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Voting machines in 2002 primary criticized

Miami-Dade misled by firm, report says

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The company that sold Miami-Dade the touch-screen voting machines used in the disastrous 2002 primary election misled county officials about the equipment and delivered goods that were "hardly state-of-the-art technology," according to an inspector general's report obtained Wednesday by The Herald.

The draft report by the county inspector general's office following a seven-month investigation provides a critical account of the process leading to the \$25 million purchase of a voting system that was expected to lead to trouble-free elections. Instead, the Sept. 10, 2002, election -- a national black eye for Miami-Dade -- was plagued with problems caused in part by the lengthy start-up time for the machines.

The machines' manufacturer, Omaha, Neb.-based Election Systems & Software, branded the IG's report as "factually inaccurate and unenlightened" in a response it filed with the county clerk's office late Wednesday.

Inspector General Christopher Mazzella could not be reached. The county's outgoing Elections Supervisor David Leahy, reached at home, declined comment.

The report says ES&S's sales team "conveniently left out" critical information about its product's capabilities and breached the terms of its contract. Even so, the IG's office recommends county elections officials keep the equipment.

"We have to learn to make do with what we have," the report concludes. "Surely there will be upgrades to the system. However, [county] management should not be led blindly down the path of education by a vendor who turned the 2002 Miami-Dade County elections into a beta test."

The term "beta test" is one used in the computer industry about a product released on a trial basis and circulated among experts to iron out the kinks.

The report urged county officials to "cut the proverbial umbilical cord" with paid ES&S consultants and assemble a team of election workers with comparable expertise who can run the system on Election Day.

None of the IG's four other recommendations involved ES&S. They called for improving pollworker recruitment, paying pollworkers for training, developing a nucleus of county employees to assist pollworkers and synchronizing municipal elections, which are now spread throughout the year.

In its defense, ES&S claims it met or exceeded every requirement in the county's bid specifications. Delays in turning on the iVotronic machines that bedeviled pollworkers the day of the Sept. 10 election were the result of human error or poor decision-making by county elections officials, the company says.

A company spokesman, Miguel De Grandy, said ES&S carried out the county's requests faithfully.

TRILINGUAL BALLOT

"ES&S designed and certified what no company had ever certified in Florida before, a tri-lingual ballot," De Grandy said. 'If the September primary was `beta test' for that technology, it's because that's the way the county asked us to do it."

The lengthy "boot-up time" required to open each voting terminal -- about six minutes in most cases -- "was a direct result of choices the county made subsequent to the delivery and acceptance of the system," ES&S says in its response.

The crux of the controversy is the trilingual ballot that Leahy insisted be available on each of the machines used on Election Day. County ballots are printed in English, Spanish and Haitian Creole.

As the IG's office sees it:

ES&S representatives failed to tell members of the county's selection committee that in order to produce a trilingual ballot, the firm would have to supplement the iVotronic's internal memory with a memory chip or ``flash card."

The use of this flash card vastly complicated the task of preparing the voting machines and overburdened their Intel 386 EX microprocessors. The flash cards are identified as the "root cause" of the lengthy boot-ups in the report.

The report further states that reliance on the flash cards led to hidden costs for the county, as a last-minute purchase of 3,600 cards cost more than \$130,000.

`COST UNKNOWN'

"These costs were unknown and undisclosed to county staff at the time of the initial procurement," the report states.

ES&S sees it differently:

Company representatives say they delivered a trilingual ballot to Leahy for inspection on May 7, 2002, 10 days before its contractual deadline. They say that version, compacted into two columns to save memory, was rejected because Leahy felt it was reminiscent of Palm Beach County's ill-fated butterfly ballot.

That version could have been booted up in about half the time of the single-column version finally approved by county elections officials. Leahy's decision forced ES&S to seek state certification on its revised ballot, a process that lasted until mid-August and forced elections officials to retrain some pollworkers.

ES&S says its recommended solution to the county was simpler and could have dramatically reduced set-up times at the polls: to provide machines with Creole language ballots only in the 60 precincts with Haitian voters. Those ballots would have been loaded onto machines with ballots in Creole as well as English.

Voting machines with ballots in only two languages don't require the flash cards and can be booted up in a minute and one half.

"This type of deployment would be no different than the method of machine deployment in partisan elections where some equipment is designated for Republicans and other machines for Democrats," ES&S responds.

ES&S further notes there was no requirement in the county's bid documents calling for a specific boot-up time, trilingual ballot format or microprocessor capability.

The IG's report contends the 386 microprocessor built into the iVotronics is too slow to meet the demands of the trilingual ballot, citing the opinions of the Center for Democracy and the Miami-Dade Police Department. Both were involved in the more successful Nov. 5 general election, the center as observers and the police as logistical support.

"The machines the county purchased are hardly state-of-the-art technology," the report says.

NO UPGRADES

The report notes the 386 microprocessor cannot be upgraded to a more powerful type, such as those found on most personal computers, because they are embedded in the machines and soldered onto the motherboard, ``making it virtually impossible to replace."

ES&S counters by saying the microprocessor is built into the iVotronic so that it can withstand the rigors of being lugged to and from the polls. The company says the 386 is "industry standard," and using a more powerful microprocessor ``would have sacrificed in the areas of cost, battery life, temperature and stability with no benefit."

ES&S says the IG's comparison with home PC's illustrates the investigators' "technological ignorance" and dismisses the criticisms of the Center for Democracy and police by saying their opinions on technology ``should be viewed with trepidation."