

# Candidates: We need new voting system

by Hilary Barlow

Election Day in November could be the last time Centre County voters cast their ballots using the controversial touch-screen iVotronic machines.

With three out of four candidates for the Centre County Board of Commissioners in opposition to the voting machines, the new board is guaranteed an anti-iVotronic majority.

Problems with the county's iVotronics, less than a year old, in the May primary and last year's general election have called into question the reliability of the machines, whose results cannot be verified because the machines do not produce a paper record.

In June, Concerned Voters of Centre County (CVCC) and the Penn State Statistics Department released results of the November 2006 exit polls. The results show a marked difference between the official election results. In College Township North, the official results list Lynn Swann winning the governor seat

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and Jake Corman winning the state senate seat. Exit polling gave the races to Ed Rendell and Jon Eich, respectively.

"Exit polls results in places using DRE touch screen voting have suspiciously different results than in states using optical scans" said Mary Vollero, a member of the CVCC.

Current legislation would have to change in order for commissioners to purchase machines with a paper trail (a verifiable paper trail is illegal under current law, according to the Rendell administration).

The Voter Confidence and Increased Accessibility Act, or HR 811, a bill currently working its way through Congress, would require the purchase of new machines nationally and provide \$1 billion for the cost of the equipment. The bill,

which has incurred strong opposition from voting machine manufacturers, promises a re-countable paper ballot.

The bill also provides outlines for administering audits and prohibits certification of election results until the audit has been completed, as well as \$100 million for post-election audits. If the bill is not approved, the money to purchase new machines would come from the state or county to the tune of about \$1 million.

Democrats Rich Rogers and Jon Eich as well as Republican Sue Mascolo all support the replacement of touch-screen voting machines. Incumbent Republican Steve Dersham approved the purchase of the machines and is running for reelection in the fall.

Rogers called the decision to buy the



Commissioner candidate Jon Eich current machines "irresponsible."

"The will of the residents and the voters was ignored," he said.

In August 2006, the CCBC approved a contract in the amount of \$1,166,590 with the company Election Systems and

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# Pa. atheists don't stand for pledge or prayer

by Brian Siembieda

It is customary to stand for the prayer and pledge of allegiance that open the Pennsylvania House of Representatives sessions, and one member of the visitors' gallery was sternly reminded of that in November of 2005 when the Speaker of the House's staff confronted atheist Carl Silverman for not standing up.

So on June 4, when the House opened for its summer session, Silverman brought five other atheists with him to test the policy and see if it was still in force under the new Speaker.

Unfortunately, he still doesn't know.

"We were hoping to be the only ones there," Silverman explained. "But there was a big school group."

The only staff person he was sure saw the six people sitting during the prayer and pledge was the guard standing behind them at the door of the gallery. Even Centre County representatives didn't notice.

"It must have been friendly and congenial," said Rep. Scott Conklin, who admitted

"It's just a way of letting our representatives know that not everybody subscribes to the majority opinion."

--Carl Silverman

that the interview was the first he heard of the action.

Rep. Michael Hanna, a Republican, also said he had not heard about the action and said that he personally appreciates the opening prayer, "the way we always do it and the way I hope we'll always do it."

There are other reasons representatives may not have noticed. For one, they face generally in the same direction as the gallery, and for two, many of them don't enter the chamber until after the prayer and pledge are finished, Silverman said.

"A whole bunch of the representatives didn't even show up until after the pledge and prayer," he said. "They open the doors then, and in file dozens of legislators. It wasn't important to *them*."

In November 2005, Silverman was sitting

in the gallery waiting for the session to begin, when he heard the announcement from the floor of the chamber directing representatives and visitors to stand for the prayer and the pledge. A lifelong atheist and an advocate for atheists, he decided to express his opinion by not standing.

After consulting with the Speaker at the podium, a staff member ran up the aisle and up the stairs to confront Silverman, according to the activist. The staffer told him the custom was for guests to stand and said that if he wasn't going to stand, he could wait outside until the prayer and pledge were finished. Silverman declined.

"I was a co-owner of that place, not a guest," Silverman said in a recent interview. "So I stayed seated."

Silverman and other members of

Pennsylvania Nonbelievers take issue with the words "under God" in the pledge of allegiance, an addition made at the height of the Cold War during the McCarthy Period. They also don't believe prayer belongs at a government function.

Hanna said that if they choose not to participate, that it is their choice, but that he personally had no problem with opening any government function with a prayer. He said it does not violate separation of church and state. The U.S. Supreme Court came to a similar conclusion in 1983 when it upheld the right of legislatures to open with a prayer.

Conklin, a Democrat, said the opening prayer was to bless the House and to convey the dignity and importance of the lawmaking that goes on in the hall. It reminds lawmakers to put their personal views aside and strive for the common good, he said.

Conklin added that many of the principles and virtues extolled in the prayer are

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Software to provide election equipment and software to the county. ES&S is the largest manufacturer of voting machines in the United States and claimed revenues of \$117 million in 2005. A purchase proposal by ES&S showed that the machines the commissioners purchased cost the county \$223,000 more than optical scan machines would have.

These more expensive machines don't provide a verifiable paper trail and have higher maintenance costs, according to an earlier report by the CVCC. In addition, the machines Centre County purchased have an estimated lifespan of less than five years. Optical scan machines are operating an estimated 20 years, according to the report.

The candidates who support replacing the machines said they would look to the companies that manufacture the machines first to see if the current machines can be sold back.

"That would depend on individual contractors," Eich said.

If they are not willing to accept the machines, the county could phase out the current machines gradually and replaced them with new ones, he said.

Adding printers to the current touch-screens is also possible, though only if the current law is amended. However, if HR 811 passes, touch-screen machines, even with printers, will be automatically replaced.

The current touch-screen iVotronics machines provide no verifiable paper ballot, so properly recounting votes is almost impossible. According to CVCC, there are other problems as well. The group reports that during May 15 primaries, voters sometimes selected their candidate, only to have another candidate automatically selected by the computer.

In other cases, part of the ballot would disappear and could not be retrieved, said Brenda Black, a CVCC member and poll-watcher in Halfmoon Township. Black also reported that voters who had trouble reading the print on the voting machines could find no way to enlarge it.

ES&S claims that any errors with the equipment are the fault of pollworkers, despite a recent settlement in which the company paid the state of Indiana \$750,000 after the Nov. 2006 elections.

Pollworkers in that township also complained about confusing instructions and little help from the election office.

"I think the election office should do a survey after each election asking precinct pollworkers about problems and how the process could be improved," Black said.

At the time of publication, HR 811 was headed to a floor vote in the U.S. House with 216 bipartisan sponsors.

### To contact your legislators:

Rep: John Peterson: (888) 844-1776  
Sen. Bob Casey: (866) 802-2833  
Sen. Arlen Specter: (800) 774-8941

### To contact Centre County commissioner candidates:

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ones that all people can embrace regardless of their beliefs or lack of belief, and said prayer contains fundamentals that people base their lives upon.

"Yeah, but it doesn't include just that," responded Silverman. "It includes more. It includes divisive elements, like invoking specific deities, or speaking a foreign language like Hebrew, [which happened recently]. How am I going to get principles from that? ... That's divisive."

Silverman's solution? To invite atheists and humanists to open sessions as well.

"Why not invite a humanist or atheist to present their principles of good living at the beginning of a session?" he said. "If [Conklin] considers it nonsectarian, then he should consider our thing equal."

In the meantime, Silverman and others plan to organize another test of similar size, with the hope that the gallery won't be quite so packed. Then they'll know if the Speaker is enforcing a policy they believe is unconstitutional. He said Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, a national advocacy group, has researched the case and said they are on firm footing.

Silverman, 52, was active in the 1990s in stopping the Waynesboro School Board from distributing Gideon Bibles, organizing which resulted in the creation of a night when all nonprofits could distribute literature. He was also involved in stopping the "church bulletin" discounts that a baseball team offered for Sunday games. Customers who brought church bulletins were receiving a significant discount on tickets. Despite his successes, he doesn't expect his actions to move mountains.

"It's just a way of letting our representatives know that not everybody subscribes to the majority opinion," he said. "We have the constitutional right to express that."

Centre County area representatives are unfazed by the debate.

"We have rights in this country - as long as it doesn't affect others," Conklin said.

### For more information Pennsylvania Nonbelievers

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