Voting Systems and Alternative Voting Methods for the 2022 Municipal Election, 2021-30

General Correspondence – Revised Agenda

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February 11, 2021

Mayor and Council,
City of Guelph

Subject: Internet Voting in 2022

Dear Mayor and Council,

Four years ago I wrote a letter on this subject expressing my reservations about Internet voting in our municipal elections. My view has not changed since then, and if it's possible I am even more opposed today than I was in 2017. The main reasons to object are the same today as they were then - a lack of confidence in a reliable audit process to verify results in the event a recount is needed, and the potential for cyber-fraud, for eg. schemes like "phishing" that could corrupt elector returns.

One need only think of the SPAM we receive from operators pretending to be our bank or cable TV company - that looks so "real" - to understand what I mean about how sophisticated phishing schemes have become. It wouldn't take much for a person with bad intent to spoof a domain that is close to Guelph's voting site, design excellent graphics, and invite a person to cast their vote to what turns out to be a cyber garbage bin. There is no way back to allow the voter a second chance. There is no way to know how many votes were cast this way.

The election result is thrown into question, and the outcome is that there is no way to validate the over-all result.

I think the City should adopt **mail-in voting**, a measure that has worked quite successfully at the federal and provincial levels to broaden the options available to all bodies, both able and disabled, and has a proven audit trail.

If we are to have faith in the outcome, we need to have faith in the process. Please ensure our top priorities when reviewing alternative voting options are are always integrity and validity.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Linda Kearns

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Mayor Guthrie and Members of Council:

I understand that staff is recommending mail-in ballots as an alternate method of voting for the 2022 election.

Like internet voting, the challenge that mail-in ballots presents is that voting takes place in an unsupervised environment. This opens the door to coercion, ballot theft and vote selling. There's a reason our electoral system evolved to prohibit anyone from being behind the screen with a voter (except under special circumstances) and from taking a photo of their ballot.

In debating how to maintain the integrity and security of our local elections, Council needs to keep their focus on accessibility, not convenience. Organized attempts to steal elections are not an abstract matter in Canada. This spring will be the 10th anniversary of the Robocall electoral crime, for which Guelph was the epicentre. More recently, during the UCP leadership race in Alberta, fraudulent emails were used to obtain illegitimate ballots for the internet leadership vote:

Fraudulent emails used to cast votes in UCP leadership race, CBC finds:

https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/ucp-leadership-voter-fraud-membership-lists-data-1.5091952

Both Elections Canada and Elections Ontario have best practices with regards to mail-in ballots that Guelph should be following. Use of mail-in ballots should be limited to circumstances in which they are strictly necessary. In-person elections have been run in several provinces during the pandemic with robust safety protocols.

I would like to highlight one other matter which is not addressed in the staff report. Guelph is a client of Dominion Voting Systems. If we had gone ahead with internet voting in 2018, we would likely have been impacted by the emergency situation that unfolded in a number of other municipalities. Introducing internet voting is not just a matter of resolving List of Elector issues.

Prof. Aleksander Essex addresses the 2018 event in his paper: Online Voting in Ontario's Municipal Elections: A Conflict of Legal Principles and Technology?

https://whisperlab.org/ontario-online.pdf

Here are a couple of media headlines from the days after the 2018 municipal election:

On-line voting in 51 Ontario municipalities marred by election day "system-load issue".
https://globalnews.ca/news/4585577/ontario-voting-issues/
Sudbury mayoral incumbent "disgusted" by election night delays.
https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/sudbury-voting-delay-1.4874215
"As a candidate and the leader of this city, I am demanding an explanation by the City of Greater Sudbury senior staff who put this process in place and why there was no back up plan in place," Brian Bigger said.

"Sudbury voters were let down. I am demanding a thorough investigation, analysis of what went wrong and those responsible will be held accountable."

The Guelph public engagement process underlined the following: (p. 4 of staff report):

Based on this feedback, **we see that in-person voting with paper ballots is still the most preferred option in our community** and we should continue to anticipate the highest voter turnout at voting locations, even if remote methods are offered.

96% of online respondents and 75% of phone respondents said they would vote in person.

When citizens were asked specifically about alternate methods of voting, 65.1% said they would use internet voting.

Our voting methods are a form of infrastructure. We don't ask citizens whether or not they think a bridge or a vaccine is safe. We depend on structural engineers and scientists to make an objective determination. The experts are telling us that internet voting is not secure. I am glad that it appears to be off the table for the 2022 election.

I am sure you will have a robust discussion Wednesday night about how to maintain the highest standards of election security and integrity with mail-in ballots.

Sincerely,

Susan Watson