miami-Dade County officials are studying whether to replace an expensive, controversial touch-screen voting system after a series of mishaps.

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Three years after spending \$24.5 million to install a controversial touch-screen voting system, Miami-Dade County elections officials have been asked to study scrapping the system in favor of paper-based balloting.

The request from County Manager George Burgess follows the recent resignation of Elections Supervisor Constance Kaplan and the revelation that hundreds of votes in recent elections hadn't been counted.

In a memo, Burgess asked new elections chief Lester Sola to assess whether optical scanners, which count votes marked on "bubble sheets," would deliver more accurate results. Burgess also wants information on how much a switch would cost -- and how much it might save in the long run.

County officials say the machines have more than tripled Election Day costs.

"It's a confluence of bad facts," said Lida Rodriguez-Taseff, head of the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition and a longtime critic of the elections department. "You have lousy technology that doesn't inspire voter confidence combined with outrageous costs for that lousy technology."

Burgess' April 4 directive came just days after Kaplan resigned amid revelations that a coding glitch in the county's iVotronic touch-screen machines tossed out hundreds of votes in six recent elections.

"What I've noticed about this system from the very beginning is that there are so many things that can happen and, therefore, maybe it's not the system we should've gotten years ago," said Mayor Carlos Alvarez, who met with Burgess and elections officials Monday to discuss the issue.

Any change would stir controversy after the county spent millions in 2002 to become one of the larger clients of Election Systems & Software, which makes iVotronic. But county officials say ensuring voter confidence is crucial.

"Sometimes lessons are expensive," said County Commissioner Katy Sorenson, who said she will wait for the manager's report before weighing in on the machines.

After the 2000 presidential election debacle, officials wanted "the best, most sophisticated technology," Sorenson recalled. At the time that meant buying 7,200 iVotronics, a paperless machine that stores votes on hard drives and discs -- despite concerns that there were no paper receipts.

In Broward County, Mayor Kristin Jacobs said she regrets that the county also chose iVotronics over optical scan machines.

"I understand that we've invested a lot of money in the electronic machines, but I would be more comfortable with optical scan because it gives you the ease of computerization and a paper trail," she said. "Hindsight is 20-20. In retrospect I probably would have gone with optical scan but we're beyond that now, and we've had minimal problems in Broward."

Still, in the new machines' first major test, the 2002 primary was marred in both counties by poorly trained pollworkers who struggled with the new technology.

In 2004, officials in Broward and Miami-Dade considered a plan to add printers to the touch-screen machines for the

presidential election, but the effort fizzled because the technology was not state-certified and would have cost up to \$1,200 per machine. In the end, those elections went smoothly, but critics continued to demand a paper trail.

More recently the machines received another blow when the Miami-Dade elections department revealed that a staffer's coding error had led to hundreds of ballots being thrown out in last month's special referendum on slots. Kaplan said the number of missing votes would not have affected the election's outcome, but the same error was found in five other municipal elections.

Amid the problems, the cost of the actual elections -- about one countywide and 30 or so municipal races per year -- has increased. Sola said the Nov. 2 countywide election cost \$6.6 million because of increased labor costs to program the machines, set up the equipment and print backup ballots. He said previous punchcard elections ran from \$1 million to \$2 million.

Those familiar with optical scanners, already used to count absentee ballots, estimate that it would cost about \$8 million to equip the county's 749 precincts with them.

In a statement, ES&S officials said they are very proud of the work they have done ``to greatly enhance the county's voting process."

"This is a partnership that we hope will continue well into the future," read the statement. ``Regarding the specific type of voting equipment Miami-Dade County may decide is best for them and their voters, that question is entirely up to the county to decide."

Sola has until May 27 to report back to Burgess.

Herald staff writer Beth Reinhard contributed to this article.