

Staff Report

Report To: Corporate Services Committee
Report From: Briana Bloomfield, City Clerk
Kristen Van Alphen, Manager of Legislative Services
Meeting Date: October 10, 2024
Report Code: CR-24-106
Subject: Election 2026 Voting Methods and Inaugural Meeting

Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of Staff Report CR-24-106 respecting voting methods for the 2026 municipal and school board and election and the Inaugural meeting, the Corporate Services Committee recommends that City Council:

1. Direct staff to bring forward a by-law to authorize internet & telephone voting as the voting method for the 2026 municipal and school board election; and
2. Direct staff to include an amount in the 2026 draft budget for the Inaugural Meeting.

Highlights:

- The next municipal election will be held on Monday, October 26, 2026.
- The *Municipal Elections Act, 1996* requires municipal councils to pass a by-law authorizing the use of alternative voting by May 1, 2026.
- Alternative voting methods such as internet & telephone voting is the least expensive and most customer service oriented method for the elector.
- A paper ballot election is the most expensive option and has a number of logistical challenges.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

[Strategic Plan](#) Priority: This report supports the delivery of Core Service.

Climate and Environmental Implications:

This supports the objectives of the City's Corporate Climate Change Adaptation Plan by considering climate adaptation in the development of the City's strategies, plans, and policies.

Previous Report/Authority:

[Municipal Act, 2001](#) and [Municipal Elections Act, 1996](#)

[Report CR-23-004](#) – 2022 Election Report – Accessibility and General Overview

Procedural By-law (no link provided as it comes into effect January 1, 2025)

Executive Summary

Given the superior convenience and accessibility; financial considerations and constraints on staff capacity; the support for climate change initiatives; the difficulty recruiting skilled election workers; and the positive experience of the 2022 election, staff recommend that City Council adopt internet & telephone voting again for the 2026 election. Other voting methods, including vote by mail and paper ballots, are more expensive, more time-consuming for staff and the elector, and less convenient for the elector.

Background:

Voting Methods

Municipal and school board elections must be held every four years and are administered by the Clerk as Returning Officer, pursuant to the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, S.O. 1996, C.32 (the "MEA"). A list of key dates for candidates in the 2026 municipal election are provided in Attachment 1 to this report.

Starting in 2024, the Chief Electoral Officer (Elections Ontario) has taken over the voters' list responsibility from the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) and will manage a single register of electors for both provincial and municipal elections. The voters' list for each municipal election

will be prepared using data from the [Provincial Register of Electors](#) (the "Register") maintained by Elections Ontario. Clerks' staff are cautiously optimistic that these developments will positively impact the quality of the data that forms the voters' list.

The MEA states that a by-law authorizing an alternative voting method must be passed by May 1, 2026. However, it is vital that Clerk's staff begin the groundwork for the election in 2025 and therefore require direction from Council on the voting method to be employed.

As early as 2010, the City's Manager of Elections at the time cautioned Council of difficulties recruiting skilled election workers and the overwhelming time demands of paper ballot elections:

"One of the statutory duties of the Municipal Clerk is to conduct the Municipal Election. In an election year, this has traditionally proven to be a task that takes at least 1/3 of the Clerk's time to accomplish...

...it takes a great number of people to run an election using a vote by ballot method. In future, I would recommend that staff investigate alternative voting methods, such as vote by mail, internet voting or telephone voting."

In advance of the 2018 election, a survey was conducted as part of Service Analysis which found that 60 per cent of respondents either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that they wanted to vote online in the next municipal election. In addition, another 20 per cent of respondents were indifferent to whether online voting was implemented, for a total of 80 percent of respondents endorsing or not opposing online voting.

The City has now used internet & telephone voting in 2018 and 2022. Staff deemed both elections to be a success: voting was convenient, provided improved accessibility, eliminated spoiled ballots, enabled an accurate count, allowed for quick reporting of results and was cost effective in terms of budget and efficient use of staff resources.

The third-party service provider for the 2022 election was Simply Voting. This vendor is a top provider in the industry and sets a client maximum each election cycle to ensure it can provide a quality service. Simply Voting worked with 50 Ontario municipalities in 2022 and is currently determining its cap for Ontario municipalities for the 2026 election. The company's work on the City's 2022 election was exemplary and staff would like to partner

with this vendor again. The RFP issued by the City in 2020 included the ability to collaborate with the successful vendor for two election cycles. Making a timely decision about the voting method for 2026 should ensure that the City can partner with Simply Voting again should a similar method of voting be approved.

Attached to this report is the post election survey report that AMCTO published. It outlines trends across the province such as difficulties in recruiting staff and an increase in the use of internet & telephone voting methods with more than half of municipalities using internet voting.

Inaugural Meeting

The MEA provides that the term of office begins on November 15 and the outgoing Council members will continue to hold office until their successors are elected and have signed their declarations of office. The 2026 Inaugural Meeting will occur on Monday, November 16, 2026. The Procedural By-law that comes into effect January 1, 2025 provides that at the Inaugural Meeting members will sign the declaration of office and code of conduct with no regular business to occur. Historically, the Inaugural Meeting has been open to the public and held at the Roxy Theatre or the Harmony Centre as follows:

- A procession onto the stage with Council members, a piper, and the Royal Canadian Legion Colour Party.
- An entertainer leads the singing of O'Canada.
- A Justice of the Peace performs the declaration of office with each member.
- Each Council member is provided time to make remarks.
- Remarks from dignitaries are shared.
- The Royal Canadian Legion Colour Party leaves the stage.
- An entertainer performs prior to the Council meeting occurring.
- Mayor leads the Council meeting.
- Reception for all attendees.

The cost of the Inaugural Meeting in 2022 was \$3,700.00 and required significant staff time from Clerks, Communications, and I.T.

In the analysis section of this report, staff will be looking for feedback on the type of event to be held for the 2026 Inaugural Meeting.

Analysis:

Voting Methods

This report provides analysis and recommendations regarding the following voting methods:

1. Internet & telephone voting;
2. Vote by mail;
3. Paper ballots; and
4. Combination of multiple voting methods.

1. Recommended Method – Internet and Telephone Voting

Staff recommend that City Council approve internet & telephone voting as the voting method for the 2026 election, as it best supports:

- Superior customer service by providing the most flexibility and opportunity for participation.
- Simplicity and privacy.
- Improved accessible voting options.
- Elimination of spoiled ballots (and warnings for under-votes).
- Sound accuracy of the count.
- Facilitation of participation by non-resident electors.
- The most skilled election staff because of the small staff required to be hired, trained and managed.
- Timely election results.
- Building on public familiarity with the process.
- Building on staff familiarity with the process and related procedures.
- Climate change initiatives by reducing reliance on paper and vehicles.
- Cost effectiveness.

While the recommendation is for internet & telephone voting to be the voting method for 2026, staff want to advise Council that 10% of electors who voted used the telephone in 2022 and staff anticipate this percentage to further reduce in 2026. Internet voting is a much simpler interface and can be offered alone; however, staff believe that telephone voting may still be the preference of some electors and suggest that it continue in 2026.

How internet and telephone voting works

1. Electors confirm they are on the Voters' List.
2. In early October, each elector receives a personal voter notification letter containing information to access the voting system, including:
 - a. Access credentials (e.g. a unique identification number and PIN);
 - b. The URL and telephone number for the voting system; and
 - c. Voting information such as the candidates running for office, the location of help centres, legal requirements to vote, contact information for inquiries, etc.
3. Electors access the voting system wherein they:
 - a. Confirm that they are entitled to vote;
 - b. Enter their access credentials;
 - c. Follow the prompts to vote; and
 - d. Confirm their selections.
 - e. After voting is complete, electors receive a code that they may use to confirm their ballot.
4. Help Centres are available at sites that provide easy access by transit and ample parking, as well as at institutions, retirement homes, long-term care homes and the hospital. Help Centres promote the election and assist voters with the following services:
 - a. Adding electors to the Voters' List;
 - b. Providing information on the election process;
 - c. Offering access to computers for voting on-site; and
 - d. Assisting electors with voting where requested.
5. Voting closes at 8:00 p.m. on Election Day but anyone already in a Help Centre or in the internet or telephone voting system are able to complete their voting session.
6. Results are provided at the close of the polls (in 2022, the results were available at 8:15 p.m.).

Benefits of internet & telephone voting

- Customer Service
 - Provides the most flexibility and opportunity for participation.
 - Allows for a longer voting period (10 days) and 24 hours per day voting until Monday, October 26, 2026 at 8:00 p.m.
 - Electors can vote in the privacy of their own home or anywhere in the world.
 - Electors can vote by telephone, smartphone, tablet or computer.
 - Weather and health events, such as a pandemic, do not affect voting.
 - Help Centres are available throughout the voting period to provide assistance and to allow voters to congregate in a public place to vote.
- Accessibility
 - For voters with disabilities this method supports independence, dignity, integration and equal opportunity.
 - Voters can use their personal telephones or computers with accessibility features including high volume, headphones and talk-to-you (TTY) features.
 - No need to travel or navigate polling stations.
 - Help Centres will be available in accessible locations with access by transit and ample parking; these locations provide electors who want to vote in person with the greatest access as they will be available throughout the 10-day voting period.
- Voter Education
 - The City can build on the familiarity with the system from the 2018 and 2022 elections.
 - Help Centres will be set up throughout the voting period to assist voters with general questions, registration and voting.
- Proxies
 - This method removes the need for proxies and enables absent voters to exercise their voting rights by themselves.
- Advance Polls
 - A longer voting period removes the need for advance polls and offers more time – 24/7 voting – for the voting period.

- Accuracy of Count
 - The system prevents over-voting, warns for under-voting, and does not enable a voter to mark the ballot in an unclear manner.
 - The count with this method is 100% accurate – there is no human error component or interpretation component to the count.
 - No risk of spoiled ballots or unclear voter intent – every ballot counts.
- Timing of Results
 - Earliest results – in 2022 the results were available at 8:15 p.m.
- Staffing and Resources
 - Temporary part-time staff required is significantly reduced, along with associated training time.
 - Full-time staff resources dedicated to election functions are significantly reduced including staff in divisions of Clerks, Finance, and Human Resources.
- Climate Change Initiatives
 - Vastly reduces the amount of paper because there are no printed ballots or voter kits.
 - Reduces the reliance on transportation because only a small portion of voters travel in order to vote.
- Costs
 - This is the most economical method due to the small election staff, lower postage costs and paperless format – this method is estimated to cost \$88,000 in 2026.

Concerns with internet & telephone voting

- Voter Turnout
 - The voter turnout in Owen Sound for 2022 was 39%, which was 5% higher than the provincial average (34%).
 - Research to date suggests no clear evidence that method of voting has an impact on voter turnout. The more influential factor for City elections, as seen in the data from 2006 to present, is the number of mayoral candidates.

- While many desire a high voter turnout and perceive it as evidence of the legitimacy of the voting system, a low voter turnout can be a reflection of contentment of voters about likely winners. In a review of the City's most recent five elections, voter turnout was low when the mayoral race had few candidates and high in years that it had more candidates, regardless of voting method:
 - 2006: paper ballot with traditional polls; voter turnout was 35%; the Mayor was acclaimed.
 - 2010: paper ballot with traditional polls: voter turnout was 49.30%; there were four candidates for Mayor with 2 candidates claiming 46.52% and 45.97% of the vote.
 - 2014: paper ballots with vote anywhere polls; the voter turnout was 52.24%; there were four candidates for Mayor who split the vote 47.37%, 33.89%, 13.48% and 5.26%.
 - 2018: internet & telephone voting; the voter turnout was 44.32%; there were three candidates, one of whom withdrew but remained on the ballot; the successful candidate secured 90.4% of the vote;
 - 2022: internet & telephone voting; the voter turnout was 39%; there were two candidates who split the vote 55.6% and 44.4%.
- Voter Profile
 - Concerns about this method disenfranchising senior voters did not bear out in 2022:
 - The highest number of voters by age were voters who were 69 years old.
 - Roughly half of the voters were under the age of 63 (18-62) and half were 63 and older.
 - These 2022 statistics are almost identical to the 2018 age statistics.
- Access
 - According to Statistics Canada's Canadian Internet Use Study published in 2023:
 - "Year over year, various trends in technology reflect a smarter and more connected lifestyle, benefiting both the younger and older generations."

- Approximately 93.9% of the Canadian population have a smart phone and 95% are connected to the internet.
 - More than three in four Canadians (78%) use the Internet to conduct general online banking.
- Help Centres and the Owen Sound & North Grey Public Library provide access to computers for those who do not have personal access and who prefer to use computers over the telephone.
- Help Centres are designed to emulate the paper ballot experience for those who wish to congregate in a public venue to vote.
- Security
 - Risks are mitigated with comprehensive security controls, including secure data centres, access controls, data confidentiality and data integrity.
 - The City employs a two-step authentication process.
 - Once an elector has voted they are struck from the Voters' List and are unable to log into the system.
 - When access credentials are issued to a voter, any previously issued credentials are automatically deactivated.
 - No significant attempts at voter fraud or other process challenges which would sufficiently influence the outcome of an election have been reported by Ontario municipalities using internet & telephone voting.
 - The City did not receive any allegations of voter fraud in 2018 or 2022 to refer to local police.
 - In 2022, Simply Voting's platform was rigorously evaluated by the City's Manager of I.T. before implementation. The Manager of IT continues to be confident that the system provides a secure service.
 - Testing and auditing will be performed throughout the various stages of implementation to ensure the validity and accuracy of the system is maintained.

Municipal comparisons

In 2018, 194 municipalities in Ontario used internet & telephone voting. According to AMCTO's 2022 Election Survey, in 2022 internet use increased by 16%.

Most municipalities are still in the planning stages for 2026, and many Councils have not yet approved a voting method. The results of a survey sent to the Clerk’s of Owen Sound’s neighbours and municipal comparators provided the results outlined in the table below.

Municipality	Voting Method Being Recommended
Brockville	Internet
Chatsworth	Internet & Telephone
Cobourg	Internet
Georgian Bluffs	Internet & Paper
Hanover	Internet & Telephone
Orangeville	Internet & Paper
Southgate	Internet
Stratford	Internet & Telephone
West Grey	Internet & Telephone

Alternative methods not recommended

Both the vote-by-mail and paper methods listed below anticipate the use of tabulators to manage the election count. Without tabulators, additional election staff would be required, the count would take longer, and the accuracy of the count may be affected by human error. Additionally, for paper ballots, the tabulator enables electors with disabilities to vote unassisted using accessibility tools. The City used tabulators in 2014 with great success.

2. Vote by Mail

Staff consider vote by mail to be inferior to internet & telephone voting for the City. There is a shortened voting window due to the mail-in date, a higher estimated cost, greater risk for spoiled ballots, and full reliance on the postal system (a third party with no contractual obligations to the City) which undertook rotating strikes during the 2018 election period.

How vote by mail works

1. Electors confirm they are on the Voters' List.
2. Electors receive a Voting Kit in late September containing:
 - a. A voting instruction sheet;
 - b. A composite ballot;
 - c. A ballot secrecy envelope;
 - d. A voter declaration form with bar code; and
 - e. A return envelope with prepaid postage.
3. Electors complete the declaration, mark the ballot, place the ballot in the secrecy envelope, seal the secrecy envelope and then place the secrecy envelope and declaration into the return envelope and mail back or drop off to City Hall.
4. There is a "guaranteed mail return date" after which electors are advised to use personal delivery of the return envelope to ensure receipt at City Hall by close of voting on Election Day.
5. As return envelopes are received at City Hall, they are opened to confirm the declaration is signed, the secrecy envelope is sealed and that there is an equal number of declarations and secrecy envelopes in the return envelope.
6. Voters are struck from the Voters' List and ballots secured.
7. On Election Day, eligible ballots are counted by tabulator.
8. When all ballots have been reviewed and eligible ballots counted, the tabulators will be closed and each will provide a tally that, combined, will be the election results.

Benefits and Drawbacks

- Customer Service and Accessibility
 - Vote by mail has the ability to enhance the convenience of voting for some resident and non-resident electors, but some may find it less convenient as there will be a "guaranteed mail return date" prior to Election Day to ensure receipt by close of polls.
 - Candidates will have access to less accurate lists of electors who have voted due to the lag in mailing time.

- This method may be more or less accessible than a traditional paper ballot, depending on individual electors' disabilities – it is less accessible than internet & telephone voting.
- Staffing and Resources
 - Vote by mail significantly reduces costs associated with staffing and voting locations and reduces need to recruit large numbers of skilled election staff.
 - More staff time will be involved as this is not a method of voting that has been used in the past; staff will need to develop a new voting program for the City including new policies and procedures, forms, candidate guides, training material and communication tools.
- Proxies and Advance Polls
 - Removes the need for proxy voting and advance polls.
- Accuracy of Count
 - There is no ability to interact with a voter using vote by mail so more often ballots need to be rejected because of inadvertent voter errors such as over-voting or voters not including the signed declaration with their return envelope.
 - Tabulators ensure an accurate count of all eligible ballots.
- Voter Education
 - Vote by mail would be another new voting method for electors in the City and will require ample voter education initiatives to mitigate the potential for spoiled ballots.
- Climate Change Initiatives
 - Vote by mail is extremely paper intensive as the voter kits require multiple envelopes, a page of instructions and a ballot.
 - The process of voting remotely reduces the need for voters to drive to polling stations.
- Security
 - Electors may mistakenly receive ballots intended for other individuals.
 - Electors may mistakenly disclose their identity by returning ballots in the wrong envelope.
 - Full reliance on the postal system to disseminate blank ballots and return completed ballots creates risk. The postal strike in

2018 caused a great deal of uncertainty for electors and municipal staff.

- Cost
 - Costs are estimated to be approximately \$133,000.
 - Costs are lower than for a paper ballot election due to reduction in required election workers and facility rentals but higher than internet & telephone voting due to the high cost of postage and voter kits.
 - If there was a postal strike these costs would increase as a robust advertising campaign would be necessary to explain where and how to return voter kits and additional locations around the city would need to be secured and staffed for the return of voter kits.

3. Paper Ballots

Staff do not recommend that City Council adopt paper ballots as staff consider this method to be inferior to internet & telephone voting and vote by mail. This position is based on the high-cost implications; the additional resources and full-time and part-time staff required; the challenges associated with recruiting, training and managing a large election staff; the climate change impact, the risk of spoiled ballots and later election results.

This is the method that was used in 2014. While the election was a success, recruiting skilled workers for the 100+ positions was a major challenge. The other challenge was finding accessible space that was reachable by transit, offered ample parking and could accommodate large crowds.

How paper ballots work

1. Electors confirm they are on the Voters' List.
2. In early October, each elector receives a voter notice advising of voting options and identification requirements.
3. Electors may vote an advance poll or at any voting location on Election Day.
4. Electors are provided a ballot and secrecy envelop and are stricken from the Voters' List.
5. Electors mark their ballot and have it fed through a tabulator.
6. At the close of polls, the tabulators are closed and each provides a tally that, combined, are the election results.

7. Results in 2014 were provided within a few hours of the close of polls.

Benefits and Drawbacks

- Customer Service and Accessibility
 - Provides less flexibility and opportunity for participation than internet & telephone voting.
 - Provides a very limited voting period (Election Day and select advance polls).
 - Electors must travel to a voting location.
 - More difficult for non-resident electors to participate.
 - Requires persons with disabilities to bring an aide or ask for assistance or use assistive voting equipment available at only one voting location i.e. voting paddles or sip and puff devices.
- Staffing and Resources
 - A very large election staff is required to support voting activities, and all of them require significant training.
 - This method requires highly skilled staff members who are comfortable working in excess of a 12-hour day, have exceptional attention to detail, and have superior customer service skills. This skill set is very difficult to find in large numbers for such a short contract.
 - This method significantly impacts the capacity of staff in the Clerks division, Human Resources and Payroll. It is important to note that the large staff involved makes this election method far more labour-intensive. An election coordinator will be needed to address the additional workload to ensure that staff can maintain their day-to-day responsibilities.
 - Voting locations need to be leased, assembled and dismantled.
- Proxies and Advance Voting
 - Proxies will be needed for this method and advance poll dates will be selected.
- Accuracy of the Count
 - Use of tabulators provides some controls by confirming when a voter has over-voted, voted in an unclear manner or left a contest blank on the ballot – if an error is discovered, the voter may revise the ballot or direct the tabulator operator to cast the ballot “as is”.

- Voter Education
 - With the last two elections using internet & telephone voting, additional voter education will be required.
- Climate Change Initiatives
 - This method is the least supportive of climate change initiatives as it relies heavily on paper and requires all electors to travel to a polling location.
- Security
 - Paper ballots offer a strong audit trail.
 - The high number of staff increases the potential for human error.
- Costs
 - This is the most costly method with an estimate for 2026 of \$161,000.
 - This high cost is due to the large number of election staff and related training, equipment and supplies.

4. Combination of Multiple Voting Methods

Staff do not recommend combining any two methods together, such as internet & telephone voting with paper ballots. In effect, such an approach would result in the conduct of two separate elections at the same time, resulting in the need for two sets of policies and procedures, more staff training and more equipment and materials. This translates to significantly higher costs, more staff resources spent on the election, and fewer other projects being addressed in the election year.

If internet & telephone voting is chosen, Help Centres will allow electors to vote in person, with or without assistance, using a voting kiosk.

4.b. Internet and Paper

Although it is not recommended, staff have analyzed combining internet and paper voting. The above-noted benefits and drawbacks remain for each method. Combining these two methods will require a more robust communication and advertising plan to mitigate voter confusion. Additionally, with this method, an election coordinator may be needed to ensure staff can maintain the division's day-to-day work. The estimate of costs for this combination of voting methods is \$142,000.

Inaugural Meeting

Municipalities vary in how they undertake their Inaugural Meetings. Outlined below is how some of our neighbouring municipalities and comparator municipalities undertake their Inaugural Meeting.

Council Chambers with Event	Council Chambers No Event	Offsite with Event
Chatsworth	Brockville	Orangeville
Cobourg	Orillia	
Georgian Bluffs	Stratford	
Grey County	Town of Blue Mountains	
Hanover		
Southgate		
West Grey		

Should Council want to continue with an event similar to previous years, staff propose including \$5,000.00 in the draft 2026 budget to cover fees related to space rental, performers, refreshments, and the program.

Should Council opt for a smaller event in Council Chambers, staff propose an afternoon ceremony followed by a reception in the Atriums that will also act as a meet-and-greet with City staff. This occasion would be an excellent way to promote Council-staff relations and introduce new councillors and their families to City Hall. For this model, staff propose including \$1,500.00 in the draft 2026 budget to cover light refreshments.

Direction from Committee is being sought on the funds that should be included in the draft 2026 budget.

Financial Implications:

Voting Methods

The financial implications for the 2026 election are outlined throughout the report and will be determined by the method chosen by City Council.

Method	Estimated Cost
Internet & Telephone	\$ 88,000
Vote by Mail	\$133,000
Paper	\$161,000
Internet & Paper	\$142,000

The estimates above include contingencies for legal advice, compliance audits and other costs that may or may not be required. For instance, in 2022 it cost the City \$70,000 to conduct the election because there were no complex legal issues or compliance audits.

Funds are placed in an election reserve each year. In 2023 and 2024, \$20,000 was placed in reserve each year. If this amount continues to be reserved in 2025 and 2026 the election reserves for the 2026 election will be \$80,000.

Inaugural Meeting

The financial considerations have been outlined in the analysis section of the report. The 2026 draft budget will include the amount recommended by Committee.

Communication Strategy:

The decision of Council will be integrated into a communication plan for the municipal and school board elections and may include media releases, flyers with City mail-outs, a dedicated website, voter information sessions and advertisements in the newspaper and on the radio.

Consultation:

City Manager, Director of Corporate Services, Manager of Corporate Services, Manager of I.T., Human Resources Manager, Clerks at various Ontario municipalities

Attachments:

1. AMCTO 2022 Post Election Survey Report
2. Election 2026 Key Dates for Candidates

Recommended by:

Briana Bloomfield, City Clerk

Kristen Van Alphen, Manager of Legislative Services

Kate Allan, Director of Corporate Services

Submission approved by:

Tim Simmonds, City Manager

For more information on this report, please contact Briana Bloomfield, City Clerk at bbloomfield@owensound.ca or 519-376-4440 ext. 1247.