
Subject: Voting Method for the 2026 Municipal Election

Staff Report No. CPS-012-24

Commission: Corporate Services Commission

Date: June 26, 2024

Recommendation:

- 1) That Council authorize the use of a combination of internet voting in conjunction with paper ballots and vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal Election; and
- 2) That staff be directed to bring forward the necessary by-law to authorize an alternative voting option of internet voting in conjunction with paper ballots and vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal Election; and
- 3) That staff be authorized and directed to do all things necessary to give effect to this resolution; and
- 4) That staff report back in 2025 with an update on the 2026 Municipal Election Plan.

1. Purpose:

The next regular municipal election will take place on Monday, October 26, 2026. The purpose of this report is to provide Council with an overview of the various voting methods available for the 2026 Municipal Election and provide a recommendation for the voting method that staff believe is best suited for the Town for the 2026 Municipal Election.

2. Executive Summary:

In the 2022 Municipal Election, York Region, Markham, Newmarket, Vaughan, and Aurora utilized internet voting. If approved by Council, internet voting, in conjunction with paper ballots and vote tabulators, will be used for the 2026 Municipal Election at the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville.

3. Background:

3.1 Legislative Background

The 2026 Municipal Election will take place on Monday, October 26, 2026.

The *Municipal Elections Act*, 1996, as amended, governs all municipal elections and by-elections in Ontario. The Act is guided by several principles as established by case law. The guiding principles are as follows:

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

Section 11(1) of the *Municipal Elections Act*, as amended, establishes the Clerk's responsibility for conducting elections within the municipality and Section 11(2) establishes the Clerk's responsibility for:

- Preparing for the election;
- Preparing for and conducting a recount in the election;
- Maintaining peace and order in connection with the election; and
- Reporting to Council following the election respecting prevention of barriers and accommodations for electors and candidates with disabilities.

Section 42(1) of the *Municipal Elections Act*, as amended, provides for Council to pass a by-law to:

- Authorize the use of voting and vote-counting equipment; and
- Authorize electors to use an alternative voting method.

If Council authorizes any method of voting and vote counting equipment beyond a traditional paper ballot/manual count, staff will be required to bring a by-law forward authorizing the alternative voting method(s) and vote counting equipment at a future Council meeting for Council's consideration and approval.

If alternative voting methods are approved, it is the Clerk's responsibility to establish an election model, which outlines if the alternative voting methods are used, when they will be used during the course of the election (early voting, election day, etc.), and how they will be offered. Should Council choose an alternative voting method, an information report

will be brought back to Council in the fall of 2025 with additional information on the election model for the 2026 Municipal Election.

3.2 Town of Stouffville Election Background

The Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville used the alternative voting method, “optical scan vote tabulators with paper ballots” for the 2014, 2018, and 2022 municipal elections. The following table summarizes the Town’s voting turnout utilizing this election method:

Year	Voting Method	Voter Turnout Percentage
2022	Optical Scan Vote Tabulators with Paper Ballots	34.19%
2018	Optical Scan Vote Tabulators with Paper Ballots	47.63%
2014	Optical Scan Vote Tabulators with Paper Ballots	45%
2010	Optical Scan Vote Tabulators with Paper Ballots	43.96%

4. Analysis and Options:

Voting Methods

4.1 Traditional Paper Ballot with Manual Count

This is the original method of voting, where an elector attends a polling station and casts their vote by marking an ‘X’ next to the candidate they are voting for on a piece of paper. The Town could either require eligible electors to visit a specific polling station or allow electors to vote anywhere within the municipality. With either method, voters receive a Voter Notification Card with specific information about where they can vote, and what they will need to cast their ballot. Ballots would be securely placed into a ballot box and at the close of voting, ballots would be manually counted.

A traditional paper ballot election with a manual count is not recommended as there are several disadvantages related to this method. An increase in the number of election staff would be required to accommodate the manual count, increasing the overall costs of the election. In addition, it would take longer to release the election results, and some may see the municipality moving backwards by shifting to a manual count for election results.

4.2 Optical Scan Vote Tabulator with Paper Ballots

The use of optical scan vote tabulators with paper ballots requires electors to attend their assigned voting location in-person to mark their vote onto a paper ballot and provide the ballot to an election staff to feed into the tabulator. The tabulators assist voters with ensuring that their ballots were properly marked by identifying errors on ballots before the vote is cast. This helps to reduce and/or eliminate the chance of spoiled ballots. The tabulator scans the ballot and counts the vote cast for each office,

while maintaining a running tally for each office. After the close of the voting period, election staff can obtain the running tally for each office and results can be announced in an efficient and timely manner.

4.3 Vote-By-Mail

Vote-By-Mail involves each qualified elector to be mailed a ballot kit which contains a composite ballot (all races the elector may vote in on one ballot), voter declaration form, secrecy envelope, and return mail envelope. The elector is provided a firm deadline in which all ballots should be marked and mailed back to the Town, and/or dropped off to one of the Town's secure ballot casting locations up to 8:00 p.m. on election night. Counting votes can either be done manually or by centralized vote tabulators.

This is a tested and trusted method of electing representatives in a number of municipalities. The disadvantages to this method are the postage costs related to the mailing and returning of ballots and the potential errors made by Canada Post in getting the ballots to the residents. The Town may also be susceptible to the threat of a Canada Post strike as was the case in the 2018 Municipal Election. In addition, errors by voters can easily occur (i.e. forgetting to sign their voter declaration form or return both the voter declaration and the ballot in the same envelope).

4.4 Internet Voting

Internet voting has been in used in Ontario since 2003. One (1) municipality used internet voting in 2003 compared to over 200 municipalities who utilized some form of online voting during the 2022 Municipal Election.

Internet voting allows electors to vote remotely from various devices, including laptops, mobile phones, and tablets, eliminating the need to travel to a physical voting location. In order to vote by internet, each elector would receive a unique Voter Information Package which includes information as to how to vote via the internet, a PIN, etc. Once the voting period opens, the elector can log onto the internet voting site using the unique information provided to them in their Voter Information Package.

The voting system can be programmed to require one-step or two-step authentication. It can be programmed to require an elector to enter their date of birth as well as an additional security feature. Once the elector is ready to vote and has entered any required authentication, the appropriate ballot face with the applicable races would be presented to the voter based on their voters' profile, which is their specific ward and school support. The internet voting platforms operate using a live cast which prohibits a person from casting a ballot more than once from different devices.

To support those electors who may not have internet or an electronic device, voter assistance centres would be equipped with electronic voting stations available at set locations and times during the voting period to provide those electors an opportunity to vote via the internet.

As a voting method, internet voting provides electors with greater accessibility and flexibility in their participation in local democracy. Voters can cast a ballot from home, while on vacation, away on business or studying at university or college outside of Stouffville. The internet voting option also negates ballot waste and the potential for an elector to incorrectly mark a ballot, as a virtual ballot has defined fields to mark the ballot, ensuring electors cannot place an incorrect mark on the ballot or unintentionally overvote a ballot.

4.5 Hybrid

A hybrid election would offer two voting methods, internet voting and vote tabulators. This would allow the Town to offer a new, modern and efficient voting method for electors, while still providing a voting method in which electors are familiar with.

Running a hybrid election results in the Town effectively running two different elections, as the Town would be required to establish two different procedures for voting and produce separate training modules.

Several municipalities within York Region including the Town of Aurora, Town of Newmarket, City of Markham, and City of Vaughan, to name a few, used some form of a hybrid voting method of internet voting and vote tabulators in the 2022 Municipal Election.

4.6 Analysis

There are long-term considerations that should be understood when determining whether to add additional voting methods. In particular, those related to the rising costs to employ temporary election workers, increasing difficulty recruiting and retaining election workers through Voting Day, and the potential limitations for electors in Stouffville to participate in the democratic process in a time of modernization and increasing uptake in internet voting amongst Ontario municipalities.

While vote tabulators with paper ballots have proven to be reliable and familiar for the Town, internet voting has received widespread adoption by municipalities across Ontario. The Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario's (AMCTO) 2022 Municipal Elections Survey reported that more than half of Ontario municipalities used internet voting and the satisfaction with internet voting has increased.¹ The Association of Municipalities Ontario (AMO) further confirms these statistics by noting that in 2022, 42 more municipalities used internet and/or phone/combined methods of voting than in the 2018 election.²

¹ <https://www.amcto.com/about-amcto/news-announcements/2022-municipal-elections-survey-key-findings>

² <https://www.amo.on.ca/municipal-election-statistics>

The adoption of internet voting, paired with vote tabulator with paper ballots will provide electors a new, modern, innovative way to vote, while still providing a familiar option of voting to those who may not be as comfortable with technology.

Statistics from other municipalities shows that there will be a sizeable shift from voting in-person to voting online for electors in a hybrid method. This shift would allow the Town to consider changes to the scale and types of facilities and spaces used as voting places. In addition, it is anticipated that less people will cast their ballots in-person using paper ballots which may present opportunities to have a vote-anywhere-model. This would provide voters with greater flexibility to attend the voting place that is most convenient for them on Voting Day.

4.7 Option A (Recommended)

Building on the success, popularity, and familiarity of the internet voting option, the reliability of the optical scan vote tabulators for the past municipal elections, and the statistics provided by AMCTO and AMO, staff recommend that Stouffville use a combination of internet voting in conjunction with paper ballots and vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal Election.

The details related to if internet voting will be available during advance vote and voting day, as well as when and where paper ballots will be available will be determined by the Clerk/Returning Officer who will consider what is deemed to be in the best interest of the electors.

It is important to note that should Council proceed with this option, there will be an opportunity for the Town to work with area municipalities within York Region to procure an internet voting vendor. It would be advantageous for the Town to have the same vendors for the 2026 Municipal Election as other municipalities in York Region as it would allow staff to work collaboratively with them on election processes and procedures.

4.8 Option B

Council may wish to remain status quo and continue with the same practice as the previous four elections with the use of optical scan vote tabulators.

4.9 Option C

Council may wish to select a different voting method such as solely internet voting or vote-by-mail.

Staff would not recommend either of these as staff believe when introducing a new voting method, the method in which electors are comfortable with should be available in some form.

5. Financial Implications:

All costs associated with the conduct of municipal elections are funded by the Town's Election Reserve.

At this point in time, the total costs are not known, however, staff will continue to allocate funds in the Election Reserve as part of the 2025 Budget to ensure there is adequate funds available for the 2026 Municipal Election.

6. Alignment with Strategic Plan:

- Good Governance
- Organizational Effectiveness

7. Attachments:

None

8. Related Reports:

None

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