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Shiver: Election setup still faulty

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Miami-Dade County's \$5 million makeshift election process may have spared the county further embarrassment on Nov. 5, but it was hardly a model for future elections, concludes a report issued Wednesday by County Manager Steve Shiver.

The legions of county employees and uniformed police officers who pulled together to make the county's election process work in all likelihood will not be a fixture for future major elections, the report says.

In the report, Shiver recommends a leaner, less costly system that relies more on well-trained volunteer poll workers and less on county workers. Also essential, he said, are technological improvements by the county's touch-screen voting machine supplier that will speed up the time needed to open voter precincts.

Shiver said he wants to make sure that ``conducting an election will no longer be a crisis."

Shiver's recommendations for an election subcommittee headed by Commissioner Betty Ferguson include:

- Bulk up the elections department by creating several senior management positions and adding staff members.
- Don't rely on police in future elections for logistical support and oversight.
- Scale back the number of county employees stationed at each precinct from three to one. That employee should serve as a technical troubleshooter.
- Recruit more computer-savvy volunteer poll workers, perhaps in partnership with private business or public schools.
- Test and certify poll workers for competency, in particular the precinct clerks. Pay raises for poll workers should be considered.

Ferguson said she has not had a chance to read the report, which contains more than 300 detailed recommendations. She said her subcommittee intends to act on it, and will also get input from the Miami-Dade Election Reform Coalition, a civic oversight group.

Coalition spokeswoman Lida Rodríguez-Taseff declined to comment, but she noted that some of Shiver's recommendations echoed those of the group. They included reducing the number of county employees at the polls and eliminating police involvement.

Miami-Dade Inspector General Christopher Mazzella said he believes that the results of an ongoing investigation by his staff should be considered by county policymakers before changing the elections system. His office's interim report on the county's purchase of voting equipment last year is expected by

late February or early March.

ROLE OF POLICE

Police Chief Carlos Alvarez also declined to comment on the report's specifics, saying he had not yet read it. But he agreed generally with Shiver's recommendation that the police not play a major role in elections. "A police department should not be in the role we were put in," he said.

While Election Day estimates from county officials pegged the price of the Nov. 5 vote at upward of \$4 million, Shiver's report lists the actual cost at \$4.9 million. About \$2.1 million of that was a result of police overtime pay.

LOADING BALLOTS

Of all the responses to the dismal Sept. 10 primary election, Shiver's report said that loading the ballots into touch-screen voting machines the night before balloting `` contributed most to November's success."

But Shiver also said the time required to load the ballots -- about four hours at an average precinct -- was too cumbersome. He said the machine vendor, Election Systems & Software, is testing a new procedure that could reduce start-up time to less than an hour.

Shiver said ES&S needs to make substantial improvements as well to its audio voting machines, used for people with vision problems. The report said it took too long to load ballots on the machines and criticized the voting program as poorly designed.

ES&S executives could not be reached for comment Wednesday.