Voter ID costs still debated

Counties say they're already overworked

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Georgia's revised voter identification law is headed to the U.S. Justice Department for approval, but questions remain about how much the free IDs may cost the state and the burden they may create for local officials.

The law calls on the state's 159 voter registration offices to issue free ID cards to any registered voter who does not have a photo ID and needs one to vote. Lawmakers have yet to approve money for local registrars to create the cards.

Republicans, who championed the photo ID requirement as a way to stamp out election fraud, estimate it could be done for under $200,000. But they pledged to fund the measure no matter the cost.

"I will wholeheartedly endorse and recommend whatever budgetary efforts it takes to make this in every county in the state available as soon as practical for our citizens," Gov. Sonny Perdue said Thursday when he signed Senate Bill 84 into law.

Secretary of State Cathy Cox's office said the state may have to spend nearly $1 million on equipment required to issue the cards. Cox's office estimated that a computer, camera, printer and other equipment will run about $6,000 per county. That does not include the cost of training, supplies and maintenance.

Some county registrars are concerned about the additional responsibility.

"I have the same number of staff that Fulton County had in voter registration in 1964," said Fulton registration chief John Sullivan. "With no additional staff in more than 40 years, every additional duty you give me ... it's difficult. Computers make us efficient, but someone has to tap those keys."

SB 84, approved by the Legislature this week, revised a year-old law that required voters to present a government-issued photo ID at the polls. The law was suspended by a federal judge who said the $20 fee for a state ID was tantamount to a poll tax. Opponents also said some minorities, the elderly and disabled would have a hard time getting a state ID, because not every county has a driver's license station. Supporters of the new law say it addresses those concerns.
Sen. Cecil Staton (R-Macon), the bill's sponsor, said Friday he has been researching technologies and companies he believes will be able to produce the cards cost effectively.

He said he did not know how Cox's staff came up with its estimate, but said that it was probably based on different technology. He anticipates the cost will be less than a $1 million, but said the price tag should not be a factor.

"If it costs $1 million, then it costs $1 million," Staton said. "I want everyone who wants to get a photo identification card to have one."

Democrats, however, seized on the budget question surrounding the already controversial law.

"Members of the General Assembly should know the cost of what they are voting on," Sen. David Adelman (D-Decatur) said in an interview Friday. "It is irresponsible to vote for something without knowing its cost."

During last week's debate on the bill, Adelman tried unsuccessfully to scuttle it — at least temporarily — because it lacked a "fiscal note" outlining its cost. Other Democrats complained that the new mandate may be a hardship for some counties.

State Rep. Jay Shaw (D-Lakeland) said that in some rural areas, the registrars are part-time, work out of their homes and may be at the courthouse only once a week. Shaw represents parts of four South Georgia counties.

In Shaw's hometown, Lanier County elections official Judy Mullis said locals will figure out a way to comply with the new requirements.

"To me, it's just something else the state has put on folks at the local level," said Mills, who is both probate judge and elections superintendent and handles elections, traffic cases, probate issues and vital records with one full-time clerk.

Clarence Johnson, a member of the Chatham County Board of Registrars in Savannah, said he'll comply, though he questions the necessity of the new measure.

"I think they're wasting the taxpayers' money," Johnson said. "In order for me to get a passport, I need a birth certificate. In order for me to go to work for any agency in the state of Georgia, I must show them my Social Security card. Things I can't use to vote are now the things I need to get the materials to vote.

"That makes about as much sense as a dead mule trying to pull a wagon."

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