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Rob Zaleski

Rob Zaleski: Accenture deal veteran asks, 'Why?'

By Rob Zaleski
January 14, 2005

The question begs an answer.

Why did Kevin Kennedy, executive director of the state Elections Board, enter into a \$13.9 million contract with the controversial technology giant Accenture - on his own, without a vote of the full board - to create a federally mandated state voter database?

A lot of people in this town have been asking that question - and a whole bunch of others - ever since the deal was disclosed in October.

Does Kennedy actually have that authority? they want to know. Why was there no public involvement? And why did he choose Accenture - a subsidiary of a Bermuda-based conglomerate that's been linked to voter database problems in Florida, Pennsylvania and elsewhere?

Some people find the whole scenario not just bizarre, but goofy.

Which is why it was hardly surprising that several parties - including state Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Madison, and Mike McCabe of election watchdog Wisconsin Democracy Campaign - filed a lawsuit on Dec. 23 alleging that Kennedy did not have such authority and asked a judge to terminate the deal.

And why, a week later, Attorney General Peg Lautenschlager said she was investigating whether Kennedy's awarding of the contract violated Wisconsin's open government laws.

One person who read about the controversy in Wisconsin was Chris Wilson, the election technology administrator for Franklin County, Ohio - which includes the capital city, Columbus, and has 850,000 registered voters. He recently contacted The Capital Times to

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About Rob

Rob Zaleski is a 32-year veteran of the news business. His columns appear every Monday and Wednesday in the Communities section.

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talk about his own experience with Accenture.

Accenture, Wilson noted, didn't actually develop the voter database system that Franklin County used from 2000 to 2004. But it did take control of the bug-plagued system after buying election.com in 2003 and could not make it work properly.

So when Accenture hinted it wanted out of the contract, Wilson says, Franklin County jumped at the opportunity.

That's why, Wilson says, when he found out about Wisconsin's deal with Accenture, he nearly fell off his chair.

"We sit here in this office - my assistant and I - and we're just stunned every time we read this stuff," he said. "It's like, 'What the hell are they thinking over there? Is anybody checking into this stuff?'"

It's especially baffling, he says, seeing as how there are plenty of technology firms that have good, solid records with voter databases. Companies like Sequoia, owned by England's DeLaRue corporation, which Franklin County switched to last year.

But if Franklin County's no longer involved with Accenture, why does Wilson still feel compelled to speak out?

"Because anytime I can tell a county or state to stay away, I do," he said. "I mean, I've got the gray hairs from dealing with these idiots."

Kennedy, who has stated that he followed Department of Administration guidelines in considering bids to create the voter database, said when contacted last week that he'd love to respond to Wilson's comments but can't because of the lawsuit.

But Accenture spokesman Jim McAvoy was more than happy to respond.

He acknowledged that the system in Franklin County that Accenture took control of after purchasing election.com did have some problems. But that's because Franklin County was "using the software inappropriately," he said.

And when the county didn't accept Accenture's advice, the firm asked that the contract be terminated - not the other way around, he said.

He also maintained that media accounts indicating that Accenture's statewide voter database system in Pennsylvania was plagued with glitches were incorrect.

On the contrary, that system has performed "exceptionally well," said McAvoy, who insinuated that Accenture's critics don't know what they're talking about.

But why, he was asked, would Wilson go out of his way to criticize the firm?

"I can't even speculate," McAvoy said.

So what can Wisconsin residents conclude from all this?

Well, here's my slant. I think the state should slam on the brakes and put the Accenture deal on hold until the attorney general conducts a thorough investigation.

Granted, that may take some time - time which Kennedy claims the state doesn't have. But after the last two presidential elections, there are a lot of cynical voters out there - and rightly so.

In light of that, it seems preposterous that we'd allow a decision about something as important and sensitive as a statewide voter database to be left in the hands of a single state official and a controversial firm whose parent company is based in the Caribbean.

As they say, this one doesn't pass the sniff test.

We need some answers.

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