RECOUNT PROCEEDURE

Suppose you bought 50 decks of cards, shuffled them all up, and then grabed a big mixed handful and threw them all away. Would you count the number remaining in each suit by marking whether it was a spade, heart, diamond, or club one card at a time on a tally sheet? What are the chances you would get the same result if you did it twice? Nevertheless, this is the basic method used to recount your votes in Norwalk's recent "recanvas" of the council races in District A and District E. How could you make the job of counting cards easier and more accurate? One way is to divide the cards into piles by suit first, and then count the number in each pile. While you are counting each suit, any card placed in the wrong pile would be likely to be noticed immediately.

Both the optical scan machines, and the hand recount method, result in an inherently inaccurate ballot count. The scanning machines are very good at counting, but, even if they are both programmed correctly, and working perfectly, they cannot determine the voter's intent – they can only determine whether the ovals on the ballot were properly filled in. In the last election there were ballots where the candidates names were "checked", where the oval had a small dot in it, and where the ovals were circled. While the machine cannot count these ballots, a hand count can and did find them and count them.

A hand recount, however, is subject to human error – votes are missed, or improperly assigned. I observed both errors while watching the recount in Norwalk on November 13th. There were only a few, all of which I believe were completely unintentional errors. Nevertheless, these errors were never corrected and remain in the final totals. Why? One reason is that the observers were forbidden to speak to the counters to point out the errors. We could take notes, but the incorrectly recorded ballots were placed in the pile with the correctly recorded ballots, so the only way to correct the error after the fact would be to count them again – a process that would result in the same human error problem.

There is a way to get a better result, and it is to combine the two methods (machine count and hand count) so that each compensates for the others' weakness. Instead of writing down each ballot's vote on a tally sheet, the ballots should be sorted into separate piles first. In the recent election, with two candidates to be elected per district, four piles would probably work well – one with both republicans receiving votes, one with both democrats, one mixed, and one with any question as to intent or any third party (i.e. working families) vote. Observers should be encouraged to speak up if they observe any error so that it can be corrected immediately. This should not be a problem, because it is very easy to look in one of the piles to see if a ballot was put in the wrong pile. Each pile is a way to attach information about how the ballot will be counted to the actual ballot before counting. This information stays with the ballot as long as it remains in the pile and can be rechecked easily at any time by simple observation.

When the all democratic or all republican pile reaches a convenient size, say 200 or 300 or so, it can be fed into the scanner for a final check. The number of ballots can be counted as they are fed into the scanner and the scanner should print a report of the same numbers. If there is any difference, the ballots can be checked again, or fed in again until the both people and machine have the same count. Each such completed pile should be sealed and stored.

What about the other piles? The mixed pile can be further sorted into smaller piles. Four piles for ballots with only a single vote for one of the four candidate and four piles with one of the four possible combinations of one democrat and one republican. These piles can then be checked by the machine and rechecked if necessary until hand count and machine count are the same. The last pile contains any questionable ballots where voter intent must be determined, or where a person voted twice for the same candidate(s) or whatever. This pile will be small. Those ballots that the machine can read, can be double checked by machine, until everyone gets the same count for them. Only a hand count can, in the end, determine voter intent, but the final pile will be very small, so counting them should yield a consistent result.

At the end of this process, everyone will be satisfied that the votes were counted correctly. People may still disagree as to whether a handful of votes should or should not have been counted, but any such disputed ballots will be segregated and will be available for any court challenge or Secretary of the State ruling as to validity.

An additional advantage of this kind of recount is that candidates and office holders would learn whether the machines count accurately, and what types of mistakes in filling out a ballot result in the ballot not being counted the same way the voter intended to vote. This information can be used to educate voters for future elections.

Stuart W. Wells III, 224 West Norwalk Road, Norwalk, CT 06850. 203-866-9045