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Software offers real-time election-day data

By Maya Rao
Inquirer Staff Writer

As campaign workers barbecued on his Atlantic City lawn, Fourth Ward coordinator Anthony Cox was hunkered down in the garage, discerning from a laptop the next move in the push to get Mayor Lorenzo Langford a victory by the time polls closed in two hours.

Other campaigners did the same across the seaside resort in the June 2 primary as part of a new twist on the intense street operations to get out the vote that are a tradition in this city, where elections are knock-down, drag-out-to-the-bloody-end affairs.

For Cox, real-time numbers showed turnout among targeted voters in the ward's fourth district was just 15.65 percent, well below that of other areas. Then another ward leader walked in with a message: "I just got a call from headquarters, and they're concerned about 4-4."

So Cox dispatched the volunteers to knock on doors, giving them BlackBerrys designed to provide up-to-the-minute information on how many people had yet to vote in each house and urging one to "Stay in that area and just nail it."

The technology came courtesy of First Tuesday in November, a small voter-tracking company in Galloway whose services are being picked up by campaigns from Democratic-to-the-core Atlantic City to those in the Republican-leaning suburbs of Burlington and Atlantic Counties.

The company invented a system for which a patent is pending that allows everyone in a campaign to access a database of targeted voters via BlackBerrys and laptops connected by wireless Internet. They can then learn in real time which voters have gone to the polls, their voting history, and other personal information.

Campaigners who observe low turnout among targeted voters in certain districts, as Cox did, can redirect resources to boost a candidate's chance of success. And they don't have to waste time calling or visiting people who already voted.

Workers can slice voter data in dozens of ways and view voting patterns on maps. The BlackBerrys are also equipped with GPS to allow headquarters staff to track workers.

Though campaigns have long found ways to pinpoint likely supporters, Election Day operations are often still carried out on paper, particularly in smaller races. Volunteers at polling places track who voted using hard copies of voter lists, which are picked up several times a day by campaign workers who take them back to headquarters.

The company has played an interesting role in the battle for political control in Burlington County, a longtime GOP haven where races have become increasingly competitive.

It started with Democrats as the underdogs in a 2007 race for three council seats in Evesham, the



DAVID M WARREN / Staff Photographer

Atlantic City Mayor Lorenzo Langford's campaign manager, Wilbur Banks (center), reviews data with Jason Yard (left) and Richard Young of First Tuesday in November.

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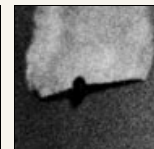
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county's most populous town. They approached First Tuesday with the thought that the software would be a success if they could pick up two seats by more than 100 votes, company cofounder Richard Young said.

Republicans had controlled the council for years but Democrats, pressing the need for change, picked up all three seats by wide margins.

Chris Russell, a political strategist who works for the county GOP, reached out to First Tuesday after those Evesham losses and signed on. His three Republican candidates in Evesham used the company's software and won in a landslide.

There are, of course, many factors that go into election successes: electoral mood, campaign issues, political organization. But those familiar with the technology say it works particularly well in races like Evesham's, where turnout is generally low because, as a nonpartisan town, it holds elections in May.

Rick Perr, Burlington County Democratic chairman, said the technology was a fascinating idea. He said it wasn't for every campaign and could sometimes be cost prohibitive, but it offered a tool that could be effective in smaller races.

The Burlington County GOP has used it in freeholder and state Senate races and when Medford Mayor Chris Myers launched an ultimately unsuccessful bid for the Third District congressional seat last year.

Russell, who has worked on campaigns for 14 years, including Myers', said the technology was addictive for political junkies and "fun for someone who enjoys politics and enjoys trying to beat the other guy."

The company, whose charges vary depending on the range of services used and number of voting districts, has also worked on campaigns in Indiana, Alaska, Nevada, and New York. This year, the Virginia GOP is using the technology for its Assembly races.

In Atlantic County, the company worked for Republicans in the ferociously competitive Second District races in 2007, and it has done work in suburbs there, including in Galloway and Hamilton. First Tuesday will work for only one side of a campaign.

Candidates can use the BlackBerrys when going door to door to enter such information as voters' stances on issues and whether they want lawn signs.

The company's founders hadn't even worked on a campaign before devising the software.

Young said he was waiting in line to vote in Absecon 10 years ago when he noticed a Republican and a Democrat in the corner of the room, crossing off names of voters on computer printouts. When he questioned the effectiveness of the process, he was told: "That's the way we do it."

The wireless technology needed to start a better way was in its infancy then, he said. After a Fortune 500 firm bought a company of his that helped landlords track tenants' records, Young teamed with David Cerrone, the tech guy in their partnership.

They launched First Tuesday in 2006.

Around the time of the 2007 Evesham Democratic sweep, Atlantic City Councilman Marty Small was canvassing in the resort's Bungalow Park section when Young handed him a business card.

"He said, 'Call me. You'll definitely win the election,' " Small said.

He liked what he saw, but in summer 2008, he wasn't ready to commit.

First Tuesday then met with the Langford camp, which used its technology in the 2008 election and won.

The Democratic primary was a three-way race among Langford, Small, and David Tayoun. Tayoun, a retired city police officer, is the son of James Tayoun, a former Philadelphia councilman.

Langford, who was the most established candidate, won in such a landslide that having the technology wouldn't have changed the outcome for Small.

As further evidence of the hard-nosed nature of Atlantic City elections, two of Small's campaign workers were charged Friday with submitting fraudulent absentee ballots in the primary.


Former Atlantic City Mayor Scott Evans understands as well as anyone the limitations of technology.

A relative political newcomer when he was appointed mayor in late 2007, Evans lost to Langford in last year's mayoral primary after using First Tuesday.

In Atlantic City elections, it's all about the street game on Election Day, Evans said. In the end, he said, Langford, who had been mayor and a city councilman, had a superior political organization.

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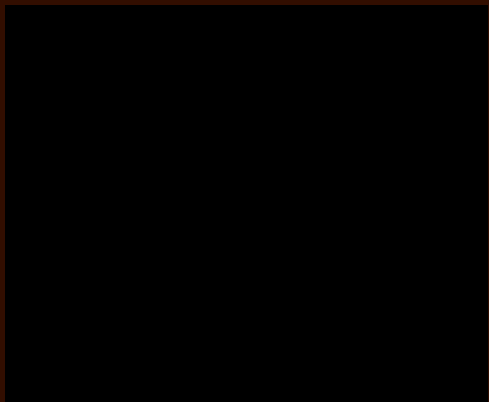
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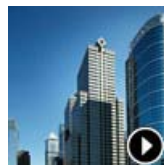
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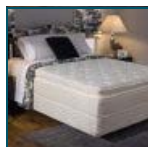


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