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COLUMBUS BUSINESS FIRST

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'Eureka' moment yields election idea

Voting IT consultant thinks his system solves worries over accuracy, security

Business First of Columbus - August 3, 2007 by [Jeff Bell](#) Business First

A chance stop at a Big Lots discount store could change Chris Wilson's life and the way ballots are cast on Election Day.

Wilson, an elections technology consultant in Columbus, is developing what he calls a one-of-a-kind voting system that meshes paper ballots with digital-pen technology. He thinks it can address mounting concerns over the security of electronic voting machines and the need for a paper trail to be tracked when the validity of a vote is questioned.

The question now is whether Wilson and his long-time friend and business associate, Steve Hilsman, can make digital pen technology fly on the elections front? The challenges include steering it through government elections certification processes and finding investors.

"It will be a long haul to get it to be a workable, salable product," Wilson said, "but I think it will be worth it."



Janet Adams | Business First
Chris Wilson, left, and Steve Hilsman successfully field-tested their digital pen voting system with customers at the Buckeye Hall of Fame Cafe.

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Wilson's timing may be right. Elections officials across the country are questioning the accuracy of their electronic voting machines and considering a return to systems that use paper ballots.

A study commissioned by California's secretary of state claimed three of the electronic voting systems used in that state are inadequate to ensure the accuracy and integrity of election results. Florida has outlawed most touch-screen voting machines in its elections.

In Ohio, a study of voting machines is expected to be completed this fall, said Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner. Fifty-six of Ohio's 88 counties use touch-screen systems. The rest have optical-scan machines that require voters to use a pen or pencil to fill in a bubble next to a candidate's name on paper ballots.

Stumbling on a solution

Wilson wasn't thinking about voting machines in May, when he stopped at a Big Lots to buy legal pads. A box of odd-looking paper marked at a closeout price caught his attention and he bought it.

When he looked closely at the paper, Wilson saw it carried a tiny dot pattern, the kind used for business forms read by digital pens. When the pens are depressed on the paper, small cameras on the tips turn to record handwriting as they cross the page. The pens are placed in electronic cradles and the data are transmitted to computers.

It's the sort of thing that interests Wilson, a former information technology director at the Franklin County Board of Elections who now runs a Web site devoted to election information at [votingindustry.com](#). He went online and bought a digital pen for \$125.

"I had the paper," he said, "so I wanted to see how this works. One morning I woke up and said, 'Why not use it for ballots and vote with it?'"

Since then, Wilson has been working with Digital Pen Systems of Boston and Hilsman, who runs a computing company in Columbus, on developing a system in which a voter can use a digital pen to mark a paper ballot. After the pen is placed in the electronic cradle and the vote is transmitted to a computer, the voter can review the ballot on the computer screen and make changes to it before it is sent to a tabulator.

Wilson thinks the system would provide voters with a better method to verify their votes than optical-scan voting machines. He also feels it alleviates security concerns associated with touch-screen voting systems and could be produced at a third of the cost.

"There's no fancy, \$3,000 touch-screen device here," Wilson said.

Changes need consensus, cash

With some sample ballots in hand, Wilson and Hilsman performed their first field tests in mid-June in the bar at the Buckeye Hall of Fame Cafe in Columbus. They were so encouraged by the reaction they continued the tests at a conference of Ohio election officials in Columbus days later.

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Aaron Ockerman, a lobbyist for the Ohio Association of Election Officials, was impressed by how well the digital pen system worked when he tried it at the conference.

"I was kind of flabbergasted," he said. "It seems almost too good to be true. It has every element you look for in a voting system."

That includes a paper trail to track votes and a paper document that clearly registers a voter's intent when the ballot was cast, Ockerman said.

"I think a lot of the product," he said. "The question is whether they can work through the details to get a system certified at the state and federal levels."

Ockerman said it's unlikely elections officials will be willing to toss aside the multimillion-dollar investments they have made in touch screens. Instead, he expects to see a mix of touch-screen, optical-scan and new technologies, such as Wilson's digital pen system.

Brunner said her goal is to make sure Ohio's election results can be trusted. But changes, she said, will take into account issues such as cost and training for elections workers.

"Any change in voting machines will have to be accompanied by money," Brunner said. "It's extremely difficult to tell our counties they have to buy new machines and not how they will have to pay for them. Hopefully we won't have to do that."

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