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The City

While We Weren't Looking

One hard and fast rule about New York's state government - maybe about any government at all, really - is that you have to watch 'em every minute.

Here is a particularly troubling new example: While we were all busy with elections, the New York State Board of Elections issued a draft proposal for buying \$220 million worth of new voting machines. Apparently, manufacturers will be allowed - perhaps even encouraged - to push for one type of machine, while many civic groups and concerned voters are pushing for something else.

And what the manufacturers are peddling will probably cost the government a lot more money than the machines that the others want. What in the world could be going on here?

To back up a moment, the federal government, after the disastrous presidential vote in 2000, passed the Help America Vote Act, which gave money to states that improve their voting systems. The idea was to make it easier for citizens to vote and to provide an accurate, tamper-proof record.

But imagine, for a moment, that you own a voting machine company. If you can persuade a state like New York to certify your machine, you'll win the lotto. Lobbyists and politicians with rich contributors have therefore been swarming around this pot of molasses in Albany - for so long, in fact, that New York is the last state to settle on machines with money provided by the Help America Vote Act.

A few months ago, the Legislature outlined what kinds of machines are needed. For the most part they did a decent job, with a couple of exceptions. First, they required a "full-faced ballot" that would allow voters to see all the races on one huge page. This is a ridiculous requirement that will inevitably make New York's machines more costly than they would otherwise be.

Even more important, the board's guidelines do not appear to require or even encourage vendors to offer optical scanning equipment. Instead, they'll be able to offer only direct recording devices, or D.R.E.'s, which are more expensive and less reliable than the optical scanning machines. D.R.E.'s cost about \$8,000 to \$11,000 per machine, compared to \$5,500 for optical scanning equipment.

The new guidelines are in draft form, so there is still time for those who care about the way New Yorkers vote to make certain that these same voters get the right equipment.

The draft voting machine guidelines are available at www.elections.state.ny.us. The final version should assure that the source codes for the machines are available to the state and that someone in authority is around to make sure nobody is stealing the vote. Certainly any machine needs a voter-verified paper ballot for recounting. But communities should also be offered a chance to buy the best optical scanning machines on the market today.

The buying of new voting machines is not a routine state contract, like purchasing a fleet of trucks. Our basic rights as citizens depend on this one, and we should make certain the Board of Elections gets it right for New York's voters.