REPORT

Clerk's Department

TO: **Mayor and Members of Council**

FROM: **Emily Elliott, Deputy Clerk and Debbie Leroux, Director of Legislative Services/Clerk**

DATE: **April 14, 2025**

REPORT: **CL-21/25**   **FILE NO.**

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SUBJECT: **2026 Municipal and School Board Election – Method of Voting/Alternate Voting Method(s)**

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BACKGROUND:

In April of 2021, staff put forward a report recommending that Council authorize the Clerk to use the Alternative Voting Methods of vote-by-mail with the addition of internet voting as a pilot for the 2022 Municipal Election. This recommendation was defeated by Council at the time. In 2023, Council directed that staff investigate internet voting once again, and the result of those efforts are outlined in this report.

The 2026 Ontario Municipal Elections will take place on Monday, October 26, 2026. As part of planning for the municipal election, Council is being asked to consider the various voting methods available for electors, as well as vote counting procedures.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the various voting methods and procedures and provide a recommendation for the voting method that Staff believes is best suited for the Township. If Council authorizes any method of voting and vote counting equipment beyond a traditional paper ballot/manual count, Staff will be required to bring a by-law forward authorizing the alternative voting method(s) and vote counting equipment at a future Council meeting for Council's consideration and approval.

DISCUSSION

Since 2000, the Township of Uxbridge has experienced a relatively high voter turnout compared to other Ontario municipalities. Voter turnout in Ontario municipal elections usually falls somewhere between 25 and 35 percent. Typically, Uxbridge has seen an average voter turnout of 50 percent or more in past municipal elections. However, the 2022 Election saw voter turnout fall to 39%. While Vote-By-Mail has been the Township's voting method of choice for many years, the dip in voter turnout in the previous election may signal that it is a good time to implement change.

Staff have taken many factors into consideration in preparing a recommendation to Council regarding the method of voting for the 2026 Municipal Election. Based on the considerations outlined in this report, staff are recommending that Council approve the use of internet voting as the alternative voting method for the 2026 Uxbridge Municipal Election.

RELEVANT LEGISLATION

The *Municipal Elections Act,1996*, as amended (the Act) governs all municipal elections and by-elections in Ontario. The Act is guided by these principles:

- Secrecy and confidentiality of the vote is paramount
- Election must be fair, unbiased and accessible to all voters
- Integrity of the process must be maintained throughout the election
- There should be certainty of the results (they reflect the votes cast)
- Voters and candidates are to be treated fairly and consistently.

Section 11(1) of the Act, establishes the Clerk's responsibility for conducting the Municipal Election and Section 11(2) establishes the Clerk's responsibility for:

a) Preparing for the election;
b) Preparing for and conducting a recount in the election;
c) Maintaining peace and order in connection with the election; and
d) Reporting to Council following the election respecting prevention of barriers and accommodations for electors and candidates with disabilities.

Section 42(1) of the Act, provides for Council to pass a by-law to:

a) Authorize the use of voting and vote-counting equipment; and
b) Authorize electors to use an alternative voting method.

Since the 2018 Ontario municipal elections, the Province has revoked O. Reg. 310/16, essentially preventing municipalities from conducting ranked ballot elections.

If an alternative voting method is approved, it is the Clerk's responsibility to establish an election model, which outlines if the alternative voting method(s) is/are used, when they will be used during the election (early voting, election day, etc.), and how they will be offered.

ELECTION BACKGROUND

The Township implemented the vote-by-mail method of election in 2000 and has continued to use this approach through the 2022 Election. In 2006, centralized automated vote tabulation equipment was introduced, which helped streamline and expedite the election results.

The following table summarizes Township election methods since 2000:

YEAR	VOTER TURNOUT	VOTING METHOD	TABULATION METHOD
2022	39.61%	Vote by mail	Vote Tabulation Machine
2018	50.93%	Vote by mail	Vote Tabulation Machine
2015 by-election	54.25%	Vote by mail	Vote Tabulation Machine
2014	50.68%	Vote by mail	Vote Tabulation Machine
2010	51.1%	Vote by mail	Vote Tabulation Machine
2006	49.9%	Vote by mail	Vote Tabulation Machine
2003	47.87%	Vote by mail	Manual Count
2000	40.87%	Vote by mail	Manual Count

In alignment with past practice, staff have engaged a service provider for Voter List Management services for the 2026 Election. Should Council decide not to authorize the exclusive use of internet voting, staff recommend returning to Vote by Mail, which will require that staff engage a supplier for the provision of vote by mail services and tabulation machines.

VOTING METHODS AVAILABLE

Traditional Paper Ballot

This is the 'classic' method of voting, used for both provincial and federal elections, where an elector attends a polling station and casts their vote by marking an 'X' next to the candidate they are voting for on a piece of paper (ballot). The Township could either require eligible electors to visit a specific polling station or allow electors to vote anywhere in the municipality. With either method, voters receive a Voter Notification Card with specific information about where they can vote, and what they will need to

cast their ballot. Council could also decide whether the votes be manually counted or counted using a vote tabulator.

Progressive legislation and advancements in technology have lessened the advantages to this method for the Township of Uxbridge. An elector may feel a sense of pride in exercising their democratic right of casting a ballot in person, or use it as a social occasion, however, these would be the only advantages that staff could outline in this case.

The disadvantages to this method are numerous. The first is the necessary hiring and training of staff to work at each polling station for advanced votes and on election day. This would be a significant cost to the municipality and come with no guarantees that the Township could even attract enough suitable candidates. A second disadvantage is securing voting locations as this would require cooperation from school boards to use areas within schools as polling stations, which can be challenging. Schools are preferred for polling stations due to the requirement that they be fully accessible. For other municipalities in recent municipal elections, there have been school boards that have demanded the municipality provide on-site security, at the sole cost of the municipality, and that the polling station not be in areas also used by the students.

Telephone Voting

In previous elections, telephone voting has been used by municipalities as an alternative to internet voting, particularly to accommodate individuals who may lack internet access or feel uncomfortable using computers. For example, since 2014, the Town of Ajax offered both internet and telephone voting as the only options for casting a ballot. Despite this, usage of the telephone option has been consistently low, with only 6% of voters choosing it.

Telephone voting allows electors to complete their ballot using any point-to-point phone connection by navigating an audio ballot. While the intention is to increase accessibility, the method is widely seen as outdated and problematic.

One of the most cited issues with telephone voting is the significant amount of time it takes to complete the audio ballot. In municipalities like Uxbridge, where voters must select from numerous positions such as Regional Chair, Mayor, Regional Councillor, Ward Councillor, and various school board candidates, the audio process can become lengthy and confusing. The sequence of races, number of choices, and review functions can lead to voter fatigue and disengagement.

Additionally, feedback from municipal Clerks has highlighted serious concerns. Many have reported unfavorable experiences, particularly pointing out the system's lack of security and insufficient audit capabilities in the event of a recount.

Despite its role in providing an alternative for some voters, the effectiveness and viability of telephone voting are increasingly being questioned due to its outdated nature and practical limitations.

Vote-by-Mail

This method has been used by the Township in every election since 2000. It involves mailing each qualified elector a ballot kit which contains a composite ballot (all races

the elector may vote in on one ballot), voter declaration form, secrecy envelope, and return mail envelope. The elector is provided a firm deadline in which all ballots should be mailed back to the Township, and the Township provides secure ballot casting locations up to 8:00 PM on Election Day. Counting votes can either be done manually or by centralized vote tabulators.

Many residents and staff are familiar with the processes surrounding this type of election. While vote-by-mail provides a much higher level of convenience and accessibility for electors over the traditional paper ballot method, staff believe that internet voting is the superior method for convenience, security and accessibility since it allows voters the flexibility to vote when they wish to, from their mobile or fixed devices.

The disadvantage to this system is that the Township has no control over errors made by Canada Post in getting the ballots to the residents and back to the Township by deadline dates. The vote-by-mail process is susceptible to the threat of a Canada Post strike (as was the case in the 2018 Municipal Election). Residents can also make mistakes such as forgetting to sign their voter declaration form or failing to return the voter declaration form.

Internet Voting

This method of voting has been in use in Ontario since 2003. According to data from the AMCTO, more than half (58%) of municipalities in Ontario used internet voting in the 2022 municipal election, marking a 16% increase in the use of internet voting compared to 2018.

Internet voting can be done in either one or two-step methods. In both methods, each elector would receive a Voter Information Package. The two-step method requires electors to register with the municipality where they may be asked questions to further authenticate their identity and then mailed or securely emailed a PIN. With the one-step method, the Voter Information Package would include a PIN so that the elector could immediately vote (when logging in with a PIN, the elector would be required to validate their date of birth and pass a captcha challenge to vote). Votes and voter identification are kept on separate servers at secured locations in Canada and can be tabulated within minutes at the close of voting. The system is constantly monitored by the service provider to ensure the security and integrity of the election. Electors who cast their ballot electronically are instantly checked off the voter's list, restricting them from voting a second time using another method, such as vote by mail (if a hybrid voting method is chosen by Council).

Despite some false claims, online voting in Ontario is safe and secure, according to multiple academic studies conducted in Ontario, as well as the demonstrable success of internet voting in many Ontario municipalities over the past 22 years. In a 2018 threat assessment by the Communications Security Establishment (CSE) on cyber threats to Canada's democracy, the CSE found that the likelihood of a cyber threat on a municipal election in Ontario was low, and that internet voting was found to be a more secure voting method than vote-by-mail.

Online Electoral Voting Standards are being developed by the Digital Governance Standards Institute and are currently in the review stages. In the meantime, the internet voting providers staff spoke with explained that regardless of formal

standards, vendors are highly concerned with cyber security and the integrity of their systems. Vendors explained that they hold cyber security certification, constantly monitor for anomalies, conduct frequent updates, and "battle test" their systems.

Internet voting also promotes inclusivity by allowing individuals with accessibility needs to cast a ballot independently without having to leave their home. Internet voting promotes sustainability by reducing the carbon footprint through eliminating the need to travel to a voting location and reduces the amount of paper required to support elections. Further, moving to internet voting presents operational efficiencies, such as reduced staffing levels for ballot handling and tabulation leading up to and including Election Day.

In years previous, there were significant concerns regarding access to quality internet connection in rural areas of the Township. In September 2023, fibre-to-the-home was commenced by the Region through the Durham OneNet initiative for Uxbridge and Brock, marking significant improvements in internet connectivity for those in rural areas of the municipality. Internet voting depends upon a reliable internet connection, and the Township is in a much better place than ever before in terms of connectivity. Any residents who continue to experience an unreliable or weak internet connection could participate in internet voting by voting from their mobile device while in an area with a stronger internet connection, or by visiting a Township facility and utilizing a Township computer kiosk that will be available for use throughout the Township during the voting period.

Ballot on Demand

Ballot on demand involves printing a ballot at the time it is needed, rather than the ballots being pre-printed in large quantities beforehand. This method requires staff availability to print and process the ballots deposited in the ballot box, and it also requires the procurement of specialized software, specialized paper and dedicated printers at polling locations or election offices that can generate customized ballots for each voter as they check in. This method would only be feasible as an add-on to one of the other methods described and could not be used on its own.

Hybrid Voting Method

Potential Hybrid Options:

- Internet Voting and Vote by Mail: This method would involve significant financial and staff resources, essentially duplicating efforts to support two standalone methods. The costs associated with each method are expanded on later in this report.

- Internet Voting and Telephone Voting: As described above, staff are of the opinion that telephone voting is minimally used, is cumbersome to implement, and offers a poor user experience.

- Internet Voting and Paper Ballot on Demand: This method would create less of a burden on staff than either of the other hybrid options, but it still requires additional equipment, staffing resources and training, and may contribute to increased margin for human error. It also would result in higher costs to deliver

the Election as a platform program for the service has to be purchased along with tabulating requirements ie centralized tabulators or manual count. Both of these tabulation methods require staff to carry out and manage the process.

Staff have evaluated the viability of using multiple methods simultaneously, however, staff are of the opinion that any combination of methods will duplicate staff time and costs and result in a complicated process with additional room for error during consolidation of results. Therefore, it is recommended that Council decide on one method only. Staff are suggesting that the method of choice be solely internet voting.

NORTH DURHAM COLLABORATION

Staff have been meeting regularly with the Township of Brock and the Township of Scugog to discuss a coordinated approach that best meets the needs of north Durham residents. These meetings between Clerks Department staff have included demonstration sessions with numerous vendors, and input from other municipalities.

SECURITY/RISK & RISK MITIGATION

All election models (paper, vote-by-mail, touch screen, tabulators, telephone, online) have inherent risks. It is important for election administrators to identify, understand and manage each of the risks involved in any method of voting.

Fraud/Coercion

Online or vote-by-mail voting does not relieve voters, candidates or others from acting in accordance with the Act (Section 42) which states that no person shall:

- Interfere or attempt to interfere with an elector who is marking the ballot.
- Obtain or attempt to obtain information about how a voter intends to vote or has voted.
- Communicate any information about how a voter intends to vote or has voted.

This means that even when forms of absentee voting are used, it is still a serious offence under the Elections Act to commit voter fraud, including voting on someone else's behalf or coercing someone to vote for a particular set of candidates.

Online Security

With respect to internet voting, threats of computer viruses or hacker-orchestrated "denial of service" attacks could compromise an election and public confidence in the electoral process. Mitigation strategies such as requiring a third-party audit of the vendor platform, requiring a vendor threat assessment monitoring tool running during the duration of the voting period, robust security protocols for access to the online voting platform, and comprehensive, active communication of penalties associated with election fraud, would mitigate security risks.

Access

Naturally, there is a "digital divide" between those who have home computers with a reliable internet connection and those who do not. Increased and enhanced connectivity over the past few years has made internet access more available and reliable across the municipality and has positioned the Township in a better place to offer internet voting to residents.

It is understood that there remain residents who do not have access to a computer or internet-capable device. Should Council determine that they wish to proceed with online voting, staff would offer public computer terminals at accessible locations where residents could vote if they did not have a home computer, smart phone, or reliable internet access. The libraries are equipped with numerous computer terminals to provide public access to computers. Internet voting providers interviewed by staff indicated compliance with AODA standards.

Town Hall would be available for the public to attend and use kiosks throughout the entire voting period. Extended hours of operation are always offered during this period, i.e. after hours and weekends, to allow electors an additional opportunity to vote or to seek assistance should they require it. Community Halls would also be set up for internet voting access to the public on selected dates and times to allow access by the public. Communications campaigns will be focused on educating the voters on the process along with what they should expect as part of the process.

Voters' List

In the previous election, there were ongoing province-wide concerns about the accuracy of the Voters' List. Recently, responsibility for compiling data for the Voters' List has changed from MPAC to Elections Ontario. While much of the integration of data has been transferred to Elections Ontario, there is still work being done to complete this data hand-off. As in past elections, the Township will host extensive opportunities for List revisions within the community leading up to the Election and will promote Elections Ontario's Voter Registration service tool for residents to confirm, update or add their information to the Register for provincial, municipal, DSSAB and school board elections. The Township will also explore opportunities for changes to be made to the Voters' List electronically through two or three-step voter authentication methods. Staff have always implemented a very robust Communications Strategy to encourage early review by the public to assist with cleansing the list.

Voter Confusion

Staff are committed to making the transition to internet voting, should Council approve of this action, as smooth as possible by developing and implementing a robust communication plan directed at voters. Staff will also commit to having a strong presence in the community in the weeks leading up to the election to assist residents with any questions or concerns they may have regarding the process.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Township has approximately $170,000 budgeted for the 2026 Election.

General Costs:

The cost associated with Elector List Management totals $9,950 for the 2026 Election. The Township would also need to cover wage costs associated with hiring an Elections Coordinator, the costs associated with posting notices in the newspaper, as well as signage printing costs.

Internet Voting Costs:

It would cost the Township approximately $60,000 to administer the internet voting service. This cost includes online voting instructions, the online voting platform, and associated services necessary to carry out internet voting, including Canada Post mailing costs. Some vendors are willing to offer a discounted rate if multiple municipalities in the region contract for the same vendor. This could be an opportunity to achieve cost savings and strengthen collaboration across the region.

The Township would need to invest in approximately eight laptops to facilitate voting kiosks at Township locations. This would cost a total of approximately $10,850 including tax. It is important to note, however, that following the election, these laptops would be absorbed into the Township's laptop inventory to be dispersed amongst staff as needed.

Vote by Mail Costs:

Canada Post Business Reply Mail costs $1.23 per elector, each way. Therefore, the estimated costs associated with mailing the Voter Information Package out to electors, and receiving their ballot back to our office would be $41,756.

The cost to lease tabulators to count mailed-in ballots would be an estimated $33,669.70, which also includes ballot printing, election management software, support services and training.

FUTURE/ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Though Uxbridge has had obvious success with vote-by-mail, there is still a need for the Township to innovate and use new technology that benefits residents. In 2022, 58% of municipalities in Ontario successfully carried out some form of online voting. The Township should take this opportunity to modernize and align with the majority.

Council should be assured that internet voting practices and technology have evolved since the previous election, contributing to a more secure environment and enhancing overall trust of this method.

Council should note that approving alternative voting methods does not preclude staff from offering some opportunity for in-person voting at a Town Hall kiosk in the 2026 election model. We recognize that there are residents that appreciate the opportunity to come into a Township office to vote in person.

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

The recommendations in this report align with the following strategic priorities:
Good Governance:
1. Deliver accountable, transparent government by delivering a high standard of customer service excellence and by communicating to engage residents and share regular updates on the initiatives underway across the Township.
2. Excel at operational efficiency and effectiveness by identifying strategic technologies and process modernization to deliver improved services and programs.

4. Demonstrate fiscal responsibility and continue to offer value for money.
5. Commit to ethical, responsible and sustainable practices by consulting stakeholders and working collaboratively to address the needs of the community, and by integrating accessibility, sustainability, safety and inclusivity into decision making and project implementation at all levels.

Community Engagement:
4. Promote resident engagement in our community by identifying opportunities to enhance community engagement.

Community Well-Being:
2. Enhance community accessibility by continuing to identify opportunities to improve accessibility throughout the municipality and by advocating for community-wide accessibility improvements through programming and education.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Report CL-21/25 of Emily Elliott, Deputy Clerk and Debbie Leroux, Director of Legislative Services/Clerk be received for information;

AND THAT Council authorize the Clerk to use the Alternative Voting Method of internet voting as a pilot for the 2026 Municipal Election;

AND THAT, in accordance with Section 42 (1) (b) of the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, as amended, Council direct staff to prepare the necessary by-law authorizing the use of an alternative voting method;

AND THAT Council direct staff to sole source the purchase of an Election delivery service regardless of the alternative voting method selected.

Respectfully Submitted by:

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Emily Elliott   Debbie Leroux
Deputy Clerk   Director of Legislative Services/Clerk