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Printers failed on voting machines News-Record; December 15, 2006; By Mark Binker, Staff Writer GREENSBORO — The system meant to produce a paper backup of votes cast on Guilford County's electronic voting machines failed in many cases during the election Nov. 7. About 9 percent of the printers attached to the county's voting machines had a jam or other problem. In many cases, that problem made the paper record generated unusable for purposes of a state-mandated audit, according to county elections director George Gilbert. The electronic records were not affected and remained intact, he said. Guilford County voters cast ballots on direct-record, or DRE, systems that have a computer touchscreen. During the past several years, some computer scientists and voting advocates have charged this type of system is susceptible to error and fraud. So in 2005, state lawmakers required each such machine produce a paper record, typically produced on a small reel-to-reel printer. Those printers were what failed on some systems. Gilbert, who has long been a critic of paper records, called the problems "predictable." He said the fact no one noticed the problem until post-election audits belied one of the supposed benefits of the paper backup: that it allows voters to verify their choices. "The vast majority of voters I witnessed never looked at the paper," Gilbert said. Printer problems were not restricted to Guilford County. Similar problems occurred in Alamance and Mecklenburg counties, according to Gilbert and state officials. "We have contacted the vendor and we're going to be meeting with them after the first of the year," said Johnnie McLean, the deputy director of the State Board of Elections. That vendor is ES&S, one of only a handful of companies in the United States that makes the machines and the only company allowed to sell voting equipment in North Carolina. "Based on the information we have now, we're not in a position to determine if it was something with the way the machine was being used or operated or whether it was an issue with the equipment itself," said Ken Fields, a spokesman for the company. Guilford County spent \$3.4 million on new voting equipment that was first used in 2006. Federal grants funded \$2.1 million of that amount. Before the 2008 elections, Gilbert said, the county will need to spend at least \$1.4 million for additional equipment, all of that from local tax dollars. Local voting advocates urged the county to use a different type of system known as optical scan, in which a voter marks their choice on a piece of paper that is counted by a machine. The system is similar to those that score standardized test forms. "He (Gilbert) knew that there would be problems," said Joyce McCloy, a voting advocate who has been critical of Gilbert on the paper record issue. "He asked his county to buy these machines when he himself testified to the state that there would be problems with the paper backups." Where McCloy sees an argument for switching to optical scan systems, Gilbert says the problems with paper argue for a move to other backup technology, such as a system that uses sound to independently record a voter's choice. In cases where the printers did work and their results were compared to those counted electronically, they matched exactly, Gilbert said. Contact Mark Binker at (919) 832-5549 or mbinker@news-record.com

[Previous Page](#)

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