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Optical-scan cards show improvement

By Lisa A. Abraham
Beacon Journal staff writer

A new shipment of computer memory cards for voting equipment at the Summit County Board of Elections continued to experience failures Thursday -- but at a lower rate than those tested earlier in the week.

Testing was expected to continue today on the latest batch of memory cards received by the elections board from Election Systems & Software, the Omaha, Neb., company that manufactured the county's new optical-scan voting system.

County residents are expected to vote using the optical-scan system in the May 2 primary.

After success with the initial 177 cards tested this week, the remaining 348 cards began to experience a failure rate as high as 30 percent. The company has since shipped hundreds of new cards to the county this week.

The most recent shipment, which arrived Thursday, had a 10 percent failure rate, said Bryan Williams, elections board director. The new voting equipment should include 525 of the cards, which are loaded into machines that read ballots.

ES&S spokeswoman Ellen Bogard did not return calls Thursday seeking comment.

Optical-scan voting involves a paper ballot that voters mark with a pencil. The ballots are then fed into a scanner that reads the pencil marks and records votes on the memory cards.

Williams said that of about 260 new cards tested initially Thursday, 27 malfunctioned.

Company officials believe the errors are attributable to memory cards produced by one ES&S subcontractor.

Through the end of the workday Thursday, 438 properly working cards had been tested -- a figure that included the original 177, said Marijean Donofrio, elections board deputy director.

Donofrio said ES&S representatives working on the implementation told board staffers that they have never experienced a failure rate higher than 1 percent in other counties.

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Donofrio wondered whether the company should consider a recall of the product.

She also expressed concern that ES&S continues to send memory cards to Summit County from the subcontractor whose product is being questioned. ES&S has not named the subcontractor.

Donofrio said the board was expecting Thursday's shipment to include only memory cards made by the company that made the original 177 that tested successfully, but that wasn't the case.

``They've been referring to the cards as finicky," she said of ES&S. ``If that's the case, if they work fine in May, will they work fine in November? I would advocate for an entire new batch of cards. We don't need any problems (in the future) that we can head off now," she said.

Williams said about three weeks remain before the board needs to begin programming the cards for the May 2 elections, and he is confident ES&S will take care of the problems. ``They know their reputation is at stake," he said.

Williams said any delay in implementing the new voting system is a concern. ``We take every setback seriously because we want to stay on schedule. We'll keep testing," he said.

Ohio Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell hired a consulting company to come in and test all the new voting equipment before it is used in any election. That testing began Monday.

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