

San Francisco sets sights on open source voting by November 2019



If San Francisco implements an open-source voting system, it will be at the forefront of a voting movement across the United States. (Connor Hunt/Special to S.F. Examiner)

By [Joshua Sabatini](#) on November 26, 2015 1:00 am

San Francisco could have an open-source voting system in place by the November 2019 election, under a plan approved earlier this month by the Elections Commission.

The timeline could result in the emergence of San Francisco as the leader of the open-source voting movement in the United States.

For supporters of open-source voting, the importance of that point can't be underscored enough.

“San Francisco could help write some U.S. democracy history with its leadership role,” said a Nov. 18 letter to the Elections Commission from Gregory Miller, co-founder of the Open Source Election Technology (OSET) Foundation, a collection of executives from top technology companies like Apple and Facebook. “And the total estimated cost to do so [\$8 million] is a fraction of status-quo alternatives.”

Open-source voting systems bring a greater level of transparency and accountability by allowing the public to have access to the source codes of the system, which is used to tabulate the votes. A system owned by The City could also save taxpayers money.

If the recommendations are followed by Mayor Ed Lee and the Board of Supervisors, The City would allocate funds to begin the project for the fiscal year beginning July 2016. There are 13 steps outlined in the Elections Commission [unanimously approved open-source voting resolution](#), which was drafted by commission president Christopher Jerdonek who is a software developer. The effort has drawn support from those like Brett Turner, of the Open Voting Consortium, who has advocated in San Francisco for open-source voting for about eight years.

Steps include hiring a project director, establishing an open-source voting committee and making various design decisions. The commission supports an open-source voting system using paper ballots.

The resolution sets the goal for San Francisco to have “open voting system be available for use by the Department of Elections for the June 2020 Presidential Primary Election, and for partial or pilot use by the November 2019 Municipal Election or earlier.”

With the commission's Nov. 18 unanimous approval of the resolution backing open-source voting, Department of Elections Director John Arntz has canceled his plans to issue a request for proposals to solicit new voting machines from the few companies which provide machines using closed source software. “I am not planning to issue an RFP in January at this time,” Arntz said in an email to the San Francisco Examiner. “I've contacted the vendor, Dominion Voting Systems, regarding an extension of the contract.” The city contract with Dominion, formerly known as Sequoia Voting Systems, Inc., ends in December 2016. During the span of the nine year contract The City will have spent a total of \$19.69 million, including \$2.86 million on software licensing fees, \$6.53 million on hardware, and \$1.63 million on hardware maintenance.

There are various efforts ongoing to create open-source voting systems. Among them, is the OSET Foundation's TrustTheVote Project. “The TrustTheVote Project technology is patent-pending intended for public ownership,” Miller said in the letter. “Much of the open source Election Technology Framework is in design and development, slated for incremental release over the next three years.”

Other cities like Los Angeles are working on open-source systems, but San Francisco could employ a system first and one that more closely adheres to open-source principles.

If the board and mayor adhere to the commission's recommendation, San Francisco's effort could impact the nation. "The development and certification of an open voting system could not only provide San Francisco with an affordable, accurate, flexible, and secure voting system, but could benefit all election jurisdictions across the country by providing them such an option," the resolution says.

This is an opportune moment for open-source voting systems to take the center stage. The "America's Voting Machines at Risk" report issued in September by the Brennan Center for Justice at the NYU School of Law warns of consequences of the outdated voting machines employed throughout the nation, noting that next year 43 states will use electronic voting machines that are at least 10 years old.

"No one we talked to predicted there will be a vast meltdown of all, or even most, of the nation's voting equipment in 2016," the report said. "Aging machines do not all fail at once on a single day. But many argued that unless and until equipment is replaced, we will increasingly see problems from aging equipment that have already been occurring more frequently than they should — flipped votes, freezes, shut downs, long lines, and, in the worst case scenarios, lost votes and erroneous tallies."