



## Sangamon may need new voting machines

Current system not certified for mail-in

By BERNARD SCHOENBURG  
POLITICAL WRITER

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With little more than six months until the general election, Sangamon County faces the prospect of having to abandon the new voting machines it paid \$1.7 million for just 21/2 years ago.

**WEB EXTRA:** [Concerns about Populex \(pdf\)](#) | [Populex's response \(pdf\)](#)

Voters, meanwhile, face the prospect of having to learn how to cast their ballots all over again.

With the Illinois State Board of Elections balking at continued approval for the county to use its new machines, Sangamon County Clerk Joe Aiello said Tuesday he thinks there's only a 50-50 chance the devices provided by Populex Corp., which were first used in the March 2006 primary election, will be permitted in the Nov. 4 election.

In Chicago Monday, the state elections board deferred the matter to a May 19 meeting in Springfield.

Aiello said one issue blocking continued state approval is that Populex is not getting federally required testing of a process to allow electronic counting of mail-in absentee ballots.

With the existing system, he said, mail-in absentee ballots are hand-counted. The ballots are designed to be scanned, but for now, that's being used as a check on the hand-count, Aiello said.

About 4,500 mail-in absentee ballots are expected for the Nov. 4 election, Aiello estimated.

"We bought this equipment in good faith, assuming that it was going to be tested at all levels when necessary," he said. "Right now, we are put in a desperate situation by this vendor. We are hopeful that he will change his mind and do the right thing."

Grant money that came with federal voting law changes paid for just about all of what was spent on the county's 930 Populex machines, Aiello said.

Dianne Felts, director of voting systems and standards for the State Board of Elections, has recommended against granting final approval at this time.

"It's an incomplete system," Felts said Tuesday. "Sangamon is far too large of a county to be manually counting."

Sanford Morganstein of West Dundee, president of Elgin-based Populex, said the federal certification process is voluntary but is adopted by Illinois.

“We have completed a percentage of it,” he said, adding that a lab was “quite a ways through it” when that lab, in Huntsville, Ala., lost its ability to do federally approved testing about a year ago.

“They were testing all the aspects of the mail-in absentee in addition to some enhancements that we thought would be a good idea for the precinct-based voting,” Morganstein said, adding that Populex has used other labs for parts of its required testing as well.

In a report Felts wrote for the State Board of Elections, she said Morganstein indicated that testing “cost too much and that the Federal Standards are too unpredictable and are constantly evolving at this time. Mr. Morganstein indicated he was not returning to Federal testing any time soon, thus no major changes can be accomplished.”

While the report mentioned other problems with the voting machines, Felts said the lack of the approved machine-counting system for mail-in absentee ballots is “a major stumbling block.”

Morganstein said the reason he doesn’t intend to immediately seek such testing is based on “a combination” of factors, including “getting stability at the test labs.”

Felts said she was instructed by the board Monday to meet with the company and Sangamon County officials and “try and compromise” before the May meeting.

Technically, Populex has been seeking “final approval” for its voting system from the board. Felts said that all voting processes in the state’s 110 voting jurisdictions (including counties and city election commissions) are on interim status. There has been much updating of rules and machinery, and with every change, she said, there’s a two-year interim period. But Populex is the only company in the situation of seeking final approval in the face of a negative staff recommendation.

If the county has to find other machines to use by November, Aiello said, “(w)e need to aggressively pursue funding for it” and might ask the elections board to help secure federal funds.

Aiello also said his office has been discussing the situation with the state’s attorney’s office to try to hold Populex to its contract, “which might be difficult.”

Aiello noted that Populex is new to the election-machine game, making the cost of federally required testing a larger burden per unit that it would be for a company with wider distribution.

Sangamon County is the only jurisdiction in Illinois using the Populex machines and is the largest customer of the company. The next-biggest customer is a jurisdiction in Missouri that has about 30 machines, Morganstein said.

“The most important thing to remember in all of this (is) the integrity of the voting process has not been compromised, and no votes have ever been compromised,” Aiello

said.

Bernard Schoenburg can be reached at 788-1540.

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## The cost?

Any calculation of the cost of a new voting system is “at the early stages of the process,” said Sangamon County Clerk Joe Aiello. The Populex system cost the county about \$1.7 million, mostly grant money.

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## Pros, cons of Populex machines

### Pros

\*Prints on paper ballots that allows voters to verify their choices and enables easy recounts, when needed.

\*Notifies voters if they fail to vote for a race.

\*Has no punch-cards.

### Cons

\*Lacks federal approval for an automatic system to count mail-in absentee ballots.

\*Some machines “froze” during balloting and needed to be restarted.

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