OPEN VOTING CONSORTIUM

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U.S. Election Assistance Commission
Dr. DeForest B. Soaries, Jr., Chair
Gracia M. Hillman, Vice Chair
Paul D. DeGregorio
Ray Martinez III
1225 New York Avenue, NW - Suite 1100
Washington, DC 20005

RE: PUBLIC SOFTWARE FOR PUBLIC ELECTIONS

Dear Commissioners:

We are delighted to learn of your interest in open source voting software. The Open Voting Consortium is the organization most actively promoting this mode of election administration, and we would be happy to participate in the next EAC hearing.

As you sort through this, it is important to remember that Open Source does not simply mean letting people look at the source code. To achieve the greatest public benefit, engineers must be able to test the code, recommend changes (under the same open license terms), and publish their findings for public discussion. Since there are many Free Software/Open Source software licenses, the specific terms that apply to a particular program must be clearly stated. At the same time, the versions of software used in elections must be properly certified, and all uncertified variants of election-related code must be labeled as such.

Public licensing of published source code has served the computing world very well. Most of the software used to bring us the Internet is open source with public licenses. Apache (web server software) and Linux (computer operating system) are outstanding examples of such software. Studies have shown that software programs open for peer review are higher quality, better performing, and have fewer bugs than competing closed source proprietary software. It is no wonder that most of the web servers on the Internet are running robust applications like Apache along with an open source operating system like Linux.

Open source voting systems could also allow election systems from different vendors to provide compatible output. As it is, each vendor of proprietary systems also uses proprietary file formats. Aggregating the vote count is complicated by the fact that the results are presented in the various formats vendors have chosen to use. How can we talk about standards in this regard when the details are trade secrets? The advent of true open voting will bring interoperability, better standards, simplicity and efficiency, as well as openness.

Last month we gave a demonstration of our prototype voting software to a receptive public audience. This was announced in the New York Times, Washington Post, Baltimore Sun, San Jose Mercury News, and many other papers coast-to-coast on April 1st.

People like this sensible idea. After seeing our April 1 demo at the County Government Center in San Jose California, the San Jose Mercury News lauded our system as the "Touch Screen Holy Grail" (April 8 editorial). Open source is a key component of the Open Voting Consortium model, and we've thought through many other issues related to security, accessibility, and usability.

Reading or vision impaired voters can vote privately and unassisted, as with other electronic voting machines. They can also use a separate independent station enabling them to hear and verify their ballot, giving them the same full rights to a voter-verified paper ballot as voters with no impairment.

The San Jose Mercury News followed their April 8 editorial with another editorial (Apr 23) urging our Secretary of State to "replace your proprietary code with open-source software that voters can trust."   At a minimum, we think that open source public software should be offered as soon as possible to jurisdictions as an alternative to closed source black box voting systems.

We have been able to move the project forward with volunteer scientists and engineers. However, funding will be needed in order to complete and certify the high-quality production-grade comprehensive software that the world's greatest democracy deserves. The Open Voting Consortium is working with states and their public universities to advance our open source voting software development project.

The Open Voting Consortium intends to be a durable organization that will provide an on-going structure for maintenance and delivery of Open Voting systems for many years after the research and development has been completed. Our business model aims to foster competition among a greater number of vendors focused on services rather than hardware.

We look forward to increasing the dialog between the Election Assistance Administration and the Open Voting Consortium. I would appreciate the opportunity to present our case regarding *public software for public elections* at one of your hearings.

Sincerely,

Alan Dechert

And our Board of Directors:

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