

Internet voting approved for 2018 in "hybrid" model

By Brock Weir

Aurorans will be able to go to the polls from the comfort of their own homes in the 2018 Municipal Election.

Following a Council decision last week, Aurora will adopt a "hybrid" voting system which will allow eligible voters to cast their ballots online in advanced polls while giving people the option of coming out on Election Day itself to physically cast their vote. It was a decision that was hardly free of contention, ultimately coming down to a 7-2 vote, with Aurora's two youngest Councillors Paul Pirri and Jeff Thom being the loudest champions of traditional paper ballots.

The irony was not lost on other members of Council who championed electronic voting not only as the way of the future, but also as a way of opening the vote up to more people, whether they are physically unable to make it to a polling station or simply don't have time to make it before or after the daily commute.

They were nevertheless firm in their convictions.

Speaking against the recommendation, Councillor Thom cited a number of studies from British Columbia to the City of Toronto, to Australia recommending against internet voting to 2013. Despite the expansive staff report on different voting options pursued by other towns and cities, it did not address why places like Waterloo, Whitby and Guelph have either moved away from, or rejected, internet voting.

He also referenced recent security hacks, including one at Disney, as being a cause for concern when it comes to the safety of the vote.

"We all want everyone to be able to exercise their constitutional right to vote and I think is very sacred but we have to make very sure that we have the safest method possible to conduct our elections and we owe that to the residents," said Councillor Thom. "If one day every four years the people of Aurora have to put it in their calendar and say I am going to make efforts to vote I agree that it would be better for inclusivity for people with accessibility issues but I think the risks associated with internet voting don't outweigh the benefits. The status quo is fine to me."

In his report, however, Town Clerk Michael de Rond cautioned that no voting method is 100 per cent risk-free. While a hybrid voting system might be more expensive at first than either paper-only or internet-only methods, there are significant benefits in the end.

"There is no such thing as a perfect election," he said. "Unexpected issues always arise and staff are forced to think quickly about how to solve problems. These issues could manifest themselves in situations like temporary election staff not reporting on election day, a power outage, or any number of other hitches. Likewise, staff also accept that there is an inherent risk with any method of alternative voting. Our commitment to Council is to prepare as thoroughly as we can for the method of Council's choosing."

"Does the status quo of a paper ballot counted by vote tabulators create a problem? Staff's response would be no, as this is a proven model in this municipality to elect representatives. However, the addition of internet voting does enhance the democratic process for the residents of Aurora. By providing voters an additional option from the traditional paper ballot, the election becomes much more inclusive to the whole population of Aurora."

Ultimately, this was a deciding factor for Councillors like Wendy Gaertner who were not altogether enthusiastic about an internet model.

"I am going to vote for this because I believe that anything that can contribute to accessibility is the right way to go for this Council, so I will be in favour," she said. "I am not happy about it, but there it is!"

Others, however, were more fulsome in their support, including Mayor Geoff Dawe, who was in favour of internet voting at the outset.

For Councillor Michael Thompson, convenience was just one deciding factor with accessibility the other.

Some, he said, find it a challenge to get out to vote, particularly those with mobility issues and the cost of getting to the polling station could be an additional barrier to exercising their democratic rights.

"This option allows all a better opportunity to get out and vote," he said. "They may not exercise it, it might not approve numbers as some Councillors have alluded to, but it does create a more equal playing field and allows people the opportunity to vote who may have had challenges getting out in the past."

"I don't believe that internet voting in any way elevates the risk to the Town. We conduct a lot of online business. If someone wants to attack the Town through malware or a cyber security attack, having online voting or not will not increase or elevate our exposure level."

Added Councillor Joh Abel: ?We pay our taxes online, we should be able to vote online. This is where we're going. We're going to be online and using technology. This is where we're going with our lifestyle. I would be in favour of going hybrid. The safeguards will be in place.?

With a hybrid model in place, staff will be gauging its success next year. If the success is resounding, the Clerk noted there is a possibility there could be a further push to move towards 100 per cent electronic voting by the time of the 2022 municipal election.