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No more chads: City gears up for punch-free primary

By John McCormick
Tribune staff reporter
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Tales of glitches emerged before Saturday's public unveiling of new voting machines for Cook County: An emergency run to Radio Shack for a soldering iron. Broken wires inside a brand-new ballot counter. And a last-minute debate over whether voters should be asked to complete an arrow or fill in a circle.

But in the end, the State Board of Elections on Friday approved five types of high-tech equipment that will be used in Chicago and suburban Cook County for the first election here in roughly a quarter-century without punch-card ballots.

Final certification of the more than \$50 million in equipment bought by the city and county from California-based Sequoia Voting Systems came none too soon, considering that early voting for the March primary starts in just 16 days.

With election officials planning to show off their new equipment Saturday at malls, grocery stores and libraries in Chicago and the surrounding suburbs, plenty of work and confusion surrounds the transition to optical-scan and touch-screen voting.

This is happening in a year when early voting is also being introduced. "Being mayor is easier than this," joked Cook County Clerk David Orr, who served as interim Chicago mayor for several days after Harold Washington's death in 1987.

The new equipment will replace the notorious punch-card ballot--and its hanging, dimpled and pregnant chads. Voters in Chicago used the paper ballots since 1982, while those in suburban Cook County had punched choices since 1976.

Officials picked Sequoia last summer in a decision that marked a compromise. While most voters will mark circles on paper ballots, those who are blind, disabled or just curious about the technology can use electronic touch screens. The dual approach is one way to meet a federal requirement to provide unassisted voting to the disabled, while not fully embracing electronic voting and the security and reliability hazards some

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say it presents.

But even as voters try the new touch-screen voting machines, they shouldn't get too attached to the current model.

As part of a swap brokered by Sequoia, roughly 4,000 machines will be shipped from Chicago to Las Vegas after the primary, so that a newer model--one still not finished or approved by federal and state officials--can be used here in November's general election.

The new model will have a larger screen, better sound and a wider selection of on-screen fonts. Officials say the upgrade was negotiated after the original contract and will cost the city and county about \$1.5 million, although it will be paid for with federal funds.

Before their use, voting machines must be tested by federal and state officials to make sure they count votes accurately, will not break down under stress and are not susceptible to fraud. State officials say federal deadlines for converting to new voting systems has put added pressure on equipment manufacturers and those who certify their machines.

"Shortcuts are being taken that shouldn't be taken," said Dianne Felts, the state board's director of systems and standards.

Felts said testing for the equipment started in August but was not completed until late Thursday. In one test, roughly 100,000 ballots were fed into an optical-scan counter, a task that took more than two weeks.

The Chicago and Cook County contracts are Sequoia's biggest piece of business in the nation. The company has more than 10 people in Chicago and Springfield to help prepare for the primary and expects at least 30 here on March 21.

"There won't be anyone in the company that won't be available that night," said Jack Blaine, Sequoia's president.

The experience with punch-card ballots was less than stellar here and elsewhere. More than 120,000 Cook County voters in 2000 failed to register a choice for president or rendered their choice unusable by piercing holes next to names of two or more candidates. The ballot style came under intense scrutiny in 2000, as the nation watched controversial recounts in Florida counties that led to George W. Bush in the White House after a Supreme Court ruling.

The new optical-scan machines will spit out ballots that are "overvoted," meaning more than one candidate has been incorrectly marked. But they will allow "undervotes," where people fail to mark a selection.

Election officials are especially concerned that voters will fail to realize the ballots have two sides. To counter the learning curve, officials plan extensive voter-education campaigns. They will also play instructional videos on a continuous loop at polling places.

Tom Leach, spokesman for the Chicago Board of Election Commissioners, said officials decided to have voters mark circles rather than complete arrows on the optical-scan ballots because the circles were viewed as more voter-friendly.

"If you go back in the history of elections, you usually had a circle or a square," he said, adding that an "X" or some other solid mark can be made inside the circle with a pen.

One thing that won't change in the new voting system is the use of candidate numbers. Although they were created for punch-card ballots, they will still appear next to candidate names.

Election officials say those who are illiterate can use them, plus they are part of the Chicago voting tradition.

"The voters are used to it," Leach said, "and the candidates love it."

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