

Low turnout mars Hawaii's digital vote

May 28 2009, By HERBERT A. SAMPLE , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- They built a new digital voting system, but the voters didn't come.

There was some disagreement Wednesday over why only 6.3 percent of eligible voters used a new, first-in-the-nation digital voting procedure to cast ballots for Honolulu neighborhood board seats via the Internet or by touch-tone phone.

But officials at both the Neighborhood Commission, which oversees the neighborhood board elections, and the San Diego, Calif.-based company that created the voting system, insist that digital voting is probably the wave of the future.

"The technology side, it works," said Joan Manke, executive secretary of the commission. "But it's a whole new arena. It's something that's removed from your traditional paper ballots, which has been done for years and years.

"So my sense is because it's a change, it's something totally new, it takes time. I think, for people to buy into it, to want to actually try it," she added.

But the head of Everyone Counts, the firm that put the system together, said the low turnout announced with the results Tuesday had little to do with the technology. Instead, many voters may just have felt little inspiration to cast ballots, said Chief Executive Officer Lori Steele.

"Our systems aren't really about turnout. They're more about accessibility to participation," said Steele. "I think in local elections you'll find that - well, probably in all elections - turnout really depends on the candidates and the political parties and the [election](#) officials and their marketing campaigns."

In the 2007 neighborhood elections, turnout was 28 percent with voters choosing either paper or online ballots.

The commission did try to get the word out this year. Manke said she participated in numerous radio interviews, and the agency bought ads in local newspapers.

Web voting, which produces no paper record, cannot be used in city or state elections because state law bars voting systems that do not include a vote verification process.

One hopeful sign for the technology was that of the nearly 7,300 residents living in 22 districts with contested races that voted, 84 percent voted online. There were, however, 115,000 eligible voters.

There were a couple of glitches, Manke said. For one, some voters using the phone discovered they had to slowly punch in the passcode they had received from the commission in order to access the voting system.

Still, the election cost the commission only \$90,000 to conduct, about \$235,000 less than elections held two years ago when voters had the option of mail-in paper ballots or the Internet.

And that kind of savings, despite the disappointing participation, likely will convince the financially strapped city to again use a Web voting system for the 2011 elections for seats on neighborhood boards, which are advisory panels.

"The budget has a lot to do with it," Manke said. "I'm told that the budget for the city in two years is going to be even worse."

In the meantime, the commission can devise ideas on how to attract more people to run for board seats. That may drive costs higher, because more voters would have to be sent passcodes, Manke said. But more active campaigns for more seats may improve voter turnout, Manke said.

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On the Web:

Neighborhood commission Website with voting results:

<http://www.co.honolulu.hi.us/nco/index.htm>

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