
To: Mayor and Council

From: Sasha Helmkey-Playter, Clerk/Director of Legislative Services

Meeting Date: June 24, 2024

Subject: Report # LS-023-2024 – 2026 Municipal & School Board Election Voting Method

Recommendation

Be It Resolved that Council of the Township of Clearview hereby receive report LS-023-2024 (2026 Municipal & School Board Election Voting Method) dated June 24, 2024; and,

- 1) That Council approve Internet Voting as an alternative voting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election; and,
- 2) That staff be directed to bring a by-law forward to Council to establish alternative voting methods and to permit advance voting as per the Municipal Elections Act, 1996, once an elections vendor has been chosen.

Background

The next Municipal & School Board Election will take place on October 26, 2026. As per Section 42 of the Municipal Elections Act (MEA), as amended, it states that by May 1 in the year of an Election, the Council of a local municipality may pass by-laws that authorize:

- the use of voting and vote-counting equipment; and,
- the use of alternative voting methods that do not require electors to attend at a voting place in order to vote.

Although 2026 appears to be in the distant future, it is prudent for the municipality to approve a voting method and select a vendor to secure equipment and their expertise. Many vendors put a cap on the number of municipal clients they support during an election to ensure effective and efficient customer service.

Comments and Analysis

There are three (3) main voting methods used in Ontario municipal elections:

- Paper Ballot with Tabulators
- Internet Voting
- Vote by Mail

In the past fifteen years Clearview Township has used all three voting methods. In 2010 vote by mail was utilized, for both the 2014 and 2018 elections internet and telephone voting were used and in 2022 a hybrid voting method was utilized, being paper ballots with tabulators and internet voting.

When choosing a voting method, the principles of the MEA need to be applied as they serve as a benchmark and guide the conduct for municipal elections:

- secrecy and confidentiality of the voting process;
- fair and non-biased;
- accessible to voters;
- integrity of the voting process;
- results of the election reflect votes cast;
- voters and candidates shall be treated fairly and consistently.

Below at a high level, is a synopsis of each of the three (3) voting methods.

Paper Ballots with Tabulators

Paper Ballots with tabulators is an in-person voting method that requires the voter to attend the voting station during advance votes and or Election Day. A vote tabulator (optical scan unit) reads and records how ballots are marked. A ballot is marked by indicating the voter's choice(s). The ballot is then inserted into the vote tabulating unit. The tabulator reads and stores the information in the unit. At the close of voting on Election Day the vote tabulator will produce cumulative totals of all votes cast and the totals will be compiled to produce the final election results.

The use of vote tabulators has become a generally accepted vote counting method in Ontario municipal elections over the last several years and has been used at the provincial level of government. As a result, there are established and recognized best practices for municipalities to use for effective implementation with the vendor providing step by step guides, troubleshooting and effective accuracy testing protocol.

The use of vote-counting equipment, such as vote tabulators, allows for:

- efficient vote counting - making it possible to report unofficial election results on election night (as opposed to manual count)
- secret and confidential voting process - ballots and voters cannot be connected
- accurate and non-biased vote count - automated counting processes ensure that determination of voter intent and what is counted is consistent
- the integration of accessible technology, which allows for independent marking of a ballot which is indistinguishable from any other ballot once cast in the tabulator
- certainty and integrity of the process - results reflect votes cast

The system is precise, easy to use for voters, and capable of generating final election results very quickly following the close of voting. Moreover, manual counting of ballots is not required.

Considerations

As a voting method, paper ballots with tabulators requires significant election staff resources. Dependant on the number of polls open on election day and during advance voting, there needs to be approximately five (5) staff members at each poll. This allows for a greeter, revision clerk(s) ballot clerk and tabulator clerk. During the 2022 Election with the hybrid voting method, paper ballots were only used during advanced voting. The main reason is that managing two different vote methods on election day is cumbersome, resources are limited which has an affect on voting support for residents calling in. As well, in-person voting locations must be accessible which can limit the facilities that can be used in each ward.

Additionally, there are limited suppliers of tabulator equipment in Ontario. Dominion voting is one of the largest suppliers and their equipment is reserved quickly with larger municipal clients having their order fulfilled first. In an election where tabulators are used, it's important to not only have the equipment needed for each poll, but a back-up in case of failure.

Lastly, with the use of paper ballots the voter loses the ability to vote anywhere, at their leisure during the voting period. In this technological world where ease of online services has become the norm, voting is no different. It's a benefit to residents, such as weekenders and university students who cannot make the in-person voting dates, as well as those who's work and personal schedules conflict with those dates.

Internet Voting

Internet voting has been increasingly implemented across Ontario municipalities with the passing of each municipal election. Internet voting modernizes the election experience for voters. It offers a convenient, accessible and secure way to cast a vote without the need to attend a physical voting location and inherently offers flexible voting times – you can vote anywhere, anytime. Electors receive their voting letter in the mail providing the date of the voting period, voting website and their personal, unique voting PIN to cast their ballot. In conjunction with the PIN, many municipalities require that the birth date of the elector also be inputted as an additional security feature.

Internet voting offers benefits such as the integration of accessible technology and enables the voter to identify errors in the ballot selections prior to casting a ballot. This voting method also allows for automated election processes like online ballot processing, striking names off the voters list, and an effective and rapid count of the votes at the close of voting. Clearview voters are familiar with this voting method as it was used in 2014, 2018 and in hybrid format for the 2022 election.

Considerations

For those that still like to “vote in person” during the voting period Clearview in the past has set up advance voting dates with use of iPads for voters to electronically cast their vote, this was also provided on Election Day. It is a similar set-up to in-person paper ballots, where the voter goes behind the voting screen and instead of using paper, they use the iPad. Less staff resources are needed for this service as we do not require a ballot clerk or a tabulator clerk. Focus is on the revision clerks who can add, remove and amend the voter’s list.

Another consideration to make with internet voting is long term care facilities. In the past, letters are sent to each of the facilities offering to set up a polling station at their location to assist residents in using the iPads for voting. It is at the discretion of the facility to choose whether this extra service is needed or not.

Cyber security risks with internet voting also need to be mitigated to the best of our ability. It’s important to choose a vendor that is reputable and will provide a list of their system’s security features. Security was a large concern with the introduction of internet voting in Clearview in 2014. The vendor for that election provided user information sessions to answer all elector questions, with most being specific to security and confidentiality of the voting process.

Vote by Mail

Vote by Mail is a voting method that allows voters to receive their ballots by mail, which are then completed without attending a physical voting location and returned by mail. There are step by step instructions when the voter receives their package. There is a deadline to provide the ballots by mail to ensure it is counted by the time of the election. After the deadline, voters would be required to attend the Administration Centre in person to drop of their ballot and voter declaration. Smaller and more rural municipalities are well-versed in using this voting method, primarily due to geographic considerations that make it an effective option for administering an election. Other municipalities also use this method (sometimes in a supplementary capacity) to address accessibility needs of its residents.

Considerations

Like every voting method, vote by mail also presents some challenges. Mail processing times may impact when voters receive their vote by mail packages and when election administrators get the returned ballots to be counted. Also, over the past few elections the expiry of the union contract term for Canada Post workers has coincided with the Municipal Election. This does provide uncertainty for using a voting method that heavily relies on the postal service as there is always the possibility for workers to strike.

Furthermore, with vote by mail there is an increased chance that errors in ballot marking will occur as voters do not have the assistance of elections staff readily available. There are also increased costs given the need to use the mail service and the potential that ballots can get lost in the mail. Vote by mail may also pose issues for voters who have moved or do not have a consistent residence as their voting package may be sent to the wrong address. There is also the need for increased election support as residents may phone in to confirm their vote has been counted (i.e. delivered by Canada Post and declaration has been counted). This is not an issue with the other two voting methods as electors know they have cast a ballot in real time.

Recommendation

There isn't a one size fits all voting method. With Clearview utilizing all three methods over the past four (4) Elections, each has proven to have its pros and cons. A good indicator to how the methods work for Clearview is to look at the 2022 Election where the hybrid method was used. In total 4,125 electors voted resulting in a 31.75% voter turnout. Of this total amount, only 403 electors cast their ballot in-person over four (4) advance voting days. This equates to 10% of electors. Alternatively, 3,722 cast their ballot by internet. Although there are different factors that can contribute to the lower turnout (no in-person voting on Election Day) there does seem to be a preference for internet voting, as opposed to paper ballots.

When looking at internet voting, it's accessible to all voters while being fair and non-biased. It does support secrecy, confidentiality and the integrity of the voting process. From a staff resources perspective, internal staff members can assist where needed (i.e. advance voting, adding electors to the Voter's List, etc.) in coordination with the Clerks Department. Clearview residents have become comfortable using this method and it allows for flexibility for the voter to cast their ballot when it's convenient for them. Staff recommend using internet voting as the method for the 2026 Municipal & School Board Election. For cost savings and to promote the most effective and efficient use of resources during the Election, a hybrid method is not being proposed.

Financial Implications

Annually, \$16,000 is budgeted to go into the Election reserve. These funds are used to run the entire Municipal & School Board Election, with the highest expense being the vendor for the voting method. There are cost savings in choosing one voting method as opposed to having a hybrid. Once Council has approved a voting method, the next step is to receive quotes from reputable internet voting providers.

Clearview's Strategic Plan

The above initiative supports the following strategic pillars:

- Communication

Report Appendices

Not applicable.

Approvals

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Reviewed by: Krista Pascoe, Deputy Clerk

**Financial Implications
Reviewed by:** Kelly McDonald, Treasurer

Approved by: John Ferguson, CAO