

Staff Report

Corporate Services Department



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REPORT TO: Finance and Corporate Services Committee

DATE OF MEETING: March 17, 2025

SUBMITTED BY: A. Fusco, Director of Legislated Services/City Clerk, 519-741-2200

PREPARED BY: A. Fusco, Director of Legislated Services/City Clerk, 519-741-2200

WARD(S) INVOLVED: All

DATE OF REPORT: February 24, 2025

REPORT NO.: COR-2025-001

SUBJECT: 2026 Municipal and School Board Election Alternative Voting Methods

RECOMMENDATION:

That Council reaffirms the use of vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal Election, as outlined in Corporate Services Department report COR-2025-001; and,

That Council hereby authorizes the alternative voting methods as outlined in this report and directs the Clerk to bring forward the necessary by-law; and further,

That the election reserve contribution be increased as outlined in Corporate Services Department report COR-2025-001.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS:

- By-law 2006-135 is in place authorizing the use of paper ballots/tabulators for all Kitchener municipal and school board elections.
- The next general election will be held on Monday, October 26, 2026.
- The purpose of this report is to seek Council direction on any alternative voting methods for the 2026 municipal and school board election in addition to paper ballots/tabulators.
- Advance planning is essential for ensuring an inclusive, transparent, and well-organized election, as well as maintaining public confidence in the election process.
- Ensuring an accessible election is crucial to enabling participation for people of all abilities.
- This report supports the delivery of core services.

*** This information is available in accessible formats upon request. ***
Please call 519-741-2345 or TTY 1-866-969-9994 for assistance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- Technology has transformed how people engage with city services including involvement in municipal elections.
- Voter demographics and attitudes are evolving, and today's diverse electorate expects products and services tailored to them that are convenient and accessible.
- With technological advancements, security concerns continue to remain a top priority to protect the integrity of the election process and trust in government.
- Through post-election community engagement, over 90% of voters indicated satisfaction with their overall voting experience.
- In consultation with the Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee (GRAAC) in February 2024 they expressed no support for one method over another, rather indicating it's the number of methods (hybrid approach) that is the most accessible.
- While offering convenience, a hybrid approach presents risks associated with multiple different voting procedures, resourcing implications and training materials.
- Staff recommend offering the current Council-approved voting methods, vote tabulators be supplemented with alternative voting methods that include a home vote program upon request and drive through voting, for the 2026 Kitchener municipal council and school board election.
- The proposed home vote and drive thru voting options, to meet electors where they are, were well received by GRAAC in February 2025.

BACKGROUND:

The Municipal Elections Act, 1996 (MEA) governs the administration of local elections in Ontario. The Clerk holds independent legislative authority to administer all municipal and school board elections as the Returning Officer. These elections are planned and conducted in line with policies and procedures that reflect and uphold the principles of the Municipal Elections Act, 1996 (MEA), generally recognized as follows:

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

In keeping with the election principles, accessibility is vital to ensuring participation for individuals of all abilities, supporting the city's commitment to inclusive elections. Section 12 of the Act requires the Clerk to ensure an accessible election and remove barriers for voters and candidates with disabilities. Staff continually work to review and improve accessible options for electors, candidates, and election staff including continuously monitor legislation updates, and municipal trends and practices.

While periodic amendments have occurred, municipal election legislation is dated, and is written such that the voting process involves a paper ballot and that those ballots be hand or manually counted. Section 42 (1) of Act does provide that a municipality may pass by-laws authorizing the use of alternative voting methods, including the use of vote counting equipment, vote by mail, and telephone and internet/online voting. Many municipalities have generally abandoned manual counting due to the time and effort involved in counting votes on a composite ballot (all races the elector may vote for on one ballot) after the close of polls on Voting Day. In 2022, the City had 50 ballot faces given its 10 wards and the 5 types of

ballots required per ward (owing to the 4 school boards and option to have no school support for non-residents).

2022 Election Method Approval

In November 2021 Council considered two reports regarding alternative voting methods to recommend internet voting for advance polls (through report [COR-2021-26](#) including 2021 engagement survey results) and supplementary information regarding mail-in ballots (through report [COR-2021-33](#)) in advance of the 2022 election. After considering such information, Council opted to continue with a paper ballot/tabulator election.

For the 2022 election, electors had the opportunity to vote-anywhere during Advance Voting due to the City deploying a Voters' List system that allowed for real time updates. Vote Anywhere in your ward was piloted in 2022 which allowed the city to slightly reduce voting locations and was found to spread the voters out amongst locations in their ward, reducing wait times while still maintaining customer service in providing options.

Also in 2022, the City offered "curbside voting" to support voters who were unable to go inside the voting place, to request to have a ballot brought to their vehicle, outside of the building, or to another area within the voting place boundaries for marking. This option was implemented to help those who are unable to enter the voting place due to barriers of unreasonable difficulty, injury, disability or health and safety. Feedback was received that electors were not aware of the curbside voting option in 2022 and greater communication of this method is planned for 2026 for deployment.

Proxy voting is also available in accordance with the Act and established procedures. For the 2022 election, respecting the pandemic restrictions and health and safety considerations, city staff offered to attend upon the elector and proxy to certify the proxy form at their residence, upon request, receiving a total of 10 requests. Electors who are unable to vote in person on voting day or during the advance vote, may appoint a proxy (an eligible voter) to vote on their behalf. The Proxy then attends a voting location with the certified Proxy form, to receive a ballot on the elector's behalf. Because the marked ballots are counted using vote count tabulators in the voting place (By-law 2006-135), curbside and proxy voting does not require the passing of an alternative voting method by-law. Additional information on the administration of the 2022 Municipal Election including the post-election voter survey results can be found in [Staff Report COR-2023-091](#).

REPORT:

The 2026 Municipal Election will take place on Monday, October 26, 2026. Since the 2022 election, there has been some positive progress in legislative amendment including areas the voters' list data quality with the change to use the Elections Ontario list. This will give a more accurate list based off drivers' license and health card information rather than home ownership information used by the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC). The List will also be updated with the Provincial election ahead of a municipal and school board election.

By-law 2005-135 is already in place for the use of paper ballots/tabulators in all Kitchener municipal elections. Staff fully comply with legislated accessibility requirements while enhancing the voting experience for all, including:

- Ensuring physical voting locations are accessible, with features inside and outside the location that accommodate voters with disabilities, including magnifying sheets.
- Accessible voting equipment that plugs into the tabulator at in-person voting locations. This includes the audio-tactile interface (ATI) with sip and puff and paddle attachments, which allow individuals with various disabilities to independently mark a ballot in person.
- Providing on-site voting at long-term care homes and designated retirement homes to ensure equal access for residents.
- Providing voting locations at Ray of Hope, St. John's Kitchen and A Better Tent City to afford vulnerable populations opportunities to vote.
- Implementing proxy voting.
- Facilitating curbside voting.
- Training on accessible customer service.
- Access to interpreters and language services.
- Committing to continuous improvement through planning and reporting.

It is important at this point for Council to provide direction on the potential utilization of alternative voting methods and vote counting equipment. Council may choose to;

- only offer paper ballots/tabulators;
- select another single method to replace paper ballots/tabulators; or
- pass a By-law in addition to By-law 2006-135 to permit a hybrid voting option.

Should Council wish to proceed with the use of alternative voting methods, beyond vote count tabulators, a by-law must be passed by May 1, 2026. Upon passage of such a by-law by Council, the Clerk is required to establish procedures and forms for the use of any such alternative voting options, therefore the earlier the decision is made, the earlier planning can commence should Council decide to move forward with a new method.

Other election methods were evaluated and a summary of reasons why each method is or is not recommended by staff is provided below. The summary was informed by using the city's risk policy to assess each method, including strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The risk assessment is contained in Appendix A.

1.1 Paper Ballots and Vote Count Tabulators

For the past 5 general municipal elections, the City has used optical scan vote tabulators with paper ballots (By-law 2006-135) at prescribed polling places (i.e. voting locations/place) on prescribed Advance Voting days and on Voting Day.

While some municipalities have purchased tabulators outright, the City has chosen to lease tabulators which has eliminated the need to securely store, maintain, and periodically replace the devices. In 2018 and 2022 the City leveraged the Municipal Voting Technology Sharing Program run by Elections Ontario to lease vote tabulators owned by Elections Ontario. Elections Ontario undertook a rigorous process to procure the tabulators and assess the functional (e.g. accessibility, system security, etc.) and non-functional (e.g. privacy, proponent history, training, etc.) requirements of the tabulator system. It has been a prudent and cost saving measure to leverage Election Ontario's expertise and ability as a large elections administrator to secure tabulators for the City's recent elections. Due to the complexity of municipal and school board election ballots with multiple contests and

selection requirements, vote tabulators reduce human error in tabulating. The City works directly with the tabulator vendor to ensure that the tabulators are programmed to accept composite ballots and identify votes based on marks the elector makes that meet a certain threshold. The threshold is extensively reviewed and deemed appropriate through logic and accuracy testing conducted by the Returning Officer prior to the election.

During Advance Voting and on Voting Day, electors at the polling location will provide their marked ballot to a Tabulator Assistant who will insert the ballot into the vote tabulator. The tabulator has functionality to determine if the ballot is marked so it can be tabulated. Compared to a manual count, this added functionality ensures every opportunity for the elector's vote to be counted. Vote tabulators support accessibility and barrier reduction. Accessible voting equipment is connected to a vote tabulator at a voting location to enable independent ballot marking and printing on request.

As vote tabulators and accessible voting equipment are not connected to the internet and are securely stored, and rigorously tested prior to use during the election, the security risks associated with the equipment is generally low. While the software responsible for the aggregation or publishing of results generated by vote tabulators could be subject to cyber threats, despite the safeguards in place to prevent such instances, retention of the original tally results tapes and paper ballots always provides a guarantee that results could be verified should an issue arise.

The Clerk is confident in the ability to administer future elections using vote tabulators and this method upholds all principles of the Act. It is recommended that Council approve the use of vote tabulators for the 2026 municipal and school board election.

1.2 Vote-By-Mail

For rural municipalities, especially those with many seasonal residents, vote-by-mail is a popular election method to address accessibility, particularly prior to the use of internet voting. Vote-by-mail methods can occur exclusively as the only option or upon request as a special ballot. If a municipality is exclusively using vote-by-mail, every elector on the Voters' List would be mailed a voting kit with a return envelope, declaration form, ballot, and ballot secrecy envelope. The elector signs the declaration form and then completes their ballot, inserting the ballot into the secrecy envelope provided to ensure that a name cannot be associated with a vote. Upon the municipality receiving the return envelope, the declaration form is processed, the elector is struck from the Voters' List, and the ballot inside the ballot secrecy envelope placed in a ballot box for counting after the close of vote on Election Day. Counting votes can either be done manually or by centralized vote tabulators.

Vote-by-mail is an established remote voting method used at all levels of government, so it is familiar method for many electors, and it can be debated that it enhances access to voting by removing barrier of coming to an in-person poll and upholds the principles in the Act.

There are drawbacks to this method that should be highlighted, including the limited time frame that it can be offered due to nomination and ballot printing timelines, concerns with Canada Post delivery, prolonged time to receive and return kits by mail, high and increasing postage costs related to the mailing and returning of ballots. In addition, errors by voters can easily occur (i.e. neglecting to sign their voter declaration form or return both the voter declaration and the ballot in the same envelope) affecting the ability to ensure that all votes

are cast as intended. It does not offer a fully independent voting experience as some voters with disabilities may require assistance marking their ballot and voters with physical disabilities that limit mobility may require assistance to drop off a marked ballot in the mailbox for return.

This method is heavily dependent on matters outside of the city's control including potential errors made by Canada Post in getting the ballots to the residents and the potential risk of a Canada Post strike as was the case in the 2018 Municipal Election as well as marked ballots that may be received after the deadline to be counted.

This alternative method is not being recommended as the cost to administer the program and threats, while the risks are considered low, present by relying on other agencies make the method unsustainable.

1.3 Telephone and Internet/Online Voting

Telephone voting allows a voter to call into a digital platform using their unique identifier and personal information number (PIN) to make selections using an automated voice system. The ballot would be recorded and cast through the use of a digital platform similar to internet voting, though it is far less common and not used by many municipalities. Internet voting can be offered so that the elector completes the online ballot remotely using devices, including laptops, mobile phones, and tablets or at a centralized voting location terminal. While internet voting through a terminal in a voting location is a possibility, this option has had low uptake as it eliminates the convenience of voting remotely. Remote internet voting, being where electors do not need to travel to a polling location to cast their ballot online, can be offered as either a one-step or two-step process.

- In a one-step process, electors receive a voter information package with Elector ID and PIN numbers. Electors visit a webpage and use their ID and PIN, along with their year of birth to access and cast their ballot.
- A two-step registration process requires voters to pre-register to obtain the necessary credentials in order to access their ballot. There are various forms of a two-step registration; however, the process typically involves mailing out information packages to electors that include an elector identification number, information about the voting process, and a secure website address where the elector must go to register. Once the voter has registered, they are then sent a personal identification number (PIN) by way of a secure email. Upon receipt of the PIN, the voter can access the voting site and using both the information in the information package and the PIN number, access their ballot. Once the elector is ready to vote and has entered any required authentication, the appropriate ballot with the applicable races would be presented to the voter based on their voters' profile, which is their specific ward and school support.

This method supports independent ballot marking with the ability to customize and use personal assistive technology and is convenient available online enabling 24/7 access to voting so voters can cast a ballot from home, while on vacation, away on business or studying at university or college outside of the city. Ballot waste is negated if offering a strictly online election, as well as 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. While some municipalities did initially see a slight increase in turnout the first time, they offered internet or telephone voting, the trends

suggest that this may be a novelty bump. Studies conducted by Nicole Goodman and Zachary Spicer, referenced in their publication [Voting Online](#), have shown that voter turnout and trust in voting online occurs with each consecutive election the method is used.

Staff acknowledge that this is an accessible option and is the alternative voting method preferred based on public engagement feedback from 2021. Unlike other countries or jurisdictions, the use of digital technology in Ontario municipal elections remains largely unregulated. There is no comprehensive legal framework governing its implementation, oversight, or verification processes. All responsibility for managing, securing, and verifying digital voting systems falls solely on election administrators and the private vendors providing the technology. This creates significant challenges, as the existing legislation is not up to date with the complexities of modern digital election systems, leaving gaps in areas such as cybersecurity, transparency, and auditability. Without clear regulatory guidance, municipalities must rely on their own discretion and vendor assurances, which can lead to inconsistencies and potential risks to the integrity of the electoral process.

The [Digital Governance Standards Institute](#) is in the final stages of establishing and approving voluntary online electoral voting standards for use in Canadian municipal elections. These standards specify technical design requirements for online voting services and outline best practices for election administrators. The goal is to address concerns around the consistency of online voting implementation, the integrity of the vote, ballot privacy, and system auditability. While the development of these standards is a positive step in the right direction, and can address issues around uniformity and accountability, it's important to remember that they remain voluntary, and there is still no legal framework for the verification of online voting systems. Final approval of the standards is expected this year.

Despite the above, this alternative voting method is not recommended for 2026 for several reasons.

While no voting method is without risk, online voting presents a unique set of risks and challenges.

It is important to acknowledge that all internet voting platforms may be subject to cyber security threats. While there are no proven instances of an internet voting system being hacked or tampered with, municipalities are increasingly targets for malicious actors looking to hold information for ransom. Recent incidences include the [Toronto Public Library](#), the [City of Hamilton](#) and the [City of Huntsville](#). Hacking of a voting system would have broader societal consequences including the erosion of trust in government institutions to administer fair and secure elections. Many municipalities that offer this method contract and conduct technical security testing including penetration testing and threat risk assessments. The cost of testing is estimated to range from \$20,000 to \$40,000.

Online voting platforms also operate outside of the city's network and rely on subcontracted services and systems outside of the City's control. As such there is a higher risk of service interruptions that could impact public trust in the electoral process and the integrity of the election. During the last two (2) election cycles, issues related to technical dependencies have impacted municipalities offering internet voting on Voting Day. In 2018, a vendor experienced bandwidth throttling by a sub-contracted service provider and in 2022 a vendor

experienced a server failure that paused voting for a period of time. These issues are not security related but highlight the increasing number of dependencies that technical options rely upon. Despite security testing, these issues can and do impact election service levels and can result in greater questions about the integrity of the election process overall.

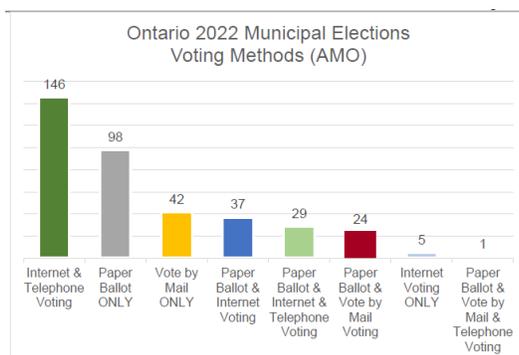
Additionally, there is limited verifiability with digital count, audit and recount using the same system. There is no external way to verify whether results reflect the proper majority of votes cast, votes are counted accurately and only valid votes are counted and upheld. Should trust in the system be called into question, there would be no paper ballot to verify results and there could not be a recount in any other way, if ordered by the Courts. This challenges principles of the Act and an inability to verify using any other means could raise larger questions about election trustworthiness and the validity of the outcome. There are also fewer Ontario-trusted internet voting vendors in the market, as it has been reported the largest vendor in the municipal election space will no longer be offering internet or telephone voting services.

Lastly, there is a variance in public technology literacy and access and while anecdotally it is believed it will encourage younger voters to participate in the process, studies have not supported this. This method heavily relies on voters' list data accuracy to ensure eligible electors receive the correct voting information and ballot and prevent unauthorized access to the system. This typically requires individualized voter notification cards as part of secure login, not only increasing printing and postage costs, but enhanced reliance on Canada Post in delivery of these cards.

2. Analysis

There are long-term considerations that should be understood when determining whether to add additional voting methods. In particular, those related to the risk policies of the municipality, rising costs of election equipment and services (particularly given the limited and trusted vendors in the Ontario marketplace), cost to employ temporary election workers, and increasing difficulty recruiting and retaining election workers through Voting Day.

The way voters cast their ballots is increasingly shifting toward technology-based and hybrid methods. Following the 2022 Municipal Election, the [Association of Municipalities Ontario \(AMO\) conducted a survey on voting methods](#) across the province reporting that over 200 municipalities utilized some form of online voting during the 2022 Municipal Election. In 2022, 66 municipalities chose to offer internet voting as a supplementary method to in-person voting for the 2022 municipal elections. Doing so offers electors the choice to vote in-person with a paper ballot or cast their ballot online, either remotely or at a polling location depending on what option the municipality selects.



The desire to offer more choices is supported by the Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee (GRAAC). On February 22, 2024, city staff engaged with GRAAC to discuss initiatives and considerations for future elections including:

- post-election accessibility initiatives regarding consultation, communication, candidate information, outreach and education,
- voting methods and assistive technology,
- voting location enhance options for voters with mobility challenges, and
- barriers to the voting process.

During the discussion GRAAC members expressed no support for one method over another, rather members indicated it's the number of methods (hybrid approach) that is the most accessible.

While more choice for electors is generally a positive, the downside of offering both paper ballot and internet voting is the additional resources and costs incurred to run two election methods. As noted in the financial considerations section of this report, substantial additional costs associated with vendor, security verification and resource requirements can result from offering both paper ballot and internet voting. Implementing mail-in ballots would require a large increase in resources, and presents challenges with postal strike abilities, higher potential for spoiled ballots, voter confusion with multiple steps/forms in the process, security and fraud prevalent with return envelopes and/or locations. While the case for internet voting as a convenient voting method that improves accessibility is strong, there are too many uncertainties and risks associated with the voting method for staff to recommend its use for Kitchener's 2026 Municipal Election.

The following chart provides a detailed comparison of voting methods used by municipalities with over 50,000 eligible electors in the 2022 municipal election, highlighting trends and differences. Despite the growth in digital voting, trends suggest that the adoption of online voting among larger municipalities is still somewhat limited.

Municipality	Eligible Electors	Paper	Mail	Phone	Internet	Home Vote
Toronto	1,930,813	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Ottawa	722,227	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Mississauga	491,260	Yes	No	No	No	No
Hamilton	405,288	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Brampton	354,884	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Vaughan	225,983	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Markham	220,234	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Kitchener	171,025	Yes	No	No	No	No
Oakville	144,970	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Burlington	142,218	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Greater Sudbury	119,418	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Guelph	104,612	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Whitby	102,618	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Barrie	102,379	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Kingston	96,204	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Ajax	85,443	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Thunder Bay	83,010	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Milton	80,367	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Pickering	76,021	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Brantford	75,305	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Niagara Falls	68,201	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
Sarnia	54,148	Yes	No	No	Yes	No

Many of Ontario's largest municipalities opted not to offer online voting in 2022, citing security and accessibility concerns. For example, the City of Toronto refrained from adopting online voting due to concerns about ensuring security and accessible voting options for all

residents. Similarly, the City of Greater Sudbury, which offered only online voting in 2018, brought back paper ballots in 2022 after experiencing vendor-related bandwidth issues that disrupted voting in the 2018 election. The City of Guelph offered online voting in 2014 and 2018, but City Council did not approve it for 2022 due to vendor-related bandwidth issues in 2018. For the 2026 election, staff recommended mail-in and vote-from-home methods; however, Guelph Council approved internet voting as an alternative method, contingent on all security requirements and testing meeting the City Clerk's satisfaction.

Summary

Given the analysis above, and, the popularity and familiarity of the vote-anywhere and vote-anywhere in your ward options, the reliability of the optical scan vote tabulators for the past 5 municipal elections, and the high satisfaction rate (90%) from the 2022 voter exit survey, staff recommend that Kitchener use the same election method for the 2026 Municipal Election. Respecting the earlier comments regarding hybrid method risks, staff are recommending enhancements that continue to leverage existing vote count tabulators and increase accessibility, including, but not limited to the following pilot programs;

- a home vote program for home-bound electors, upon request; and,
- a drive-through voting experience.

Home Vote Program Upon Request

A home vote program was successfully implemented in 2022 in Cambridge, Brampton, Vaughan, Markham, Guelph, and for the 2022 and 2018 election by Oakville, to support eligible voters who are unable to come to an in-person voting location for mobility or health reasons. The City of Kitchener in the 2022 election offered an at home Proxy voting program run by Clerk staff. Citizens who utilized this option in 2022 provided very positive feedback and gratitude about their ability to exercise their democratic right in a manner that met their unique accessibility needs.

A home vote program is different than a Proxy voting program, it would allow eligible voters who are unable to vote using other methods due to illness, injury or disability, to mark their ballot from their residence, which is brought to them by election officials (registration and appointment is required) and then tabulated through a vote count tabulator. Voters who meet the criteria for this service would be able to request a home voting appointment by contacting the Election Office. While dependent on the number of voters utilizing the program the cost of implementing a home visit/vote program for home-bound electors is relatively low. The cost depends on the number of voters who use this alternative voting method and the number of days it is offered. The outcome of the pilot program would be reported as part of the post-election report to Council.

In February 2025 staff presented to GRAAC members on the potential pilots being considered and received positive support on the home vote pilot program including feedback on appointment times, masking protocols, and health and safety considerations.

Given the dated election legislation, it is not clear whether a vote from home service is considered an alternative voting method that requires Council approval. In the interest of clarity, staff feel it is beneficial to have a by-law which specifically enables vote from home approved by Council. Should Council support this option, a by-law will be brought forward to Council to give effect to this method.

This alternative method is recommended as it is considered low risk, meets all principles of the Act including enhanced accessibility, and can be easily offered with existing resources and procedures in place.

Drive Thru Voting

Drive Thru voting was piloted in 2022 in Cambridge and Windsor, where eligible voters attend a designated drive thru voting location listed on the voter cards. The voters remain in their vehicles until prompted to drive up to the registration desk. The registration desk election officials check the ID of all voters in the vehicle from the Voters' List. The driver then parks at a designated spot and all voters receive a ballot inside a secrecy sleeve and vote within the privacy of the vehicle. Voters then place their ballot in the ballot box presented to them at their window.

In February 2025 staff presented to GRAAC members on the potential pilots being considered and received positive support on the drive thru voting option including feedback on potential locations where high volumes of electors may already be located (i.e. retail and commercial locations) serving multiple electors per vehicle, ability to use specialized accessibility equipment/supports, and limiting exposure to individuals that may have health considerations. It was noted the drive thru options offers choice to electors between a home visit and entering what could be a busy polling location.

In keeping with the principles of the Act, the following considerations would be recommended as part of the pilot:

- This alternative method would be implemented during the advance voting period.
- Voters would be welcome to walk, bike, take transit or any other form of transportation to the drive thru location.
- Curbside voting at voting locations would still be permitted, but due to the potential for longer wait times while MDRO's assist in-person voters, a drive thru option would increase convenience and reduce wait times.
- Designated spots would include signage to shut off vehicles to comply with the city's anti-idling by-law.

This alternative method is recommended as it is considered low risk, meets all principles of the Act, and can be offered with minimal additional resources relating to supplies, logistics and communications.

Additionally, as a cost savings measure and in support of the recommendation, following each successful election event, city staff are able to strategically staff and arrange voting locations, disperse inventory, and build on past accomplishments through the delivery of the same voting method. Data and feedback from voter exit survey from the 2022 election in addition to voter turnout data per location will help further refine the placement and staffing of voting locations in 2026.

Staff commitment to accessibility and removing barriers will continue as staff prepare for 2026 by developing new initiatives and enhancing existing ones. These efforts include extending advance voting periods to reduce crowds and wait times and giving voters more opportunities to cast their ballots. Staff will also implement communication, and outreach plans to ease concerns and uncertainties around voting, focusing on engaging and informing individuals.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report supports the delivery of core services.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Municipal Elections are funded through contributions from the operating budget to the election reserve. Historically the city has budgeted \$500,000 to administer the election with annual reserve contributions of \$125,000 over a four-year period between each election. In the year of an election, the funds are drawn from the reserve in order to pay for election-related costs.

Significant growth of eligible electors occurred between the 2018 and 2022 elections. This number is expected to continue to increase.

It is anticipated that the 2026 Municipal Election using paper ballots aggregated by vote tabulators along with an alternative upon request home vote and drive-thru program will cost approximately \$800,000 due to expected increases in election equipment and services costs given discounted rates experienced in the 2018-2022 election vendor contract, increased external election worker costs given rising minimum wage rates, enhanced voter communications, and population growth impacts on voter notification cards and postage.

It is recommended that Council increase the annual election contribution reserve from \$125,000 to \$200,000 to address the costs to administer the election using paper ballots and vote count tabulations. Staff have conducted a municipal scan and other municipalities with similar elector counts including the Town of Oakville, City of Windsor and City of Vaughan budgets exceed \$1M.

Any deficits arising from election administration that are unable to be fully covered from funding from the election reserve, would be off-set by the Tax Stabilization Reserve.

Alternative Voting Methods

Should Council decide to offer other alternative voting method options instead of, or in addition to the staff recommended option, financial impacts are listed below.

The term of the City's contract with its' election equipment vendor for the 2018 and 2022 election has ended, so the costs below are estimates using quotations received from vendors in the market and are subject to inflation increases and only reflect the voting method, not other factors such as postage or staffing requirements. An eligible elector utilization rate of 25% (37,500 electors) was used.

Method	Estimated Costs
Paper Ballots and Tabulators	\$155,000
Mail-in Ballots (25% elector utilization rate)	\$131,000
Internet Voting as a Supplementary Method	\$167,500

**Does not include additional staffing resources, supplies, advertisements or taxes.*

Should Council approve another alternative voting method option, additional resources will be required to hire an additional contract staff to implement a new method in keeping with best practices and additional supports required to implement the new method(s). Should Council approve additional alternative methods without the required resourcing, the Clerk will be required to evaluate and reduce in-person voting services, including fewer locations, staffing and equipment, to stay within budget.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:

INFORM – This report has been posted to the City’s website with the agenda in advance of the council / committee meeting.

ENGAGE – To obtain as much feedback from the electorate as possible, several engagement campaigns were undertaken immediately after the 2022 election including, fifty (50) "Just-in-time" Customer Satisfaction Surveys; 293 Election Worker Surveys after the election, and an Engage Kitchener Voter Experience Survey with 410 responses from electors what they felt went well and what can be improved. Prior to the 2022 Municipal Election, the City launched an [online engagement survey regarding alternative voting methods](#) that was open from July 9, 2021 to August 31, 2021. With online and in-person responses the survey received 1025 responses overall and 1014 ranked the four different voting methods in the following order from most preferred to least preferred: internet, paper, mail-in ballots, and telephone.

CONSULT – GRAAC members were consulted with, as it relates to election accessibility measures including voting methods in February 2024 and again February 2025 on proposed pilot programs. Correspondence was issued and received by each of the school boards regarding any internal discussions regarding voting methods and positions taken. During the research phase of this work comparator municipalities were benchmarked and consulted including Oakville, Guelph, Hamilton, Kingston, Waterloo, Mississauga, Greater Sudbury, Cambridge, Barrie and Burlington. We also reached out to three cities that have a larger population than Kitchener; Vaughan, Brampton and Toronto.

COLLABORATE – Collaboration on implementation and risk assessment for the alternative methods occurred with city divisions including Technology Innovation and Services (TIS), By-law Enforcement and Equity and Anti-Racism. External agencies including GRAAC, and KW AccessAbility, were engaged to provide their input on the alternative methods being recommended.

PREVIOUS REPORTS/AUTHORITIES:

- [COR-2023-091](#) 2022 Election Overview
- *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*

APPROVED BY: Victoria Raab, General Manager, Corporate Services

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A – Election Alternative Voting Methods Risk Assessment