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Md. Lawmakers Told Voting Paper Trail Impossible This Year

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. (AP) - The state does not have time before the 2006 elections to equip electronic voting machines with printers that make a paper record so voters can confirm that their ballots were recorded accurately, Maryland lawmakers were told Wednesday.

"I don't see how it would be possible," Donald Norris, professor of public policy at the University of Maryland Baltimore County, said during a hearing on the machines before the House Ways and Means Committee.

Norris directed a study commissioned by the State Board of Elections to look into the possibility of adding equipment to the Diebold touchscreen machines to provide a paper trail.

The university was asked to test seven systems that could be added to machines, but only four manufacturers provided machines for the study.

Norris said all four systems are prototypes and are not commercially available. Even if they were available on the market, he said he doesn't think it would be possible to solicit bids, buy the equipment, add it to the existing machines and train election administrators before the September primary election.

The Diebold machines have been under attack in Maryland and across the country from critics who say they can easily be manipulated and that results can't be trusted to reflect the way voters cast their ballots.

The Ways and Means Committee is considering legislation to require a paper trail that will assure Marylanders their votes are recorded accurately and allow for recounts in contested elections.

Delegate Sheila Hixson, D-Montgomery, chairwoman of the committee and sponsor of one of the bills, said the committee will continue to look at options for a verifiable voting system despite the conclusions of the Norris report.

"It won't stop us from going forward," she said.

Delegate Nancy King, D-Montgomery, said she was disappointed with the presentations by Norris and Paul Herrnson, a University of Maryland professor who headed up a second study that looked at how difficult it would be for voters to use the machines if a paper trail is incorporated into the Diebold machines.

"The cry from my constituents is that they want something done by September," she said.

Linda Lamone, the state elections administrator, told the committee that Norris is right and that it would not be possible to incorporate a paper trail in time for the September primary election.

Lamone defended the current system, calling it probably the most secure in the nation and expressing absolute confidence that the state will have a fair, accurate count of votes in September and October.

She said under questioning that the voting system could be changed ahead of the 2008 elections. "I think it's waste of money. If that's what the will of the state of Maryland is, that's what we'll do," Lamone said.

Norris said he recently completed a survey of 800 voters to test their feelings about the Diebold machines. While results are still being analyzed, the study "does not appear to support the notion that there is widespread mistrust of the system," he said.

Critics of the Diebold machines questioned the value of the two studies because the election board, which has defended the accuracy and reliability of the machines, decided which systems for providing a paper trail would be studied.

"That's intolerable," said Robert Ferraro, a co-founder of the Takoma Park-based TrueVoteMD, which has been in the forefront of the campaign against continued use of touchscreen machines that do not maintain a paper record of each ballot.

Asked what options are available if there is too little time to incorporate a paper trail into the current system, Ferraro said the state could switch back to an optical scan system in which voters fill in a circle or arrow next to the names of candidates and then feed the paper ballot into a machine which records the votes.

One of the new pieces of equipment included in the two studies is a Diebold printer module that would be added to the existing machines. Voters could look at the paper ballot, but it would be kept in rolls in the machines and they would not get a ballot to take with them when they leave the polling place.

Herrnson said all four systems included in the system would be harder for voters to use than the existing machines and would make voting less private.

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