Hybrid voting system eyed again for 2022 election

The next municipal election is less than 18 months away, and preparations are underway for the 2022 vote.

This month, Council is poised to endorse a hybrid voting model, one which will once again give eligible Aurora voters a chance to cast their votes for Mayor, Council and Trustee online or in person. But, along with endorsing this model, a reduction in in-person polling stations could be in the offing, a possibility which raised some eyebrows around the General Committee table last week.

?Staff are proposing to use internet voting in the advanced voting period, with paper ballot voting being available on specific nights in the advanced period, and as the only option on election day,? said Town Clerk Mike de Rond on his report to Council, noting this will follow much the same pattern as the 2018 municipal election. ?While some may have considered the 2018 election to be a transition for the Town going from only a paper ballot in 2014 to full internet voting in 2022, the evidence suggests that the paper ballot is still popular in Aurora with two-thirds of voters choosing that option in 2018.

?Should the hybrid method be adopted, the election model will be very close to what residents experienced in 2018. Staff would aim to start the internet voting about 10 days before the election, while simultaneously offering a paper ballot option three to four nights during the week of October 16 ? 22, 2022. On election day, staff expect to have between 15 ? 20 voting locations in the Town where only a paper ballot will be provided.?

Should Council forge ahead with staff's recommendations, procedures for voting in a situation where the global pandemic is still prevalent are also accounted for.

?While staff are hopeful that the current pandemic will not significantly affect the 2022 municipal election, it is important that a plan be in place for the safe casting of votes at polling locations should this pandemic, or any other one, cause the need for safer distance measures than what would normally be in place,? said Mr. De Rond. ?Maintaining the secrecy of elections at physical polling locations requires significant space to ensure the voter is making their decision without worrying about being observed, which helps mitigate against physical distancing concerns. The pandemic plan will be focused on lineup control, routing of electors through polling locations and any contingency plans that need to be in place should a lockdown situation be in effect. The foremost concern will be to keep staff at polling locations as well as Town residents safe. Further to this, staff expect internet voting to help mitigate against larger-than-necessary crowds at voting locations.?

When the plan came before Council members last week, a number of concerns were addressed. While Councillor John Gallo questioned the fact that staff are recommending a single-source contract to get the job done ? in this case, with Dominion Voting Systems ? and ensuring systems were in place in the event of a by-election, Councillor Wendy Gaertner focused her questions on ensuring the vote was as accessible as possible.

?There is a thought of removing some of the customary polling stations to save a little bit of money,? she said. ?You have to keep in mind that the way they are now has really been considered to be accessible?and a lot of people are still going to do in-person voting. I still think it is important to the residents.?

Mr. De Rond says analysis hasn't yet been completed on which polling stations should stay and go, but said that there weren't ?too many lines? in the last municipal election or where there too may complaints.

?It's not that we want to have lines, that's for certain, but we thought there might be an opportunity to remove some locations,? he said. ?We had some that were within a kilometre of each other, sometimes even closer than that. We're talking between?one in four, probably. Hopefully not as many to cause an impact to the service level.?

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