**Election Security and Safety in Santa Cruz County**

**Part I of a two-part opinion editorial on voting by County Clerk Gail Pellerin**

As your County Clerk, one of my most important responsibilities is to ensure that the votes cast in Santa Cruz County are secure and accurate. Despite claims that voter fraud is rampant nationally, court challenges have failed to produce evidence that voter fraud is anything more than an occasional clerical error or bad data matching.

I have been the chief elections official in Santa Cruz County for 25 years and have been active in the California Association of Clerks and Elections Officials. In my experience, you have a greater chance of getting struck by lightning twice than being a victim of voter fraud – it is virtually nonexistent. Unsubstantiated stories about widespread voter fraud likely have an ulterior motive – to destroy faith in our democracy in the hope that voters are discouraged from voting. In January of this year, the White House disbanded its voting fraud commission after failing to find evidence of widespread problems and bipartisan resistance from local elections officials.

A more significant risk comes from cybersecurity and foreign interference in our elections. In 2016, United States intelligence agencies concluded with high confidence that the Russian government hacked e-mails and spread fake news in an effort to undermine our election. While their efforts have not been shown to have penetrated our ballot counting systems, it is possible that they impacted the faith of voters in our electoral system. This practice of spreading false stories about the opposition is an age-old campaign tool. However, social media and the Internet make it very easy to fan the flames of lies and deceit for democracy meddlers both domestic and abroad.

It is extremely important that our elections systems be protected as critical infrastructure under the Department of Homeland Security. As we enter the 2018 election cycle, it is imperative that elections officials be kept informed, in real time, regarding the security of our elections so we can take immediate action to thwart any threat.

In Santa Cruz County, our voting system is not connected to the Internet. The voting machines used at our polling places are publicly programed, tested, and audited to ensure accurate counts. They are also guarded at all times by trained elections officials.

All of our county election processes and procedures are open to the public. I invite interested persons to witness the multiple layers of security we have on our voting system. During the voting season we do extensive audits to ensure that ballots are counted accurately. I am responsible for verifying the election results, and I will not certify the statement of the votes cast until I am 100 percent confident in the results. In close contests, I have hand counted the paper ballots to verify the results.

We are fortunate to live in a state where voter suppression laws are not enacted, state and county elections officials are dedicated to secure, transparent, and accurate elections, and voting rights groups are vigilant in their work. As we face new security challenges, my office will continue to work with those across the state dedicated to improving voting systems in California and to maintaining and ensuring the integrity of our democratic processes.