

Understanding the Relative Costs of Election Systems

Election Costs in South Carolina

South Carolina counties will pay over one million dollars this spring to Election Systems & Software (ES&S), the manufacturer of our voting system, for no other purpose than to continue owning the system. These annual “break/fix” and firmware contracts were part of the original purchase contract. This year’s fees are the result of a 7% across-the-board increase. Counties also pay state sales tax on these and all other contracts with ES&S.

Additional used, reconditioned voting machines are being purchased by counties in response to increasing population. These refurbished machines are bought from ES&S and become subject to annual fees. Although information from most counties will require filing a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, we know that Sumter County purchased 25 iVotronics, Greenville County 12 iVotronics, and Lexington 4 iVotronics. Greenville County paid \$23,214 (incl. tax) to purchase and install 12 used ADA-compliant¹ iVotronics. ES&S is no longer manufacturing either the iVotronic or the M-100.

Before each election, ballots must be prepared for that election. Most ballots are prepared in-house by counties or by the State Election Commission (SEC), but audio ballots are prepared by ES&S for each county. Costs of the preparation of audio ballots can be discovered by FOIA requests to the counties, but some counties do not reply to requests. The three counties for which we do have pre-tax costs of audio ballots in 2010 are Edgefield (\$ 2612.50), Newberry (\$ 2298.70), and Orangeburg (\$ 2004.30).

In the past two years, all county election directors were told by SEC to replace the batteries in their iVotronics. These batteries are required to keep the voting machines operating if power is lost in the polling place. Costs were quite variable, but Greenville County paid \$20,357.50 (incl. tax) to replace 200 iVotronic batteries. Greenville County owns 1083 iVotronics.

Batteries in the Personal Electronic Ballots (PEBs) used to initiate the ballot for each voter must be replaced every 3 to 5 years at a cost of \$10 each. Additional operating costs include repairs not covered by the annual contract, replacement data cards for the iVotronics (\$40 each) and replacement printers.

Estimating the exact price of owning and using the ES&S equipment in South Carolina is difficult because the SEC does not maintain the necessary data. Collection of the data requires filing FOIA requests for invoices with each of the 46 counties. Some counties reply immediately with the requested information, but others ignore the request, reply with incomplete information or request a fee. (Greenwood County requested \$150 for their invoices.)

Studies from Maryland², North Carolina³ and Florida⁴ indicate that Direct Register Electronic (DRE) terminals are more expensive to use than are paper ballots with precinct-based scanners.

¹ Americans with Disabilities use a special iVotronic with audio capability.

² <http://mlis.state.md.us/2010rs/misc/2010VotingSystemsStudyReport.pdf>

³ <http://www.ncvoter.net/affordable.html>

⁴ <http://www.cs.pitt.edu/~collinl/Voting/Cost.pdf>