

Ventura County's new voting system promises more speed, security ahead of the 2020 election

Kathleen Wilson, Ventura County Star Published 12:52 p.m. PT Dec. 24, 2018



(Photo: KATHLEEN WILSON/THE STAR)

Ventura County residents will vote on a new system expected to boost speed, visibility and security of results but cost some jobs for elections workers starting in 2020.

The Ventura County Board of Supervisors decided earlier this month to buy the \$4 million system from Denver-based Dominion Voting Systems, Inc., at the urging of Registrar of Voters Mark Lunn.

The system was delivered earlier this month to the county elections office in Ventura, with installation and employee training set in January, officials said.

Lunn said the existing voting system, purchased 13 years ago, is worn out.

"It's been a very good system, but it's done, it's spent," he told the board.

Earlier: [Ventura County turnout tops 70 percent in November as voters react to Trump's policies \(/story/news/politics/elections/2018/12/04/election-turnout-ventura-county-2018-november-midterm-trump-policies/2198481002/\)](#)

In an interview, Lunn said he wanted to get the Democracy Suite system in place before the "huge" California Presidential Primary Election scheduled March 3, 2020.

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He wouldn't be surprised to see turnout go well above 80 percent in the election that's been moved up to March from June to increase the state's influence in the nomination process. When California voters cast their ballots in the state primary held in June 2016, the vote was considered anticlimactic. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump had received enough votes by then to become their parties' presumptive nominees.

The move to March will make a "big difference," said Tim Allison, adjunct professor of political science at CSU Channel Islands in Camarillo. "It means

California is going to be a player in the determination of the Democratic and Republican nominees," he said.

The voting system is one of three certified by the California Secretary of State's Office, a bar that must be met for an elections system to be purchased and used. Election systems are evaluated for security, accuracy and other factors in a process taking six months to a year, said Sam Mahood, press secretary for Secretary of State Alex Padilla.

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Registrar of Voters Mark Lunn and sales manager Steven Bennett appear before the Board of Supervisors to explain new voting system. (Photo: KATHLEEN WILSON/THE STAR)

Lunn anticipates a reduction of \$320,000 from the expense of operating the current \$6-million system. Included are \$99,000 in temporary labor costs and \$222,000 savings in services and supplies. The official said he did not know how many workers hired as extra help for elections would lose jobs or hours in the conversion.

"There won't be as many opportunities," he said. "That is how things are. We owe it to the taxpayers to do things most efficiently."

The labor savings is tied to the fact that reviews of problematic ballots will be completed electronically instead of by hand. If software shows an unclear mark or too many votes on a ballot, an image will be sent to a computer where a worker can immediately review it to determine the voter's intent. The manual process can take 10 to 25 days, said Steven Bennett, regional sales manager for Dominion.

"We're saving 20 to 80 percent of the cost of reviewing the ballots and the tabulation as a whole," he said.

MORE: [Healthy turnout, record number of registered voters seen ahead of Tuesday's election \(/story/news/politics/elections/2018/11/05/record-registered-voters-turnout-expected-election/1861260002/\)](/story/news/politics/elections/2018/11/05/record-registered-voters-turnout-expected-election/1861260002/)

The sales manager said he is not related to Supervisor Steve Bennett, one of five supervisors who unanimously approved the purchase.

Under the new system, no votes will be tabulated at the polling places. Both the ballots from the polls and mail-in ballots will be counted on newly purchased high-speed scanners at the elections office, officials said. The machines can tabulate the vote three times faster than in the past, Lunn said.

In previous elections, memory cards placed inside the scanners at the polls were transported back to the elections office and read. Under the new system, the paper ballots will be taken from the polls and fed directly into the scanners.

"Basically we have gone from a digital system to a paper system," Lunn said. "It is hard to hack a paper system. We're making it simpler."



Registrar of Voters Mark Lunn speaks to the Ventura County Board of Supervisors about a new voting system. (Photo: KATHLEEN WILSON/THE STAR)

Voters can mark their choices in ovals on a paper ballot, similar to the old ballots that required them to connect arrows beside the candidates' names. Or they can vote with their fingers on an electronic tablet that will issue a printed ballot for their review.

Bennett said there will be much more visibility than with the current system because every ballot will be imaged and linked to an audit mark showing how the machine read the ballot.

The safety of the new system is higher because of governmental requirements and heightened security protocols, he said.

Lunn said the elections office will conduct mock election testing of all aspects of the new system and train staff, elections officers and voters on its use next year.

MORE: [DMV: 589 voter records not sent before election \(/story/news/2018/12/14/dmv-589-voter-records-not-sent-before-election/2321437002/\)](/story/news/2018/12/14/dmv-589-voter-records-not-sent-before-election/2321437002/)

A total of 20 California counties have purchased the same Democracy Suite system, officials said. Included are Sonoma, San Luis Obispo, Monterey, Kern, Contra Costa and Sacramento counties along with small rural counties in northern reaches of the state. Negotiations are underway with Alameda County and the city and county of San Francisco, Bennett said.

About \$650,000 of the cost of the \$4 million system will come from the county's general fund reserves, with the rest covered by state and federal funds.

The county bought the system under terms of an agreement between Sacramento County and Dominion instead of issuing its own request for bids. The larger county had already issued a request for proposals, evaluated the system and set standards, Lunn said.

"It's less expensive and more timely to do it this way if the system meets our standards," he said.

MORE: [California voter turnout sets recent record for a midterm \(/story/news/2018/11/17/california-voter-turnout-sets-recent-record-midterm/2035019002/\)](/story/news/2018/11/17/california-voter-turnout-sets-recent-record-midterm/2035019002/)

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