

City officials assure voters they will avoid a repeat of 2000 election fiasco

■ Hand-held computers at polling places should resolve past confusion regarding "inactive" voters list.

BY JAKE WAGMAN
Of the Post-Dispatch

St. Louis city officials said on Friday they were ready for the Nov. 2 election and assured voters they would not see a repeat of what happened here in 2000.

Those working on the upcoming vote say they have been preparing for four years to avoid the mistakes of the last presidential contest — when thousands of city voters were turned away from the polls. Since then, the governor has appointed all new commissioners to the Board of Elections.

The board's operations have been examined by the state auditor, and the board itself has signed a consent decree with the U.S. Department of Justice, resulting in the purchase of new technology to help with voting.

"And all of those things have helped — it's now time for the real test," Mayor Francis Slay said at a news conference Friday. Joining Slay were officials from the Election Board and the head of the local NAACP, which will be one of several local and national groups with election monitors in the city.

At issue in the last presidential contest were some 50,000 voters on the "inactive" list — voters whose addresses could not be verified. When some of those voters turned up at the polls, they were directed to the Election Board's downtown

headquarters, which was overwhelmed with people, and its phone lines were jammed. The line of voters stretched down the street. Chaos ensued when Republicans and Democrats sparred on whether to keep the polls open.

This time around, election officials at each voting precinct will have hand-held computers that will have on them the inactive voter list. Eligible voters on the list will either be allowed to vote where they are or directed to the proper polling place.

What might be more of a concern

in the Nov. 2 election is the number of new registered voters. Because of aggressive get-out-the-vote campaigns, the city Election Board has been inundated with thousands of voter registration applications. In August, there were 193,000 registered voters in the city; that number is now 215,000. The additional voters could be a problem if not all of them are properly registered or the precincts are not ready for the increase.

"The Election Board is expecting, and is preparing itself to manage, a huge voter turnout," Slay said.