THE CITY

Open-source voting inches forward

Elections Commission asks Mayor's Office for money for new system

By Joshua Sabatini
S.F. Examiner Staff Writer

While the Elections Commission may be among the least followed city bodies, the seven members are playing a critical role in determining whether San Francisco will begin to use an open-source voting system.

For years, open-source voting advocates have called on San Francisco officials to part ways with traditional voting machine companies.

Open-source voting is widely considered the best defense to voter fraud with the added benefits of cost savings and flexibility.

Much to chagrin of these advocates, The City has continued to sign contracts with nonopen-source voting companies. While no open-source voting system has been deployed elsewhere, other jurisdictions are currently working on it, such as Travis County, Texas.

After The City allocated $300,000 in the current fiscal year to move San Francisco toward an open-source voting system, the effort has gotten off to a slower-than-expected start. Advocates worry if funding isn't committed to building out such a system, the effort will face further delays.

The Elections Commission sought to address those concerns last week. As city departments must submit proposed two-year budget proposals to the Mayor's Office today, the Elections Commission voted unanimously last Thursday to request $4 million in the second fiscal year to pay for the initial stages of an open-source voting system.

The vote came after conversations in previous days among Director of Elections John Arntz, commission members and the Mayor's Office over

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Advocates for open-source voting say it is the best defense against voter fraud and provides flexibility and savings.

project concerns.

The amount was reached by looking to Travis County, which in October issued a request for proposals, to create an open-source voting software called STAR-Vote. The county has committed to spend $4 million and raise $11 million through a consortium over five years.

Another new development in the effort was what Arntz said during Thursday's meeting that instead of soliciting a consultant for open source voting as initially planned, the department will instead first hire an employee to spearhead the effort for about $100,000. The funding would come out of the $300,000 allocated earlier this year for the effort, of which nothing has yet been spent.

The hire would happen within "weeks" once the Department of Human Resources formalizes the classification. "Right now, the idea is to get a sense of what The City has to do to develop a voting system and cost and timelines," Arntz said of the new hire. "That's the initial need, but also to get a sense of the next steps, certainly."

Earlier this year, it was thought an open-source system could be ready for piloting as early as the November

2019 mayor's race and fully operational in time for the June 2020 presidential primary.

But Christopher Jerdonek, Elections Commission chair, told the San Francisco Examiner on Monday that "that will be very optimistic." He noted, "Setting aside funds early would make me more optimistic but I understand The City has a process."

Jerdonek said he is a proponent of open-source voting for three main reasons: voter transparency, cost savings, since the software is free, and the flexibility to alter the system without being at the mercy of the voting machine companies.

Next month, the commission will discuss establishing a citizen advisory committee focused on voting machines. There are 518,000 registered voters in San Francisco, of whom nearly 298,000 are permanently vote-by-mail ballots and 9,000 are military and overseas voters.

Arntz has said he plans to lease voting machine equipment to handle elections after 2018 when the contract with the existing voting machine vendor, Dominion — formerly known as Sequoia Voting Systems, Inc. — expires. The Mayor's Office has requested the department provide an update on the open-source voting effort by January 2018.

Brent Turner, from the California Association of Voting Officials, has been advocating for open-source voting for years in San Francisco. Earlier this month Turner told the commission that issues like contract extensions and leased voting machines could have been avoided if The City didn't delay the effort.

He stressed the need to commit funding to the build out in The City's budget. "My concern is that again this is a slow-walking process that at the end of the line results in a delay of the open-source system."

jsabatini@sfexaminer.com