

City of Alexandria, Virginia

MEMORANDUM

DATE: MARCH 3, 2011

TO: THE HONORABLE MAYOR AND MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL

FROM: JAMES K. HARTMANN, CITY MANAGER 

SUBJECT: BUDGET MEMO # 7 : REPLACEMENT OF THE CITY'S VOTING SYSTEM EQUIPMENT

This memorandum describes the rationale for including \$270,000 in FY 2013 of the Proposed FY 2012 – FY 2021 Capital Improvement Program to purchase digital scan voting machines to supplement the City's existing voting equipment. This funding is also planned in the Approved FY 2011 - FY 2020 Capital Improvement Plan.

Background on the City's Current Voting System:

The City's current voting system (eSlate) is an electronic system, also known as a Direct Record Electronic (DRE) voting system. The City purchased the eSlate voting system in 2003 to replace an optical scan system that was nearly nine years old at the time. The City was required to change its voting system to comply with the Help America Vote Act, which was enacted by the federal government in 2002. This legislation required all localities to provide voting systems that would be accessible to persons with disabilities, including those who are blind, in each polling place by early 2006. The City chose the eSlate after an extensive search that included input from more than 40 organizations including the Commission on Persons with Disabilities, N.A.A.C.P., League of Women Voters, Hispanic Advisory Committee, Office on Aging and Adult Services, elected officials, political parties and technology experts.

Rationale for Purchasing New Digital Scan Voting Equipment:

The City needs to purchase additional voting equipment to minimize voter delays in the November 2012 General Election, when the ballot will be approximately four times longer than it was in 2008. The November 2012 ballot will include local candidates for City Council and the School Board in addition to the traditional General Election elements. As a result, it is anticipated that each voter will spend more time in the voting booth and voters will spend much more time waiting in line if the City does not purchase additional equipment. Additional voting machines will also be required in the future for new polling places and to replace equipment that becomes inoperable as it ages.

The major issue is that the City is not permitted to expand upon the current eSlate system. The Commonwealth passed legislation in 2007 that prohibits localities from purchasing additional electronic voting machines, such as the eSlate, to increase capacity or even to replace defective units because these systems do not provide a voter verifiable paper trail.

This legislation does permit localities to continue using electronic voting machines that are already in place. By purchasing new digital scan voting machines, the City will increase its capacity to move voters through the polls and reduce delays while staying compliant with Virginia law. The new machines will provide a voter verifiable paper trail.

After seven years of use, the eSlate continues to perform well, and the system has accurately recorded close to half a million votes. As such, the City is planning to keep at least one eSlate machine at each polling place in order to better accommodate individuals with disabilities, including voters who are blind or visually impaired. In addition to these accessible machines, the City will continue using the current software and absentee paper ballot features that are part of this system.

Because the new digital scan voting machines will operate with inexpensive paper ballots and portable voting booths, it will be easy to expand or contract the number of voting booths available at each polling place. This will provide the flexibility to add a large number of portable voting booths for large elections such as the 2012 General Election.

Operating Costs Associated with Purchase of Digital Scan Voting Equipment:

It is projected that an additional \$19,000 per year will be needed for operating costs associated with the digital scan voting machines. This will provide funding to print ballots, pay license fees for the new equipment and pay for operating supplies for the new machines.

Summary and Future Actions:

The Alexandria Electoral Board, which is comprised of three members who are appointed to staggered three-year terms by the Alexandria Circuit Court, is responsible for overseeing election activities in the City. During the next year, the Electoral Board and its staff will research the City's options for purchasing additional voting machines to increase our capacity for the Presidential Election. Currently, the only viable option is to purchase digital scan voting machines, but it is possible that the State legislature could lift the ban on purchasing electronic machines and that would expand our options. In either case, the City will be required to purchase voting equipment that has been tested and authorized by the State Board of Elections. The Electoral Board and its staff will consider all viable options and make a recommendation to City Council by early calendar year 2012. Thereafter, the Board plans to acquire voting equipment in the summer in time for use in the November election.