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Possible hack shuts down online portal to public campaign financing

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A computer problem — possibly a hack — has resulted in more than a dozen candidates for statewide and legislative office facing an unexpected hurdle in their bid to get public financing.

The computer link to statewide voter registration records was shut down last week after the FBI said there was a “credible and serious threat” to the integrity of the system, said Matt Roberts, spokesman for the secretary of state’s office.

Roberts said state officials thought the problem was minor and had hoped to have it fixed by the end of last week. But now, he said, the goal is the end of this coming week.

What makes taking down the site most critical is that it is where individuals can log in to make \$5 donations to candidates to qualify them to get public money for their campaigns.

Candidates can still get donations individually, whether face-to-face or through the mail. But the ease of soliciting funds online eases the burden.

Legislative hopefuls need at least 250 of these \$5 donations. That qualifies them for \$16,044 for the primary and \$24,066 if they make it to the general election.

For those running for Arizona Corporation Commission, the only statewide race this year, it takes 1,700 qualifying donations to get \$102,711 for their primary bid and \$154,067 for the November race.

Officials at the Citizens Clean Elections Commission recommend getting 20 percent more in donations just to be sure to have enough from qualified donors.

Tom Collins, the commission’s executive director, said most of the nearly five dozen candidates hoping to run with public dollars already had turned in their signatures before the online system was shut down. But he said more than a dozen are still outstanding.

One of them is Rick Gray.

“It’s been a definite setback for us,” said Gray. The Republican state representative from Sun City is vying for one of three seats at the Arizona Corporation Commission.

Five Republicans are running in the primary. Gray and former state Sen. Al Melvin hope to get public dollars; former Chandler Mayor Boyd Dunn and incumbents Bob Burns and Andy Tobin all are collecting private donations.

Melvin said he has turned his in.

Gray said Tuesday he believes he has enough to meet the minimum threshold. But he was counting on the web site to make sure he has a cushion in case some of those who donated turn out not to be qualified electors.

The most recent campaign finance reports show Dunn with contributions of \$61,000, though \$50,000 of that is his own money. Burns has \$33,829 and Tobin has \$30,200.

Democrats were not exempt from the problem with the web site.

"It's more than irritating," said former lawmaker Tom Chabin, "especially when you're trying to get your last 30 or 40."

Chabin said he had hoped those would have come in online last week. Instead, he made a special trip on Monday to Sierra Vista to press the flesh — and come away with some \$5 donations and the forms that go with it.

That, he said, should put him over the top.

But those hand-carried donations with the paper forms require verification, meaning some could be disqualified. Chabin said those made online are immediately verified as valid, as they are compared against the voter registration database.

It is that link that led to the site being taken down in the first place.

"The FBI spoke with the Arizona Department of Administration and indicated to them that there was a credible and serious threat to our voter registration system," said Roberts.

He said there has also been an "infiltration of a piece of malware" to the computer of one of the counties. Roberts, who declined to identify which county, said efforts are underway to see if that computer, which is linked to the state voter registration database, is the cause of the threat or simply a coincidence.

Roberts said there is absolutely no link between the decision by the Department of Administration to take the system offline and the opposition by Secretary of State Michele Reagan to public financing. In fact, he said, the FBI characterized the seriousness of the threat as eight on a scale of one to 10.

"Obviously, when somebody tells you that you could have a credible threat to your voter registration system, that is a serious thing," Roberts said.

The privately administered voter registration web site at servicearizona.com continues to accept voter registration requests. But Roberts said they are being queued and held while the state-run web site remains down and will be processed when it is fixed.

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