

By Bev Harris, founder of Blackboxvoting.org

Whoever controls chain of custody for voting computers can control elections. That is, until more transparent election procedures are enacted (see end of this article). Until that time, election integrity in Niagara, falls. (Groan.)

But for bad puns, I'm afraid the company that owns the voting machine warehouse in Niagara County has me beat. That firm is aptly named "Clear Opportunity."

(See more here, including documentation on this: <http://www.bbvforums.org/forums/messages/8/82452.html>)

NIAGARA'S PROBLEM

Niagara County, New York Republicans, in a no-bid contract with a company owned by one of their largest contributors, has offered up a crucial link in voting machine chain of custody. Niagara signed a lease to house its voting computers in a warehouse owned by Clear Opportunity Properties, LLC, owned by GOP supporter David Ulrich.

Niagara County Democrats are apparently uncomfortable enough with the sweetheart deal to try to get that contract opened up to competitive bidding.

"Sweetheart deal" may be a gentle term. "Rapaciously gainful" or perhaps "copiously creative" might be more accurate ways to describe it.

IF YOU WANT TO UNDERSTAND WHAT VOTING COMPUTERS CAN DO TO YOU, IT HELPS TO UNDERSTAND POLITICS, FINANCIAL MANEUVERING AND CORRUPTION

POLITICS: Read on for the Democrats, because they have corruption problems too. But ... Republicans hold a super-majority in Niagara County, which is governed by a county legislature made up of 15 members. Only three of the 15 Niagara County legislators are Democrats.

FINANCIAL MANEUVERING: Secure in their comfortable hold on the county legislature, Ulrich-supported Republicans steamrolled into a lease to rent a warehouse owned by Clear

Opportunity Properties LLC, controlled by one of their most generous donors, David Ulrich.

"In the months leading up to the county Republicans deciding to hand the lease to Ulrich, he made contributions of more than \$12,000 to local Republicans, \$6,000 of which went directly into the Niagara County Republican Committee." writes Darryl McPherson of the Niagara Falls Reporter.

McPherson's outstanding reporting on Ulrich's previous "clear opportunities" with Niagara tax money included an effort by GOP county legislators to sign a \$640,000 lease on a building that cost Ulrich just \$75,000 in 2004.

Niagara's Republican legislators also signed leases with Ulrich for the facility that houses their elections board, and other county offices.

According to McPherson, Ulrich's combined valuation on those properties in 1999 was just under \$1 million; flush with county-assigned taxpayer-funded leases, he turned around and sold the properties for \$9.1 million six years later.

But that's not the only hit on taxpayers. Republican lawmakers had public money foot the bill for a \$500,000 facility that they recently proposed selling for just \$160,000 to another GOP donor.

CORRUPTION: The building commissioner for the city of Niagara Falls, Guy Bax, pleaded guilty this month to taking bribes this month. Bax admitted to taking payoffs in exchange for steering work to a contractor, John Gross, who is now serving a 33-year sentence. Public official Bax's sentence? Probation. Does he lose his pension? Nope.

Bax was stripped of his position as building commissioner in 2011 and replaced by Dennis Virtuoso, who is now one of the Democratic county legislators backing a new contract on the voting machine warehouse.

In fact, Niagara County has a reputation for corruption. Even the Wikipedia entry for Niagara Falls has a section on its corruption.

For example: Former Niagara Falls Mayor Vincent Anello ripped off the pension fund of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, of which he was a member, and was sentenced to 13 months in prison. Anelli was also indicted on federal charges of corruption regarding illegal payments from the powerful local businessman Joseph Anderson. He signed a plea agreement in Sept. 2010.

And if you've been following the flurry of busts in the New York legislature, you will know that this isn't about Republicans or Democrats, its about who has control over power and money.

WHAT'S THE MORAL OF THIS STORY?

The bottom line, and a solution for the never-ending grime we find when we look into who warehouses and transports voting machines, is to mitigate with true public transparency. We need to stop depending entirely on claimed results from a secret count inside a computer.

Contemporaneous public comparison, human eyes on all the ballots, such as hand counts, public videotaping of ballots, or scanned copies on DVD, will provide meaningful ways to catch voting machine tampering, as long as such measures are made available at the same time votes are counted.

Election transparency is the most practical way to deal with corruption. Public transparency, combined with enforcement and consequence for transgression, are the most powerful anti-corruption measures in the world. In fact, the whole reason transparency is needed is that corruption exists, along with "clear opportunity."

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