

## Williamson County Commission votes against buying new voting machines

By Coleman Bomar • Staff Writer  
May 9, 2023



Sharon Spigel speaks to the commissioners about paper ballot voting.  
Coleman Bomar

The Williamson County Board of Commissioners denied a resolution authorizing the purchase of new Election Systems and Software (ES&S) voting machines at a meeting Monday night.

The resolution would have appropriated \$909,276 in state funds for the county's election commission to buy the voting system. It consists of voting machines that create ballots and tabulators that read the printed-out ballots to count the votes.

In recent months, concerned citizens have spoken at town halls and meetings, wanting to do away with electronic voting machines and return to hand-counted paper ballots. Some have also argued for using precinct voting instead of voting centers and restricting early voting.

Ten spoke during Monday night's public comment segment.

"Do not buy or use electronic voting machines," said Alan Rogers, a Williamson County resident. "We need paper ballots and hand counting. It has worked for hundreds of years. You got the proof right in front of you. If there is some issue with the count, it can be recounted."

Sharon Spigel, another resident, agreed with Rogers's sentiments.

"We are asking for you, the county commissioners, to take back your constitutional role and return us to precinct voting where we can have a vastly cheaper counterfeit-proof hand-marked paper ballot option which can be counted by tabulator but must be hand counted to certify an election."

While the county commission can refuse to fund the purchase of the machines, it is state law that the election commission then purchases the devices with its own funds in such a scenario. It is also state law that voting machines must be used if over 300 people live within a precinct where voting is taking place.

Across the county, it is illegal to eliminate voting machines and revert to an entirely paper ballot system. However, some counties, such as Shelby County, allow voters to vote electronically or use a paper ballot, which is legal.

Williamson County Election Commission Chairman Jonathan Duda answered questions from commissioners and explained why the Election Commission chose the ES&S system over purely paper ballot options. He claimed paper ballot systems are more expensive than hybrid electronic voting.

Furthermore, while the system uses machines, results can be audited via paper because it requires paper ballots to record votes. According to Duda, fewer than 5% in Shelby County voted via paper in recent elections.

"Tonight, you heard that there would be more reliability, that it could be cheaper and that there is better security with hand-marked paper ballots, but our findings have actually found the opposite for Williamson County," he said. "The implementation of putting in hand-marked paper ballots costs more than the proposal we have this evening. Hand-marked paper ballots are, in fact, prone to errors. They are prone to manipulation and fraud. It is one of the reasons that we went from hand-marked paper ballots to machines."

The election commission tested purely paper ballot methods at the most recent Williamson County GOP convention. Out of the 609 votes cast, 19 of the ballots had to be redone to be recorded because instructions weren't followed.

"Somebody put an x over a candidate, circled a candidate and whatnot," Duda said. "The voter intent aspect of a hand-marked paper ballot compared to a ballot marking device that ensures the voter intent is retained is another area that we are just not prepared to make a recommendation to pursue right now."

Twelve commissioners voted in favor of the resolution authorizing the purchase of the machines, and 11 voted against it. The resolution failed because the commission did not reach a majority of 13 votes needed to pass, and Barb Sturgeon (District 8) was absent.

Ricky Jones (District 1), Lisa Hayes, (District 1), Gregg Lawrence (District 4), Pete Stresser (District 4), Mary Smith (District 5), Greg Sanford (District 5), Erin Nations (District 6), Christopher Richards (District 7), Drew Torres (District 8), Matt Williams (District 9) and Brian Clifford (District 12) voted against the resolution.

All others, aside from Sturgeon, voted for it.

Smith stated that the comments and emails from her constituents informed her decision.

"It is our tax dollars paying for these systems and our voters using them," she said. "It is those stakeholders we are ultimately accountable to, and it is their experience at the voting

booth that should matter most. So, while I do fully support, based on state statutes, the operational funding of our elections department and the need for specific machines for ADA compliance and county purposes, I cannot support the purchase of these machines as a permanent solution, and I hope we can work out an agreement with the state to use the funds being offered the way our voters are asking us to.”

Duda claimed that regardless of the county commission’s decision, the election commission would still purchase the machines.

“Our commission is tasked with conducting the elections in Williamson County, and we need machines to do that,” he said. “It would be our intent to proceed with what we’ve selected, the system we’ve selected.”

**Tags**

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Voting Machines

Election Systems And Software

Jonathan Duda

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