
HALDIMAND COUNTY

Report CLE-06-2025 Municipal Election 2026 – Alternative Voting Options For Consideration by Council in Committee on May 20, 2025



OBJECTIVE:

To authorize the use of alternative voting options for the 2026 Haldimand County Municipal Election.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. THAT Report CLE-06-2025 Municipal Election 2026 – Alternate Voting Options be received;
2. AND THAT the by-laws attached to Report CLE-06-2025 be approved at a future Council meeting.

Prepared and respectfully submitted by: Chad Curtis, Municipal Clerk

Approved: Cathy Case, Chief Administrative Officer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

The next municipal election is scheduled for October 26, 2026 and Haldimand County Council may pass a by-law authorizing the use of an alternative voting method which permits the use of technology for the counting of votes, or for votes to be cast via mail, telephone, or Internet voting. A hybrid voting model including both internet voting and vote tabulators has been used successfully by Haldimand County for the last regular municipal elections in 2022, as well as for by-elections in 2023 and 2025. This report provides options for various alternative voting methods to be considered for use in the 2026 municipal election. Based on ensuring accessibility, security, and convenience, staff are recommending a hybrid voting method utilizing vote tabulators and internet voting for the October 2026 municipal election.

BACKGROUND:

Municipal elections occur every four years in Ontario with a pre-determined date, and are governed by the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996* (MEA). While much of the administrative details related to the election rest with the Municipal Clerk, Council may pass by-laws authorizing the use of alternative voting methods, permitting the use of technology for the counting of votes, or allowing for votes to be cast via mail, telephone, or Internet voting.

Internet voting was utilized in the 2022 municipal election, the 2023 Ward 4 By-Election, and the 2025 Wards 1 and 4 By-Election. Based on the success of these elections and Haldimand County's commitment to continuous improvement, staff are confident that internet voting will continue to be successful. Further, tabulators, a form of vote-counting equipment has also been utilized in previous municipal elections and has become a standardized method for elections in Haldimand.

ANALYSIS:

The MEA outlines the framework which all 444 municipalities in Ontario conduct elections. Certain aspects are legislated through the MEA, other aspects are to be determined by the Clerk, who is responsible under the MEA for conducting elections, and there are a few matters to be determined by Council. The areas that require Council determination are:

- Placing a question on the ballot;
- Language of forms to be used, if other than English;
- Authorizing the use of vote-counting equipment such as optical scanning vote tabulators;
- Authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method that does not require electors to attend at a voting place in order to vote;
- Authorizing the need for a by-election for municipal office
- Establishing rules and procedures with respect to the use of municipal resources during an election campaign (Haldimand County Policy 2003-07)
- Establishing a compliance audit committee by October 1 of an election year

Of the above list, the two matters that require Council approval at this time are the potential authorization of the use of vote-counting equipment, and authorization to use an alternative voting method that does not require electors to attend a voting place in order to vote. The legislated deadline to have by-laws in place to authorize both of these facets of the election is by May 1st in the year of an election. If Council wishes to proceed with an alternative voting method in addition to in-person voting, staff will need to focus time and resources in procuring the service and establishing procedures to that effect. The balance of the report outlines options, including the preferred one by staff, and implications in this regard.

Vote Tabulators

Since 2006, Haldimand County has utilized optical scan tabulators to count votes. When voters mark their ballot, the ballot is inserted into the tabulator which reads the information on the ballot, stores the information then provides a cumulative total of all votes cast at the close of the polls. This technology ensures confidentiality of the vote, and makes the process of counting composite ballots efficient and quicker than manual counting, and unofficial results are available in a timely manner. Haldimand County voters are familiar with this technology; further, Elections Ontario has adopted the use of vote tabulators for their elections. Staff are confident in the efficiency, security and reliability of this technology and continue to recommend this method for elections as it has become standardized.

Internet Voting

Internet voting is an alternative voting method that has been in use in Ontario municipal elections since 2003. Many municipalities have been using this method as an alternative option in addition to in-person voting, and some have moved to utilize internet only. Internet voting provides the most accessible option for voting and allows eligible electors to vote from anywhere in the world where they have a device that can connect to the internet.

Security is a factor to be considered in connection with internet voting. Voting systems providers utilize various security measures to ensure protection from cybersecurity threats. While there have been no proven instances of an internet voting system being compromised, staff will ensure through the procurement process and various risk management mitigation strategies to ensure the integrity of the election. The vendor selected to provide internet voting will be required to employ encryption for all voter data and transmissions, have multi-factor authentication, and continuously monitor for cyber threats during the voting period.

An eligible elector can log in to the internet voting portal using their unique voter ID and PIN. Once the elector confirms that they are aware of offences and penalties under the *Municipal Elections Act* and

that they are not committing any fraudulent acts, the voter will receive their blank ballot. The internet voting model attempts to replicate the manner in which an elector would vote in-person at a voting location. They will receive a blank ballot. The system will flag any ballot marking errors such as blank, over or under voted races and allows for corrections prior to casting. Once the ballot is cast, the voter is struck off the voters' list in real time.

Internet voting is considered the most accessible form of voting. It allows an eligible elector to utilize a screen reader, adjust colour contrast, and change font size.

According to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), out of 444 municipalities in Ontario, 217 passed a by-law to allow for Internet voting. This is a 24% increase from the 2018 municipal elections.

FINANCIAL/LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:

Although municipal elections occur every four years, an annual contribution is made to the Election Reserve Fund in order to evenly distribute the cost of the event over the term of Council. Since 2022, annual contributions of approximately \$70,000 have been made to the Elections Reserve Fund in order to cover an anticipated cost of \$280,000. Overall costs have varied from election to election depending on the number of workers hired, the number of polling locations and the number of ballots supplies required, and the extent of compliance audit activity involved.

Elections are administered as efficiently as possible; however, due to the unpredictable nature of voter turnout, candidate races, potential emergency or pandemic situation, etc., planning for elections must often take multiple scenarios into account in the preparation stage and costs will reflect those factors.

For the 2022 election, Haldimand County secured a vote tabulator provider for the 2022 and 2026 municipal elections. As this vendor has consistently provided a reliable product, Haldimand County will continue this agreement if Council supports this method of voting. A procurement process will be undertaken to identify an internet voting vendor who can best fit Haldimand's needs.

The cost of the 2018 election was approximately \$181,000 and the 2022 election was approximately \$251,000. In addition, further budget impacts from the 2022 election include costs for the Municipal Election Compliance Audit Committee (MECAC) which were funded from the Elections Reserve Fund. Due to inflation and other unanticipated rises in costs, the 2026 cost will likely be more than what was expended in 2022. In addition, with the addition of a seventh Councillor and seventh ward, this will have a further impact on the budget. Additional supplies, ballots, election workers, voting locations, etc., will all factor into an increased cost.

A temporary Election Assistant has always been hired to assist staff in the Clerks Division with election administration, the costs of which are included in the budget figures. It is expected that this position will be recruited in early 2026 to ensure sufficient resourcing for the election.

The full budget for the 2026 municipal election will be included in the Draft 2026 Tax Supported Operating Budget.

STAKEHOLDER IMPACTS:

In considering an alternative voting method, the primary intent is to provide accessibility and convenience for Haldimand County voters. Communication will be a key factor in ensuring the success of alternative voting. A robust communications plan will also be required to inform the public about Haldimand County adopting a seven ward model.

In addition to Clerks Division staff, the administration of the municipal election will involve staff from Innovation and Technology Services (ITS), Customer Experience and Communications, and Facilities and Parks Operations in order to administer communications, organize and set up voting locations, etc. The assistance of ITS staff is key in setting up logic and accuracy testing of tabulators, and the results tally software that display election results.

REPORT IMPACTS:

Agreement: No

By-law: Yes

Budget Amendment: No

Policy: No

REFERENCES:

None.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Draft Use of Optical Scanning Vote Tabulators By-law.
2. Draft Internet Voting By-law.