Problems with electronic voting in Ireland

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More cash for failed voting system. (Home news)

Byline: Richard Oakley

THE cost of electronic voting is continuing to rise, with a further E400,000 being spent trying to prove that the system is safe to use in an election.

The Department of the Environment has revealed that it is spending E97,000 on a fresh assessment of the controversial system, while the Commission on Electronic Voting, an independent body, has decided to spend E280,000 on three separate tests.

This is in addition to the E52m already spent on electronic voting machines, which are now being stored at an annual cost of more than E650,000.

Although the total cost is approaching E60m, the Department of the Environment continues to defend the system. Its research seems to overlap with the independent commission's, but the department says "parallel testing" is needed and the commission must independently verify if the system works.

All four tests will be completed by next month, but neither the department nor the commission can say if they will be sufficient to validate the system. Officials admit the tests may just show that even more tests are necessary, because they could raise fresh doubts about the software.

The revelation has prompted fresh calls for the electronic voting system to be scrapped. Joe McCarthy, a computer specialist, said the situation was now becoming farcical.

"The system is flawed and no matter how many tests you do on it, this is going to remain the case," he said. "We have already wasted money that could have been spent on more useful things and now we are spending more and more trying to prove that this wasn't a mistake when it is becoming clear that it was. The money should have been used to ensure more people vote."

The government had committed to the system when the independent commission threw everything into confusion by saying it could not recommend the system for use in the European and local elections of 2004.

The commission ran up a bill of E640,000 to the end of last year. This does not include the costs of the new tests.

The Department of the Environment says it will continue to test the system to see if it can be used in future elections.

Ultimately it is up to the department to prove it can be trusted.

Fergus O'Dowd, Fine Gael's environment spokesman, said electronic voting has been mishandled. "This affair has undermined any confidence the public might have in electronic voting. We already have a system that the public trust and that everybody is happy with. It should be used in the next general election."

According to McCarthy, because voting involves a secret ballot it is impossible to prove that electronic voting is safe. "The computer is not allowed to record who does what, because it is a secret ballot, therefore it cannot check what it did," he said.

"The computer is trusted to read a vote correctly, but it cannot be checked if it doesn't do this. A paper receipt trail doesn't help either because it is produced by the computer too.

"If I was in government I would ride this one out until the next general election and then if I got elected again, I would drop it at an early stage in my next term. If I was the leader of a new party coming in, I would drop it immediately and blame the last government for buying it," he said.

NedapPowervote, the Dutch company behind the electronic voting system, insists it is safe and this will be shown to be the case. While the independent commission is not in a position to recommend its use, it has said that this does not mean the system doesn't work.

Testing the software is expected to be a complex and lengthy process. These tests have already been held up because the software authors did not want to release it to a third party over concerns relating to copyright.

In America a recent report into the country's elections system has called for verifiable paper trails for electronic voting machines.