

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Mon, Mar. 31, 2008

## Disaster looms again on Election Day in Florida

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Is another Florida election disaster in the offing? Sadly, yes. Barely seven months before the presidential election and it is *déjà vu* all over again. How did we get here (again) and, more important, is there anything we can do to stop the train wreck?

First, to how we got here. It was politics, plain and simple. Promising that "when Floridians cast ballots in an election at any level -- local, state or federal -- they can leave the polling place knowing that their vote has been counted and recorded and can be verified," in May 2007, Gov. Charlie Crist signed into law a bill that eliminated those pesky, paperless touchscreen voting machines and replaced them with allegedly more reliable, recountable "optical-scan equipment that provides a paper trail." The same bill, which had the full support of both parties, also included a provision changing Florida's presidential primary to the last Tuesday in January and another provision allowing candidates seeking federal office to retain their existing public office (namely, the governorship), at the time of qualifying for the federal office.

### The voters lose

Sound like a horse trade? Yes -- at the expense of Florida's voters.

The part of the law requiring a change in voting technology applies to 15 Florida counties, including Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach. These counties represent more than half of all Florida voters. What is more, the switch is required to take place no later than July 1, 2008 -- that's barely more than one year after the inking of the new voting law.

This law was passed a year too late. A technology change of this magnitude, to be prudent, would require study and planning. But again, this is politics. When courageous and competent election supervisors, such as Miami-Dade's Lester Sola, asked the hard questions, few activists and even fewer legislators were there to back them up. The questions went unanswered. One exception was Rep. Ronald A. Brisé, D-North Miami, who in the last hours of the session forced assurances that the new optical systems would be required to comply with the language-access provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But even this was too little, too late. In the end, all that the supervisors had to rely on were the verbal promises (though nothing in writing) of the governor and his secretary of state, Kurt Browning, that the new equipment would be certified and delivered by no later than September 2007.

### Software not certified

It is now late March 2008 and the software for the ES&S DS200, the system that will be used by 13 Florida counties, including Miami-Dade and Broward, has yet to be certified. The latest promise from the secretary of state is that certification will take place by today -- March 31. This means that in the best-case scenario, the new systems will not be delivered until mid-April at the earliest, barely six

months until the November election.

In the best-case scenario, the supervisors in 13 of Florida's largest counties will have only six months to test the systems, learn how to use them, train their poll workers and educate their voters. And this does not even take into account the fact that the supervisors have to be ready to run their August primaries on the new systems. So, make that less than four months.

The problems are further complicated by early voting, which, in Florida is "out of precinct" voting, meaning that a voter can vote at any of the designated early-voting sites in the county regardless of where the voter lives.

With the elimination of touch screens, supervisors in the 15 counties that are switching equipment need to find a new way to make all ballot styles for each election available at all early voting locations, so as to accommodate any voter who shows up to vote. In Miami-Dade, the ballot styles can number in the hundreds.

The governor's promised solution was the untested technology known as "ballot on demand" -- a way of printing any ballot style at any early voting site, in minutes and at the touch of a button. Because this technology is untested (and to date not yet delivered) for August and November, supervisors need to have back-up options in the event of technology glitches, including having enough preprinted back-up paper ballots on hand.

How do we stop the train wreck? All we can do is get out and vote despite the possibility of long lines and, yes, a little chaos.

### Get involved

The other important thing we can all do is volunteer to work the election so that we can move the voters through the process as quickly as possible. If you speak more than one language, are computer literate or are patient and good at giving and following directions, call your supervisor of elections and volunteer to be a poll worker.

Also, if you can devote the next few months, the supervisor of elections of Miami-Dade County hires seasonal workers for three to four months to do voter education and community outreach, which will be crucial this time around, lest we allow ourselves to become "the next Florida."

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