

October 24, 2013

TO: Ramsey County Board of Commissioners

FROM: Joseph Mansky  
Ramsey County Elections Manager

SUBJECT : STATUS OF NEW VOTING SYSTEM ACQUISITION

I wanted to bring you up to date on the status of our efforts to acquire a new voting system. Starting in January, our voting systems task force, which includes two members of our staff and our local election officials for the cities of Maplewood, White Bear Lake, Shoreview and St Anthony, has been working to define the requirements of the new voting system and draft a new joint powers agreement under which the county and cities would operate the voting system for the next fourteen years.

The new joint powers agreement has been prepared, reviewed by the county attorney and the city attorneys, and is in the process of being approved by each of the city councils. I plan to have the JPA ready for your consideration in December.

As we conceive it, the new voting system would be comprised of three basic elements operating as a single, fully integrated system that we could use for the fourteen year period envisioned. These three elements include: a ballot counter for use at each polling place on election day and at designated locations for in-person voting prior to election day; a ballot marking device for use in conjunction with the ballot counters that would enable elderly and disabled voters to vote independently and secretly; and central counting equipment that would facilitate the high speed and high volume counting of ballots here at the Elections office that have been cast by mail.

Our original plan had been to adopt the new joint powers agreement this year, request proposals from the voting system vendors, purchase a new voting system early next year and implement it in time for the 2014 state elections. I now conclude that it would not be prudent to acquire and deploy a new voting system in 2014.

There are three voting system vendors that are currently doing business in this state. One is our current vendor. The other two are companies that operate in many other states and would like

to do the same here as well. Each has a voting system that they would like to offer for our consideration.

The Minnesota election law sets out the conditions for use of voting systems in this state. All voting systems must be examined by an independent testing authority designated by the US Election Assistance Commission to determine if the voting system operates in compliance with standards adopted by the Commission. Those voting systems meeting the federal standards must then be tested by the secretary of state to determine if the voting system is in compliance with the provisions of our state law. Voting systems passing both the federal and state testing requirements are then certified for use and are available for us to purchase.

To date, none of the three systems likely to be offered to us has been fully and unconditionally certified for use by the secretary of state. As a consequence, there are no voting systems meeting our basic requirements that in my view are ready for our purchase and use in 2014. However, it is highly likely that all three vendors, given another year to continue development and testing of their products, will have fully functional voting systems meeting our requirements ready for use in time for implementation in 2015.

We have been awarded two grants under the Help America Vote Act by the secretary of state. The appropriation language for the second of these grants requires us to spend the grant money (\$382,000, which must be matched by the county) no later than March 31, 2014. Any unexpended funds must be returned to the secretary of state. Since it is in our interest to keep the grant money, we should request that the legislature amend the appropriation law next year and provide us with additional time to spend those funds on a new voting system. I have spoken to Claudia Brewington and Nick Riley about this and have drafted a proposal for inclusion in our 2014 legislative platform. Since at least twelve other counties are in a similar situation, my thought is that the legislature should be amenable to such a request.

Although an increasing number of our ballot counters are malfunctioning (after thirteen years of use), I am confident that we can continue to use our current voting system for one more year and have begun planning along those lines for the 2014 state elections.

In conclusion, my recommendations to you are that we delay requesting proposals for a new voting system until after the 2014 state general election, and plan to acquire and implement our new voting system in time for the 2015 city and school district elections.

cc: Julie Kleinschmidt  
Lee Mehrkens