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New Machines Will Safeguard Our Precious Right To Vote

Susan Bysiewicz

On Election Day this November, Connecticut citizens will make history. Connecticut voters will use the traditional lever voting machines for the last time in the November 7th election. After that, a new and even stronger era of voting begins in Connecticut, one that ensures secure and reliable elections well into the future.

The lever voting machines have served our state well; we have consistently held fair, reliable, and secure elections. Our state and local election officials have worked hard over the years to earn that reputation and we all want to make sure that our elections remain secure and reliable.

The federal Help America Vote Act (“HAVA”), passed after the 2000 Presidential election, requires changes in the administration of our elections. It requires states to provide technology that is accessible for people with disabilities in time for the election this November, and it also requires a paper trail for every vote cast to ensure accuracy and security. HAVA also requires that we replace all of our lever voting machines throughout the state in time for the election in November 2007.

The Office of the Secretary of the State recently announced new voting technology for the State of Connecticut. First, a telephone-based technology will be installed in each polling place to allow people with disabilities – for the first time in seventy (70) years -- to come to the polling place to cast their vote in this November’s election. We are extremely proud that our state will be taking this significant step toward making elections truly accessible.

Next, we will replace lever voting machines with “optical scan” voting machines by November 2007. We will be working with LHS Associates, a Massachusetts company with an excellent record of customer service. Their machines are already in use in thousands of precincts throughout New England, including ten towns in Connecticut. LHS has earned praise from elections officials for their reliability, the ease with which voters adapt to using their machines, and the security of their ballots from fraud.

People who have taken a standardized test or filled out a lottery ticket already have experience with the process involved in filling out an optical scan ballot. Each voter is given a paper ballot and they make selections by filling in bubbles on the ballot itself. The ballot is fed into a machine for scanning and stored in a locked container. In the event of a recount, the ballot serves as its own paper trail.

Our plan to replace traditional lever voting machines with widely praised optical scan technology should put many people at ease, particularly those who anticipated that the state would choose “ATM-style” or DRE machines and computerized technology.

When choosing new technology, the principles of accessibility, reliability and security guided our decision-making. Thousands of citizens tested equipment and offered their opinions. We heard from members of academic institutions and many advocacy groups. Members of TrueVote Connecticut were ahead of the curve advocating for optical scan technology. We also followed press accounts of scandals all across the country involving DRE voting machines.

At the end of this process, we concluded that DRE technology is simply not ready for “prime time” in Connecticut. While no system is full-proof, optical scan technology is proven to be secure and reliable. We have a formal partnership with the University of Connecticut’s Department of Computer Science and Engineering, in which UConn will assist in certification and acceptance testing of the new voting technology.

We are conducting meetings across the state to demonstrate the new machines. We have twenty (20) visits scheduled over the next six weeks. This includes a stop here in Meriden at City Hall on September 21st at 10 a.m.

Although not required until 2007, we will provide optical scan machines to a number of towns this November. We sent surveys out to all 169 municipalities in Connecticut and we were delighted with the large number that expressed interest in serving as demonstration sites this November. We will be selecting towns within the next week and will begin training for election officials and workers during September.

The cost of the new machines and training will be covered by federal funds. It is my responsibility as Secretary of the State to ensure the long-term integrity of the electoral process and accessibility of our voting machines. There is no right more precious than the right to vote, and we will safeguard that right with new equipment that protects the security and reliability of our elections or years to come.

Susan Bysiewicz is the Secretary of the State of Connecticut