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Activists laying out options to urge Allegheny County to acquire new voting machines



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A coalition of activists wants a new commission to review — and recommend replacements for — Allegheny County’s 4,600 voting machines. And as befits an effort to double-check the results of each election, organizers have back-up plans to ensure they have their say.

The coalition, which includes the local League of Women Voters and the election-transparency group Vote Allegheny, has proposed an ordinance to create a 13-member “Voting Process Review Commission” tasked with “conduct[ing] regular periodic reviews” of voting equipment. If it decides newer equipment is needed, the commission would recommend the machines to be purchased, if voters approve a referendum to pay for them.

“Sooner or later, the county will have to replace the machines, and we’d like them to be prepared with a recommendation about the replacement,” said Annette Shimer, vice president of the League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh.

The effort stems from longstanding doubts about the touch-screen voting machines Allegheny County uses. Such

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machines Allegheny County uses. Such machines store votes in memory, but have no paper trail to confirm voters' choices. Some activists say the absence of hard copies makes it harder to detect vote-rigging.



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“You can’t do a proper recount or audit with the machines we have, because there is nothing to count,” said Ron Bandes, head of Vote Allegheny.

It appears to be a foregone conclusion that the commission will recommend replacing the current machines. The ordinance says voting machines must retain a paper record of each ballot so voters can verify them at the polls and “totals can be verified by an independent hand count” after election day.

The commission would consist of 10 members and three alternates. Some would be named by the county executive and County Council directly; others would be chosen from a pool of computer/cybersecurity experts, representatives of disabled voters, and advocacy groups.

County Director of Elections Mark Wolosik seemed somewhat bemused by the proposal.

“We talk about this stuff now,” he said. “It comes up at every meeting of the Board of Elections,” a panel led by Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald that oversees voting and certifies election results.

Allegheny County is one of 24 Pennsylvania counties using the iVotronic manufactured by Nebraska-based Election Systems & Software. Mr. Wolosik’s staff performs a number of quality-control tests on the machines each election, including studying the programming of randomly selected machines for tampering.

“There’s been nothing untoward” in any election, he said, including this year’s May primary. Many activists favor using optical scanners, which scan and record ballots marked by voters, But Mr. Wolosik said “every machine has strengths and weaknesses,” and purchasing scanners countywide would cost at least \$26 million.



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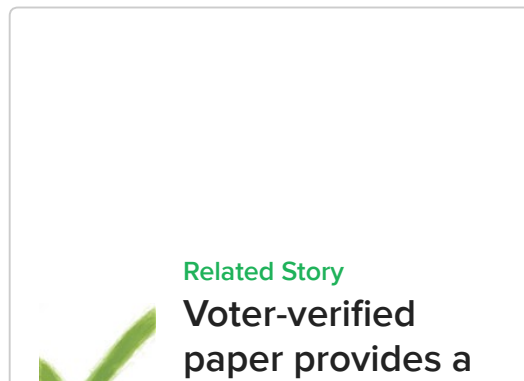
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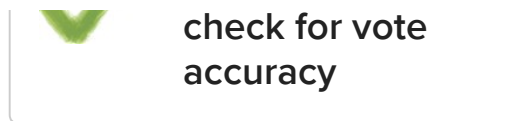
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Such replacement wouldn't happen quickly.

“There's no chance of having [new machines] for the 2018 election,” said Mr. Bandes. “We'd hope to have them for 2019 because you don't want to introduce a new system in a presidential election” in 2020.

The campaign to create the commission is following three parallel tracks: Organizers hope to encourage Allegheny County Council members to back the legislation, which currently has no sponsor. (Mr. Bandes said the measure had largely been crafted by longtime government-reform advocate David Tessitor.) At the same time, organizers are gathering 500 signatures on a petition to require council to act on the proposal.

Mr. Bandes hoped to have those signatures filed by the end of the week.

Council could reject the measure, but even that may not be the end of it. Voting activist Michelle Zuckerman-Parker is gathering signatures to place the proposed ordinance before voters in a November referendum.

Ms. Zuckerman-Parker, who was active in efforts to recount vote totals after the 2016 election, called the referendum “a

2010 election, called the referendum a continuation of the effort we started last November.” She said she has 200 volunteers collecting signatures, and is recruiting others [through the website Don’t Tread on My Vote](#). She hopes to have 22,000 signatures by the end of July.

If she succeeds, Mr. Wolosik said, the commission proposal will be the third topic to appear before county voters under the county’s referendum procedure. One passed: row-office reform in 2005. The other failed: an attempt in 2003 to keep County Council members from running for other office

Ms. Zuckerman-Parker said she would push ahead no matter what County Council does. “They may say, ‘We’ve got this,’ but there’s no guarantee.”

“The irony is that if I get the 22,000 signatures,” she added, “there will no be no way to verify the votes are legitimate.”

The proposed ordinance can be found [here](#).

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