Aurora mulls switch to internet voting

By Brock Weir

Would you be more likely to vote for Mayor and Council next year if you could do so just by logging onto your home computer, phone or tablet?

That's the question Aurora's incumbent crop of elected officials will be mulling this week, considering a recommendation from municipal staff to move towards an internet-only voting system in time for the 2018 election.

According to a report before Council members this week by Deputy Clerk Samantha Yew, the recommendations stem from the citizen-led Governance Review Committee struck by Council earlier this year. If adopted, the system would reduce the current number of locations set up to assist those unable to vote from home and save money on staff and other resources.

?Increased adoption of internet voting has been the trend amongst Ontario municipalities,? says Ms. Yew. ?Only 12 municipalities utilized internet voting in 2003, and this number has increased to 91 in 2014, representing nearly 22 per cent of all Ontario municipalities. It is anticipated that this number will increase significantly for the 2018 municipal election.?

The popularity of internet voting can be largely chalked up to simple convenience, she says, allowing those registered to vote to do so from anywhere at any time, providing improved access to electors with disabilities, students who are away from home, seasonal residents, and shift workers. Internet browsers can also be adjusted to font size, by language, and converted into speech. Additional advantages include a reduction in paper and voter proxies.

With every advantage, however, comes a disadvantage and those outlined in the report include ?a perceived reduction in voting process oversight; availability of internet access for voters; quality of internet at voting locations; and security concerns around internet voting.?

Should internet-only be approved by General Committee this week and ratified by at the April 25 Council meeting, there will be consideration on how this program will be implemented.

In a ?one-step? authentication process, a package will be sent to each individual voter with instructions and a personal PIN number required for voting. This PIN will allow voters to log onto a special voting website to verify their information. Once completed, you will be free to vote.

In a ?two-step? process, there is an additional layer requiring a PIN number for registration, and a further package with a second PIN is sent before you can gain access to the vote.

?If internet voting is approved, a limited number of voting locations equipped with tablets or laptops would be available for voters without a device or internet access the ability to vote,? said Ms. Yew. ?These locations would also allow electors to be added to the voters list, and provide assistance to voters who are unfamiliar with the internet. These locations would be available during advance voting and on voting day, and elections staff will be present to provide appropriate support for voters. Alternative voting locations, such as seniors facilities, would be identified and available for voters who may not be able to attend a location or require assistance to vote. Staff would be available at these locations to provide appropriate support as required.

?Further support for voters would also be provided through the Town in the form of telephone assistance. Regular hours would be identified throughout the voting period during which staff would be available to answer phone calls regarding internet voting procedures.?

Aurora currently uses the tabulator system of voting which centres on a printed ballot with circles to be shaded in next to your candidates ? or referendum options ? of choice. These completed ballots are then fed into electronic tabulators for voting.

This has been the system in place since 2003 and this is not the first time there have been calls for change, whether it is to make the voting process more efficient, or to make it more convenient for people to take part in the polls and boost voter participation.

While there is a note of caution in the report over the concerns of election officials being unable to control the devices that could be used by voters across Aurora and that there is no actual evidence electronic voting increases voter turnout.

?The adoption of technology in elections continues to grow in popularity amongst Ontario municipalities,? concludes Ms. Yew. ?Although there are risks with implementing internet voting, staff support this option as enhancements such as improved convenience and accessibility, fewer required resources, and voting modernization would be beneficial to a range of voters and the Town.?