Arlington's New Voting System Q&A

Q: Why is Arlington changing voting systems?

A: Although our current electronic voting system has served us well, it is now 12 years old and is reaching the end of its life expectancy – which was only about 10 years to begin with – and we are encountering more issues with machines that we can't deploy for elections. We feel it is important to have an updated, reliable system in place in time for the busy 2016 Presidential election.

Q: Why a paper-based system? Why can't we use electronic machines like the current ones?

A: Virginia law prohibits localities from purchasing electronic voting machines. Localities like Arlington who already owned such machines before the 2007 law change may continue to use them, but when the machines are ready for replacement, the new system must be paper-based. Arlington is now at that point.

Q: How does the paper-based system work?

A: All voters will be given a paper ballot to mark their selections. When complete, voters insert the ballot into a digital scanner, which not only reads the ballots markings but also saves a digital image of the ballot. At the close of polls, election officers run a tally of all votes cast on the scanner.

Q: What are the advantages of this system over the old electronic system?

A: There are two key advantages.

1. When the polls are very busy, more voters can mark ballots at any given time, limited only to how many marking stations can fit in a polling place. With the old machines, we had a limited number that we could deploy to each polling place. If a voter took a long time voting, he or she tied up a machine for other voters, who had to wait to mark their ballots.
2. With paper there is a durable record of all votes cast. If, for example, a polling place loses electricity, voting can continue with paper without interruption. The ballots can be inserted into the scanner later by pollworkers, or in the worst-case scenario, they can be counted by hand.

Q: What about voters with disabilities or physical limitations? The electronic machines allow them to make touch selections or vote audio ballots.

A: The new system will work similarly, allowing those with special needs to vote without assistance should they so choose. Each polling place will have a ballot marking station that will allow either touch-screen or audio selection. Once the voter completes all selections, the station produces a paper ballot, which is then inserted in the scanner to be tallied along with all other voted ballots.

Q: What should I expect when I arrive at the polls on Election Day?

A: First, of course, you must show your photo ID and check in at the pollbook, which is no different than in the past. You will still be handed a voting permit card, but instead of being directed to a voting machine, you will then go to a Ballot Station. The Ballot Officer will take your permit and hand you a paper ballot.

The Ballot Officer will then direct you to an open ballot marking station, which could either be a stand with privacy screens or privacy screens set up on a table, depending on your particular precinct setup. If all stations are busy, you can even vote using a clipboard if you choose!

At the marking station, use the ball-point pen provided to mark your ballot selections. Simply fill in the oval to the left of your selections. If you wish to write-in a name not on the ballot, complete the oval next to the write-in line for that office and write in the name of the candidate you wish to vote for.

Once you are finished marking your ballot, check all of your selections carefully! If you made an error, please return to the Ballot Station to get a new ballot. Your previous ballot will be voided by the Ballot Officer.

When you are satisfied all your selections are marked as you choose, take your ballot over to the scanner. If you are concerned about others possibly viewing your marked ballot, the Officers can give you a privacy folder. You may need to briefly wait if other voters are inserting their ballots ahead of you.

When you get to the scanner, you will see a green light, which means it is ready to read your ballot. Simply insert your ballot into the slot. You can insert it upside down or

bottom first – it will read it in any direction! The light will turn red while it is reading your ballot, and then green again once it has been accepted.

If there are issues with the scanner reading the ballot, it won't be read, and the scanner's printer will produce a brief report, telling you why it couldn't read your ballot. Take the report and your ballot over to the nearby Election Officer, who will explain the issue to you. You do not need to show the Officer your ballot if you don't want to, just the paper report. In most cases, the report will say something like more choices marked than allowed, or blank ballot inserted. These issues can be remedied by returning to the ballot officer so you can mark a fresh ballot.

Q: How do I mark my ballot?

A: Each selection on the ballot will have a oval next to the name or choice. Simply fill in the oval using a blue or black ball-point pen, which we will provide for voters at the polls. If you mark a wrong selection or change your mind after you've made a selection, take your ballot back to the Ballot Officer, who will void your original ballot and issue you a fresh one.

It is important that your ballot is marked properly so the scanner can read your selections. If you scratch through a wrong choice and circle the one you really want, for example, the scanner won't understand your intent. Please go get a new ballot!

Q: Will the new system have a summary screen so I can review my choices before I cast my ballot?

A: With a paper system, the ballot itself is your summary, so all voters need to review their choices carefully before they insert the ballot in the scanner. Once the scanner accepts the ballot, no changes can be made. This is the same as touching the "VOTE" button on the electronic machines.

In some cases, voters are alerted to ballots marked incorrectly. If you make more than one selection for an office where only one is allowed, the scanner will not accept your ballot. Similarly, if you insert a blank ballot – or if you make selections by not properly filling in the ovals, the scanner will not read your ballot. An Election Officer can assist if you encounter these situations. In most cases, you just need to go get a new ballot and properly mark your selection, but the scanner will also allow the officer to override your ballot if you chose.

If you make selections in some but not all offices on the ballot, however, the scanner will accept your ballot and count the selections you did make. This is because you are not required to vote for all offices or issues if you choose not to.

Q: Why did you choose this particular system?

A: In Virginia, all voting systems need to be certified both at the national level by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission and at the state level by the State Board of Elections. Currently only four vendors meet both certification standards. We carefully examined all four vendors, and while they all work in a similar manner as far as voter interaction is concerned, the differences between vendors come down to the less publicly visible aspects of a system, including programming, support, tabulation and reporting, and absentee processing. Our final decision to select equipment from Unisyn Voting Solutions was based on these factors.

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