

Politics and Economics

Activists win voter-verified paper ballot

by Suzan Erem

When Centre County commissioners voted 2-1 in August to replace the voting machines the county purchased just two years ago, they were riding a national tide that has turned against touch-screen voting.

After spending almost \$2 billion in federal funds on machines that produce unverifiable results, 38 states and 17 Pennsylvania counties have now restricted, banned or simply opted out of the use of touch-screen machines that provide no paper trail.

More than 55 percent of Americans are expected to vote on machines with paper trails in November, according to a recent CBS report. Respected public voices, from U.S. Rep. John Conyers to *The New York Times*, are speaking out against the machines, buoyed by facts dug up in reports by journalists Dan Rather, Mark Crispin Miller, Greg Palast and others.

But the vote in August didn't come without effort.

"It was not an easy decision," Commissioner Rich Rogers told *Voices*. "I understand the state of the economy and the rising cost of everything."

Commissioners said the funds for the new optical-scan machines will come from the county's \$8 million in undesignated funds,



Mary Vollero

which are currently a healthy 8 percent higher than required. Rogers said the purchase of the new machines will not cause a tax increase.

Chairman Jon Eich, who ran for office on the issue, said the public testimony offered at two hearings and through e-mail was overwhelmingly in favor of a paper trail.

While many favored optical-scan machines, he said, at least a third made comments indicating that they liked the iVotronic touch-screen machines but wished they had a paper trail.

"I think if Pennsylvania had found a way to have a paper trail, this would have turned out differently," Eich said.

Out of the 263 responses the commissioners received, only 47 favored keeping the touch-screen machines.

Rogers said the finances ultimately swayed him. One touch-screen machine is needed for every 200 voters, and given the recent surge in voter registration, Centre County was looking at purchasing another

50 to 100 iVotronics to add to the 392 it owns. But precincts only require one optical-scan machine and one AutoMark machine for people with disabilities, no matter how many voters there are.

"I could not justify spending between \$150,000 and \$300,000 on the iVotronic that's going to be decertified in a couple of years. That's all but certain," he said. Election Systems & Software, one of the top two touch-screen voting machine makers, told Rogers it is not producing anymore iVotronics except to fulfill a contract in North Carolina.

Commissioner Steve Dershem, who voted against the decision to replace the touch-screen machines, did not respond to repeated requests for an interview.

What made the difference?

The tide that's turning in the United States isn't turning due to the wave of a magic wand or sudden enlightenment by elected leaders. It's turning because of the daily, often mundane, work of Americans who were outraged by the election fiascos of 2000 and 2004.

Mary Vollero, of Bellefonte, was one of those Americans. She was watching C-SPAN one night in 2005 as Mark Crispin Miller explained the problems with the

Help America Vote Act, which funded new voting machines.

"I thought, 'I can't take on another thing. I'm not even going to go there.' But I did," she said. "He said to go to VerifiedVoting.org and named a couple of other Web sites, and I thought, 'Do I want to do this?' I knew it would involve being active, and I was tired."

Brenda Black, of Halfmoon Township, was another. She and another woman began organizing a public meeting at Schlow Centre Region Library.

They invited Chris Exarchos, then chairman of the Board of Commissioners, and the public to a viewing of the documentary *Uncounted*. Black had just recently met Vollero, and the group hadn't even named itself yet.

"After the meeting, a reporter came up to me and asked, 'Who do you represent?'" Black said. "I was thrown off balance and said, 'The concerned voters of Centre County.' Afterwards, Mary came up to me and said, 'Who did we represent?' And I told her!"

Vollero, Black and other members of the newly formed organization Concerned

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New local public access channel coming to region

by Lauren Bala

A new cable TV channel is now ready and waiting for Centre Region citizens to step up and put it to good use.

The Centre County municipalities that make up the Centre Area Cable Consortium are in the midst of renewing their cable franchise agreement with Comcast, which includes a new cable channel that can be used for and by the residents of the region.

The agreement, which goes into effect Feb. 17, 2009, will cover State College and Bellefonte boroughs and College, Ferguson, Harris, Halfmoon, Patton and Benner townships. State College Borough Council approved the agreement Aug. 4.

The 10-year deal, which includes an automatic five-year renewal, calls for the creation of a third public, educational and governmental channel and empowers the CACC to determine its use.

"What happens to the channel is dictated by what the community wants it to be."

—CNET Executive Director Cynthia Hahn

The region already has a governmental channel and an educational channel (Channels 7 and 98, respectively), which are run by CNET.

CNET Executive Director Cynthia Hahn said a lot of the decision about the use of the new PEG channel is up to the community.

"What happens to the channel is dictated by what the community wants it to be," Hahn said. "Community members need to step forward and volunteer their time. The CACC then needs to approve it."

Negotiating a local public access channel bucks a national trend toward statewide franchise agreements.

Under such agreements, municipalities

have less opportunity to keep or gain public access channels, a right guaranteed by the federal Cable Communications Act of 1984. Cable companies, after all, would prefer to retain those channels for more profitable purposes.

In the past, many communities have not actively pursued public access, said Deb Vinsel, interim executive director of the Alliance for Community Media, a 30-year-old national public access advocacy organization that, two years ago, helped to defeat statewide cable franchise legislation sponsored by Verizon.

"If a community doesn't bring it up during a franchise renewal, the cable company

won't bring it up, either," Vinsel said. "It's not something that provides revenue, so they don't have any reason to."

Common material for public access channels includes interviews, speeches, community gatherings and performances. Airtime is doled out on a content-neutral, first-come, first-served basis.

In Centre County, getting the public access channel was as simple as the CACC bringing it up in negotiations after community members requested as much from elected officials at town meetings, explained Harris Township Manager Amy Farkas, a member of the CACC technical committee during the preliminary negotiations. But it's only the first step in establishing a public access channel.

One condition for the third channel is that

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Voters of Centre County—with help from Marybeth Kuznick, of the nonprofit, non-partisan organization VotePA—funneled information from around the country to the commissioners.

They also organized county residents to voice their opposition to touch-screen machines at the commissioner meetings that preceded the decision to purchase the iVotronics.

Meanwhile, no one attending a commissioners meeting spoke against the optical-scan machines. Still, when the time came to vote, Republicans Exarchos and Dershem voted for the iVotronics.

“At that point, we were all very defeated and felt hopeless,” Vollero said. “I thought it was all over.”

That’s when two more Centre County residents—Bob Brownlee, of Millheim, and Elizabeth Goreham, a State College Borough Council member—joined the fray in earnest.

“Bob called me and said, ‘What’s with these machines? This is unacceptable,’” Vollero recalled. “And I said, ‘Where were you?’ I would say Bob and Elizabeth rekindled the effort. Some of us were getting burned out, but they joined in, and we renewed our campaign, thinking, ‘Well, let’s just change the machines.’”

But changing the machines meant changing the commissioners who had voted for them.

Black, Brownlee and his daughter Lisa began collecting signatures to show commissioners the broad support for a verifiable paper trail. Eventually, CVCC turned in more than 1,100 names from 32 of the 35 boroughs and townships in the county.

Meanwhile, Eich, a Democrat, who had witnessed firsthand problems with the

machines, adopted the issue for his campaign for county commission last spring. When Democrat Rogers threw his hat into the ring, voting machine activists quickly put his feet to the fire as well.

There were times in the last three months, though, that Rogers supporters wondered if he would come through.

“I was a little worried because he was concerned about the cost, and he’s very fiscally concerned,” Vollero said.

“The committee campaigned diligently for Rich Rogers,” said Black of the CVCC effort to get Rogers elected. “And then when he looked like he had doubts about it, I really couldn’t believe it.”

“I wanted to be financially responsible with taxpayer money,” Rogers said in his own defense. “But in the end, I have not wavered from believing in a paper trail. It was a matter of when and how we got there.”

The net cost of the new machines is still unknown. The price tag from ES&S is \$1.1 million, with a four-and-a-half-year maintenance contract of \$58,000 per year. Officials agree that an estimated \$144,000 can be expected from the Help America Vote Act, bringing the purchase price to below \$1 million.

Additionally, nearby counties have expressed an interest in purchasing the touch-screen machines, which officials expect will help offset the cost.

As for the contract, the county was already committed to ES&S for \$40,000 per year for the next three years. The new contract translates into a net increase of \$18,000 per year. Finally, ballots themselves are expected to cost 33 cents each, or an estimated \$30,000 per election, though Eich said there is room for savings there once in-house staff design the ballots and more local printers are used for printing them.

Some residents are not pleased to hear these numbers.

“They said they have some in reserve, as though that’s a cookie jar they can just dip into,” said Bill Mattern, of Bellefonte. “That’s the taxpayer’s money. I served on the school board, and it used to drive me crazy when people would say, ‘Don’t worry; the state’s going to pay for it.’”

Mattern said he didn’t attend the hearings or write to the commissioners during the three months of debate on the subject.

“Not to degrade the people voicing their opinion, but I think it’s a very small minority, and that makes me angry with the majority, and I’m angry with myself for not getting involved earlier,” he said.

But commissioners did hear from people.

Eich said he went from business gatherings to firehouses, and he received an “overwhelming” number of supportive comments.

“One day, I stopped at Burger King in Bellefonte for lunch, not the hangout of the rich and famous, and a senior citizen came up to me and patted me on the shoulder and literally said, ‘You’re doing the right thing.’ And if I’m getting that kind of input from a person on the street who’d be financially

impacted by this, I think I have a pretty good sense of what the public was thinking.”

Rogers has been hearing from people too. “There are people out there who are pretty irate because they think it’s going to lead to this major tax increase, and it isn’t.”

He said he deliberated over every aspect of the decision.

“I know every decision is not going to be popular with everybody, but ultimately, you try to do the best for the majority you represent,” Rogers said

More to do

The day of the vote, Vollero was exhausted. Still, she looked to the future, to securing an election result with integrity, and her work wasn’t yet done. She was organizing poll workers and lobbying for audits in the next election, to confirm the machines are functioning properly.

“So if people want to participate in democracy, that’s a good way to do it—be a poll worker. I’d rather have a respectable result that takes a longer time than a result that can’t be audited that is immediate,” she said. “It takes a lot of time to get it right, and it takes people, not just computers.”



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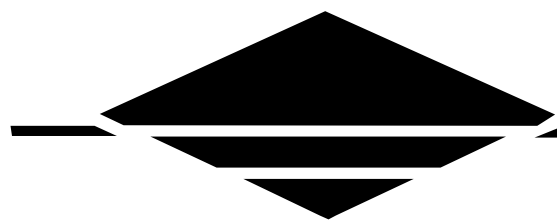
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the existing two PEG channels fill 60 percent of prime-time viewing hours with locally produced programs for six consecutive months.

Hahn told *Voices* that CNET is very close to meeting that requirement. The agreement also states that Comcast will provide the CACC with two installments of a \$240,000 capital grant. The funds can be put toward the creation of a public access channel but are not designated specifically for that purpose, and cannot be used to cover operating expenses.

But the CACC is still unsure about what to do with the channel.

"Since the public access channel is so hypothetical at this point, decisions haven't been made about funding or management," Hahn said.

"This may mean they will choose to have another education or government channel," she said. "Since it's essentially a 15-year agreement, a public access channel can be activated at any point after Feb. 19."

The agreement does not assign responsibility to anyone for programming. Members

of the public can decide.

"(CACC) board members would be looking for people who are organized and able to protect the municipality from inappropriate material," Farkas said.

But what is inappropriate?

Under the 1984 Cable Communications Act, obscenity is punishable by up to \$10,000 in fines and prison time. Obscenity is defined by "community standards," as described in a 1957 U.S. Supreme Court decision. Other laws related to the act address libel, slander, invasion of privacy and false advertising.

Radnor Studio 21 in Wayne, Pa., is an example of what can happen when members of the community get organized. The station wasn't in full swing until 12 years after the channel was established in a franchise agreement with what was then Adelphia and is now Comcast.

Although Adelphia originally provided a manager, the channel was soon turned over, with cable company funding, to the nonprofit Radnor Station 21. The station is run almost exclusively by volunteers. General Manager George Strimel, one of two paid members of the staff, said he established the station by finding volunteers interested

enough to form the nonprofit, procuring additional funding and maintaining both over time.

"We find volunteers by working with local newspapers, and since there are a lot of schools around, we can offer internships," Strimel said. "We have a lot of ways to get funding. We get government funding, businesses fund us, we get donations and have fundraisers. Funding is still ever the problem. Since the channel is part of the cable company, people at home are compar-

ing you to big networks, and you need the funding to be able to compete."

Strimel uses the funds for equipment and classes on how to utilize it, both of which are free to anyone who wants to produce a program.

"The station is truly open," Strimel said. "We show children's programs, government reports, safety videos, business news, gardening shows and a program for the local Unidentified Flying Objects Club. We want to bring people in, not keep them out."

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