

County will try optical-scan voting

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Ballot readers will be used in vote on April 5, says county official

By TIM ROWDEN
Of the Post-Dispatch

Jefferson County is going high-tech for the next election by tossing out the punch-card ballots it has used for decades and replacing them with an optical-scan system.

The County Commission on Tuesday approved a lease-purchase agreement through UMB Bank to finance the switch.

County commissioners in December approved a \$410,000 contract with Henry M. Adkins and Son Inc., an election-equipment provider based in Clinton, Mo., for the purchase of 80 optical-scan ballot readers to replace the punch-card ballots and card counters that the county has used since 1978.

About 76 of the new ballot readers will be used in the April 5 election, says Jeannie Goff, the county's chief deputy elections clerk.

Jefferson County will be reimbursed for about \$220,000 of the cost of the optical-scan system out of funding provided to the state through the federal Help America Vote Act.

The law is designed, in part, to help counties replace their outdated voting machinery.

The law also requires states to set up statewide voter-registration databases and guarantee access at the polls for the blind and disabled.

With an optical-scan system, voters use a pencil to mark paper ballots, which are then counted by a computer.

A memory card in the scanner keeps a running tally of vote totals. After the polls close, those totals are transferred by a computer modem to the county clerk's office, where they are tabulated.

The paper ballots are stored in a sealed container, in case they are needed for a manual recount.

"We're interested in having a smooth election without a lot of problems," said County Commissioner Ed Kemp, 1st District.

County election officials are also looking at other ways to smooth the election process.

Goff says the county plans to try a new method of providing election

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Jeannie Goff, Jefferson County
chief deputy elections clerk

judges with up-to-date voter registration information on election day, using a keyboard-mounted handheld computer and programming provided by St. Louis-based Milken Technologies to help voters find their correct polling places.

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Optical-scan system to replace punch cards

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Goff says Milken is providing a handheld and software to Jefferson County to try free-of-charge.

Goff says the software, if effective, would eliminate about half of the telephone calls the county clerk's office receives from polling sites trying to verify voter-registration information on election day.

Those calls are more than just a headache for employees of the county clerk's office.

Goff said the county received so many telephone calls from polling sites during the general election on Nov. 2 that the volume of waiting calls began jamming the telephone lines of other offices at the county Administration Center in Hillsboro.

Goff says the county is planning to place the trial unit at one of the polling sites in the northern end of the county, where new housing developments and population growth are likely to create some questions for judges on election day.

"I want to get a good taste of whether it's going to be helpful to us," Goff said. "If it works out, it will probably go on next year's budget."

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