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### New machines may have heads spinning

Officials to unveil new system for fall election

By Suzanne Bohan, STAFF WRITER



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San Mateo County is pushing to go electronic — voting, that is.

If Warren Slocum, the county's chief elections officer, has his way, voters will spin a wheel on a black electronic panel to cast their votes Nov. 7.

Then they'll push some buttons, review a paper record, push another button and they're done.

If that sounds slightly more complicated than punching holes in a paper ballot — and carefully removing any hanging chads — your hunch is on par with test voters in other areas.

During a presentation Tuesday in Redwood City, Slocum described his plans to ask the Board of Supervisors next week to approve a \$10.5 million purchase of the eSlate electronic voting system, manufactured by Hart InterCivic in Austin, Texas. The eSlate model was selected because of its electronically robust design, said Sarah Carrade, a program specialist with the San Mateo County elections office. The system is in use in Orange County, as well as hundreds of other counties nationwide, a Hart representative said Tuesday.



Kitty Mullooly, vice mayor of Hillsborough, tests the new eSlate electronic voting machine during a presentation by San Mateo County Chief Elections Officer Warren Slocum in Redwood City on Tuesday. (Ron Lewis/staff)

The eSlate system also creates a voter-verified paper ballot, and offers one model with novel features that enable even those with physical impairments such as blindness or paralysis to vote. The purchase will put the county in compliance with the federal Help America Vote Act, which requires at least one accessible voting device in every polling place.

But the switch from paper to pixels will take some adjustment, Slocum said.

"It's a huge massive educational undertaking to make sure this goes well," he said. "We have to learn a completely new language and a completely new approach to the conduct of elections."

Each of the more than 470 precincts in the county will have several of the systems, including one that's handicapped-accessible, Carrade said. They will replace a paper-and-optical-scan system in use since 1992.

While Slocum and his staff praised the Hart system for its reliability and the breadth of its features, test voters were less enthusiastic about its ease of use.

In a 2004 study in Ann Arbor, Mich., participants reported that out of six systems tested, the touchscreen system made by Diebold was easiest to use. With this machine, they simply pressed on the screen to select a candidate or to vote on a ballot measure.

With the Hart eSlate system, to which they gave the least enthusiastic ratings, they had to spin the wheel to make a selection, then press a button to accept the choice. Voters also reported more confusion when changing a vote with the eSlate model, and hence made slightly more errors, compared with Diebold and other models tested.

"Many voters objected to the dial and button interface," said Paul Herrnsen, the director of the Center for American Politics and Citizenship at the University of Maryland, who helped conduct the test.

"Some younger voters considered it 'clunky,' while some senior citizens found it difficult to operate," he said.

Creating an interface that's easy to use but doesn't compromise the reliability of the results is the overarching challenge of converting from paper to electronic voting, noted Herrnsen and two other experts in a 2002 study.

"Unlike just about every other (computerized) system in our society, voting systems must be usable by every citizen at least 18 years old," they noted. "This includes the elderly, disabled, uneducated and poor users. It also includes individuals who, for whatever reason, have opted out of using electronic machinery."

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Carrade, the elections program specialist, acknowledged that users generally prefer touchscreens, but noted that they have hidden risks.

"In regards to usability, yes, people are more comfortable with touchscreens," she said. "But the reason we chose not to use touchscreens is the calibration issue."

What that means, Carrade explained, is that sometimes a person imprecisely hits a touchscreen button, perhaps because of a long fingernail or a medical condition that causes hand tremors, and inadvertently selects the wrong one. With the eSlate system, she said, there isn't that risk.

"With this rotary dial, there's no mistaking what you selected," Carrade said.

Carrade said this spring county election workers ran extensive pilot tests with the eSlate system.

"As far as long-term usability, we found that once people really got on it, they recognized that it wasn't as difficult as they thought," she said, adding that "the wheel works like an iPod, and a lot of people are familiar with that."

In addition, if a voter prefers to continue using a paper ballot, they can choose to do so at the polling place. Absentee voters will also continue to get a paper ballot.

State and federal funds cover just more than \$9 million of the funding for the machines, with \$1.3 million coming from county coffers. However, the latter amount is offset by \$900,000 in savings accrued by the elections department, Slocum said.

He added that the county will save an estimated \$1.2 million every four-year election cycle, primarily from the elimination of the purchase of paper ballots, many of which were thrown away unused because of state requirements to prepare for a 75 percent voter turnout.

If the board approves the purchase, Slocum plans an extensive retraining program for county's 2,200 poll workers.

His department will begin running two training classes daily through Sept. 17 at three locations — in Daly City, San Mateo and Redwood City.

The elections department is also engaged in community outreach, and in Redwood City and San Mateo, two centers with the machines will open 29 days ahead of election day — coinciding with the opening of the absentee ballot voting period — allowing voters to take their time getting used to the machines while officially casting their vote. At least four days before election, four more locations with the machines will be opened.

For more information on the eSlate system, visit the county's election office Web site at <http://www.shapethefuture.com/eslate>.

Contact Suzanne Bohan at (650) 348-4324 or [sbohan@angnewspapers.com](mailto:sbohan@angnewspapers.com).

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