SF Open Source Voting System Project

FACT SHEET

What is the project?
The project is for the City and County of San Francisco to develop and certify an open source paper-ballot voting system, as described in detail by a resolution passed unanimously by the San Francisco Elections Commission in November 2015.[1]

What is a voting system?
A voting system is the hardware and software needed to cast and count ballots, like precinct and vote-by-mail ballot scanners, and accessible voting machines for people with disabilities.

What is an open source voting system?
An open source voting system is a voting system consisting of open source software running on commercial off-the-shelf (COTS, aka "commodity") hardware.

What is open source software?
Open source software is software that is free for anyone to inspect, use, and make a copy of and improve.[2] The software is public and non-proprietary. Firefox, Android, and the Linux operating system are three widely used examples of open source software. Open source software is used heavily by successful technology companies large and small.

What are some advantages of open source?
Open source is more affordable, more flexible, and 100% transparent. There are no licensing fees. San Francisco would be free to improve its system without needing vendor permission. Anyone could service the system without San Francisco being locked in to a single vendor.

Who supports this idea?
In addition to open source and election integrity advocates, the Board of Supervisors and San Francisco Elections Commission both passed unanimous resolutions supporting the development of an open source voting system. Supporters include groups like the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), Code for America's SF chapter, and the SF DCCC.

Why doesn't an open source voting system already exist?
The idea has been talked about for over 10 years, but building one requires leadership and financial resources. Existing vendors have not chosen to create a public system.

Is Los Angeles County or Travis County, TX already building an open source system?
No. LA started developing their own system, but so far nothing has been made open source. Travis County decided not to work on their own system.

How much will it cost?
Estimates from advocates to develop and certify a new system average around $6 million spread over three years, plus money to deploy the system. The first four years of San Francisco's current, proprietary voting system had a price of $13.78 million in 2007 dollars.

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1 See http://sfgov.org/electionscommission/motions-and-resolutions .
2 See https://opensource.org/osd .

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What is the current status?
In July 2016, the Mayor and Board of Supervisors allocated $300,000 to the Department of Elections for the Planning Phase / Phase 1 to work out cost, timeline, and next steps. In October 2017, the Department contracted with the firm Slalom to draft a report due January 2018. The Elections Commission also created a 5-member Open Source Voting System Technical Advisory Committee (OSVTAC) in April 2017 to develop project recommendations.

When would the system be ready?
Advocates estimate that a full system could be developed and certified within two or three years once funded. A partial system (e.g. vote-by-mail only) could be developed much sooner.

Who would develop the system and with what oversight?
The Department of Elections could issue RFP's for outside organizations or firms to develop and certify individual system components. The Elections Commission oversees the Department of Elections. The Board of Supervisors must approve contracts. The Elections Commission's OSVTAC would also be monitoring the project.

Has the California Secretary of State spoken publicly about open source voting?
Secretary of State Alex Padilla said publicly in November 2015 that he thought it "quite possible" and "very likely" that an open source voting system would be certified by his office during his current term. In September 2016, he said on television that "open source is the ultimate in transparency and accountability for all." However, he has not stated a preference.

How can San Francisco reduce project risk?
A voting system divides naturally into several smaller components. The Elections Commission recommends developing these components separately to reduce complexity and risk, as opposed to putting “all your eggs in one basket.” Benefits accrue with each component that is developed and certified, independent of the others getting finished. Supportive organizations like foundations, companies, other jurisdictions, and even the State of California could also contribute to the project since the system would benefit everyone.

What about our current voting system?
The contract for San Francisco's current system ends in December 2018. The Director of Elections is planning to lease a new system at that point while the open source system is being developed.

How can I help?
1. Tell the Mayor, the Board of Supervisors, and San Francisco's Committee on Information Technology (COIT) that you support open source voting, and ask them to fully fund San Francisco's open source voting project.
2. Follow and retweet @SFOpenVoting on Twitter.
3. Keep tabs on progress by attending San Francisco Elections Commission meetings on the third Wednesday of each month at 6pm in Room 408 of SF City Hall.
4. Spread the word!

Where can I learn more?
For more information, contact: Chris Jerdonek, chris.jerdonek@gmail.com, (415) 286-2238 or visit http://www.sfopenvoting.org.