

# City hopes to find greater efficiency in palms of hands

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Updated: 01/20/08 7:02 AM

Palm readers might become a common sight in City Hall as officials look for ways to boost efficiency.

No, not psychics who predict the future by scrutinizing the lines on people's hands.

These palm readers use biometric technology to identify individuals. When a person places his or her hand on a scanner, it identifies the individual — and the precise time he or she arrived or left.

A growing number of corporations and municipalities have been using biometrics for employee tracking chores that traditionally have been done manually.

In city government, 110 employees spend at least some of their time logging more than 469,000 manual time-keeping transactions each year. Most offices have manual systems that require employees to sign in on sheets.

Buffalo's human resources commissioner has been pushing to update the antiquated system since he started five years ago.

"This is the only organization I've encountered that doesn't have some type of time clock system," Leonard A. Matarese said.

Matarese's plan has the support of Mayor Mayor W. Brown, who has directed staffers to get cost estimates and check out the technology.

The plan calls for installing 17 palm readers on most floors of City Hall by the end of the year. Employees will place their hands on palm readers that are linked to computers. A software system will generate payroll reports with minimal legwork required by humans.

The pilot project won't include police stations, firehouses, public works satellite centers or the City Hall offices of the Board of Education. But officials say they believe even the scaled-down system focusing on city workers on about 20 floors of City Hall would save thousands of dollars a month in overtime and costs tied to correcting mistakes.

"It would pay for itself real quickly in just timekeeper savings," said Robert F. Leach, the city's technology chief, who estimated that the system would cost less than \$100,000 to launch.

A few City Hall operations, including the comptroller's office, have used palm readers for years. But the devices have not been linked to city computers, Matarese said, so they're not as efficient.

But Delaware Council Member Michael J. LoCurto has reservations about the concept. While he understands how the technology can streamline timekeeping, he worries it could cause fallout. He wondered if the same palm readers that streamline paperwork will be used to track workers' movements, minute by minute.

"It seems a little Big Brother-ish," he said. "There's a fine line between getting good productivity from employees and going so far that you demoralize them."

Matarese said unless people are incorrectly reporting their hours, he can't see how palm readers will "demoralize" workers. If anything, he said, it could work in some employees' favor.

"Many people are working a lot of extra hours and not getting paid for them," he said.

LoCurto also questioned whether long lines would form each morning and afternoon as employees wait to scan their hands at a limited number of sites.

Raj Mehta, the city's director of management information systems, said officials have studied City Hall occupancy and pinpointed what they consider convenient locations near elevators. Since the process takes just seconds, backups should not be an issue, Mehta said.

The Common Council and control board would have to approve plans to use state efficiency funds to pay for the high-tech timekeeping program.