

Rhode Island Loses Access to State Email Archives

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(TNS) — PROVIDENCE, R.I. — An access-to-public-records request has uncovered the state's previously unreported loss of access to many years of emails to and from people in state government.

The predicament resulted from the 2015 shift from one email system to another by the state's Division of Information Technology, also known as DoIT, according to an email that Richard Thornton, the campaign-finance director for the state Board of Elections, sent to software entrepreneur and two-time candidate for governor Ken Block on Wednesday.

The email said, in part: "There were significant problems with the syncing process, as the two systems are wholly incompatible with each other." As a result, Thornton told Block, "there may, or may not be, additional email communications responsive to your request, but for which the State of RI has no capacity to retrieve presently."

"This is an unbelievable email," Block said Thursday. "If I am reading this correctly, an email system upgrade made in 2015 by the RI Digital Office of Information Technology has rendered many, if not most state emails made prior to 2015 unrecoverable."

Department of Administration spokeswoman Brenna McCabe told The Journal, "We did not lose the emails." But she acknowledged, "They are [now] in a format that is

not easily searchable ... [And] it would take significant resources to put the data in an accessible, searchable format."

"The vendor we used — Microsoft Consulting Services — made the State aware that we could lose up to 5 percent of its total email in this process, but management accepted the risk because there was no alternative due to technical differences between the two systems," she added.

Despite that, she said, the administration considers the \$1.15-million upgrade a success because the state "continued operations without significant disruption."

As to why the state switched to the new email system, McCabe said the state sought to replace "a widespread mix of outdated Novell GroupWise and Microsoft Exchange systems," and what it got in their place was a "cloud-hosted, consolidated platform we have now — Microsoft Office 365 [that provides] DoIT the opportunity for more efficient backup of data, a more standardized approach for records retention and a secure disaster recovery solution."

Block's response: "Wow. How does that square with Thornton's email?"

Block, who has not indicated plans to run for public office in 2018, performed a computer analysis of the potential for voter fraud in Rhode Island earlier this year. The work was done for a nonprofit organization co-founded by President Donald Trump's former chief strategist Stephen Bannon.

As part of his continuing inquiry, Block asked the elections board for communications — dating back to Jan. 1, 2003 — from the state to local boards of canvassers about "voter registration ... voter identification policies and processes."

This was the response he got from Thornton on Wednesday: "In 2015, the State of RI converted its email system from GroupWise to Outlook365. Emails from active GroupWise mailboxes were transferred, or synced, with mailboxes created in Outlook365.

"There were significant problems with the syncing process, as the two systems are wholly incompatible with each other. DoIT used a third party tool to act as a go-between to import GroupWise mailboxes to Outlook365, but the results were very inconsistent. As a result ... there may, or may not be, additional email communications responsive to your request, but for which the State of RI has no capacity to retrieve presently."

"If needed, the action of recovering any data that used to exist in GroupWise would need to be contracted out to a third party, as the State of RI does not have the resources or technology currently to perform this activity."

As for the cost, Thornton told Block: "DoIT did not provide a cost estimate for this data recovery, but indicated that it could potentially reflect hundreds of hours worth of work to retrieve mailboxes which may or may not be usable."

Block responded, "It is bad enough that the Board of Elections wanted to charge me \$600 for emails sent to local Boards of Canvassers that set voter registration policy.

Now, the State (and by extension the Board) may ask to charge me for 'hundreds of hours' of work that may or may not recover those emails.'

"If old emails can only be produced with 'hundreds of hours' of effort, at the cost of many thousands of dollars, those emails are effectively lost," he said.

"How widespread is this loss of State emails? What is the impact to not have perhaps a decade of State email documentation?" Block asked. "I know that if I lost my historical emails it would have a major impact on me both professionally and personally." The state has not yet answered those questions.

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<http://www.govtech.com/products/Rhode-Island-Loses-Access-to-State-Email-Archives.html>