

# The Star-Ledger

## **N.J. makes new push to get controversial smart guns in stores after failing for years**

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The 1911 pistol is one of Timmy Oh's favorite guns.

Oh has experimented on firearms since he was a teenager, looking for ways to make them safer, and he said he was drawn to how the 1911's "beautiful" design once changed the industry. When the gun was introduced more than a century ago, its improved durability made it a U.S. military mainstay.

"We should always encourage innovation," said Oh, founder of the New York-based Vara Safety, which sells mountable holsters you unlock with a fingerprint. "There's no reason the firearm industry can't advance."

What that innovation looks like in New Jersey will partially be up to Oh, who was one of several recent appointees to a new state commission tasked with approving so-called smart guns, firearms that only work for authorized users.

The appointments come nearly two decades after New Jersey tried to largely ban traditional handguns once smart guns became a reality, and many blame the dearth of smart guns today on that looming prohibition. One national headline called it the "New Jersey Law That's Kept Smart Guns Off Shelves."

Lawmakers changed course in 2019. Now state statute only requires sellers to stock smart guns once they meet "performance standards."

What those standards are will be up to the seven people on the Personalized Handgun Authorization Commission, and several members told NJ Advance Media they'll begin searching soon for what technology exists and what still needs to be developed.

At the same time, leaders in the small smart gun industry said they were likely a few years away from having guns widely available for consumers, and many gun owners and the National Rifle Association remain deeply skeptical of what has become a polarizing idea.

A smart gun can theoretically recognize its owner, through traits like how a hand grips the weapon, fingerprints or via radio signals sent by something you wear, like a special watch.

The appeal can be summed up in one James Bond scene from "Skyfall:" Bad Guy steals Bond's gun. Bad Guy tries to shoot Bond. Gun won't fire because gun only works for Bond. Bad Guy eaten by Komodo Dragon. (That last bit is less relevant.)

“Personalized handgun technology has the potential to save lives and prevent needless lives from being lost to accidents or gun violence,” Gov. Phil Murphy said last month when he made the appointments.

The Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence has long advocated for more investment. A 2018 report faulted the firearms industry for not funding more safety features and called on governments to invest in smart gun entrepreneurs.

“Hopefully this commission will be able to move the needle,” said Nicola Bocour, Giffords’ government affairs director and one of New Jersey’s appointees.

Advances could be especially helpful for children, said Jennifer Chuang, another commission member and section chief for adolescent medicine at St. Joseph’s University Medical Center. Kids with depression or mental illness will be less able to hurt themselves if nearby guns didn’t function, she said.

Life or death situations make it a trickier equation.

“If you’re using a firearm for self-defense, the most important thing is when you pull the trigger, it goes ‘boom,’” said Robert Nixon, the governor’s fourth appointee and the government affairs director for the Policeman’s Benevolent Association.

Smart guns by definition increase the number of things that have to happen before a bullet can leave a barrel.

If triggers require fingerprints, what happens if your hand is sweaty? If the gun recognizes your hand, could stress change how you hold it?

Police were exempt from New Jersey’s original law, and cops are likely a long way from embracing smart guns, Nixon said.

Nationally, some departments are testing the waters. Law enforcement leaders from Illinois and Michigan are part of the Gun Safety Consortium, which advocates for ways to make guns harder to steal or misuse. The group issued a letter late last month asking for new products they can evaluate.

Yet a true James Bond smart gun may never be viable, said Scott Bach, executive director of the Association of New Jersey Rifle and Pistol Clubs.

“Putting sensitive electronics on a device designed to contain a small explosion is an idea destined to fail,” he said.

Several companies are working to change his mind.

Biofire advertises fingerprint readers. A video from iGun Technology Corp demonstrates a ring that unlocks a shotgun’s trigger.

LodeStar also started with radio signals, but it now plans to include multiple ways users can access guns, which will also sync with phones.

“It’s the future,” CEO Gareth Glaser said in an interview. “Everything else in your life has technology in it — I mean my coffee pot has more technology than my firearm.”

The company hopes to have a \$795 handgun ready for sale sometime next year, he added.

In some ways, smart gun designers are hoping to repeat Tesla’s success in the car industry by pioneering technology often ignored by major manufacturers.

And just as Tesla is haunted by reports of vehicles allegedly bursting into flame, the smart gun industry continues to contend with a German company’s controversial introduction several years ago of the Armatix iP1 pistol.

The gun was expensive. Its security features were reportedly easily overcome. One Maryland store owner backed off plans to sell it after he said he received death threats.

Proponents say a lot has changed since.

“The technology has dramatically improved,” said Margot Hirsch, head of the Smart Tech Challenges Foundation, which invests in gun safety research.

Potential demand has also risen. A surging number of residents are applying to buy firearms, including some for the first time. “I don’t think we’ve seen numbers this high ever,” state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said Wednesday during a public hearing.

Within a year, New Jersey’s commission is supposed to define the features locally sold smart guns will need, according to the law. Any model should be “reasonably resistant to being fired by anyone other than the handgun’s authorized user” with technology that can’t be removed.

There’s no timeline on when they must test and approve a gun for sale.

However, giving any firearm the green light starts a 60-day timer for gun stores.

By the end, every seller in the state is required to stock at least one approved smart gun. If they sell out, they’ve got 21 days to order more. Violating the law triggers fines.

Many gun companies implicitly criticize rules like these, including some groups that aren’t even directly affected.

“We believe our technology should be a consumer choice and not a requirement by the government,” reads the homepage for Machine Inc., which makes an add-on letting you unlock a handgun with your phone.

Commission members serve four-year terms, but they won't step down until replacements are found. They're not paid, although expenses can be reimbursed.

Three other members are appointed by the health department, the State Police and the attorney general's office. Deputy Attorney General Kirstin Krueger will represent the latter, according to an office spokesman, but the other two agencies have not yet announced appointments.

*The Associated Press contributed to this report.*