

Culver, Mauro disagree on how to update voting systems

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In one corner of the ring: Chet Culver.

In the other corner: Michael Mauro.

There's some professional sparring going on between the former top election official in Iowa and the current one. It runs deeper than just their differences over how exactly to update Iowa's voting machine equipment before the high-stakes presidential vote in November. Both men downplay the tension, but it intensified last week. Culver made some stinging comments about Mauro and the "mistakes" of Iowa's county election officials. And a federal report critical of Culver came to light.

The U.S. Elections Assistance Commission, in a new report, found that when Culver was secretary of state, his office misspent \$92,895 in federal money meant for purchasing handicapped-accessible voting equipment and for voter education efforts. The commission previously had agreed with a 2007 state audit that found over \$61,000 in alleged misspending, but now is raising that amount.

Culver flatly disputes the findings. An appeal was launched of the original order to repay \$61,238. Dealings with the federal commission continue.

When Mauro took over as secretary of state, he inherited the whole situation. Mauro declined last week to weigh in on whether any of Culver's spending was improper. "I'm not going to get on one side or the other on that," Mauro said, "because it doesn't serve any useful purpose for me."

Meanwhile, each man is trying to drum up support for his own proposal for ensuring a paper trail for every voting machine in Iowa. Mauro wants to spend \$9.7 million to give every voter an actual paper ballot that could be recounted later.

Culver wants to spend only \$2 million to equip touch-screen voting machines, which have electronic ballots, with a special printer that shows voters their choices on a continuous roll of paper.

In Mauro's cheering section are watchdog groups, and some key lawmakers and county election officials of both political stripes.

Sean Flaherty of Iowans for Voting Integrity, a Fairfield-based citizens group, gave Culver's plan a thumbs down. "Paper printouts are better than no paper trail, but spending money on paper-trail printers is chasing good money after bad," said Flaherty, of North Liberty. "No one respects these printers, and it is likely that Congress will ban them in the near future."

Culver blasted the more expensive plan last week.

"Money does not grow on trees around here," he said in an interview. "The idea that we could come up with \$9 million right now is a pipe dream. It's irresponsible to suggest otherwise." Mauro has said he would pay for his plan for optical scan machines and ballot-marking devices with \$3.7 million already earmarked, and by paying the voting equipment vendor the remaining \$6 million on installment over the next three years.

And Culver had a strong message to counties: They should have bought the voting machine equipment he recommended as secretary of state. Now it's their turn to scrape up the extra cash.

He said counties have been responsible for buying voting equipment since 1846. His \$2 million plan to update the touch-screen machines is "a very generous offer," he said. If counties need more money to replace their touch-screens, "they can make their own decisions at the local level," he said. Culver said he fought for eight years to get as much money as possible for voting machine equipment, and Iowa counties received more money per capita than any state in the nation.

In 2005, the state had a bucket of money: \$18.5 million in mostly federal dollars through the Help America Vote Act. Culver said he advised all the counties to choose optical scan machines, and he and then-Gov. Tom Vilsack sent out letters "to that effect."

"I have no idea why so many counties decided not to do that," Culver said. "And that was a mistake on their part." The Des Moines Register obtained a copy of the July 2005 letter signed by Culver and Vilsack, and there's no mention of optical scan machines. Nor does it discourage counties from buying touch-screen machines, which were cutting-edge then but are falling out of favor today.

But the letter states: "Regardless of the system and vendor you choose, we urge you to select a primary election system that includes a voter verifiable paper audit trail."

Election officials bristled at Culver's recollection that he advised all the auditors to pick optical scan machines.

"I would say most of my colleagues would say they do not agree with that," said Mary Mosiman, auditor in Story County, where more than 30,000 residents voted in the governor's race in 2006.

Mosiman said she does not regret choosing the touch-screens, based on the information available at the time.

She said she remains very confident in the systems today. But the complicated process of attaching the printers and paper rolls will cause bottlenecks, she predicted. Mosiman wants to replace all her touch-screens with optical scan and ballot-marking devices - and applauds Mauro's plan.

"True satisfaction will come when every vote is cast on a paper ballot," Mosiman said.

Nineteen counties have nothing but touch-screen machines.

In a twist, the top Republican leaders in the Iowa Legislature, Sen. Ron Wieck and Rep. Christopher Rants, both back Mauro's plan. They support it even though it's more expensive and would strip local authorities of their control over what equipment to buy.

"This secretary of state has been very open and easy to work with regarding how best to spend the money on voting machines," said Rants, of Sioux City. "Unfortunately, that was not always true with the previous head election official when we had the HAVA dollars to spend. He thought events like holding parties was the way to go."

The state audit found Culver's office inappropriately used federal money in 2005 to pay entertainers at a "celebration of voting."

Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal said he's leaning toward Mauro's plan, but only if lawmakers can find the money during a tight budget year.

Gronstal, a Council Bluffs Democrat, doubts attaching printers to touch-screens will be trustworthy enough.

"Some Rube Goldberg bolt on the side of the existing equipment mechanism? There's many of us that think that's probably a waste," he said.

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy agreed he'd like to find the money for Mauro's plan, but supported Culver's idea as well. Other lawmakers gently chided Culver.

"It's difficult to move beyond what's happened in the past, but we have no choice," said state Sen. Jeff Danielson, a Democrat from Cedar Falls. "The basic building blocks of democracy are at stake. Our views of the technology has changed. So nobody has to live old arguments."

State Rep. Libby Jacobs, a Republican from West Des Moines, said: "We want everything to work on election night. We want no questions whatsoever. At the end of the day, it's the right investment of the money. Culver's plan isn't." If lawmakers pick Mauro's plan, Culver has the option to veto it.

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