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HEADLINE: St. Louis County is about to announce its choice of a new voting system

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BODY:

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Torn between a past of hanging chads and computer glitches, St. Louis voters will learn as early as Friday what their vote-casting future will be. The county's Election Board is expected to choose the winner of an almost $11 million contract to provide a new system to the state's largest bloc of registered voters.


On the drawing board is a hybrid system that uses both touch-screen and optical-scan voting machines. On voters' minds is an ever-present fear of fraud from new-fangled election equipment.

For months, crowds of concerned voters have frequented County Council and Election Board meetings, speaking out against the supposed dangers of touch-screen voting.

"Touch-screens "are notorious in their use elsewhere," said Virginia Harris, an outspoken critic of the new systems.

John Diehl, the county's Election Board chairman, said he understands that others share Harris' fear. He said that means the board's biggest job will be to build voter confidence during this time of change.

"We've never had widespread complaints of how elections are conducted in St. Louis County, and we want to maintain that," he said.

Federal push

In October 2002, President Bush signed the Help America Vote Act into law, allocating $3.9 billion to states and requiring they implement and maintain an interactive, centralized computer voter registration list.

As a part of this act, states were also encouraged -- and offered millions in federal money -- to update their voting systems. The goal was simple: to move from a paper ballot system to more uniformed, modern system.

Some states reacted quickly, sinking millions into cutting edge computer voting machines. Others preferred to wait until the Dec. 31 deadline this year.

St. Louis County received $9.6 million in federal funds to help pay for a new system. Diehl said he expects the overall price of a new system to be between $10 million and $11 million.

St. Louis is also going through this process. Like the county, city officials are planning a hybrid system. They have accepted bids from four of the same companies. The one exception is AccuPoll.
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The city expects to get $2.2 million in federal aid to help pay for the changes, which could mean that the city will need to come up with as much as $1.2 million to cover the additional costs.

Last month, the St. Charles County Council approved $832,050 for 180 optical-scan machines, made by Diebold.

St. Louis County dragged its feet on making a decision. The trepidation was understandable. While few people had any problem with optical-scan machines, concerns over touch-screen voting systems were commonplace.

And according to County Republican Elections Director Joseph Goek, touch-screen machines would be the primary machine in most elections. Optical-scans would be the primary machine only during large federal elections in August and November in even-numbered years.

The chief reasons: The county's ballots often are long, and hundreds of different versions are needed because of various overlapping jurisdictions and districts, such as those for municipalities, schools and legislative seats. Optical-scan ballots would be lengthy and would have to be stored in special climate-controlled conditions.

Optical-scan machines operate much like SAT tests, feeding a paper ballot into a scanner. Touch-screen machines are similar to ATMs and have been deemed the best way to comply with federal requirements for use by the blind, deaf and physically challenged.

Checkered past

The problem is, computerized systems have a spotty track record at best. Horror stories of payoffs, lost votes and systems vulnerable to tampering led many people in states such as Ohio, Florida, North Carolina and California to question their effectiveness.

And such problems were not limited to just one or two companies. Nearly every company specializing in making touch-screen voting machines has suffered some form of controversy.

Officials say Diebold and ES&S are the most likely candidates to win county job. But both companies have had their share of problems. A few examples:

Wake County, N.C., November 2002: ES&S machines failed to count 436 ballots at two Wake County locations. ES&S officials confirmed the machines were defective.

Sacramento, Calif., April 2004: California officials ban the use of 15,000 Diebold touch-screen computers after their poor performance in the state's March primary.

Miami-Dade County, Florida, May 2003: An internal review of election results found that the ES&S system was unusable for auditing, recounting or certifying an election because of a serious software bug.

In 2003, copies of the source code for a Diebold touch-screen machine were inadvertently made public, fueling fears of lax protections and potential for voter tampering.

However, officials said there are two factors that should allay fears. First, Missouri requires a paper trail for all computerized voting machines. This, officials say, provides a valuable backup in case of problems.

Secondly, most of the problems with touch-screen computers occurred early in their development.

"It takes a while to get the bugs worked out," said Marci Andino, executive director of the South Carolina Election Commission.

Last year, Andino came under fire for helping South Carolina go to a statewide touch-screen system. In public meetings, on the radio, and at the Statehouse, people highlighted the same problems that cause anxiety today.

In November last year, nearly 1 million people in that state voted on ES&S's iVotronic machine. The 15 counties that used them were finished with their tabulations by 9 p.m., way ahead of the rest of the state.

"People were scared at first, but now most agree that the touch-screens are much easier," Andino said. "Change is always scary, but that shouldn't keep you from pushing forward."

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**GRAPHIC:** photo
PHOTO by ASSOCIATED PRESS - Broward County election judge Robert Rosenberg examines one of the disputed ballots in Florida in 2000. The election is famous for its debate of hanging chads. Alan Diaz | The

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