

Los Altos Town Crier

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County Board of Supervisors reviews election process

By Traci Newell
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The Nov. 4 election tested the patience of many local voters and candidates, who watched as results trickled in daily after Election Day and changed the outcomes in some tight races.

Now that the dust has settled, Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian, chairman of the Finance and Government Operations Committee, held a special hearing Jan. 28 to discuss election matters involving the county's Registrar of Voters.

"The most important thing is the accuracy and the integrity of the vote-counting process," Simitian said in an interview with the Town Crier. "It is a source of biannual frustration that we are getting the results as late as we are – stretching into the days and weeks that follow."

Final Election Day results were not posted to the Registrar of Voters website until 4 a.m. Nov. 5, placing Santa Clara County among the last counties in California to issue final Election Night results. After Election Day, the county still had 150,000 vote-by-mail ballots to count that were returned at polling places Nov. 4. It took the

county five days to tally and report the additional vote-by-mail results.

The vote-by-mail ballots changed the outcome of two Los Altos School District matters on the ballot: the race for the third seat on the board of trustees and the Measure N bond vote, which initially appeared to fall short of approval but ultimately passed.

Santa Clara County Registrar of Voters Shannon Bushey delivered an 11-page report at the special hearing that outlined ballot-counting delays and a host of other post-election problems and offered potential solutions.

"This has been a recurring challenge for the county," Simitian said. "It's time we look for some long-term solutions."

Simitian said there are some immediate procedures he'd like to see enacted in upcoming elections to speed the process of reporting results.

"We need to put more folks on the job during election season," he said. "I'd also like to see 24-hour vote counting (of the vote-by-mail ballots returned on Election Day)."

Simitian expressed his disappointment with the Registrar of Voters' communication problems after the election. Bushey's report revealed

that the employee who normally handled the press was on a 16-month medical leave, so Bushey took on many of the press inquiries herself, in addition to her other duties.

"The county needs to step up its game in communicating election results," Simitian said. "I feel that the county did not communicate well, which contributed to the problems. We need to have a spokesperson who can effectively communicate what is happening in real time."

Simitian also registered interest in developing a county ordinance that would prompt an automatic recount in close races to assure voters of the accuracy of the process. He added that the state is crafting legislation on recounts, but the county must be more proactive in pursuing changes.

"We shouldn't wait for the state to act," he said. "If there is a negligible margin of difference that will determine the vote, and I don't know what that number is, (there should be a county-funded recount)."

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors is scheduled to continue the discussion at its Feb. 25 meeting, and longer-term solutions for election improvements will be ongoing.

For more information, visit scgov.igm2.com/Citizens/Detail_Meeting.aspx?ID=6240.

February 27, 2019

Open Forum: Counties need to share best practices to secure our elections

Joe Simitian

Feb. 27, 2019 Updated: Feb. 27, 2019 4 a.m.



(FILES) In this file photo taken on November 6, 2018 a voter casts his ballot in the midterm election at the East Midwood Jewish Center polling station in the Brooklyn borough of New York City. - Foreign meddling and hacking attempts had "no material impact" on the US midterm congressional elections last year, according to a high-level review by the Justice and Homeland Security Departments on February 5, 2019. A summary of the classified report did not confirm various reports from state and local security officials during the campaign that foreign actors tried to break into voting systems and databases in multiple states. (Photo by Angela Weiss / AFP)ANGELA WEISS/AFP/Getty ImagesAngela Weiss/AFP/Getty Images

It seems that every day we are confronted with more and more evidence that a safe, free, fair and trustworthy election is far from guaranteed. But how have we responded? Without sharing the kinds of information we need to secure our elections.

In the face of these attacks on the most central aspect of our democracy, most of the conversations have occurred at the state and federal levels of government. But the United States has more than 3,000 counties and county-equivalent entities, and it is these smaller local governments that run our polling places, collect our ballots and count our votes.

Counties are on the front line in the never-ending battle to secure our elections. Collaboration and communication among these counties can — indeed, must — play a vital role in these efforts. But we make it much too hard for counties to learn from one another and share best practices.

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We leave it up to the individual states to pass the laws that regulate our elections. Then, we leave it up to the individual counties or county-equivalents to implement those laws with their own individual policies, practices and purchasing agreements. We need to do more.

That's why Santa Clara County is hosting a conference to put California's county election officials in touch with world-renowned experts in voting and election security. The conference is free and open to the public (<https://electionsecurity2019.eventbrite.com>).

While there's no evidence — yet — that anyone has successfully altered the results of an election in America (although not for lack of trying), we do know that California was identified as one of 21 states whose election systems were targeted by Russian hackers in the 2016 election.

Election security concerns are many and varied. For example, in some jurisdictions, the voting machines themselves may be vulnerable to malicious hackers. Different jurisdictions use different systems with different strengths and vulnerabilities.

A modern registrar of voters controls far more than just the voting machines, including everything from computers housing databases of registered voters, to election records, and more. Basic cybersecurity practices vary widely from place to place.

But we can deal with that diversity of equipment and concerns. There's a wealth of expertise available about running secure elections and ensuring their integrity. Despite differences in local law, the problems of securing an election are not that much different in California than in Kentucky.

We hope our election security conference is the start of a longer, nationwide effort that encourages information sharing, communication and collaboration that will make our elections stronger, safer and more secure.

Even if these hackers fail to change a single vote, their very existence and the frequency of their attacks strikes at something more essential and even more difficult to protect: the trust of the American public.

Just about a year from now, on March 3, 2020, California voters will cast their votes for president. Will each and every one of California's 58 counties be prepared? "Let's hope so," seems an inadequate response.

So do your part: Ask your registrar of voters and your county supervisors, "What are you doing to protect the security of our voting systems?" And then demand good answers and suggest they join us at our election security conference.

Joe Simitian is the president of the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and a former member of the state Senate. He has previously served as an elections supervisor/observer in Bosnia and El Salvador.

March 6, 2019

Election Security Event Held at Googleplex in Mountain View

Hosted by Santa Clara County: 'Protecting the Front Line: County Election Security in the 21st Century'

By Anoushah Rasta and Bay City News • Published March 6, 2019 • Updated on March 6, 2019 at 6:52 pm



Santa Clara County hosted a free, daylong election security conference Wednesday at Google's Mountain View campus, with a keynote address from California Secretary of State Alex Padilla.

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County Board of Supervisors President Joe Simitian moderated the event, titled "Protecting the Front Line: County Election Security in the 21st Century."

"If we want to make sure that the vote count is right, counties have to get the job done, and we've got to be on the front lines of this security conversation in terms of making sure that our systems are safe and sound," Simitian said.

Speakers from technology, law and policy backgrounds discussed protecting votes at the ballot box in Santa Clara County and the Bay Area.

Padilla said a number of voting machines are outdated and counties across the country need more money for better computers and software to count ballots and mark them for people with disabilities.

"We must make a commitment," Padilla said. "Not a one-time commitment, not a once every 15 year commitment, but a sustained commitment to invest in our elections."

Padilla also noted that this year, California's budget has an extra \$134 million just for upgrading election equipment. And for the first time, he said, his office sends alerts and emails to registered voters with easy instructions on when and where to vote.

Barbara Simons, a computer scientist and board chair of Verified Voting, spoke on one of the panels, arguing that ironically, using more traditional, low-tech systems like paper ballots is the safest way to vote.

"At this point, we really don't know of a better, more secure option," Simons said. "Computers can make mistakes, they can have software bugs, there can be hidden malware, and we now have to worry about hacking."

Panelists included California Voter Foundation President Kim Alexander and professors from Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley.

Santa Cruz County Clerk Gail Pellerin, Santa Clara County Chief Privacy Officer Mike Shapiro and San Mateo County Supervisor Warren Slocum closed the day with a "County Perspectives" panel after the lunchtime keynote by Padilla.

September 9, 2019

Santa Clara Co. Supervisor Joe Simitian Wants More Focus on Election Security Ahead of 2020

By Nicholas Chan/ September 9, 2019



The North County rep wants to hear regular updates about election security, starting at the Oct. 22 Board of Supervisors meeting.

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday will hear a proposal to have regular cybersecurity updates about the local voting system as part of an ongoing effort to prepare for the 2020 elections.

“It’s very clear that the Russians are coming,” Supervisor Joe Simitian quipped about his plan, which comes up for consideration at Tuesday’s board meeting. “The security of the 2020 election will largely rest on the security of local systems and their level of preparedness to address any potential attacks.”

Simitian’s latest proposal comes about six months after his office convened a conference on election security in the 21st century, which featured Secretary of State Alex Padilla as keynote speaker and six months ahead of the March 2020 primary.

The county supervisor said one of his biggest takeaways from the event this past spring
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was that public officials need more than just good policies and the latest, greatest technology to protect our elections—they need to maintain the public’s trust.

“American democracy is built upon the idea that our elections fairly and accurately reflect the will of our voters,” Simitian said in a memo about his proposal. “It is our job to communicate with the public and help them to understand what we are doing to make that idea a reality.”

In that spirit, he said, he’s urging his colleagues to order regular updates about election security efforts, starting at the Oct. 22 meeting of the Board of Supervisors. He said the updates should be prepared by various county departments, including, of course, that of Registrar of Voters (ROV) Shannon Bushey.

“These reports involve sensitive subjects, and we should certainly not compromise our security efforts through excessive disclosure,” Simitian wrote. “However, there is quite a lot of information that could be of use to the public that is not confidential.”

And once the county drafts a document detailing its best practices, the supervisor said, he would like to present that as a model for other jurisdictions.

The county’s efforts come as Secretary of State Padilla prepares to scrutinize the cybersecurity of its new voting technology, which will be deliberately disconnected from the internet to avoid risks of remote hacking. State officials will test the system’s vulnerability by staging “break-ins” to pinpoint anything that needs fixing.

After all, Simitian said, foreign interference in national elections in 2016 is a cautionary tale for local governments as they prepare for 2020.

“Foreign governments attacked out elections in 2016,” he wrote in his memo. “According to assessments by the United States intelligence community (including the CIA, FBI and others), malicious actors sponsored by the Russian government obtained access to the systems of multiple state and local election boards. They breached the election systems in Arizona and stole the information of 76,000 voters in Illinois, and it is likely that they engaged in other behavior that we will never know about.”

Experts say there’s little doubt that foreign interests will try again in the coming year.

“Anyone who thinks that Vladimir Putin will just look around and leave when he enters our voter registration databases the next time—you better think again,” Stanford University political science Professor Larry Diamond said at a forum in Sunnyvale last week. “As political scientists, we have taken free and fair elections for granted.”

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But the federal government has failed to act with the urgency the matter deserves, Diamond continued. Even though many leaders within President Donald Trump’s own party agree there’s a problem.

“Behind closed doors, even Republicans will tell you that the evidence is incontrovertible—a foreign country has tried to hack our elections,” Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Fremont) said at the same panel event where Diamond addressed the issue.

Nationally, Khanna and Rep. John Ratcliffe, a Republican colleague from Texas, are spearheading legislation that would fortify the US government’s cybersecurity strongholds. The bipartisan Advancing Cybersecurity Diagnostics and Mitigation Act would boost the defenses of election systems on the federal, state and local level.

That’s welcome news for Simitian, who said counties are the first line of defense.

“We buy the voting machines, implement security measures, count the votes, and ensure those counts are accurate,” he said in his memo. “Here in Santa Clara County, employees across many departments are hard at work on these problems every day.”

By way of example, he said, the county ROV has been making sure that its new voting machines comply with state safety, security and integrity benchmarks.

Meanwhile, the county’s security team actively ensures that the system is safe from hackers and its attorneys make sure that the confidential information citizens share as part of the process is kept as safe as possible.

“If done right,” Simitian went on to write, “election day goes off smoothly and the public goes about its business, never giving this difficult task a second thought.”

The Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors meets at 9:30am Tuesday at 70 W. Hedding St. in San Jose. [Click here to read the agenda.](#)