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Indiana Secretary of State touts regional vote center

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LA PORTE — Accidentally going to a polling booth in the wrong precinct could become a thing of the past if vote centers are introduced into La Porte County.

At least that's the message some state and local officials are trying to get across to encourage counties like La Porte to get on board with a new voting model.

On Thursday, Indiana Secretary of State Connie Lawson visited the county complex in La Porte for a regional vote center meeting to explain the benefits of leaving the old precinct model of voting.

There, officials from La Porte, Lake and other area counties converged to get the latest information on the concept.

During a press conference before the meeting, Lawson said technology is the secret behind this model.

"There's an electronic poll book connected in real time to all the locations as well as the clerk's office," she said. "There's no wrong place for the voter to go. The upside is it's very possible it could save counties money. We're advising them to do a good budget analysis. There will be some initial expense, but overall the counties are saving a lot of dollars on their elections."

She pointed out that the average county spends \$100,000 on an election year, so this can amount to a lot of savings.

This is because the current system requires a precinct for every 1,200 active voters, whereas the new system requires one for only every 10,000.

But counties can choose to have more.

"The beauty of the plan is it's up to the county," she said. "Only the county knows its demographics and geographics."

La Porte County Clerk Lynne Spevak said she is supportive of the new model.

"I support it as a clerk just because of the hassle of getting 500 poll workers and equipment out to all the polling locations," she said. "It would be less locations to get equipment delivered to. And it would still have bipartisan poll workers."

She said she would like to have voting centers in each of the 21 townships, which is more than the required amount. She pointed out that the city of La Porte would be simplified with only two voting areas instead of almost 10.

These sites would most likely be the La Porte Civic Auditorium and the county complex.

And she said satellite locations could be at the local grocery stores.

"With the electronic polling books," she said, "once you vote, you're done. It wouldn't matter where your

location is.”

She estimated the start up cost to be about \$100,000 with the electronic poll books costing between \$2,000 and \$3,000 a piece, with 20 to 40 of them needed. The county would also need to make sure it had strong wireless internet service in all voting locations, a problem in some areas.

“But in the long run it will save money,” she said.

Before the meeting, La Porte County Commissioner Willie Milsap said he was interested in the new system, but wanted to make sure it was the right fit for the county.

During the meeting, he did question Lawson on the practicality of buying the equipment, which is projected to last some 20 years, because of new innovations and requirements in state law making older devices obsolete.

She recommended leasing equipment from providers to keep them up to date.

Seven counties operate under the new model, including Johnson, Switzerland, Vanderburgh, Cass, Tippecanoe, Blackford and Wayne.

“I visited all seven... and the voters were very positive,” she said. “They liked the convenience. Voters in Johnson County, they loved it when I visited there because that vote center was close to Marion County and they could catch it on their way to and from work. And the poll workers love it because they stay busy all day. There’s more people going through those locations.”

To adopt a vote center model, she said the county commissioners and council both need to pass a resolution to this effect, then a study committee needs to be formed to develop the plan.

The plan then needs to be presented at an advertised meeting of the election board, where questions will be taken from the public. This must be followed by another advertised meeting, with the county clerk and Democratic and Republican officials unanimously approving it. The plan becomes active 60 days after being filed with the Indiana Election Division.

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