

Secretary of State: County's voting machines require additional security

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson

Tuesday, 14 August 2007

Last Updated Wednesday, 01 October 2008

LAKEPORT – Local elections officials are still trying to sort out the possible impacts of the California Secretary of State's decision to decertify some electronic voting systems used across the state.

“I know it affects us, but I don't know everything that affects us just yet,” said Lake County Registrar of Voters Diane Fridley.

Fridley said that Secretary of State Debra Bowen's Aug. 3 decision included Hart InterCivic's eSlate voting system, which Lake County uses.

Bowen withdrew approval for the Hart InterCivic system, then reissued a conditional approval, which will require additional security measures, according to Bowen's office.

The InterCivic system “will be required to comply with increased security and post-election auditing procedures,” a statement from Bowen's office explained.

Besides Lake, counties using eSlate include Humboldt, Orange, Madera, San Mateo, Sonoma and Yolo, according to the Secretary of State's office.

Bowen's office reported that direct recording electronic voting systems manufactured by Diebold and Sequoia also were decertified.

In the case of the InkaVote Plus system by Election Systems and Software, the company didn't submit information that would allow its system to be reviewed, according to the Secretary of State's office. That system was decertified and the company has since submitted the requested documents.

County purchases machines to meet federal law

The federal Help America Vote Act required counties to purchase the voting machines in an effort to comply with disability access requirements, said Fridley. The act requires at least one such machine at each polling place.

In accordance with that, in 2006 the county purchased 50 eSlate machines, one for each county polling place, at a cost of \$567,910.67, said Fridley. That figure didn't include additional necessary equipment, such as a laptop computer.

Proposition 41 funds – in the amount of \$321,390.02 – helped the county pay for the eSlate system, said Fridley. She is asking for reimbursement for the remainder of the costs from the Help America Vote Act, a lengthy and difficult process, she added.

She said she chose the eSlate system because she believed it was the most user-friendly.

Fridley said the electronic voting system was used for the first time in the June 2006 election.

In the system's most recent use in November, 53 votes were cast countywide using eSlate, said Fridley, out of 19,575 total votes cast. Fridley said out of 20 polling place sites, 11 machines were used and 9 weren't; not all of the machines were utilized in the November election.

Most of Lake County's votes were cast by absentee ballot, 10,316 to be exact, said Fridley.

With so many people switching to absentee voting, why the need for voting machines?

Fridley said not all states have allowed permanent absentee voting as California has.

System has paper backups

Lake County has a blended voting system, said Fridley, which includes not just the eSlate but the paper-based optical scan Mark-A-Vote, used since 1983.

Only Sonoma, Madera and Lake counties have that “blended system,” where the votes that are cast on the eSlates are actually duplicated on the Mark-A-Vote ballots, said Fridley.

Money had been available for Lake County to go to a completely electronic system, but Fridley said, “I'm glad we didn't,” in light of these recent problems and because of the fact that, if the county had needed to completely upgrade due to decertification, money might have been available for that effort.

Lake County uses a complicated auditing processing of checking eSlate paper receipts against the system's audit trail, Fridley said. A two-person auditing board then creates a Mark-A-Vote paper ballot record which is counted and tallied along with the official ballots. The backup will be the paper receipt off the eSlate along with the records from the mobile ballot box.

Some counties have an entirely electronic system, including audits and optical scans. “We do have issues but not as many as those counties that have the total package,” said Fridley.

Fridley said her office is working with Hart to come up with a plan to meet Bowen's requirements for security and auditing. She said many of the security requirements have been in place since the eSlates were used in June 2006.

An Aug. 4 statement from Hart InterCivic said Bowen's assessment was not a realistic risk assessment.

“Putting isolated technology in the hands of computer experts in order to engage in unrestricted, calculated, advanced and malicious attacks is highly improbably in a real-world election,” the Texas company's statement read.

Hart InterCivic said it will work to meet Bowen's requirements, and that it is continuing to improve the security and technology of its machines, which are used in thousands of jurisdictions across 11 states.

Fridley said she spoke with Hart representatives on Aug. 9, and said a working group composed of representatives from counties and cities that use the machines will meet to discuss the security procedures that Bowen is requiring.

Lake and Madera will actually be represented by an elections official from Sonoma County, said Fridley, because those three counties use the same blended voting system and have the same concerns.

Fridley said she doesn't foresee having to buy new machines. “As long as we meet the security issues we

shouldn't have a problem.”

In June, Bowen announced she was forming a Post-Election Audit Standards Working Group to review security and reliability of the state's voting systems, and decide if post-election audit standards needed to be strengthened.

At the same time, Bowen launched a “top-to-bottom review” of voting systems currently certified for use in California elections, according to her office.

Bowen didn't specifically look at blended systems like Lake's, said Fridley.

Fridley also voiced her concern that the systems were tested in a lab, not a real-world scenario, and that Bowen's criteria for the review “was pretty broad and not very specific.”

Tomorrow, the state chief deputy secretary of state discusses the reasons the review was necessary; the president of the California Association of Clerks and Elections Officials explains his concerns about the review protocols.

E-mail Elizabeth Larson at elarson@lakeconews.com.

{mos_sb_discuss:3}