

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CLERKS AND PLANNING SERVICES

re: Establish Voting Systems and Alternative Voting Methods for the 2026 Municipal Election

OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this report is to seek authority from Council to establish voting systems and alternative voting methods for the 2026 Municipal Election.

RECOMMENDATION

That The Report of the Director of Clerks and Planning Services be received; and

That Council approve Internet Voting as an alternative voting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election; and

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 and 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.

Under the MEA, the City Clerk is given the statutory responsibility to develop the required policies and procedures she deems necessary to conduct the election and which meet the principles of the MEA. The last day for Council to pass a by-law authorizing this program for the 2026 Election is May 1, 2026 and the required policies and procedures are to be completed by June 1, 2026.

ANALYSIS

There are three (3) main voting methods used in Ontario municipal elections: Paper Ballot with Tabulators, Internet Voting, and Vote by Mail. 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 high level, is a synopsis of each of the three methods:

PAPER BALLOTS WITH TABULATORS

Traditional in-person voting is the oldest and most familiar method of casting ballots, widely accepted by the electorate. This method requires voters to attend the voting station during advanced votes and/or Election Day. The tabulator reads and records how ballots are marked. The City has been using optical scanners/vote tabulators since 2000 or earlier for voting locations and has continued to use them in each municipal election since. The use of vote-counting equipment allows for increased consistency in vote counting over a manual counting process and supports the reporting of unofficial election results on Election Night. The use of vote tabulators upholds all principles of the MEA and allows for:

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

CONSIDERATIONS

The municipality currently owns five tabulators. However, these machines have now surpassed their intended lifespan and no longer supported by election software vendors. If we decide to proceed with in-person voting with tabulators we would need to purchase five new tabulators at a cost of approximately \$7,500 each. The acquisition process would need to be started mid 2025 to ensure we have them for the 2026 election.

Tabulators require significant election staff resources such as revision clerks, ballot clerks, tabulator clerks. All staff require training.

With the use of paper ballots, the voter loses the ability to vote anywhere, at their leisure during the voting period. Despite ongoing efforts to improve accessibility, in-person voting can still present physical barriers for voters with disabilities or those unable to visit polling stations due to illness or locations. During peak voting hours, such as lunch or after business hours, long lines can deter voters. Inclement weather can further disrupt turnout. In-person voting is confined to specific hours on advance poll days and election days, which may not accommodate voters with busy schedules, unexpected conflict or remote work schedules.



INTERNET VOTING

Internet voting has been progressively adopted by municipalities across Ontario in recent municipal elections. It modernizes the voting experience by offering a convenient, accessible, and secure way for electors to cast their ballots without the need to attend a physical voting location. This method provides greater flexibility, allowing voters to vote from anywhere and at any time within the designated voting period.

Voters receive a personalized voting letter in the mail, which includes the date of the voting period, the voting website, and a unique Personal Identification Number (PIN). In many municipalities, electors are also required to input their birth date as an additional security measure to further protect the integrity of the voting process.

The benefits of internet voting include the integration of accessible technology, which enables individuals with disabilities to participate more easily in the electoral process. Additionally, internet voting allows voters to review and correct any errors in their selections before finalizing their ballot. This method also streamlines election operations by automating processes such as ballot processing, updating the voters' list, and providing rapid, accurate vote counting at the close of voting.

In a 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.

CONSIDERATIONS

For those that still like to "vote in person" during the voting period we can set up advance voting dates with use of iPads/laptops for voters to electronically cast their vote, this would also be 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/laptop. 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.

Similar to Hockeyville, polling stations could be set up in long term care facilities, apartment buildings, etc. to assist residents in using iPads/laptops for voting. It is at the discretion of each facility to choose whether this extra service is needed or not.

Cyber security risks with internet voting need to be mitigated to the best of our ability. It is important to choose a vendor that is reputable and will provide a list of their system's security features.

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 Election Location 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 is no one-size-fits-all voting method, and each has its own advantages and challenges. Elliot Lake has utilized two of the three methods discussed in past elections, and each has proven to have its pros and cons.

- **Paper Ballot with Tabulators:** This method has been a reliable and familiar approach for Elliot Lake in previous elections. Voters are accustomed to the technology, and it has served the community well. However, our current tabulators are no longer supported by software vendors due to their age. As a result, purchasing new tabulators would be necessary to ensure readiness for the 2026 election. Additionally, this investment would commit the city to continuing the use of paper ballots for several future elections. There is also an option to lease tabulators with travel and per diems being an additional cost on top of the lease rate. We would need to secure units now to ensure availability for the 2026 election.
- **Vote by Mail:** In the 2022 election, 126 voters chose this option, but the low uptake required a disproportionate amount of staff time and resources. Additionally, the process incurred an extra cost on top of regular election expenses. Given the limited use and the costs involved, staff felt the service did not provide sufficient value to justify its continuation.
- **Internet Voting:** Internet voting offers several advantages, including accessibility, fairness, and impartiality. It ensures voter secrecy, confidentiality, and the integrity of the election process. From an administrative perspective, internal staff can assist with tasks such as managing advance voting and updating the Voter's List in coordination with the Clerks Department. Elliot Lake residents gained familiarity with online voting during the Kraft Hockeyville initiative, which demonstrates that the community is comfortable with this method. Additionally, internet voting provides voters the flexibility to cast their ballots at their convenience, enhancing voter participation.



Based on these factors, staff recommend adopting internet voting as the primary method for the 2026 Municipal & School Board Election.

If approved by Council, Elliot Lake would partner with neighboring communities—who have also chosen electronic voting for the 2026 election—to create a joint Request for Proposals (RFP) for quotes from reputable internet voting providers. These municipalities would also collaborate on developing the Elections Manual and the necessary reporting requirements.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Each year, \$22,000 is allocated to the Election Reserve. These funds are used to cover the costs associated with running the Municipal and School Board Elections.

Tabulators: If tabulators are selected as the voting method, the cost for purchasing five new tabulators is estimated at approximately \$37,500. Leasing is approximately \$9,000 plus travel and per diem.

Electronic Voting: If electronic voting is chosen, Elliot Lake would collaborate with neighboring communities to develop a joint Request for Proposals (RFP) to obtain quotes from reputable internet voting providers. This collaborative approach could help reduce costs and ensure competitive pricing for the service.

Vote by Mail: We are not recommending Vote by Mail as an alternative method for the 2026 election

LINKS TO STRATEGIC PLAN

Services to our Community:

The City will collaborate with neighbouring communities to make strategic use of shared services

The City is committed to making community spaces accessible, regardless of ability and encourages all to do the same.

SUMMARY

Through the implementation of alternative voting methods, the City will continue to improve the accessibility of its elections and further enable electors to exercise their right to vote.

