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Dade's voting software fails tests

ES&S' fixes not certified by state

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TALLAHASSEE - The company being paid millions of dollars to run Miami-Dade's high-tech voting machines has failed to win state approval for its plan to fix the problems that led, in part, to last year's bungled primary elections.

State officials withheld their blessing last week after finding flaws in a new computer program designed by Election Systems & Software to make booting up the iVotronic machines quicker and easier.

The flaws, according to a letter from the state Division of Elections, were "of sufficient gravity" and far enough out of compliance with state standards that the new software could not be approved.

The slow boot-up times resulted from Miami-Dade County's complicated, three-language ballot and were blamed last year for delaying poll openings and preventing thousands of people from voting -- delays that some believe may have cost former U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno the Democratic nomination for governor.

"We caught the problems, but they will be addressed," said Paul Craft, a state elections official in charge of certifying voting equipment.

ES&S gets 60 days to correct the bugs, but the rejection is more bad news for a major county contractor already under fire from the county inspector general, who had called the equipment ``hardly state of the art."

The rejection also sheds more doubt on the viability of new touch-screen technology that was adopted quickly following the contested 2000 presidential election that put Florida's punch-card ballots under a global microscope.

Critics have said the touch-screen machines -- which are used in Miami-Dade, Broward, Palm Beach and 12 other counties -- are rife with glitches. The manufacturers and county officials say the machines make voting more accessible, presenting ballots and instructions in languages such as Creole and Spanish and reading ballots to the visually impaired.

"This isn't the end of the world, but it certainly is disappointing," said Mike Limas, chief operating officer for ES&S, which sold machines to 11 Florida counties, including Miami-Dade and Broward.

OVER THREE DAYS

The state findings came after three days of tests at ES&S' Omaha, Neb., headquarters in which analysts looked for potential bugs and performed test runs designed to expose problems. Their tactics included deleting and corrupting computer files to slipping a gum wrapper into a machine.

According to a summary of the state's findings, the examiners found that, for example, an iVotronic with missing files would not boot up and the machines did not detect certain corrupt files.

In one test of an audio machine, a portion of the ballot was not read. The state noted that ``it could have easily been a candidate name and the outcome would have been a candidate's name would have been left off the ballot."

Limas said Tuesday that many of the tests were flawed, creating the wrong impression of the machines. He noted that elections officials purposely corrupted files in a way that would not have occurred in general use of the machine.

"This is not a plausible scenario for how a file would be missing," Limas said.

PILING ON

For Miami-Dade elections officials already struggling with the recent departure of Supervisor David Leahy, and an inspector general's report critical of the \$25 million ES&S contract, the state's findings present another potential Election Day nightmare.

The county must be prepared for a major set of city elections in November in Hialeah, Miami Beach and Miami -- representing a third of all registered voters.

Four months later, in March 2004, the Democratic presidential primary will be held.

"We want [the machines] to be certified well before that," said Lester Sola, acting director of elections in the county. ``We've received assurances from our vendor that they can correct these deficiencies.'

Herald staff writer Karl Ross contributed to this report.