

MANAGEMENT REPORT

Date: July 22, 2025
To: Finance and Labour Relations Sub-committee
From: Tatiana Dafoe, City Clerk
Report Number: FIN25-024
Attachments: Attachment 1: Benefits and drawbacks of each voting method
Attachment 2: Voting Methods Review: How each voting method works

Title: 2026 Municipal and School Board Election Alternative Voting Methods

Objective: To obtain direction on the vote method to be used in the upcoming 2026 municipal and school board election, and to seek support for offering free transit on Election Day on October 26, 2026.

Background: The Municipal Elections Act, 1996 (MEA) governs the administration of local elections in Ontario. The Clerk holds independent legislative authority to administer all municipal and school board elections as the Returning Officer. These elections are planned and conducted in line with policies and procedures that reflect and uphold the principles of the MEA, generally recognized as follows:

- The secrecy and confidentiality of the voting process is paramount;
- The election shall be fair and non-biased;
- The election shall be accessible to the voters;
- The integrity of the voting process shall be maintained throughout the election;
- There is to be certainty that the results of the election reflect the votes cast; and,
- Voters and candidates shall be treated fairly and consistently.

In keeping with the election principles, accessibility is vital to ensuring participation for individuals of all abilities, supporting the City's commitment to inclusive elections. Section 12 of the MEA requires the Clerk to ensure an accessible election and remove barriers for voters and candidates with disabilities. Staff continually work to review and improve accessible options for electors, candidates, and election staff including continuously monitoring legislation updates, and municipal trends and practices.

Section 42 (1) of MEA does provide that a municipality may pass by-laws authorizing the use of alternative voting methods, including the use of vote counting equipment, vote by mail, and telephone and internet/online voting.

Analysis: The 2026 Municipal Election will take place on Monday, October 26, 2026. Since the 2022 election, there has been some positive legislative amendments including in areas such as the voters' list data quality with the change to use the Elections Ontario list. This will give a more accurate list based off drivers' license and health card information rather than home ownership information used by the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC).

Should Council wish to proceed with the use of alternative voting methods, beyond vote count tabulators, a by-law must be passed by May 1, 2026. Upon passage of such a by-law by Council, the Clerk is required to establish procedures and forms for the use of any such alternative voting options, therefore the earlier the decision is made, the earlier planning can commence should Council decide to move forward with a new method.

Factors considered when selecting an alternate voting method and use of voting and vote-counting equipment have expanded over several elections to include:

- Risk analysis
- Elector eligibility
- Confidentiality
- Security of the system
- Systemic design
- Ballot design
- Security of the ballots
- Security of ballot boxes
- Voting places
- Election personnel needed
- Count and Recount
- Community capacity / demand
- Community education outreach
- Accessibility
- Voter engagement vs voter exclusion
- Costs / cost comparison
- Impact on candidates

Each method of voting has pros and cons to be considered when planning for the next election.

Voter turnout does not appear to be affected by the method of voting used by Stratford. It was previously anticipated that the easier it was for electors to vote, more people would vote and participation rates would increase.

Voter participation at the municipal level continues to be the lowest of the three-levels of government even after alternate voting methods were introduced 20 years ago.

Stratford's experience in voter turnout has been in the 45% to 50% range whether using paper ballots with manual count, paper ballots with optical scanners or internet / telephone voting.

Table 1: Voter Turnout 1994 to 2014

Year of Election	Voter Turnout	Number of Voters
1994*	49.3 %	n/a
1997*	46.0 %	9,865
2000	50.0 %	11,393
2003	49.7 %	n/a
2006	45.5 %	10,124
2010	47.8 %	10,303
2014	47.6 %	10,864
2018	49.79 %	11,677
2022	43.9 %	11,661

Note: * includes PUC candidates

Factors influencing voter turnout:

- controversial issues during the election campaign
- number of candidates for mayor's race
- level of interest in the candidate campaigns by electors – this can be influenced by age, education and economic conditions
- previous voting history within the family or networking group
- recent provincial and federal elections or by-elections in the municipality can lead to voter fatigue by the time the municipal election is held
- weather conditions on voting day

The City has received positive feedback on the use of internet and telephone voting such as:

- allows voters to vote anywhere, anytime during the voting period (including when on vacation)
- allows voters to vote comfortably within their own home
- is easy to use

Questions or concerns which have been raised including:

- wanting to vote in-person with paper and pencil
- questioning security and accuracy of the system

The City would issue a tender or request for proposal to select the voting system, once the type of alternate voting method is determined. The system selected will need to be compatible with other systems used to maintain and update the voters list received from Elections Ontario, accommodate vote anywhere and anytime during the voting period, be easy to operate, accessible, and able to have third-party certification or review.

A by-law is required to authorize an alternate voting method in place of a paper ballot and to authorize the use of voting and vote-counting equipment in place of a manual count. The Clerk is required to have procedures and forms for use of voting and vote counting equipment authorized by by-law developed by June 1, 2026.

Stratford has used internet and telephone voting for the 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 municipal and school board elections.

Options:

1. Continue to use internet and telephone voting
2. Use internet voting and eliminate telephone voting
3. Use internet voting and paper ballot with vote tabulators
4. Consider another voting method identified by Sub-committee
5. Use paper ballot with manual count

A draft by-law has not been included as part of this report. A by-law will be brought forward at a later date based on Council's direction.

Council direction through a by-law is only legislatively required regarding voting or vote-counting equipment and alternative voting methods. A decision regarding accessible voting service enhancements is at the discretion of the City Clerk under Sections 12 (1) and (2) of the MEA which speaks to the City Clerk's responsibility to ensure an accessible election and planning to ensure the identification, removal and prevention of barriers that affect voters and candidates with disabilities. Information and the intention of the City Clerk is included for Council and the public's awareness.

Accessibility and Human Rights Considerations

The City is committed to proactively planning for accessible election services that are designed to be inclusive. It is paramount that voters have the ability to mark their ballot independently and ensure the confidentiality of a vote. Staff also understand the duty to accommodate. If established service options do not support a voter, accommodations are offered in line with the principles of respect for dignity, individualization, integration and full participation. Due to the principle of individualization, each person's unique

needs are considered on a case by-case basis when an accommodation request is made. City staff have, in the past, supported case-by-case needs in past election cycles and will continue to make such support available through individual discussions.

Masked/Scent-Free Location

A separate location will be offered for individuals to vote where all individuals are masked, and no scents are worn or used in the room. This option will be piloted at City Hall in 2026 in consideration of the pandemic and public comfort attending a voting location or voter help centre. The intent of this pilot is to support barrier reduction for individuals with scent sensitivities or who may be immunocompromised.

A masked option was offered by the Cities of Hamilton, Toronto, Barrie and Guelph. It is staff's understanding that only the City of Guelph offered a scent-free location.

This option would likely be offered at City Hall as a central location in 2026 during advanced voting and on Election Day. This allows for preparation and cleaning of the space ahead of voting and affords staff greater control of the area, which would not be possible in other spaces.

Transit Consideration

The budget during a municipal election year includes funds to provide free transit on Election Day to support increased community access to voting in-person. The City Clerk's Office intends to work closely again with colleagues in the Transit Division to offer free transit again on voting day. A free fare day supports the reduction of barriers or transportation friction to get to a voting location. The cost to offer this is estimated to be \$5,000 and can be funded from the existing election reserve.

This option is being recommended for the municipal and school board election. Civic participation is important at all levels of government and each election authority is responsible for supporting voter engagement and removing barriers to voting. It is recommended that these options be offered for the municipal election as transit is a municipal service. A local election subsidized by local funding is being proposed. No request has been received by the City to offer this option for other elections at higher levels of government and there is no indication from Elections Canada or Elections Ontario that this is something they would pursue. Funding from other levels of government would be necessary if similar services were to be offered for Federal or Provincial elections in the future.

Vote Methods:

Internet Voting

An internet voting option allows a voter to securely login to an online platform to access, mark and cast their ballot. Step-by-step information on how this alternative

voting method works can be found in Attachment 2 of the Voting Methods Review: How each voting method works.

Strengths

- Supports independent ballot marking with the ability to customize and use personal assistive technology.
- Convenient online 24/7 access.

Weaknesses

- Variance in public technology literacy and access.
- Voters' list data accuracy important to prevent issues accessing.
- Need to receive voter notification card as part of secure login.

Opportunities

- Potential to increase voter turnout through barrier reduction and based on engagement survey data.
- Move to the Elections Ontario voters' list for 2026 will improve data accuracy.
- Potential to pilot draft standards.

Threats

- Potential security risk due to malicious actors.
- Potential for voter fraud with fully remote method.
- Technical dependencies on platforms and systems outside of the City's control.
- Potential for technical dependencies to impact reliability of service and public trust in election process.
- Inability to conduct a recount in any other way. This may compromise MEA principles related to ensuring results reflect the proper majority of votes cast, votes are counted accurately, and only valid votes are counted and upheld.

Approximately 5 municipalities used internet voting only in the 2022 municipal election. Approximately 93 municipalities did not use internet voting.

Vote by Tabulators

Voters attend in-person and mark a ballot which is then fed into a tabulator. Vote tabulators read and record how the ballot is marked, deposits it into the ballot box, stores the information and produces election results after the close of the voting place.

Strengths

- The use of vote-counting equipment allows for increased consistency in vote counting over a manual counting process.
- Supports the reporting of unofficial election results on election night.

- Reduce human error in tabulating due to the complexity of municipal and school board election ballots with multiple contests and selection requirements.
- Upholds all principles of the MEA.
- Offers a consistent foundational technology.

Weaknesses

- vote tabulators are scanning and recording vote counts accurately prior to use at a voting location

Opportunities

- Thorough logic and accuracy procedures can be established to ensure that vote tabulators are scanning and recording vote counts accurately prior to use at a voting location.

Threats

- Machines and results have a risk that they can be tampered with.

Vote by Mail

A vote by mail option would allow a voter to request a vote by mail kit, receive, mark and return a paper ballot by mail before Election Day. Step-by-step information on how this alternative voting method works can be found in Attachment 2 of the Voting methods review: How each voting method works.

Strengths

- Established remote voting method used at all levels of government.
- Enhances access to voting by removing barrier of coming to an in-person poll.
- Familiarity from previous provincial and federal elections.
- Upholds all principles of the MEA.

Weaknesses

- Prolonged time to receive and return kit by mail.
- Limited time frame that it can be offered due to nomination, ballot printing and mail timelines.
- Does not offer a fully independent voting experience as some voters with disabilities may require assistance marking their ballot.
- Voters with physical disabilities that limit mobility may require assistance to drop off a marked ballot in the mailbox for return.
- Marked ballots may be received after the deadline to be counted.

Opportunities

- N/A

Threats

- Third party dependency on Canada Post.
- Potential for voter fraud with fully remote method.
- Separate ballot casting process without verification at the time of casting.

Vote by Phone

A vote by phone option would allow a voter to call into a digital platform to make selections using an automated voice system. The ballot would be recorded and cast using the digital platform the same as online voting. Step-by-step information on how this alternative voting method works can be found in Attachment 2 of the Voting methods review: How each voting method works.

Strengths

- Easily accessible and familiar phone technology.

Weaknesses

- Slow ballot reading takes time to complete.
- Limited accessible features in that call speed cannot be adjusted.
- Automated call features may be irritating and provide poor customer experience.

Opportunities

- N/A

Threats

- Potential security risk due to malicious actors.
- Potential for voter fraud with fully remote method.
- Technical dependencies on platforms and systems outside of the City's control.
- Potential for technical dependencies to impact reliability of service and public trust in election process.
- Inability to conduct a recount in any other way. This may compromise MEA principles related to ensuring results reflect the proper majority of votes cast, votes are counted accurately, and only valid votes are counted and upheld.

Vote by phone was used in conjunction with internet voting by municipalities in the 2022 municipal election.

Staff Recommendation: Staff recommend continuing the use of internet and telephone voting for the 2022 municipal and school board election. Staff are diligent in reviewing specifications and perform due diligence from the procurement process, to ensure the security requirements are met when choosing a vendor, through to logistic and accuracy testing leading up to the Municipal Election. Staff will continue to provide on-site services to assist voters in person or over the phone with casting their ballot electronically.

Approximately 145 municipalities in Ontario used internet and telephone voting to conduct their municipal election in 2022.

Financial Implications:

The cost for internet and telephone voting services during the 2022 municipal and school board election was approximately \$33,409.

Following the 2022 election, election reserve funding was increased through the budget process to address the impacts of inflation, sustain existing service levels and ensure enough funds were available after the election to support any post-election processes such as recounts, compliance audits, and by-elections. The total reserve funds available for the 2026 is currently estimated at \$275,103.

Financial impact to current year operating budget:

The cost to prepare and issue a request for proposal can be funded within current approved operating budgets. There are no other anticipated impacts.

Financial impact on future year operating budget:

Online / Internet Voting (Vendor: Simply Voting) *Estimate subject to change

- Internet & Telephone Voting Fee: \$28,000
- Managed Voter Information Letter: \$5,500
- Security Audit: \$3,000.00
- Total Base Cost (estimate): \$36,500.00

The \$5,000 required to provide free transit on election day can be funded through the Election Reserve.

Alignment with Strategic Priorities:

Not applicable: This report does not align with one of the Strategic Priorities as the purpose is to provide direction on the vote method for the upcoming 2026 Municipal and School Board Election.

Alignment with One Planet Principles:

Material and Products

Using materials from sustainable sources and promoting products which help people reduce consumption.

Staff Recommendation: THAT the use of internet and telephone voting in the 2026 municipal and school board election be approved;

AND THAT free transit on election day be approved to support access and remove barriers to voting for the 2026 municipal and school board election;

AND THAT the Clerk be directed to prepare a by-law authorizing the use of internet and telephone voting in the 2026 municipal and school board election.

Prepared by: Tatiana Dafoe, City Clerk

Recommended by: Karmen Krueger, CPA, CA, Director of Corporate Services
Adam Betteridge, Interim Chief Administrative Officer