



**Editorial Endorsements
of Paper Ballot/Optical Scan Voting
from New York State Newspapers**

Prepared By
New Yorkers for Verified Voting
www.nyvv.org

December 10, 2006

As New York State considers which voting equipment will replace its current mechanical lever voting machines, more and more media outlets have editorialized in favor of adoption of hand marked paper ballots and precinct based ballot scanners. This document contains editorial endorsements and opinion pieces from New York State newspapers that have appeared as of December 10, 2006.

Newspapers which have editorialized in favor paper ballots and scanners include:

- The Albany Times Union
- The Buffalo News
- The Cazenovia Republican
- The Eagle regional papers in Chittenango and Canastota
- The Elmira Star Gazette
- The Hamilton & Morrisville Tribune
- The Ithaca Journal
- The New York Daily News
- The New York Times
- The Oneida Press
- The Saratogian
- The Schenectady Gazette
- The Syracuse Post Standard
- The Troy Record

All materials are copyrighted to the respective newspapers in which the piece appeared.

Bo Lipari

Executive Director, New Yorkers for Verified Voting

December 10, 2006

Virtues of Optical-Scan Voting

New York Times Editorial
March 9th, 2005

New York is on the verge of selecting its next generation of voting machines. The Legislature appears poised to do one important thing right: to require that touch-screen voting machines produce voter-verifiable paper records. But it is in danger of doing another important thing wrong: giving short shrift to optical-scan voting, the most reliable and cost-effective of the current technologies. As it finalizes voting machine legislation, Albany should ignore lobbyists for high-priced voting machines and come out strongly for optical-scan machines.

The big voting machine companies, which are well connected politically, are aggressively pushing touch-screen voting. These A.T.M.-style machines make a lot of sense for the manufacturers because they are expensive and need to be replaced frequently. But touch-screen machines are highly vulnerable to being hacked or maliciously programmed to change votes. And they cost far more than voting machines should. If touch-screen machines are going to be used - and they have spread rapidly in recent years - it is vital that they produce voter-verifiable paper records of every vote to ensure that their results are accurate.

The better course would be not to use them at all. The best voting technology now available uses optical scanning. These machines work like a standardized test. Voters mark their choices on a paper form, which is then counted by a computer. The paper ballots are kept, becoming the official record of the election. They can be recounted, and if there is a discrepancy between them and the machine count, the paper ballots are the final word.

Optical-scan machines produce a better paper record than touch-screen machines because it is one the voter has actually filled out, not a receipt that the voter must check for accuracy. Optical-scan machines are also far cheaper than touch-screens. Their relatively low cost will be welcomed by taxpayers, of course, but it also has a direct impact on elections. Because touch-screen machines are so expensive, localities are likely to buy too few, leading to long lines at the polls.

The draft bills that the Legislature is working on do not rule out optical-scan voting, but they are far more focused on touch-screen voting. That may be because voting machine manufacturers have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars lobbying legislators, or it may simply be that optical-scan equipment has had a lower profile. Whatever the reason, the Legislature owes it to the voters - and the taxpayers - to promote optical-scan voting.

Voting machines need an immediate upgrade to optical

The Saratogian
March 17, 2005

The lever voting machine should become a thing of the past, the League of Women Voters of New York contends.

The group makes a good point.

For voting that is accurate, easy, accountable and cost-effective, state of the art machines use optical scanners.

It's the way of the future, and the way the Legislature should go in deciding what kind of voting machines ought to be used in New York.

The Legislature has been leaning toward touch-screen voting, which the League notes can be more expensive and easier to alter.

In contrast, with optical scanners, votes are marked by hand or with an accessible ballot marking device and then inserted into an optical scanner, to be counted at the polling place at the end of the voting period.

Optical scanners are used in 25 percent of all precincts in the United States. The paper ballots produce a permanent paper record that can be manually audited.

Change can't happen overnight, because it takes money and time to convert to new, high-tech machines. But as the Legislature considers alternatives to levers, it ought to be looking at optical scanners.

The voter services chairwoman of the Saratoga County chapter of the League of Women Voters sums it up this way: 'It is important to those who have studied the voting machines that they pass the SARA test -- secure, accurate, recountable, accessible. The optical-scan voting machine passes this test.'

Optical scanners should be wave of the future

The Troy Record

March 20, 2005

The lever voting machine should become a thing of the past, the League of Women Voters of New York contends.

The group makes a good point.

For voting that is accurate, easy, accountable and cost-effective, state-of-the-art machines use optical scanners.

It's the wave of the future and the way the state Legislature should go in deciding what kind of voting machines ought to be used in New York.

The Legislature has been leaning toward touch-screen voting, which the League notes can be more expensive and easier to alter.

In contrast, with optical scanners, votes are marked by hand or with an accessible ballot marking device and then inserted into an optical scanner, to be counted at the polling place at the end of the voting period.

Optical scanners are used in 25 percent of all precincts in the U.S.

The paper ballots produce a permanent paper record that can be manually audited.

In fact, the states of Arizona, Michigan, Ohio, and Minnesota will be using optical scanners to comply with the Help America Vote Act.

We realize that change can't happen overnight, because it takes money and time to convert to new, high-tech machines. But as the Legislature considers alternatives to levers, it ought to be looking at optical scanners.

The voter services chairwoman of a local chapter of the League of Women Voters sums it up this way:

"It is important to those who have studied the voting machines that they pass the SARA test - secure, accurate, recountable, accessible. The optical-scan voting machine passes this test."

How we will vote

N.Y. lawmakers should offer optical-scan mode as choice for local governments

Elmira Star Gazette

Opinion for Tuesday March 29, 2005

New York legislators face more than a budget deadline. Time also is running out on them to make a decision about new voting machines to replace the state's 20,000 lever-style dinosaurs now in use.

If lobbyists for the voting-machine companies have their way, the lawmakers will be smooth-talked into high-priced, touch-screen equipment that looks and feels high-tech but carries liabilities.

A better alternative, in voting security, cost and ease of storage, would be the optical-scan systems that have been used safely and successfully for the past 20 years in a number of states. Oklahoma, for instance, has all but one of its 3,000 optical-scan machines still in operation after 15 years, says Bo Lipari, an Alpine resident and director of New Yorkers for Verified Voting.

Lipari, too, is lobbying the Legislature but not with the big bucks of his competitors. His group likes the optical scan because it allows voters to mark a paper ballot, much like a lottery ticket, and have it scanned right after they vote. Mismarked ballots get kicked back, allowing voters to correct mistakes. And the obvious advantage: a paper copy for disputed votes or recounts.

Touch screens cost twice as much as optical scans and can come equipped with paper receipts, but they also can malfunction or be immobilized by power failures.

Under the Help America Vote Act, New York is supposed to make up its mind on voting machines in time for the fall 2006 elections, and lawmakers already are working on borrowed time, Lipari points out.

The federal government covers about 95 percent of the purchase price of the first batch of machines for counties, but maintenance and future placement costs are up to counties. That fact ought to make optical scans an easy choice for local governments. They cost half of touch screens, last longer and require simpler storage.

At best, lawmakers should require the optical scan statewide, but at least, they should give counties a choice. In Chemung, for example, the optical scan would be \$531,880 cheaper. In Steuben, the savings is \$335,640, according to New Yorkers for Verified Voting.

In less populous counties, such as Schuyler and Tioga, the savings run between \$14,000 and \$16,000. That's because each voting precinct in the state will require at least one touch-screen version for disabled voters who cannot fill in the paper ballot.

In more populous counties, one scanner can handle several voting precincts in one building, as opposed to one touch-screen per precinct. And then there's the storage dilemma. The touch-screens have to be stored in temperature-controlled rooms. The optical scans require less pampering.

Scan machines make more sense for cash-strapped counties. They also make sense for voters, who deserve the peace of mind that their vote has been counted and noted on a non-electronic record. For lawmakers, this really should be a simple choice. The optical-scan ought to be their pick, but if not, at least a local option.

Making Every Vote Count

This editorial appeared in the Eagle regional papers in Chittenango, Canastota, and in the Oneida Press on March 30, 2005.

It also appeared in the Cazenovia Republican and the Hamilton & Morrisville Tribune on April 13, 2005

There has been a lot of furor recently over the possible selection of new voting machines for Madison County. A recent Demonstration Day did not live up to expectations, with vendors inadequately prepared to fully exhibit the paper ballot optical scanning devices and others pulling out of the demonstration altogether. The push was on for touch-screen (DRE) technology.

Many who attended, including us, came away disappointed with the experience.

Most disappointing was when Lebanon Supervisor Jim Goldstein presented a resolution at the March 8 Board of Supervisors meeting to have the county retain optical scanning machines as a possible choice to replace existing lever machines. The resolution was not to endorse or purchase optical scanning machines, only to allow them to remain a viable choice for the county until further examination of their capabilities could be completed. Goldstein's resolution was crushed.

About a week later, Madison County Election Commissioners Lynne Jones and Laura Costello penned a letter to Assemblyman Keith Wright, chairman of the committee investigating the reliability and accuracy of new voting equipment. That letter indicated that, in their opinions, optical scanning was the most reliable voting machine, but they endorsed the DREs instead, citing cost and efficiency as two big components of that opinion.

Numerous media outlets and advocates of the disabled have come out in favor of the optical scanning voting equipment. New Yorkers for Verified Voting, a non-partisan advocacy group, has endorsed optical scanning as the most reliable system.

While DRE technology with its bells and whistles is very attractive, in the end, it's performance that counts. Touch screen monitors have a very short life span, while optical scanning technology, which passed its 30th anniversary some time ago, continues to be the choice of many higher education institution and overseers of standardized testing.

After two highly contentious federal elections, we ought to have learned our lesson: Only the most accurate equipment will do.

A Vote for Paper

Syracuse Post Standard Editorial
April 17, 2005

For several years, state legislators have been wooed, wined and dined by politically connected lobbyists working for the nation's largest voting-machine manufacturers.

Now lawmakers are about to decide which type of voting machine would best suit New York as they overhaul the state's election system. Millions of public dollars are at stake. So is the integrity of the election process.

That's why New Yorkers need voting machines that are secure, accurate, accessible, verifiable and cost-effective. Fortunately, there is a technology available that best meets those criteria: optical scanning of paper ballots. Unfortunately, legislators aren't hearing much about it; voting-machine companies and their lobbyists have been largely pushing electronic touch-screen machines similar to ATMs. Those machines are more expensive and have to be replaced more frequently than optical scanners.

Optical scanning is tried and trusted. Nearly a third of American voters now cast paper ballots read by optical scanners. Some counties in New York, including Onondaga, use the technology for absentee ballots. Anyone who has ever taken a standardized multiple-choice test in school would know how it works. Voters fill in circles next to the names of the candidates they favor. A scanning machine then records the votes directly off the ballots.

Under federal law, New York must replace nearly 20,000 lever-action voting machines in more than 15,570 election districts. The new machines must be accessible to people with disabilities. They must make allowances for voters who cannot speak or read English. And they must allow voters to ensure their votes are accurate before they are cast.

Optical scanning fits the bill on all counts. Voters certainly could review their marked ballots before turning them in. And the ballots would always be available to count by hand in case of challenges by candidates or unforeseen foul-ups.

Ballot-marking devices, too, would be available in each polling place to assist folks with visual, hearing, mobility and language difficulties. The devices don't record votes. They just help people mark ballots.

Touch-screen machines, on the other hand, have proven unreliable and vulnerable to malicious programmers. Unlike optical scanning, these machines record votes as voters make their choices. Sometimes they go haywire.

Three years ago, Miami-Dade County, Fla., spent \$24.5 million on a touch-screen system. But coding errors left hundreds of votes uncounted in recent elections. And computer crashes wiped out almost every electronic record for the 2002 gubernatorial primary. Meanwhile, Election Day costs tripled. Now, Miami-Dade and other counties across the nation are considering switching to simpler scanner-readable paper ballots.

New York lawmakers should learn from that costly mistake. There's a chance, though, that they could just let each county decide on its own. (Voting-machine vendors are already pushing their wares at the county level.) That could lead to a patchwork of voting systems with potentially chaotic consequences, especially in statewide elections.

For once, legislators should reject the advances of lobbyists and make a decision that is in the best interest of the state's citizens. They should choose optical scanning as the single standard for voting machines in New York.

Albany must act to help NYers vote

New York Daily News Editorial
May 5, 2005

After the Bush-Gore meltdown in Florida in 2000, Congress set new election standards and came up with money to help states upgrade their voting systems. Four years later, New York is the only state that has failed to comply with the law, putting \$220 million in federal funds at risk.

Now, after extended haggling, the Legislature has managed to resolve the simple issues, such as which types of identification will be acceptable at polling places. Lawmakers have also determined that New York will continue to be - you guessed it - the only state to use a full-face ballot, showing every candidate in every race on one sheet. (Why? So that every politician is guaranteed the front page.)

But at this late date, lawmakers shamefully haven't settled the most important issue: which voting machines New Yorkers will use. Beset by lobbyists hawking a multitude of electronic systems, they dither. It's time to make the call so local officials can be prepared for next year's statewide elections. The city Board of Elections had hoped to try out new machines in this fall's mayoral contest. Thanks to the Legislature, the board will have to learn on the fly in 2006.

The Help America Vote Act permits two types of machines: ATM-style touch-screen computers or paper ballots that are optically scanned. Optical scanning is the better choice. A voter fills out a paper ballot the way a Lotto player fills out a ticket and feeds it into a scanner. The votes are tallied, and ballots are deposited in a locked compartment, where they can be hand-counted in a close race.

A study of voting systems by Caltech and MIT concluded that optical scanning produced fewer errors and votes lost. Experience is proving the study right. In Ohio as well as in Florida's largest county, Miami-Dade, election officials first went with ATM-style voting, but they are now considering switching to optical scanning.

Scanners minimize the possibility of hacking because they don't tie into a central computer, and they are more economical than ATM-style machines. To cast ballots on one of those gizmos, voters stand before a screen, punching in their selections while others wait. To use an optical scanner, a voter simply slips a ballot into the machine and is done in seconds. So polling places require fewer machines, cutting purchase costs. A coalition of civic groups estimates that the tab for optical scanners would be about half that of the ATMs. Easier to use, more reliable and cheaper. Optical scanners get our vote.

The sensible choice for voting reform

Syracuse Post-Standard Editorial
May 06, 2005

This is the second editorial by the Post Standard endorsing optical scan voting.

After months of wheeling and dealing, state legislators still haven't agreed on a fundamental issue at the heart of election reform in New York: What type of machine will voters use to cast ballots?

That and a few other matters have kept New York from fully complying with the federal Help America Vote Act. This law calls for a top-to-bottom overhaul of all states' electoral systems. But the dilly-dallying in Albany has left New York the only state to yet meet all of the law's requirements. If legislators don't get their act together soon, the state could lose \$220 million in federal funding.

The nation's largest voting-machine vendors, of course, have been more than happy to help legislators make their decision. Since 2002, they've spent nearly \$1.2 million on politically connected lobbyists to make their cases.

The companies are pushing touch-screen electronic voting machines. But these machines have proven unreliable and vulnerable to manipulation. Many communities that invested heavily in the expensive devices now regret their decisions and are considering switching to simpler scanner-readable paper ballots.

That is the direction New York should go. Nearly a third of American voters already cast paper ballots read by optical scanners. The technology is secure. It's accurate. It's accessible. It's verifiable. And it's cost-effective. Claims by some that the printing and storing of paper ballots make optical scanning the more expensive option seem overstated.

All New Yorkers should urge their legislators to adopt this sensible system statewide.

Optical scan voting: Albany can't decide, so Tompkins should

The Ithaca Journal Editorial

May 13, 2005

In one move on Tuesday, state lawmakers delivered bad news and good news to those interested in making sure that future elections run smoothly in this state.

First, the bad news.

Following the infamous hanging-chad debacle in Florida and the chaos it tossed into the 2000 presidential election, Congress passed the Help America Vote Act. Among its goals: Entice states to upgrade old voting machines by offering to pick up 95 percent of the cost. The catch, the state had to have the new machines ready to replace about 22,000 old lever-style machines by 2006. Failure to do so could cut New York out of about \$200 million in federal aid.

Every other state has acted.

But, with its usual political palsy, Albany kept promising to do something as the months and years ticked by, but never managed to cross the finish line. Several bills, including a bill cosponsored by local Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, have been stalled in committee. On Tuesday, members of a special legislative panel created to blaze this state's path into the future of voting told the media they've decided to pass the buck. Instead of making a decision to move the state forward together - securing the federal aid and taking the many advantages that united action presents - lawmakers are saying they're going to let each county decide what to do. Critics warn that a patchwork of different systems could make statewide recounts a nightmare, just like in Florida in 2000.

So what's the good news?

Since 2003 records show big voting machine manufacturers have pumped more than \$1 billion into lobbying the state Legislature on behalf of big, high-tech and expensive electronic touch-screen voting machines. Called "Direct Recording Electronic" devices, or DREs, the machine lets you interact with a computer screen and print a paper receipt when you're done.

While the lobbyist spent about five times more than the estimated \$230 million it would cost to buy the DRE machines just trying to get Albany to close the deal, grassroots groups like the League of Women Voters and Alpine-based New Yorkers for Verified Voting carried out their own counter-campaign. Their goal: Get Albany lawmakers to consider the less expensive, if far less sexy, option of optical scan machines.

Everyone who's ever taken a standardized test knows how this works - you mark the boxes on a paper ballot then send it through a machine that reads the votes. The machine can detect errors and alert the voter, and the original hand-marked paper ballots are kept as a permanent record should any result be questioned. There's even a special machine that can help people with disabilities cast votes that get printed on the same ballot and scanned by the same machine.

According to New Yorkers for Verified Voting, it would cost about \$114 million to outfit the state with these machines. In Tompkins County alone, the savings would be about \$380,000 compared to DREs.

Critics, even some not on the payroll of the big voting machine companies, have said the cost of paper for ballots could make optical scan machines more expensive in the end. Optical scan backers counter that longer service time as well as less costly repair and operating costs make their machines less expensive in the end. The federal offer to help is a one-time deal, they note. If the complex DRE machines have to be fixed or replaced, state and local government will have to foot the bill.

Fair points to consider.

But, in backing optical scan voting, Lifton and the other lawmakers who backed A6503 as well as the Tompkins County Legislature when it passed Resolution No. 3 back in January, insisted there is another point to consider as well: Only the optical scan/paper ballot system provide the permanent verifiable record that is essential to electoral accountability. Digits on a memory board are wonderfully convenient, but only big boxes of hand-marked paper can be counted upon when tight or disputed races mean every vote must be recounted.

Which brings us back to the good news.

Whether they meant to or not, by tossing this to the counties state lawmakers have spared us all the billion-dollar-boondoggle we might have all been forced to eat. In that odd way, Albany showed courage by resisting the lobbyist and at least leaving counties with the option of fashioning their own reasonable solutions.

Of course, they could have given counties a little more time. But, hey, we'll take any good news out of Albany we can get.

Albany abstains on voting

New York Daily News Editorial
May 16, 2005

After hemming and hawing for three years, the Legislature has decided not to decide how New Yorkers will vote in next year's gubernatorial race. Instead, lawmakers will throw the responsibility onto 58 local election boards with no time to spare. A fine example of why "Albany" and "dysfunction" have become synonymous.

The locals, including the city Board of Elections, will now have to select an electronic voting system and put it to work on a crash basis. New York City alone must have 10,000 new machines up and running, plus trained technicians and poll workers, before fall 2006.

The deadline looms because the Legislature dithered over complying with the Help America Vote Act, a federal law enacted after the 2000 Bush-Gore fiasco in Florida. Among other things, the statute ordered states to modernize voting systems with electronic machines. New York is the last to comply because the Legislature haggled over side issues and then gave up on choosing a statewide system.

If there's a silver lining, it's that the people in charge of running elections and making sure they go smoothly will be the same people picking the machines. But it's a foregone conclusion that New York will wind up with a county-by-county hodgepodge of approaches.

There are basically two types of systems. One uses ATM-style machines on which voters touch a computer screen or push a button to register choices. The other requires voters to pencil in boxes on a ballot and then slide the ballot through an optical scanner.

The big winners here are the lobbyists shilling for the manufacturers of voting machines. After banking millions in fees during the Albany debate, they can rack up many more billable hours carrying the fight to 58 separate boards of elections. Ka-ching.

Although the lobbyists represent companies that sell both ATM-style machines and optical scanners, they are united in one quest: to sell ATM-style machines. It's no wonder, because each of those costs \$10,000 to \$11,000, roughly double the price of an optical scanner. We believe the optical scanner is the right choice.

Boards of elections will have to work fast, and smart, to organize an election in 16 months without getting fleeced - thanks to the Legislature, which could have assigned that duty a couple of years ago.

Put polling machines to a vote

Op-Ed Piece, New York Daily News

By Bill Hammond

March 9th, 2005

ALBANY - Like pushy car dealers, industry reps for voting machines are hawking top-of-the-line cream puffs with lots of bells and whistles here while keeping their economy models under wraps. Unless lawmakers smarten up in a hurry, voters across the state could get stuck with expensive lemons.

With the state facing a federal deadline to modernize its polling booths, the manufacturers are touting ATM-like machines with push-buttons and "touch screens." These devices are easy to use and 100% accurate - if you trust them, that is.

They run on software that's vulnerable to glitches, and the only paper record is generated by the machines themselves. Critics call them black boxes because voters have no way to know whether the machine has correctly tallied their choices.

The low-tech alternative is to use paper ballots - which voters fill out, SAT-style, with a No. 2 pencil - and count them with optical scanners. If these machines screw up, officials can always count the original ballots by hand.

Scanners cost about \$5,000 a pop, about \$3,000 less than a touch-screen machine. Since New York needs to replace 20,000 machines, the savings would approach \$60million.

All the major companies offer both types of equipment, and they deny promoting one technology over another. But they mysteriously avoid making the cheaper equipment available for inspection. At the Capitol recently, a lobbyist managed to shut down a demonstration of optical scanning by getting his client to pull its machine from the display.

Assemblywoman Sandra Galef of Westchester called the company to object and was told that New York is "a touch-screen state."

"I said, 'We are?'" Galef recalled. "I'm a legislator. I don't think I've voted on anything."

"Why are the vendors deciding what type of state New York State should be?" asks Bo Lipari of Ithaca, a retired software engineer who founded New Yorkers for Verified Voting. "We ought to be able to look at all our alternatives and make a rational choice."

The danger is that the small army of lobbyists working this issue, who collected almost \$1 million in fees last year, will succeed in wagging the dog - and win their clients much fatter contracts.

One manufacturer, Sequoia Voting Systems, finally let its optical scan machine see the light of day yesterday at a demonstration in Madison County. But it might be too little too late. Albany must make its decision in a hurry - in time for the equipment to be up and running next year - or lose \$220 million in federal funding.

Take a Look

Syracuse Post-Standard Editorial
July 05, 2005

which method of casting votes is best. Onondaga County legislators need to weigh in now on what type of machine voters will use to cast ballots in 2006 and beyond. The issue goes to the heart of the faith we place in our election process. It also has huge implications for taxpayers. But it's barely on county lawmakers' radar screens.

It might surprise legislators, then, that the county's two election commissioners, Republican Helen Kiggins and Democrat Edward Szczesniak, have pretty much made up their minds to order about 500 electronic touch-screen machines from Sequoia Voting Systems, which has a plant in Tioga County. Indeed, federal law gives them the final say.

But election reform groups worry that commissioners in Onondaga and other counties have been blinded by the glittering promises of voting-machine manufacturers and the politically connected lobbyists on their payrolls. (Sequoia Voting Systems alone spent more than \$300,000 on a lobbying firm run by Jeff Buley, a counsel for the state Republican Committee.) The lobbyists have been pushing the relatively expensive touch-screen machines. Civic groups like the League of Women Voters say there's a more reliable and cost-effective alternative: optical scanning of paper ballots.

That's why it's important that the county Legislature step in.

Legislators could have substantial influence in the decision if they choose to. Federal money will buy the machines. Local money, however, will pay for machine storage, some maintenance, inspectors and related costs. That is where legislators, who control most of the commissioners' budget, could hold sway.

Legislators should independently research the different options free of outside influences and make their recommendations to the election commissioners. They should pay particular attention to optical scanning; about a third of American voters now cast ballots that way without serious problems. By contrast, an increasing number of counties across the country are regretting their decisions to invest millions of dollars in error-prone touch-screen systems.

Lawmakers have to start their inquiry now. The commissioners anticipate placing orders for the machines before the end of the year. The new machines have to be up and running in 2006.

Chairman Dale Sweetland and Legislator Bill Meyer, who heads the committee overseeing election matters, owe it to all county residents to do a prompt, thorough and open review.

Which way to vote

Counties should seek public input on what kind of new voting machines to use.

Elmira Star-Gazette Editorial

July 7, 2005

Get ready to say goodbye to those old lever-style voting machines. Starting next year, they will be antiques of democracy.

What will replace them? That's a decision county boards of elections will make. But before they decide between paper or touch screen, county officials ought to test public reaction to the new equipment available.

The New York Legislature in its just-concluded session gave counties the right to choose between the optical scan and touch screen machines rather than dictate a one-machine-fits-all policy. For optical scan proponents such as Bo Lipari of New Yorkers for Verified Voting, having a choice is a chance for him to make a convincing case for scannable paper ballots that go through machines taking up less space and costing less than touch screen models.

For many counties where storage is an issue, the optical scan is a good choice. In Chemung where as many as five voting precincts use one building, a single optical scan machine can do the work of five touch screen models plus the system retains a paper record of each vote.

But touch screen advocates, many of whom are experienced at running elections, cite more privacy, speed of voting, lower printing costs and less storage of paper ballots as reasons to go with the touch screen versions.

New Yorkers for Verified Voting have done some math that make a compelling argument for optical scan. In Chemung and Steuben counties combined, the group estimates optical scan machines would cost the state about \$900,000 less and statewide could save about \$82 million if every county used them.

However, each county has the freedom to decide on whether voters will mark a piece of paper or put their finger to a glass screen. That choice is what we recommended during the legislative session, and now that counties have that power, they should use it wisely by doing some field research before the 2006 elections when these machines are likely to show up.

Demonstrations at shopping malls or even at polling places this fall could give county officials a sense of what machines voters prefer. With that feedback, they can decide what best suits their local voters, county budgets and storage facilities.

Try before buying. It's good way to make a smarter choice.

Voting redesigned

Optical scanners seem the best bet as counties scramble to meet mandate

The Buffalo News

July 14, 2005

New York's 57 counties and biggest city now have to scramble to make a decision that should have been made in Albany. The State Legislature passed a new voting-machine law just in time to cash in on federal assistance, but it blew the chance to have a uniform voting system in this state.

Under the new law, mandated by the federal Help America Vote Act of 2002, New Yorkers accustomed to pulling a lever at the voting booth will have to adjust to new methods. By next year's elections, the old-style machines must be replaced by new technology. Both the Senate and Assembly left the choice - either an ATM-style touch screen, or an optical scanner of marked ballots - up to counties and New York City.

The state law does call for any voting machine adopted to have a verified paper trail, for verification and recount purposes. That's a good thing, and it has forced manufacturers to develop that capability for their systems, and to provide voters a chance to check and verify their choices before leaving the booth. But the choice of systems remains local.

Erie County should choose optical scanners. The technology is time-tested, the machines are cheaper to store and maintain, units that do fail can be easily and quickly replaced and the system, once voters are used to it, should speed the voting process.

Most voters are familiar with optical-scan machines through standardized testing, which requires them to mark their choices on a paper form, which is then counted by a computer. The paper ballots are retained and become the official record of the election. Moreover, they can be recounted and if there is a discrepancy between the paper and the machine count, the paper ballots are the final word.

The other alternative, touch-screen voting, involves ATM-style machines that are expensive to maintain or replace. Opponents of these machines contend that the more extensive internal programming makes these machines vulnerable to hacking or vote-changing reprogramming.

Because of the intense lobbying for lucrative machine purchase and maintenance contracts and a blizzard of claims and counter-claims with often questionable assertions, counties have been placed in a difficult situation. State lawmakers have, essentially, shifted the burden of decision-making and the lobbying that goes along with it to county officials. As a result, New York State will wind up with various methods to get to the same result.

That defeats a major goal of the voting reform act. Albany's delay in addressing the issue, making it the last state to act, adds another measure of uncertainty over last-minute poll-worker training and familiarity with the new systems. Counties must now act quickly - and they should go with the more proven optical scan system.

They had no shame on HAVA

Schenectady Gazette Editorial
September 11, 2005

County election commissioners in New York state are nervous, and for good reason. The chances of them getting the new voting machines required by federal law in place by next year's primaries are as slim as George W. Bush's margin of victory over Al Gore in the tainted 2000 presidential election – the event that prompted the Help America Vote Act of 2002, also known as HAVA. There simply doesn't appear to be enough time, and the blame for that lies squarely with Gov. Pataki and the legislative leaders.

These men, who disagree about nearly everything, couldn't be bothered to deal seriously with this issue even though they had years to do it – and plenty of incentive. The incentive was that at least some of the \$250 million the feds gave New York State under HAVA may have to be returned if it fails to comply.

The leaders didn't act until the end of last session – and then they punted to the counties, leaving them to decide what kind of machines to buy. But the counties can't do that until the state Board of Elections (not known for its speed) provides them with a list of HAVA-certified machines. If they don't have that list soon, and order the machines by Dec. 31, they stand to lose the federal money.

Even if the machines do get ordered in time, they still have to be built, delivered and tested; and then local elections boards have to train poll workers and voters in their use. There is something to be said for not rushing into things – states that quickly opted for electronic “touch” voting machines after HAVA was passed had major problems with them – but New York State has created problems for itself by going too slowly.

As for what machines to order, we, along with the League of Women Voters, like the paper-based optical scan systems, which are cheaper, more reliable and less susceptible to error and fraud. But the makers of computerized touch voting systems know how to play the game in New York State – they are spending big money on politically connected lobbyists – so it would be foolish to bet against them.

The best strategy may be to technically comply with the law by having one new machine in each polling place. Not only might that spare the state federal penalties, but allow it to find out which machines work best.

Voting machines: Lifton right on choice

Ithaca Journal Editorial

November 9, 2005

As most voters know, Tuesday's visit to those old lever voting machines was, for most people, the last. The troubling question now becomes - what next?

If you remember back to 2000, there was that little fuss over counting votes in Florida. Congress, which in the end got to watch while the Supreme Court settled the issue, decided such a thing shouldn't happen again. Federal lawmakers set aside a bundle of cash, and ordered all states to overhaul voting machines to make sure they meet a host of new standards. The new machine had to be in place by 2006, giving them a dry run in a federal election before facing the crush and controversy of the 2008 presidential race.

By this spring, every state but one had acted.

With time running out for the state to get about \$200 million in federal money to get the job done, a special legislative panel in Albany decided in May to let the counties decide. The options: more expensive ATM-style electronic machines, called "direct recording electronic" or DREs, or less expensive but paper-hungry optical scanners.

But now the options may be running out.

Local Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, Speaker Shelly Silver's appointee to a 10-member advisory panel looking over voting modernization, is raising an alarm as the deadline for local action approaches. While Albany lawmakers passed a law in June backing choice for counties, local officials still have to pick from a list of state certified machines. Lifton, whose panel met for the first time Oct. 20, said she fears the machine manufacturers who each make both electronic and optical devices might only submit the more expensive DREs for certification by the state Board of Election. Counties would be left with the freedom to choose from a single option.

From the start an advocate of the paper-based optical scanner machines, Lifton says cutting off local discretion sidesteps the law and cheats New York voters and taxpayers.

Lifton was right about optical scanner, and she's right again.

New York missed the boat when it didn't select optical scanning machines throughout the state, a decision made under more than \$1 million in pro-DRE lobbying from manufacturers. The scanners are cheaper to buy, cheaper to maintain, have a proven record in many parts of the country and, perhaps most importantly, leave an unrivaled paper trail of every voters choices should tight races require a careful second tally. Lifton, like-minded legislators and vocal good government groups won a victory when they fought for local choice, and that victory cannot be allowed to be erased by the cunning of corporations sensing a fatter deal.

Lifton has called on the state Board of Elections to require manufacturers to submit the optical scanner machines along with the DREs for certification. She says that's the intent of the law. Some state officials say the Board of Elections doesn't have that power. If it doesn't, state lawmakers do, and they should get together and order companies and the BOE to provide local options, which is what legislators clearly intended back in June.

Beyond local choice and \$200 or so in federal money, there is something else at stake here - the credibility of government and the electoral process. If corporations who poured \$1 million plus can use inaction to trump the lawmakers they couldn't buy - and decide how we will vote for a generation in the process - then more than a few political cynics will have had their worst suspicions realized, and more than a few new ones will be born.

While We Weren't Looking

The New York Times

November 13, 2005

New York/Region Opinions - The City

One hard and fast rule about New York's state government - maybe about any government at all, really - is that you have to watch 'em every minute.

Here is a particularly troubling new example: While we were all busy with elections, the New York State Board of Elections issued a draft proposal for buying \$220 million worth of new voting machines. Apparently, manufacturers will be allowed - perhaps even encouraged - to push for one type of machine, while many civic groups and concerned voters are pushing for something else.

And what the manufacturers are peddling will probably cost the government a lot more money than the machines that the others want. What in the world could be going on here?

To back up a moment, the federal government, after the disastrous presidential vote in 2000, passed the Help America Vote Act, which gave money to states that improve their voting systems. The idea was to make it easier for citizens to vote and to provide an accurate, tamper-proof record.

But imagine, for a moment, that you own a voting machine company. If you can persuade a state like New York to certify your machine, you'll win the lotto. Lobbyists and politicians with rich contributors have therefore been swarming around this pot of molasses in Albany - for so long, in fact, that New York is the last state to settle on machines with money provided by the Help America Vote Act.

A few months ago, the Legislature outlined what kinds of machines are needed. For the most part they did a decent job, with a couple of exceptions. First, they required a "full-faced ballot" that would allow voters to see all the races on one huge page. This is a ridiculous requirement that will inevitably make New York's machines more costly than they would otherwise be.

Even more important, the board's guidelines do not appear to require or even encourage vendors to offer optical scanning equipment. Instead, they'll be able to offer only direct recording devices, or DRE's, which are more expensive and less reliable than the optical scanning machines. DRE's cost about \$8,000 to \$11,000 per machine, compared to \$5,500 for optical scanning equipment.

The new guidelines are in draft form, so there is still time for those who care about the way New Yorkers vote to make certain that these same voters get the right equipment.

The draft voting machine guidelines are available at www.elections.state.ny.us. The final version should assure that the source codes for the machines are available to the state and that someone in authority is around to make sure nobody is stealing the vote. Certainly any machine needs a voter-verified paper ballot for recounting. But communities should also be offered a chance to buy the best optical scanning machines on the market today.

The buying of new voting machines is not a routine state contract, like purchasing a fleet of trucks. Our basic rights as citizens depend on this one, and we should make certain the Board of Elections gets it right for New York's voters.

Get the vote right

New York headed for trouble if counties don't have voting-machine choices.

Elmira Star Gazette Editorial
November 20, 2005

A year from now Twin Tiers voters and the rest of New York will walk into polling places and cast their ballots on new machines. But what kind will they be, and when voters walk out how certain can they be that their votes have counted?

The credibility of that 2006 vote and the ones in succeeding years rest with the New York State Board of Elections, which appears to be on a misguided path toward forcing statewide use of touch-screen machines that are not only excessively expensive but too flawed to ensure reliability.

Each county should have the option to choose the touch-screen machines, as flawed as they are, or the more reliable optical-scan machines that we have endorsed because they are more cost-efficient and credible for Chemung, Schuyler and Steuben counties.

At the state level, the Legislature and Gov. George Pataki should intervene and direct the state Board of Elections to interpret state law in a way that would allow a choice, rather than the board's apparent interpretation that says touch-screens are the only way to display what is called a full-face ballot.

Lurking on the sidelines but hardly disinterested are the manufacturers of voting machines who would love to sell the state the more expensive touch-screen versions at \$8,000 to \$11,500 per unit compared with \$5,500 per optical-scan. But those touch-screens are riddled with problems, so much so that Miami-Dade County's elections supervisor recommended the county get rid of the \$24.5 million worth of machines it bought in 2002.

Touch-screen machines simply have not been perfected. Maybe one day they will, but as an October General Accounting Office report indicates, they have caused a multitude of problems. A North Carolina county cited by the GAO report experienced memories filling up as the touch-screen machines continued to accept as many as 4,000 votes that were not counted.

The state Board of Elections appears ready to ignore such problems and adopt a disastrous policy that could cost the federal, state and local governments more than necessary and result in embarrassing voting irregularities in a very important 2006 election in New York.

Only pressure from the public, legislators and the governor can bring good sense to bear on the elections board before it's too late. That pressure needs to come soon or New Yorkers will be stuck with an imperfect way to choose their public officials.

'Dead Last' in Voting Reform

New York Times Editorial
January 24, 2006

There are times when residents of New York can only look to the State Capitol in Albany and ask, What in tarnation are those people doing? Here we are, more than five years after the disastrous presidential vote in 2000 prompted Congress to pass the Help America Vote Act. That powerful law provides each state with lots of money to revamp its old voting systems. And so far, every state except New York has gotten the job started.

New York is so far behind the rest of the country that the Justice Department has threatened to sue, and that could cost New York some of \$2.3 billion in federal funds for fixing the voting system.

First, blame the lawmakers: Gov. George Pataki, State Senator Joseph Bruno and Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver. Instead of passing legislation in 2004, they finally agreed on a middling package last June. That was excruciatingly late to get new voting systems in place by this year's elections.

Dawdling, of course, has always been one of the Legislature's strong suits. But it is not hard to imagine how lobbyists, smelling this huge vat of money, have been driving things. The salespeople are pushing for equipment that can be too expensive and not secure enough. What every New York voter needs is what every other American voter needs - a verifiable paper record. But agents for voting machine companies have been trying to convince state leaders that they cannot deliver those machines, at least not quickly.

The most promising solution is to use a system that is available, works well and provides paper for recounting, which is required so often in this state. That is the optical scanning machine, which is cheaper than other electronic machines. Most companies make them, even though some try to keep that hidden, probably so they can sell more expensive machines.

The state needs to end this embarrassing delay, and the state's lawmakers should make certain that they are serving voters, not vendors and their powerful lobbyists. The Board of Elections needs to set guidelines that require systems that are secure and controlled by the state. And any New Yorkers with clout in Washington - like Governor Pataki, Senators Charles Schumer and Hillary Clinton, and Mayor Michael Bloomberg - need to start pleading with the Justice Department to give New York time to get it right.

A Voting Machine Mess

New York Times Editorial
March 3, 2006

The United States Justice Department sued New York State this week for having the worst record in the nation when it comes to complying with the Help America Vote Act. Now lawyers for the state and the Bush administration are trying to negotiate a solution in a rushed atmosphere that could involve some very bad compromises. Being late is humiliating, but hurrying up and buying the wrong voting systems would be far worse.

The impatience of the Justice Department with New York is understandable, and state leaders should hang their heads. The federal government is pushing the state to complete a database, choose machines and test them by the fall elections. That would be nice, but it's simply unrealistic.

New York could lose some or all of \$49 million in federal aid for the purchase of new voting machines, so officials have quite an incentive to move quickly. There have been alarming rumors about a possible agreement that would skimp on testing the new equipment, or even adopt machines that don't have the safety net of a paper trail. These are fundamental protections of the voters' right to make sure that their ballots are counted accurately. Attorney General Eliot Spitzer's lawyers must make certain that Washington does not push through insecure machines and faulty testing procedures by this backdoor route.

There are better options. The state could certify optical scanning systems, which can be adapted more easily to New York's requirements than other voting machines. (They are also less expensive than some of the fancier electronic gizmos being pushed by Albany lobbyists.) Another possible compromise would put a special machine or phone at each polling place this fall for disabled voters, who have been of particular concern to the Justice Department. Then the state would be responsible for coming up with an entire fleet of satisfactory new machines → accessible to the handicapped → in time for the presidential election in 2008.

Board of Elections commissioners have argued that New York's delay has saved voters from problems encountered in other states that have adopted new voting systems much more rapidly. But the argument that New York has taken its time to get a better system works only if the commissioners actually get a better system.

In with the new

Chemung County voting machine display lets public have a look and a say

Elmira Star Gazette Editorial
March 19, 2006

This Wednesday, voters in Chemung County can vote, in a way, for the kind of machine they would like to see replace the old lever types that have been around for at least 50 years in New York state.

Their vote won't be counted, per se, but the feedback they provide on a survey will help the Chemung County Board of Elections gauge how well people like the different machines that will be on display for the public from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Wednesday in the lobby of the Clemens Center. The board's decision to let the public give the machines a test drive is sound and fair.

After more than a year of controversy in New York about which equipment is better, the voters themselves deserve a chance to get their hands on each machine and to ask manufacturing representatives about the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Editorially, we have sided with groups such as New Yorkers for Verified Voting in backing the optical-scan devices because of their features, such as a readily available paper trail of ballots and their mechanical reliability.

But not everyone shares that perspective. Advocates of the touch-screen machines - equipment that works like an ATM-type of device - like their efficiency, speed and reliability. The debate over the two machines has been so polarizing that the state Board of Elections has left the decision up to each board of elections.

For counties such as Chemung, optical scan provides an option that cuts down on storage space of machines, produces a paper record and offers a style of equipment that is durable and less expensive to replace than the touch-screen version. Verified Voters estimates that optical scans could be more than \$500,000 cheaper to purchase with the money that the federal government has doled out to New York as part of the Help Americans Vote Act.

The U.S. Justice Department currently is suing New York over its failure to meet the voting reform deadline, but meanwhile counties must decide what kind of machine they want for their residents. In Chemung, the local elections commissioners will make that call, but they want to know what voters think. That is why it is vital for as many people as possible to drop by the Clemens Center on Wednesday to try out the machines, fill out the surveys and give the commissioners feedback.

The ultimate goal of the new machines is to avoid the 2000 presidential Election Day debacle in Florida. In New York, the reform effort means the old lever machines have maybe one more election left in them.

With the state's antiquated voting system on its way out, Chemung County voters can help figure out what to replace it with.

Their best chance is to come out on Wednesday and take a look. Then let the county board of elections know. It could make a difference.

Ballot Security

Report strengthens case in N.Y. counties for rethinking touch-screen machines.

The Elmira Star Gazette
August 29, 2006

Electronics and computers are supposed to make our world easier and more efficient. But when it comes to counting our votes, technology hasn't provided all the answers -- yet. That's the spin out of a report by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University's law school.

And election officials should pay close attention. The center gained considerable credibility when it woke up the New York Legislature in 2004 with a stinging report on the Legislature's sloppy ways of doing business. The result was more productive sessions in 2005 and 2006.

This latest report from a Brennan Center task force is even more dramatic because it looks at new voting systems being proposed nationwide to counter the bungled and antiquated methods that plagued the 2000 presidential election -- especially in Florida.

What the center's report, released Monday, contends is that none of the proposed computerized voting methods is immune to software tampering by those who want to rig an election. The report comes at a crucial time for New York counties where election officials must decide what kind of machines they should adopt for their voters: the touch-screen types -- called Direct Recording Electronic machines or DREs -- or the Precinct Count Optical Scan machines -- optical scan for short.

However, the report also points out that a task force examination of touch-screen machines showed they were more susceptible to voter errors, especially among lower-income groups and minorities. Tests by the Brennan Center task force studying voting patterns found that touch-screens in combination with what are called full-face ballots -- displays that pack all races and candidates on one computer screen -- are about 70 percent more likely to cause voters to skip making a selection or accidentally select too many candidates and thus invalidate the vote.

The optical scans, where voters mark ballots by hand, will immediately detect problems and allow voters to fix mistakes. Plus they provide a paper trail that some touch-screen machines do not.

We have long believed that advocates of the optical scan option have made a compelling case for choosing their preferred method over the touch-screens, and the Brennan Center task force's findings add further credence to that argument.

The touch-screens are nice devices. Americans have become accustomed to touch-screens for their banking and herding their groceries through supermarket checkout stations. But when it comes to democracy and the sanctity of a protected vote in America, touch-screens have yet to demonstrate the level of reliability that voters deserve.

As the Brennan report points out, any computerized system needs close and frequent audits to ensure their integrity. But beyond that necessary security measure, the optical scan system, though not as trendy as touch-screens, offers a more dependable way to make sure that voters don't get confused and that ballot totals have a paper record to back them up.

Trust in Voting

Problems with electronic machines show wisdom of going with optical scanning

The Syracuse Post-Standard
September 28, 2006

New York counties should join the growing number of communities that are rethinking the wisdom of switching to electronic voting machines.

All states are required under federal law to overhaul the way ballots are cast. In New York, that means replacing nearly 20,000 old lever-action voting machines in more than 15,500 election districts.

It's up to election commissioners in each county to decide what will take the place of those old machines. Any new machines must be accessible to people with disabilities, and must allow voters to ensure their votes are accurate before they are cast.

Many commissioners, including the two in Onondaga County, have pretty much made up their minds to go with electronic touch-screen voting machines. But these devices have proven unreliable and vulnerable to manipulation.

Just this year, serious glitches were reported with electronic machines in primary elections in at least five states. Machines in one Texas county recorded about 100,000 more votes than were actually cast!

That's why many counties and several states have decided to scrap their expensive electronic systems and go, instead, with a tried and trusted technology: optical scanning of paper ballots. Optical scanning is secure, accurate, accessible, verifiable and cost-effective. This is common knowledge because nearly one-third of American voters now cast paper ballots read by optical scanners.

New York counties would be wise to do the same. There's too much at stake in elections these days to have the will of voters cast in doubt.

Make Every Vote Count

Optical scan machines are preferable to expensive touch-screen systems

Albany Times Union Editorial
October 15, 2006

New York was the last state in the nation to comply with the federal law requiring states to upgrade their voting systems. But there was a silver lining nonetheless: New York could learn from the mistakes of other states that had rushed to acquire new systems.

Or not. More and more it appears that New York might make a big mistake by purchasing expensive touch screen machines over simpler, less costly and more reliable optical scanning systems.

Much of the blame can be placed on the Legislature, which left it to the counties to decide which systems to buy. But the counties can only purchase machines that have been certified by the state Board of Elections, and that process has been troubling. For one thing, manufacturers of the more expensive touch screen machines have been lobbying heavily to have their systems certified, while giving optical scanners short shrift. The Sierra Club wants manufacturers of both systems to be required to submit an optical scanning system for certification along with their touch screen product.

Optical scanners work the way Lotto ticket outlets do. That is, voters mark their choices on a paper ballot that is scanned into the system and saved if a recount is needed. By contrast, touch-screen machines perform much as ATMs do. But there are more risks associated with these machines than optical scanners. For example, in 2002, Miami's Dade County touch-screen system was riddled with coding errors and voting records in the gubernatorial primary that year were destroyed by computer crashes. Granted, New York learned something from that experience by requiring a verifiable paper trail, but the potential for coding glitches, or sabotage, remains.

The League of Women Voters is concerned about the secrecy surrounding the verification process, largely because manufacturers are withholding so much information on the grounds of proprietary interests. And the prospect of having counties turn to manufacturers to fix glitches, or revise or replace codes, is far from reassuring. Any changes should be subject to an independent review by a panel of computer experts.

Voting Last, Voting Smart

A new report rejects electronic screen machines that lack a paper trail for verification

Albany Times Union Editorial
Saturday, December 9, 2006

New York will be the last state in the nation to decide on what kind of voting systems will replace its outdated lever machines. That's largely because the Legislature tossed the issue into the laps of the counties, which must decide individually what types of voting machines to buy to comply with the federal Help America Vote Act.

But it's not all bad news, as some good government groups, notably the League of Women Voters, have been saying all along, on the grounds that it was better to wait and see what other states did, and avoid making their mistakes. And now comes a report by the National Institute of Standards and Technology that reaffirms that view.

The institute minces no words about electronic voting. It "cannot be made secure," the report states, and shouldn't be used without a paper trail.

Already the momentum is building for a federal standard that would put the report's findings into a national standard. Last Tuesday, the Technical Guidelines Development Committee, a federal panel, agreed that any new voting system should provide a way to verify results independently. It is up to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission to decide whether to adopt such a standard.

The institute report endorses so-called optical scan machines that have backup paper records. Under this system, voters mark paper ballots, much as bettors fill out a paper lottery form, which are then scanned electronically. The ballots are then stored and can be retrieved in the event of a recount.

Some electronic voting machines, which resemble ATM machines, also produce paper records that can be used for recounts. But not all. In some states, the electronic ballot is final. If there is a tight race, or if a candidate charges fraud, there is no way to double check each ballot and determine if the election was fair. The report specifically rejects these machines.

New York requires a paper trail for whatever type of system the counties decide to purchase, so a federal standard would pose no problem here. But critics are right to warn that electronic screen voting is still risky, given the chances for a glitch, or outright sabotage, in the coding. Optical scan machines, which we have endorsed, produce easily verifiable results and are much less expensive than electronic screen systems. And now there is a national report that endorses optical scan systems as well. All of a sudden, the choice for counties becomes an easy one.