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County's new voting machines boast increased accessibility

BY FALON MCCAIN
News-Democrat

Independence for people with disabilities is the goal St. Clair County Clerk Bob Delaney is trying to reach by purchasing more-accessible voting machines.

A demonstration of the machine was given at LINC In c. on Wednesday in Belleville.

The new machines are touch-screen operated for the hearing impaired and equipped with headphones and a keypad for the vision impaired. The machines can be set on a stand that can be adjusted for height, or set on a table.

A voter-verified paper audit machine is attached to the voting machine and records the ballot information in the machine's database. The information is then sealed and held for 22 months as mandated by federal law.

An access card is used to initiate the system, but ballot information is not recorded on the card. The system gives the voter options to make changes if mistakes are made. At the end of the session, all the options marked on the ballot are reviewed by the voter before the ballot is submitted. If the voter rejects the ballot, they will be given the option to start over.

The federal government has allocated money to all states through the Help America Vote Act to ensure that at least one of these machines is available at each polling place. Because the equipment costs \$5,000, each polling place is only required to have one machine accessible.

"It will cost \$921,000 to purchase 158 machines," said Delaney. "We were given a federal grant for \$905,000, but the county will have to come up with \$16,000."

Delaney said Fidar Election Co., located in Rock Island, reviewed 10 to 15 voting systems before a decision was made. The system selected is being tested by the state board of elections. Clearance to purchase the remainder of the machines will be given in three weeks.

"This really is the best one." said Terrv Bartruff, account manager for Fidar. "Clinton County

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signed a contract (with us) and 70 other counties have proposals to go to this (system)."

With this system, voters can change the size of the text and adjust the contrast of the color on the screen. Voters won't have to worry about over-voting because a beep will sound to alert them if they try to vote for more than one candidate per race. A warning also is given if a voter does not vote on a race.

Write-in candidates will still be allowed. Voters can type in the candidate's name by using a keypad that will appear on the screen or by using the letters on the numeric keypad attached to the voting machine.

Marilyn Hughes, information and referral specialist for LINC Inc., is visually impaired and tested the equipment during the demonstration.

Hughes said, "I think this is the most fantastic machine I've ever worked with. The instructions were easy to follow through, and the speech is very clear because it's a human voice -- much better than synthesized. I hope everyone uses this machine."

Delaney said the new machines should be available at the polls in March. Election judges are expected to be trained by January.

To request an advance viewing of a disability-accessible voting machine, contact the St. Clair County Clerk's office at 277-6600, ext. 2380.

Contact reporter Falon McCain at 239-2655.



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