Allegheny County voters must learn new machines in just 6 weeks

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By Jerome L. Sherman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

After more than 40 years of casting votes on massive mechanical lever machines, Allegheny County voters now have less than six weeks to learn how to use a new generation of computerized equipment.

County officials have not yet signed a final deal with Nebraska-based Election Systems & Software, but they're already preparing a major educational campaign to familiarize 877,999 registered voters with the company's iVotronic, a touch-screen machine weighing less than 15 pounds.

That campaign likely will encompass TV ads, countywide demonstration sessions and extensive training classes for as many as 6,500 poll workers.

"We'll do what it takes to make people feel comfortable with these new machines," said Kevin Evanto, spokesman for county Chief Executive Dan Onorato.

On Wednesday, Mr. Onorato announced that he was backing away from a potential contract with another company, Sequoia Voting Systems, because its machine faced an uncertain certification process at the state level.

ES&S has agreed to sell 4,700 iVotronics to the county for $11.9 million. From 1,300 to 2,600 of the machines will be available for the May 16 primary, at least one for every precinct. As a backup, the company will provide optical scanners that read paper ballots.

A $12 million federal grant will cover the cost of both the machines and the educational campaign.

Tonight at 6, the county's three-member elections board, which includes Mr. Onorato and County Council's two at-large members, will vote on the deal with ES&S during a public hearing at the county courthouse, Downtown.

They have little wiggle room. If the county doesn't put new equipment in place by the primary, it will violate the federal Help America Vote Act and could face legal action from the Justice Department.

Once the county has finalized the contract, ES&S will teach election officials here how to manage its system. Amanda Brown, a spokeswoman, said the company would customize its
training to meet the county's needs.

Mr. Evanto said demonstration sessions for voters likely will be held in community centers, schools and nursing homes across the county. Local TV stations may be asked to broadcast public service announcements.

Steve Pilarski, manager of the county's Office of Property Assessments, will shift to the elections division to help direct a training program for poll workers.

"I'll be moving from the smoldering ashes of assessments to the blazing flame of elections," he said yesterday in his final appearance before the assessment appeals board.

Allegheny County officials can seek guidance from their neighbors. Almost two dozen Pennsylvania counties -- including Beaver, Butler, Cambria, Greene, Mercer and Westmoreland -- have signed on with ES&S.

Westmoreland County is holding its first public demonstration of the iVotronic from 5 to 7 p.m. today at the New Alexandria Fireman's Club on Route 22. A complete schedule of the sessions is on the county's Web site: www.co.westmoreland.pa.us.

The Web site also features an online demonstration of voting on the iVotronic.

On Wednesday, Westmoreland County received its first 460 machines, said Paula Pedicone, director of the county's election bureau. It will have 740 in place for the primary.

The county has held dozens of two-hour training classes, many taught by ES&S employees, for more than 1,550 poll workers.

Regis Young, director of Butler County's election bureau, said he hopes to put together a short commercial for local TV stations.

"They'll run it like crazy," he said.

In Mercer, Beaver and Greene counties, voters are familiar with touch-screen voting technology. They all have used the UniLect Patriot, a machine that was decertified in Pennsylvania last year when a state examiner discovered technical problems, forcing the counties to chose a new machine supplier.

ES&S, one of the biggest voting machine companies in the country, has seen its share of glitches. But it has both state and federal certification, and the support of local election officials.

"We've had a good working relationship with them," Mr. Young said.

Mr. Evanto said Allegheny County officials, along with ES&S technicians, will try to be ready for problems.

"We're going to have some hiccups," he said. "But it's nothing we can't overcome."