

Tougher tests sought for voting machines

Senator calls for a new state panel in wake of errors and thwarted probe

Wednesday, March 19, 2008

BY DIANE C. WALSH

Star-Ledger Staff

The ongoing debate over errors in the presidential primary election results led yesterday to a call by a state senator to establish a new government panel tasked to perform more rigorous testing of electronic voting machines.

State Sen. Nicholas Scutari (D- Union) said he was angered that Sequoia Voting Systems, the manufacturer of New Jersey's 10,000 voting machines, quashed Union County's plans to have a Princeton University computer expert test nine voting machines that posted errors in the Feb. 5 primary election.

Sequoia threatened to sue Union County if it turned voting machines over to professor Edward Felten at Princeton. The Colorado-based company said the independent analysis would violate its licensing agreement with the county.

"Evidently, Sequoia believes that maintaining its 'trade secrets' trumps the rights of New Jerseyans to have their voices properly recorded in an election," Scutari said.

He plans to introduce legislation to create a Voting Machine Integrity Unit within the state Division of Gaming Enforcement to thoroughly test and certify all new voting technologies before they are implemented.

"It's an embarrassment that we have a far more rigorous and thorough approach to ensuring the fidelity of our slot machines than voting machines," Scutari said.

Union County Clerk Joanne Rajoppi applauded Scutari's initiative. She uncovered the errors when she double-checked the primary results. While the candidates' tallies were correct, Rajoppi found the Democratic and Republican turnout figures had errors. The same problems were also detected in Bergen, Gloucester, Mercer and Middlesex counties.

Sequoia maintained the errors were caused by poll workers who inadvertently pressed buttons on the control panels. Michelle Shafer, a Sequoia spokeswoman, released a statement yesterday saying her company already submits to a federal certification process.

Shafer said independent review is a complex process that must be done in accordance with the Sequoia licensing agreement.

Despite the firm's contentions, Rajoppi argued an independent review is warranted.

"The problems demand another set of eyes," Rajoppi said.

Felten submitted a request under the state Open Public Records Act yesterday, asking for a copy of the official results tape from the nine affected machines in Union County,

Rajoppi said. The clerk said she made a copy for the professor.

Diane C. Walsh may be reached at dwalsh@starledger.com or (732) 404-8087.