

If New Jersey doesn't upgrade to computerized voting, it's just plain stupid.

Fast and accurate tallies, with scant room for error or fraud. An end to voter confusion. Thousands of new computers for schools or libraries.

Switching to computerized voting also is taxpayer-friendly: \$6 million a year for state taxpayers, not counting the gains from federal contributions, cash from selling the current voting machines, and savings from maintaining and storing antiquated machines or having to buy new electronic ones.

Perhaps best of all, no worries about Jay Leno making jokes about clueless N.J. voters.

Let's face it: Florida isn't the only state susceptible to an electoral meltdown.

Before Florida there was Chesilhurst.

A year before the infamous presidential elections debacle, less than two dozen votes in the little community of Chesilhurst separated mayoral candidates. More importantly, it separated democracy from the slipshod machines used to count the votes.

Though the stakes weren't nearly as high, the election was tarnished just the same for this tiny N.J. community. All because of a glitch in ancient voting technology.

Voters in Chesilhurst chose a last-minute write-in ticket challenging

Elections Upgrade: Bringing the ballot to the 21st century

Select one candidate:

Albert Gore Jr.

George W. Bush

Illustration, design by JEF DAUBER / Courier-Post

the incumbents. Because the process of writing-in their candidates' names was confusing, their votes were discarded, and the incumbents appeared as the victors.

Such flaws in the current system are inevitable. And the problem is compounded because there's no parity in election systems. Across the state, 21 counties use three completely different types of technology - and eight different types of machines - to do the same thing: tally the electorate's wishes.

This state needs an elections upgrade. And a new way of conducting elections ought to be uniform statewide, easy to use, cost effective, painfully accurate and insulated from fraud.

It's a tall order to achieve all of these objectives, but it certainly is possible - and affordable.

Computerized voting is the answer.

A host of companies have introduced computerized voting systems

to the market. From touch-screen systems to point-and-click computer systems.

Upgrading to computerized voting would cost New Jersey about \$6 million a year, according to VoteHere.net, a company that can provide a package that includes the hardware, software and services needed to implement such a system. And \$6 million - less any federal contributions, of course - is peanuts for a state that spent somewhere around \$120 million just to prepare for the Y2K bug.

In fact, a new computerized voting system would reduce the financial burden some counties already are facing.

Camden County is one of five in New Jersey that still uses one type of the old "lever" machines in its elections. Most of the county's voting machines are more than 40 years old, according to Richard Wooster, the

county's superintendent of elections. In fact, the particular machines the county uses haven't even been manufactured since 1971.

"We scrape for parts," said Wooster, who would like to get new voting machines for the county. "Imagine if you had a 50-year-old car."

Wooster said the county rings up a \$25,000 to \$40,000 bill annually just to maintain the devices. He hopes the freeholder board soon will appropriate as much as \$4 million to buy new machines that are a step in the right direction, but still miles away from the benefits of a computerized system.

Downtime also is an issue.

Now, the behemoth, antiquated devices are only good for one thing - elections. When there isn't an election, the artifacts have to be stored somewhere. That costs money - about \$70,000 a year for Camden County, says Wooster.

If the state negotiated a deal with a vendor for new, computerized technology, the devices could operate on typical computers. These same computers could be used in classrooms when they're not needed for elections. All the while, Wooster - and the elections superintendents from New Jersey's other 20 counties - wouldn't have to squeeze millions of dollars out of county freeholders who like to look thrifty.

Aside from the economic advantage of a new system, the main benefit is how computerized voting would slice out the factors that can make voting inaccurate: Hanging or dimpled chad, optical scan cards that don't register a vote - or too many votes. These are all problems that surfaced in last year's national election.

But don't think Florida is the only place befuddled by a flawed voting system. If the 2000 presidential election had been hair-trigger close in another state, the same story of missing votes, confusing ballots and recount hysteria would have surfaced.

"It happens all over the place," said Dale Tibbitts, director of computer services for Election Data Systems, which monitors voting technology nationwide. Only close elections invite the scouring eyes of criticism.

Shortly after the 2000 presidential election, reports surfaced about another election enigma right across the Delaware. In Philadelphia, at least 3,000 votes were miscounted - with either fraud or elections workers' mathematical ineptitude as the culprit. Either way, it's the unacceptable result of a slipshod, outdated system.

New Jersey doesn't have a clean election slate, either: Back in the political machine days of Hudson County in the early to mid 1900s, the party bosses had a certain knack for bringing out the zombie vote. Back

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A thrifty proposal

New Jersey spends billions of dollars each year on all kinds of things. The representatives whom residents elect are responsible for all of your tax dollars. An investment in the technology we use to vote - \$6 million a year, tops - would be minuscule in comparison to some of the ways they spend your money now.

Here's an idea of where the state tax dollars go:

- \$120 million - to exterminate the infamous Y2K bug. Hey, at least it worked, right?
- \$149.8 million - budgeted this fiscal year for salary increases and other benefits for state workers.
- \$6.2 million - what it costs to run the governor's office.
- \$955.3 million - cost of running the department of corrections. Divided by the 27,500 state prisoners behind bars, that comes close to \$35,000 per prisoner, per year.

Now let's talk about future money to be spent on elections:

- \$23.5 million - the approximate cost to replace all of New Jersey's mechanical voting machines with the bulky, single-purpose electronic machines that are used in some of the state's counties, including Burlington. Counties still would have to pay for storing these devices.
- \$30 million - the approximate cost to replace every single voting machine in New Jersey with state-of-the-art, computerized voting technology. Spread out over the five-year minimum life of the computers - figuring that the state will not keep this system for another 30 years - the cost would be \$6 million a year. Not to mention, the state could sell its old machines to other states - a common practice - and reduce the cost further.

Sources: Fiscal 2002 state budget; Y2K remediation notes of the state budget; the Department of Corrections; the Camden County Superintendent of Elections Office; VoteHere.net.

Point, click! V...O...T...E

(Your vote has been sent.)

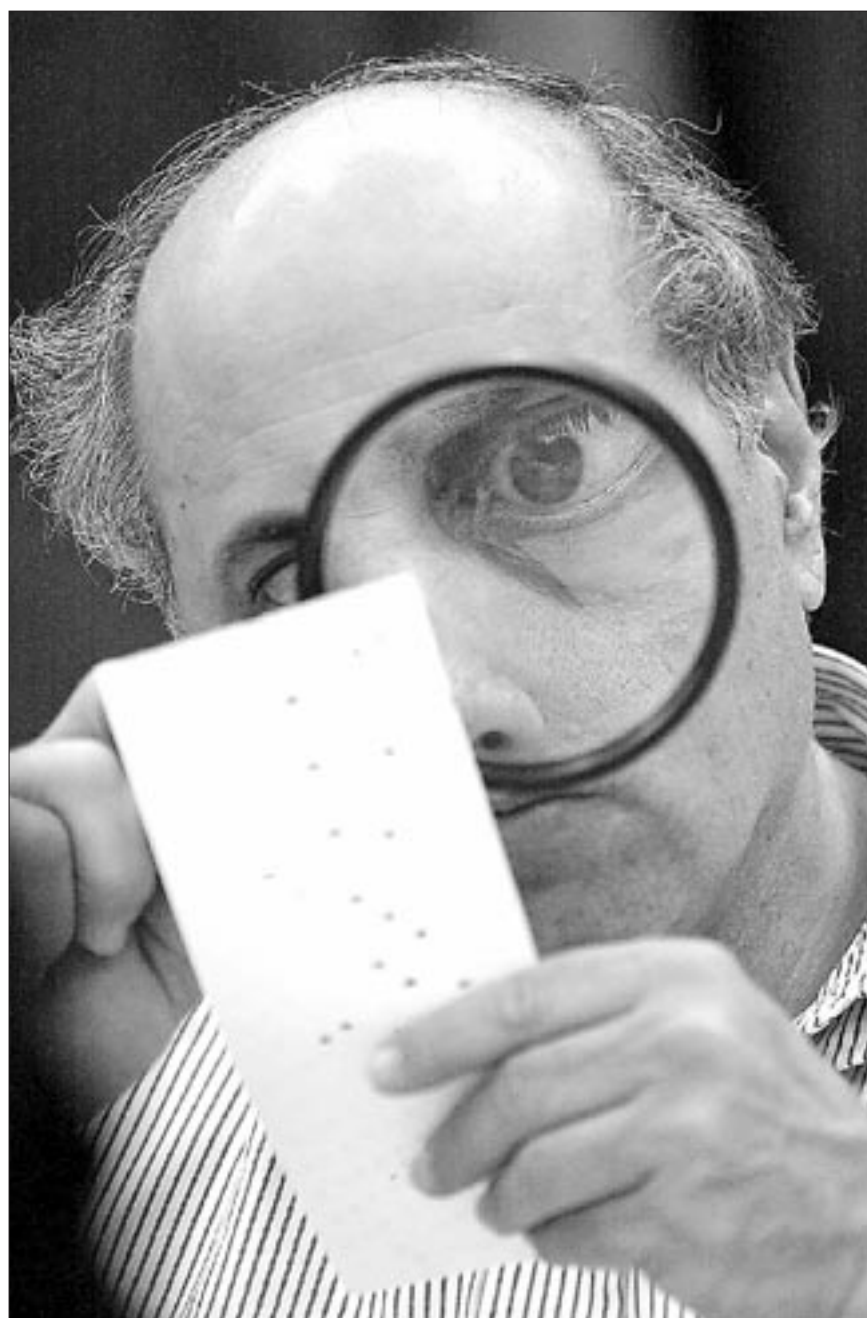
To get an idea of what computerized voting will be like, the *Courier-Post* asked VoteHere.net to create a computerized version of the November 2000 ballot in Maple Shade. It can be found through the "Elections Upgrade" link at the Courier-Post Web site (www.courierpostonline.com).

The Internet voting example we set up provides an idea of what computerized voting at the polls will be like, and it also offers the experience of remote voting. Keep in mind, though a mouse is necessary to vote on our sample site, touch-screen voting could be an option at the polls.

Also, our test site doesn't offer the opportunity to cast a write-in vote - something that obviously must be a part of any new voting system.

It's simply an example of what the future ballot could look like, and how the system might work.

Log onto the *Courier-Post* Web site and take a test drive.



Judge Robert Rosenberg searches for dangling chad after last year's Florida ballot fiasco. This nonsense would be history under computerized voting.

About the editorials

Today's Opinion pages try to persuade you, the taxpaying, voting N.J. resident, to support computerized voting. It shouldn't be a hard sell.

In fact, it's difficult to see exactly who would oppose such a move. These editorials highlight a number of key issues pertaining to voting:

■ Current voting technology - if it still can be called technology - dates to the Cold War. These machines are expensive to maintain and store and are anything but secure from fraud. Also, as we all have seen, current

voting practices also are open to human error.

■ Internet voting - the kind that allows you to vote at home in your feetie pajamas - is still a few years away. Technology has to catch up.

■ However, Intranet voting - the computerized system we think the state should implement - is ready to be employed. Here's what you get: Votes are counted quickly and accurately. Voters have a chance to double-check their ballot before casting it. The system is virtually tamper-proof.

■ Best of all, computerized, Intranet voting is quite affordable, and actually would save some taxpayers big money. The system tops out at \$6 million a year for state taxpayers. We say tops out, because federal funds

likely are available to defray the cost to the state, and there will be savings from scrapping some of the old systems, in which local taxpayers have had to pony up money to fix and store voting machine relics.

The really big savings would come in those counties that are considering purchasing newer voting technology. They, of course, could keep that money if New Jersey adopted a statewide system.

■ As a bonus, the switch to computerized voting would mean some 10,000 computers would be made available to schools, libraries, wherever. Except on Election Days, these computers could be put to good use, unlike current voting machines, which are useless for anything other than voting.

Tell us what you think

Of course, we encourage anyone who thinks the state should make the switch to computerized voting to contact his or her state representatives, either by regular mail or via e-mail. Our Web site has hyperlinks to all of the local officials.

The *Courier-Post* also would like to hear from you.

Send us your thoughts. Should the state spend the money to upgrade voting technology? Should it keep the current systems? Did you have fun playing with the sample ballot on our Web site?

Send your letters to: Letters to the Editor, *Courier-Post*, P.O. Box 5300, Cherry Hill, 08034. Fax them to (856) 663-2831. E-mail letters to cpedit@courierpostonline.com.

We look forward to hearing from you.

A couple of other pertinent notes: ■ Deputy Editorial Page Editor Dan McDonough Jr. took the lead on this project. He spoke to technology and election experts across the nation to formulate these ideas and suggestions.

■ Much of the technological information - and the computerized ballot on our Web site - are from VoteHere.net, an outfit that, along with other companies, would be quite interested in setting up, for a fee, New Jersey's computerized voting system. We don't endorse one company over another, but we must acknowledge VoteHere.net's contribution to this editorial project.

- Alan Bauer, editorial page editor