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Local Editorial: \$350,000 for nine months of work?

April 16, 2013 | 9:00 pm

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After three years of delay, Maryland elections officials are finally replacing the state's aging touch-screen voting machines with ones that can optically scan paper ballots in time for the 2016 presidential election. However, an April 12 story in the Maryland Reporter noted that they are planning to spend virtually all of the \$1.2 million budgeted for the transition on just five outside contractors.



Maryland Election Board Administrator Linda Lamone has recommended paying a yet-to-be-hired senior project manager \$350,000 for just nine months of work to replace the state's aging touch-screen voting machines with ones that can optically scan paper ballots in time for the 2016 presidential election. (Photo: Examiner file)

Election Board Administrator Linda Lamone, who previously stated that the switch would occur "over my dead body," has recommended paying the yet-to-be-hired senior project manager \$350,000, the deputy project manager \$300,000, two business analysts \$210,000 each, and a technical writer \$170,000 for just nine months of work.

Del. Guy Guzzone, D-Howard, chairman of the Public Safety and Administration Subcommittee, which oversees Lamone's budget, was "floored" by the proposed salaries, some of which are twice as high as Gov. Martin O'Malley's. His fellow Howard County Democrat, state Sen. Jim Robey, said that "everybody is scratching their heads" over how it could cost more than \$1 million when state employees have already written two versions of the request for proposal -- a major component of the contract.

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This is not the first time Lamone has come up with highly questionable figures. Two years after the Maryland General Assembly passed legislation requiring the switch, she overestimated the cost of moving from touch-screen to optical scan machines in a 2009 presentation before the Board of Public Works. However, the following year, the Department of Legislative Services concluded that Maryland would actually save \$9.5 million over eight years because optical scan equipment requires less labor, less maintenance and less technical support to operate.

Nationally known computer science experts have warned of the risks of voter fraud posed by Maryland's aging touch-screen machines, which are vulnerable to hacking and other manipulation. Optical scan machines reduce that risk by producing a voter-verified paper trail that can be audited in close races. They also have the added advantage of reducing the wait times at polling places. During the 2012 presidential election, 20 of Maryland's 24 jurisdictions failed to provide at least one touch-screen machine for every 200 registered voters, as required by state law, resulting in long lines at polling places.

Lamone's past opposition to optical scanners and her greatly inflated cost estimates make her current figures highly suspect. Legislators should take the time to verify them first.

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