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Palm Pilots undergo test at polls

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Palm Pilots have joined ballot boxes as basic tools in Tuesday's primary election in St. Louis.

As an experiment, the Board of Election Commissioners has bought 20 of the miniature computers. They were programmed to show the 1,000-page list of inactive voters and find names in the list.

The St. Louis Board of Election Commissioners bought the Palm Pilots in place of the more-expensive laptop computers the Department of Justice ordered the board to put in every polling place. The laptops were to contain lists of inactive voters.

The laptops were part of a consent decree with the Department of Justice meant to make voting easier for those whose names are not on the main signature roster for a polling place. But the city could not afford to provide the laptops. Buying the Palm Pilots for a few polling places was seen as a partial step toward fulfilling that obligation.

The total cost of the computers, purchased from Miken Technologies, is about $4,000.

"We're trying to put a minimal investment to see how it's going to happen," said James O'Toole, Democratic director of the election board.

"We've talked to some specialists already," O'Toole said. "They're really enthused about it."

If the project works as planned, the election board will increase the number of Palm Pilots in the hands of election officials.

The number of Palm Pilots the election board gets will depend on the amount of interest from election specialists, who deal with the lists.

Election specialists are election officials in polling places who help people whose names are not on the main signature roster for that ward and precinct.

"We are envisioning that maybe one day it will take the place of all the paper and we can have it in every (polling place)," O'Toole said.

Martin White, a senior account manager with Miken Technologies, demonstrated the Palm Pilot to election board commissioners at a July 27 meeting.

Not having to print the inactive voters lists for polling places would save $8,000 to $10,000 per election, O'Toole said.

The Palm Pilots access information on inactive voters by first and last name, street address and birthday.

"It's a much quicker way to look up information," White said.

"They'll do everything that they intended to do with the laptops," said Derio Gambaro, election board chairman.