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**Subject:** 2026 Municipal and School Board Election Voting Methods  
**Report to:** Thorold City Council

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## Recommendations

1. That Council **APPROVE** the use of vote-counting equipment such as optical scanning vote tabulators for the 2026 municipal and school board election; and
2. That Council **APPROVE** the use of internet voting as an alternative voting method for the 2026 municipal and school board election; and
3. That Council **APPROVE** the use of advanced voting and proxy voting for the 2026 municipal and school board election; and
4. That Council **DIRECT** staff to work with Niagara region local municipalities regarding a joint procurement of election voting equipment.

## Key Facts

- The *Municipal Elections Act* requires Council to decide, prior to a municipal election, the use of voting and vote-counting equipment, and whether to employ alternative voting methods.
- The City of Thorold has successfully used optical scanners/vote tabulators since 1997.
- Internet voting was used for the 2022 municipal and school board election as an alternative voting method in advance of Election Day.
- In 2022, the 12 Niagara region municipalities used the following voting methods:
  - In-Person paper ballots with no alternative option: 2
  - In-Person paper ballots on Election Day and Internet Voting in Advance: 4
  - In-Person paper ballots on Election Day and vote by mail in advance upon request: 5
  - Vote by mail only: 1
- In 2022, across Ontario, 217 municipalities used internet voting and 71 municipalities used vote by mail.
- All 12 lower-tier municipalities in Niagara are working together through the Clerks and CAOs working groups to submit a joint request for proposals regarding election voting equipment to reduce costs.

## **Budgetary Status**

Money has been allocated in annual budgets to cover costs associated with the 2026 municipal and school board election.

The City entered into an agreement with Dominion Voting which covered the 2018 and 2022 elections. Now that the contract has expired, the City will need to seek a new vendor for the 2026 election. In addition, the City rented vote tabulators and ePoll books (laptops used to manage the voters' list) from Elections Ontario in 2022 and will seek to rent this equipment for 2026. At this time, staff do not know how much these costs will amount to until a procurement is released and a new agreement is signed.

The 2022 election cost approximately \$91,000 (\$5.05 per elector) with some of the larger expenses being the rental of equipment and software, the mailing of voter letters, the printing of ballots, and wages for temporary election workers. If Council chooses to use the same voting methods as in 2022, expenses will be similar to 2022 with an increase due to inflation and a growth in the number of electors.

Adding an alternative voting option will be more expensive than an in-person only voting election. However, by adding an alternative option, staff would be able to reduce costs in other areas. For example, if internet voting is added to in-person voting with tabulators, staff could reduce costs by printing fewer ballots in anticipation of voters using internet voting, reduce the number of in-person advanced voting locations thereby reducing staff wages and the hiring of temporary election workers.

## **Analysis**

The 2026 municipal and school board election takes place on Monday, October 26, 2026.

Section 42(1) of the *Municipal Elections Act* (the "MEA") states that prior to an election:

The council of a local municipality may pass by-laws,

- a. authorizing the use of voting and vote-counting equipment such as voting machines, voting recorders or optical scanning vote tabulators;
- b. authorizing the electors to use an alternative voting method, such as voting by mail or by telephone, that does not require voters to attend at a voting place in order to vote.

In addition to the requirements for a by-law as noted above, if Council authorizes the use of an alternative voting method, it is further required that Council authorize through by-law the use of advanced voting and proxy voting.

The City Clerk has several criteria to consider before making a recommendation on vote-counting equipment and alternative voting methods. The first is whether an option upholds the principles of the MEA and its regulations. These principles, while not established as part of legislation, are generally recognized based on case law as:

- a. the secrecy and confidentiality of the voting process is paramount;
- b. the election shall be fair and non-biased;
- c. the election shall be accessible to the voters;
- d. the integrity of the voting process shall be maintained throughout the election;
- e. there is to be certainty that the results of the election reflect the votes cast;
- f. voters and candidates shall be treated fairly and consistently; and
- g. the proper majority vote governs by ensuring that valid votes are counted and invalid votes are rejected so far as reasonably possible.

Clerk's staff are committed to in-person voting for the 2026 municipal election. In planning for this method, the use of vote tabulators is recommended.

### *Council's Role*

Council is required to pass a by-law setting the method and manner of voting by May 1st of the election year (in this case May 1, 2026). As Council is aware, the establishment of the voting method(s) to be used in a municipal election is the responsibility of Council, and the procedures and forms for the use of alternative voting methods and vote-counting equipment is the responsibility of the City Clerk.

While the deadline is May 1, 2026 for municipalities to establish their voting method and/or use of vote-counting equipment, it is important that municipalities are proactive and determine their method in advance of this deadline. This will ensure that vendors are available to provide the required services and that the City can potentially benefit from a shared service agreement with other Niagara region municipalities.

### **2022 Municipal and School Board Election**

The 2022 election took place on October 24, 2022, and council authorized the use of internet voting as an alternative option. The City of Thorold used both in-person (on Election Day) and internet voting (from October 11-22). In total, 1837 people voted

online, representing 40.7% of the voter turnout and 2671 people voted in-person, representing 59.3% of voter turnout.

## **2026 Voting Options**

For the 2026 municipal and school board election, the Clerk's Department is providing Council with three possible options that they believe meet the principles of the MEA.

### *Option One: In-Person Voting*

Option 1 is the most traditional of all voting methods and requires all voters to attend a polling station, either through advanced polls or on Election Day. All registered voters would be sent a voter card, giving details of the advanced polls and Election Day polling stations, of which there would be multiple across the municipality. Voters would be able to vote at any polling station, as well as register to vote if necessary. Proxy votes would be permitted where an elector signs a document assigning a friend or family member the ability to vote on their behalf, subject to the terms laid out in the MEA.

The City Clerk is confident in the ability to administer future municipal and school board elections using vote tabulators. Voters are familiar with the technology at both the municipal and provincial levels. Thorough procedures are established to ensure that vote tabulators are scanning and recoding vote counts accurately prior to use at a voting location. This process, known as logic and accuracy testing, is conducted with pre-marked ballots for every candidate being tested and manually verified by the City Clerk's Department.

### *Option Two: In-Person Voting with Internet Voting in Advance (Recommended)*

This option would provide for in-person voting using tabulators as outlined above in addition to allowing voters to vote online. Internet voting would involve providing each elector with unique credentials to access the secure voting website during the voting period from a personal computer, tablet or smartphone from anywhere there is an internet connection. A letter containing voter credentials with a separate voter identification number is mailed to each eligible voter who then has the choice to cast their ballot either through the online website or to attend a polling station to vote in-person.

Staff recommend internet voting for advanced voting, and not on Election Day. In addition, staff would plan for some in-person advanced voting opportunities in conjunction with internet voting, prior to Election Day.

Some advantages to internet voting:

- Resident familiarity and established use with the method from 2022
- Enhanced convenience of voting for residents and non-resident voters
- Reduced costs of voting locations and fewer temporary election officials
- Able to vote 24 hours a day within a defined voting period
- Generates faster results due to electronically automating tabulation
- Increased public trust, not only in Ontario, where more than half of municipalities made use of the method, but in other Canadian provinces, and other jurisdictions across the globe

Some disadvantages to an internet option:

- Perception of security concerns
- Unsupervised voting
- Voter card may be incorrectly delivered and placed into another person's hands and the voters' list must be accurate (It should be noted that internet voting vendors have taken comprehensive measures to address security concerns, and the use of multi-factor authentication has been successfully implemented across a number of platforms to address identity verification concerns).

#### *Option Three: In-Person Voting with Vote by Mail on Request*

This option would provide for in-person voting using tabulators as outlined in Option One and allow for voters to request a vote by mail kit. Vote by mail kits can be made available to all eligible voters who register to receive one. Voters who are not on the voters' list can request to be added before registering for a vote by mail kit. Voters who receive a kit will have to complete them and place in the mail before a cut-off date to ensure they are received before Election Day. Alternatively, voters who receive a kit could also drop them off at City Hall up until 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. The kit would include a ballot, a security declaration and a return envelope.

Some advantages to a vote by mail option:

- Enhanced convenience of voting for residents and non-resident voters
- Provides an audit trail

Some disadvantages to a vote by mail option:

- Reliant on the mail distribution process and Canada Post
- May be delays counting votes and verifying results due to mail delays
- Voters must apply for a vote by mail kit early in the election process to meet mailing deadlines
- Voters not following the instructions, resulting in rejected or late ballots
- No controls can be established to prevent a spoiled ballot (ex. over-voting)
- Should a ballot be improperly marked there is no opportunity for the voter to correct the error

## **Impact on the Environment, Climate Change**

The use of internet voting can have a potential positive impact on the environment. By using internet voting less paper ballots can be ordered in anticipation of voters using internet voting. In addition, the increased use of internet voting will reduce the number of voters who will need to drive to a polling station.

## **Alternatives Reviewed**

Please see attached Report CC2021-64 2022 Municipal and School Board Elections – Update for more details and pros and cons of various voting methods.

## **Relationship to Strategic Plan**

- Service Delivery Excellence
  - Service Modernization
  - Community Engagement

## **Other Pertinent Reports**

- Report CC2021-64 2022 Municipal and School Board Elections – Update

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**Appendices**

Appendix 1 Report CC2021-64 2022 Municipal and School Board Elections – Update