Clerks Division Staff Report

Report Title: Election 2022 Report 2 – Voting Method
Report Number: C04-2021
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Recommendation:

That the Council of the Township of Woolwich, considering Report C04-2021 respecting Election 2022 Report 2 – Voting Method:

1. approve in principle the use of internet voting in the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election; and
2. delay the final decision and the passage of an authorizing by-law until staff report back to Council on vendor solutions, including functionality, flexibility, security, accessibility, and pricing.

Background:

Municipal and school board elections must be held every four years pursuant to the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*. The next election will be October 24, 2022. In preparation for the upcoming election, on September 15, 2020 Council considered Report C14-2020 and made no changes to how residents are represented by passing the following motion:

> "That the Council of the Township of Woolwich, considering Report C14-2020 respecting Council Composition and Ward Boundaries:
>
> 1.   Maintain the current composition of Woolwich Township Council, and
> 2.   Maintain the current ward boundaries for Woolwich Township."

This report has been prepared for preliminary consideration of the method electors in Woolwich Township will use to vote in 2022.

Comments:

Legislative Requirements and Voting Principles

The Municipal Elections Act requires that the voting method will be a hand counted, paper ballot unless the Township passes a by-law authorizing an alternative voting method. If Council wishes to do so, a by-law must be passed by May 1, 2022. When considering voting method Council should consider the following voting principles:

- fair and consistent treatment of voters and Candidates,
- certainty that election results truly reflect electorate vote,
- secrecy, confidentiality and privacy of voters is paramount,
- voter accessibility, convenience, integrity and scrutiny of the election process takes priority over administrative convenience and efficiency.

Possible Voting Methods

Voting Method	Elector Experience	In-person Help	Cost	Staff and Management	Results
Internet and Telephone	Accessible, convenient, and familiar	3-5 polls/help centres in larger settlements	Low	Few part-time staff, easier to manage	Fast, 15 minutes after polls close
Internet and hand counted paper ballots	Accessible, convenient, and familiar	3-5 polls/help centres in larger settlements	Low	Few part-time staff, easier to manage	Medium, 30-60 min after polls close
Tabulator counted paper ballots	Familiar, less accessible, and convenient	5-10 polls in most settlements	High	More part-time staff, harder to manage	Medium, 30-60 min after polls close
Hand counted paper ballots	Familiar method, less accessible or convenient	5-10 or more polls in most settlements	Medium	Most part-time staff, harder to manage	Slow, 1-3 hours after polls close
In person touch screen voting	Less familiar method, less accessible or convenient	3-5 help centres in larger settlements	Medium	New method would require added planning, training and communication	Fast, 15 minutes after polls close

Voting Method	Elector Experience	In-person Help	Cost	Staff and Management	Results
Vote by mail	Less familiar method, less accessible, convenient for some	1-3 help centres plus 5-10 ballot drop box locations	Medium	New method would require added planning, training and communication	Slow, 3+ hours after polls close

Experience in Woolwich Township

Woolwich Council has previously passed by-laws authorizing tabulated vote counting (By-law 61-1997) and internet and telephone voting (By-law 26-2017). The Township's experience with internet and telephone voting was reported publicly on November 6, 2018, through the 2018 Election Evaluation and Accessibility Report (Report C38-2018).

In 2018, 81% of voters who completed the Township's online voter survey indicated they would use the internet and telephone method in the future. Comments regarding internet voting provided followed common themes, including that the system was easy, fast, convenient, user-friendly, simple, and well-explained, but could have been even faster, better tested or a backup method could have been provided so there was an alternative during the slowdown. There were fewer comments regarding telephone voting, possibly since only seven percent of voters voted by telephone. Elections staff provided feedback that some electors were frustrated with the telephone system.

Based on the 2018 experience, staff recommend internet voting be offered in future elections with an alternative method for increased voter choice and redundancy.

Recommendation and Rationale

This report recommends internet voting and a second voting method still to be determined. Prior to a final decision and selection of the second method, staff would survey vendors to see what alternative methods are being offered and costs for these services.

Staff believe internet voting as one method would provide the best possible voting experience for the electors in the Township with the following expected benefits:

- for electors with disabilities, internet voting allows more people to vote independently using their own assistive technology
- provides choice and convenience for voters, allowing them to attend a help centre to access a tablet for voting or to vote whenever, from wherever on their own computer, tablet, or smartphone
- allows electors away from home and non-resident electors to vote independently and may eliminate the need for proxy voting
- is a legal, secure and accurate voting method

- reduces unintentionally spoiled ballots and warns voters if they have under-voted using the internet voting option

Touch screen voting and vote by mail are not preferred since they are unfamiliar methods for Township electors and election administrators and are not expected to provide any customer service benefits beyond the internet voting method.

Voting Barriers

Staff recommend choosing a voting method that removes as many barriers as possible for voters participating in elections. Barriers that affect people with disabilities, people with internet or technology concerns or those with busy schedules may make the voting process too difficult for people who attempt voting. The Township has worked in past elections to reduce barriers. For example, internet and telephone voting was recommended in 2018 because of the significant reduction in barriers for people with disabilities and was supported by the Township's accessibility advisory committee GRAAC. Voting help centres and telephone voting were provided for people with concerns about technology or access to the internet.

Impact on Voter Turnout

Studies have shown that internet voting has little impact on both voter turnout and the characteristics of voters[1]. In other words, those who want to vote generally do so regardless of the method. Internet voting alone should not be expected to significantly increase voter turnout. However, selecting a voting method that reduces barriers to voting should ensure that everyone who wants to vote does so easily and conveniently which should lead to the best possible voter turnout.

Impact of COVID-19

At the time of writing this report, staff are uncertain of the impact COVID-19 will have on elections in 2022. Experiences from the federal election, other jurisdictions, byelections in Ontario municipalities suggests the Township should consider impacts on voters and elections staff.

First, if there is a continued risk of COVID-19 transmission during an election period, the voting method should make electors feel safe and should not deny electors the right to vote. With the internet voting as one option, staff anticipate that many voters would vote remotely, providing the best defence against any future COVID-19 risks and reducing the number of people who would require in-person voting help. Staff also believe that internet voting is preferable to alternatives being considered by other municipalities in Ontario like drive-through voting, home visit voting, porch drop-off and pick-up or encouraging proxy voting.

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[1] For more information see the 2016 Internet Voting Project Report Authored by: Nicole Goodman, The Centre for e-Democracy & The University of Toronto and Heather Pyman, Carleton University

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Second, part-time elections staff also need to be considered. Finding enough qualified part-time staff who are comfortable using technology is already a challenge and COVID-19 could make finding staff more difficult and/or increase costs. Offering a remote voting option like internet voting would help to reduce the need for part-time staff. Additional safety protocols, personal protective equipment and additional backup positions may still be needed for staff that do provide in-person services.

Next Steps

If Council approves internet voting in principle for the 2022 election, staff will begin a procurement process to see what methods suppliers are offering and costs for each method. Staff would then report back to Council with final recommendations considering factors like the functionality, flexibility, security, accessibility, and audit capabilities of the system as well as the company's experience and cost.

Interdepartmental Impacts:

Municipal elections are high priority for Corporate Services and may delay other departmental projects.

While the voting method has no direct impacts on other departments, Corporate Services wish to acknowledge staff in many areas who help prepare for the election and work on voting day.

Financial Impacts:

Actual costs are unknown until the procurement process is complete.

Strategic Plan Impacts:

Choosing a voting method that promotes election principals, exceptional customer service and a low risk of being impacted by COVID-19 supports the strategic plan focus area of Best Managed and Governed Municipality.

Conclusion:

Staff recommend approving internet voting in principle for the 2022 Municipal Election. This approval would allow staff to focus procurement on vendors that provide this service to determine a preferred vendor and another voting method that could be used. Staff would report back to Council on voting methods following the procurement process.

Attachments:

None.