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Group calls for audit of March 7 elections

Members say the results are "highly suspect" after an elections staffer was given the code to a computer server.

By WILL VAN SANI, Times Staff Writer
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CLEARWATER - State regulators are weighing an audit of Pinellas County's March 7 municipal elections, which snagged when a computer server froze and delayed the tallying of votes for two hours.

Officials with the Division of Elections said such reviews are rare at the local level, and could not recall when they last did one.

Bob Jackson was among the losers in the elections, which took place in Largo, Palm Harbor and Pinellas Park. City Commissioner Pat Gerard beat him in the mayor's race by 172 votes out of 6,290 cast.

Jackson does not dispute the results but says an audit is warranted.

"A neutral person ought to come in," he said. "There's an awful lot of suspicion about the whole operation."

The state's interest comes in response to the Voting Integrity Alliance of Tampa Bay, which is skeptical about the kind of touch screen voting technology the county uses and champions the virtues of paper ballots.

The group, which has about 15 members, sent a letter Monday to the Secretary of State calling for an audit. The election results are "highly suspect" and details of the count "of interest to voting system experts across the country," the letter states.

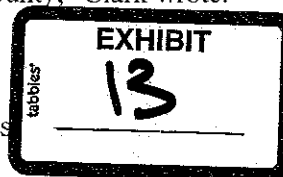
Communications during the count between Sequoia Voting Systems, the county's voting technology provider, and Jim Armstrong, a technical administrator in the Supervisor of Elections office, are of particular concern to the group.

At 8:38 p.m. a server used to tabulate results failed. Pinellas Park results had been tallied, but Largo and Palm Harbor votes had not.

Twice, a Sequoia support technician trying to get the server running provided Armstrong with the computer code, once by e-mail. County election officials say the code was used to check the system for bugs and to see if any new votes were stored for counting.

State regulators must certify any changes made to voting software. The code gave the system directions to do certain tasks, but in no way altered the Sequoia software, Supervisor Of Elections Deborah Clark wrote in a response to the letter.

"We feel there is no reason for this incident to affect voter confidence in Pinellas County," Clark wrote.



That's not enough for Pamela Haengel, Voting Integrity's executive director.

"She is alleging that everything was fine," Haengel said. "But she's not giving any proof. And she really has to prove that nothing went wrong."

Dawn Roberts, who directs the Division of Elections, said she could not comment on the criticism, but planned to move ahead with an audit out of "an abundance of caution."

Later Monday afternoon, a spokeswoman for the office, Jenny Nash, called a *Times* reporter to say it was too early to decide that an audit is needed. Nash said the elections division wanted to talk with Clark before making a decision.

Clark, the county's elections chief since 2000, has had problems before. In some cases, ballots have been lost or not counted.

Last Tuesday's gaffe happened because too little space had been set aside on the server to handle the volume of data that had to be tabulated.

County Commissioner Susan Latvala said an audit might be useful to dispel suspicion, but she said Clark can't be blamed for the most recent mishap.

"I trust her," Latvala said. "She is brutally honest."

Clark's office is sure to be under scrutiny again today as elections are held in 14 Pinellas towns.

Haengel will be on hand to observe. Besides the request for a state audit, her group has made a detailed public records request for documents relating to the delayed vote count.

Nancy Whitlock, a spokeswoman for the supervisor's office, said Clark will cooperate with an audit and will hand over paperwork to Voting Integrity, but not on Monday.

"We just have to get through these next elections tomorrow first," she said.

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