



## Staff Report

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**Report To:** Council  
**Report From:** Jamie Eckenswiller, Director of Legislative Services/Clerk  
**Meeting Date:** December 3, 2024  
**Subject:** 2026 Election Voting Method

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### Recommendations:

THAT in consideration of staff report '2026 Election Voting Method', Council directs staff to bring forward a bylaw to authorize internet and telephone voting as the voting method for the 2026 municipal and school board election.

### Highlights:

- The next municipal election will be held on Monday, October 26, 2026.
- The *Municipal Elections Act, 1996* requires municipal councils to pass a bylaw authorizing the use of alternative voting by May 1, 2026.
- Alternative voting methods such as internet and telephone voting are the least expensive and most customer service-oriented method for the elector.
- Internet and telephone voting was utilized in the 2018 and 2022 elections with great success.
- A paper ballot election is the most expensive option and has a number of logistical challenges.
- Given the superior convenience and accessibility; financial considerations and constraints on staff capacity; the support for climate change initiatives (does not require excessive paper use or physical travel to a polling station); the difficulty recruiting skilled election workers; and the positive experience of the 2022 election, staff recommend that Council adopt internet and telephone voting again for the 2026 election.
- Other voting methods, including vote by mail and paper ballots, are more expensive, more time-consuming for staff and the elector, and less convenient for the elector.

### Previous Report/Authority:

None.

## **Analysis:**

Municipal and school board elections must be held every four years and are administered by the Clerk as Returning Officer, pursuant to the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, S.O. 1996, C.32 (the “MEA”). A list of key dates for candidates in the 2026 municipal election are attached to this report. Beginning in 2024, the Chief Electoral Officer (Elections Ontario) has taken over the voters’ list responsibility from the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) and will manage a single register of electors for both provincial and municipal elections. The voters’ list for each municipal election will be prepared using data from the [Provincial Register of Electors](#) (the “Register”) maintained by Elections Ontario. Clerks staff are cautiously optimistic that these developments will positively impact the quality of the data that forms the voters’ list.

In 1996, the MEA was amended to permit the use of alternative voting methods and tabulation equipment in lieu of, or in addition to the traditional paper ballot system of voting. This change was viewed by many Ontario municipalities as a positive change to enable greater opportunity and access for both resident and non-resident electors. The MEA requires that a bylaw authorizing an alternative voting method must be passed by May 1, 2026. However, it is vital that Clerk’s staff begin the groundwork for the election in 2025 and therefore require direction from Council on the voting method to be employed.

## **Voting Methods**

Several voting method options are available for conducting the 2026 municipal and school board elections including an internet and telephone voting system, a paper ballot system using optical scan vote tabulating devices, a vote by mail system, or a combination of multiple voting methods.

### **Internet and Telephone Voting (Recommended method)**

In 2018, survey data from the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers of Ontario (AMCTO) indicated that the use of alternative voting methods by municipalities was growing, with the most popular alternative method reported by respondents being internet voting. The survey indicated that the use of internet voting within municipalities in Ontario is growing rapidly from 44 using this method in 2010, to 231 in 2022; this trend is expected to increase once again for the 2026 municipal election. Internet voting is one part of an increasing trend to modernize elections. As of 2018, at the local level, municipalities in Canada have deployed online voting in more elections than anywhere else in the world.

With advancements in technology, security, and the expansion of internet availability, internet voting is becoming increasingly popular, with the potential to reduce costs in numerous areas, such as training, administration, staffing, and resources. After the 2014

Municipal Election, researchers from the University of Toronto and the Centre for e-Democracy conducted an in-depth study regarding use of internet voting as an alternative voting method. The report studied internet voters, candidates, and election administration officials, and the primary rationale for adopting internet voting was to enhance accessibility, improve voter turnout and add convenience for voters. Conclusions noted that, overall, users (administrators and electors) found the system to be convenient, accessible, straightforward, and private with 95 percent of the respondents indicating that they were satisfied with the online voting process.

Internet and telephone voting is designed to be user-friendly, accommodating various accessibility needs, and ensuring that all voters can participate easily and securely. Internet and telephone voting allow electors to cast their ballots from the comfort of their homes or any location with internet or telephone access. In early October of an election year, each elector receives a personal voter notification letter containing information to access the voting system, including:

- a. Access credentials (e.g. a unique identification number and PIN);
- b. The URL and telephone number for the voting system; and
- c. Voting information such as the candidates running for office, the location of voting centres (for those who want to congregate in public to vote or those requiring assistance), legal requirements to vote, contact information for inquiries, etc.

When the voting period opens, electors will enter their unique credentials and follow a series of prompts to make their selections, review their choices, and submit their vote. The system ensures privacy and security by encrypting the connection and verifying the voter's identity through the unique code.

Internet voting is designed to fully verify voter intent by disallowing unintentionally spoiled ballots and, provide warning prompts in relation to offices that may be under-voted or left blank. Completing an online ballot is similar to marking a hard copy ballot.

Telephone voting follows a similar process. Voters receive a secure access code and a phone number to call. Upon dialing in, they enter their code and follow a series of voice prompts to cast their vote. The telephone system is designed to be straightforward, guiding voters through each step and confirming their selections before final submission.

Voting centres will be available for electors to visit where they can cast their vote electronically, as well as to promote the election and assist voters with the following services:

- a. Adding electors to the voters' list;
- b. Providing information on the election process;
- c. Offering access to computers for voting on-site; and
- d. Assisting electors with voting where requested.

On election day, voting closes at 8:00 p.m., however, electors that are already at a voting centre or in the internet or telephone voting system are able to complete their voting session. Results are made available at the close of the polls, meaning that the outcome of the election will be known moments after 8:00 p.m.

Staff recommend that Council approve internet and telephone voting as the voting method for the 2026 election, as it best supports:

- Superior customer service by providing the most flexibility and opportunity for participation;
- Simplicity and privacy;
- Improved accessible voting options;
- Elimination of spoiled ballots (and warnings for under-votes);
- Sound accuracy of the count;
- Participation by non-resident electors;
- Utilizing the most skilled election staff because of the small number of staff required to be hired, trained, and managed;
- Timely election results;
- Building on public familiarity with the process (this method was used in both the 2018 and 2022 West Grey municipal and school board elections);
- Building on staff familiarity with the process and related procedures;
- Climate change initiatives by reducing reliance on paper and vehicles;
- Cost effectiveness.

### **Benefits of Internet and Telephone Voting:**

#### **Customer Service**

- Provides the most flexibility and opportunity for participation;
- Allows for a longer voting period (10 days) and 24 hours per day voting until Monday, October 26, 2026, at 8:00 p.m.;
- Electors can vote in the privacy of their own home or anywhere in the world;
- Electors can vote by telephone, smartphone, tablet or computer;
- Weather and health events, such as a pandemic, do not affect voting;
- Voting centres are available throughout the voting period to provide assistance and to allow voters to congregate in a public place to vote.

#### **Accessibility**

- For voters with different abilities this method supports independence, dignity, integration and equal opportunity;
- Voters can use their personal telephones or computers with accessibility features including high volume, headphones and talk-to-you (TTY) features;
- No need to travel or navigate polling stations;

- Voting centres will be available in accessible locations with access to ample parking. These locations provide electors who want to vote in person with the greatest access as they will be available throughout the 10-day voting period.

### **Voter Education**

- West Grey can build on the familiarity with the system from the 2018 and 2022 elections;
- Voting centres will be set up throughout the voting period to assist voters with general questions, registration and voting.

### **Proxies**

- This method removes the need for proxies and enables absent voters to exercise their voting rights by themselves.

### **Advance Polls**

- A longer voting period removes the need for advance polls and offers more time – 24/7 voting – for the voting period.

### **Accuracy of Count**

- The system prevents over-voting, warns for under-voting, and does not enable a voter to mark the ballot in an unclear manner;
- The count with this method is 100 percent accurate – there is no human error component or interpretation component to the count;
- No risk of spoiled ballots or unclear voter intent – every ballot counts.

### **Timing of Results**

- Complete results are available moments after polls close.

### **Staffing and Resources**

- Temporary part-time staff required is significantly reduced, along with associated training time;
- Full-time staff resources dedicated to election functions are significantly reduced, particularly staff in the Clerks and Finance departments, as well as the human resources function.

### **Climate Change Initiatives**

- Vastly reduces the amount of paper because there are no printed ballots or voter kits;
- Reduces the reliance on transportation because only a small portion of voters travel in order to vote.

## **Costs**

- This is the most economical method due to the small election staff, lower postage costs, and paperless format – internet and telephone voting is estimated to cost \$50,000 in 2026.
- By 2026, there will be a sufficient reserve balance to conduct an election using internet and telephone voting without having to raise additional tax dollars over and above what is allocated annually.

## **Concerns with Internet and Telephone Voting:**

### **Voter Turnout**

- Voter turnout in West Grey in the 2022 municipal election was 34.5 percent, slightly above the provincial average of 34 percent;
- Research to date suggests no clear evidence that method of voting has an impact on voter turnout. The more influential factor for municipal elections is the number of mayoral candidates;
- While many desire a high voter turnout and perceive it as evidence of the legitimacy of the voting system, a low voter turnout can be a reflection of voter contentment about likely winners.

### **Access**

- According to Statistics Canada’s Canadian Internet Use Study published in 2023:
  - “Year over year, various trends in technology reflect a smarter and more connected lifestyle, benefiting both the younger and older generations.”
  - Approximately 93.9 percent of the Canadian population have a smart phone and 95 percent are connected to the internet.
  - More than three in four Canadians (78 percent) use the internet to conduct general online banking.
- Voting centres and the West Grey Public Library provide access to computers for those who do not have personal access and who prefer to use computers over the telephone;
- Voting centres are designed to emulate the paper ballot experience for those who wish to congregate in a public venue to vote.

### **Security**

- Risks are mitigated with comprehensive security controls, including secure data centres, access controls, data confidentiality, and data integrity;
- West Grey employs a two-step authentication process;
- Once an elector has voted they are struck from the voters’ list and are unable to log into the system;

- When access credentials are issued to a voter, any previously issued credentials are automatically deactivated;
- No attempts at voter fraud or other process challenges which would sufficiently influence the outcome of an election have been reported by Ontario municipalities using internet and telephone voting;
- West Grey did not receive any allegations of voter fraud in 2018 or 2022;
- In 2022, Simply Voting’s platform was rigorously evaluated by staff before implementation. Staff continues to be confident that the system provides a secure service;
- Testing and auditing will be performed throughout the various stages of implementation to ensure the validity and accuracy of the system is maintained.

### **Alternative Methods (Not Recommended)**

#### **Vote by Mail**

Staff consider vote by mail to be inferior to internet and telephone voting for West Grey. There is a shortened voting window due to the mail-in date, a higher estimated cost, greater risk for spoiled ballots, and full reliance on the postal system (a third party with no contractual obligations to the Municipality) which undertook rotating strikes during the 2018 election period.

For vote by mail, electors must first confirm they are on the voters’ list. Once confirmed, electors would receive a voting kit in late September of an election year containing a voting instruction sheet, a composite ballot, a ballot security envelope, a voter declaration form with barcode, and a prepaid return envelope. Electors complete the declaration, mark the ballot, place the ballot in the secrecy envelope, seal the secrecy envelope, and then place the secrecy envelope and declaration into the return envelope and mail back or drop off at the municipal office. There is a “guaranteed mail return date” after which electors are advised to use personal delivery of the return envelope to ensure receipt at the municipal office by close of voting on Election Day. As return envelopes are received at the municipal office, they are opened to confirm the declaration is signed, the secrecy envelope is sealed, and that there is an equal number of declarations and secrecy envelopes in the return envelope. Voters are then manually struck from the voters’ list and ballots are secured. On Election Day, eligible ballots are counted by an electronic tabulator. When all ballots have been reviewed and eligible ballots counted, the tabulators will be closed and each will provide a tally that, combined, will be the election results.

#### **Benefits and Drawbacks of Vote by Mail:**

#### **Customer Service and Accessibility**

- Vote by mail has the ability to enhance the convenience of voting for some resident and non-resident electors, but some may find it less convenient as there will be a

“guaranteed mail return date” prior to Election Day to ensure receipt by close of polls;

- Candidates will have access to less accurate lists of electors who have voted due to the lag in mailing time;
- This method may be more or less accessible than a traditional paper ballot, depending on individual electors’ abilities – it is less accessible than internet and telephone voting.

### **Staffing and Resources**

- Vote by mail reduces costs associated with staffing and voting locations and reduces need to recruit large numbers of skilled election staff;
- More staff time will be involved as this is not a method of voting that has been used in the past; staff will need to develop a new voting program for the Municipality including new policies and procedures, forms, candidate guides, training material, and communication tools.

### **Proxies and Advance Polls**

- Removes the need for proxy voting and advance polls.

### **Accuracy of Count**

- There is no ability to interact with a voter using vote by mail so the risk of ballots being rejected is greater because of inadvertent voter errors such as over-voting or voters not including the signed declaration with their return envelope;
- Tabulators ensure an accurate count of all eligible ballots.

### **Voter Education**

- Vote by mail would be another new voting method for electors in the Municipality and would require ample voter education initiatives to mitigate the potential for spoiled ballots.

### **Climate Change Initiatives**

- Vote by mail is extremely paper intensive as the voter kits require multiple envelopes, a page of instructions, and a ballot;
- The process of voting remotely reduces the need for voters to drive to polling stations. If the guaranteed mail return date is missed, electors would be required to drive to the municipal office to physically drop off their ballot.

### **Security**

- Electors may mistakenly receive ballots intended for other individuals;
- Electors may mistakenly disclose their identity by returning ballots in the wrong envelope;



- Full reliance on the postal system to disseminate blank ballots and return completed ballots creates risk. The postal strike in 2018 caused a great deal of uncertainty for electors and municipal staff.

### **Cost**

- Costs are estimated to be approximately \$90,000;
- Costs are lower than for a paper ballot election due to reduction in required election workers and facility rentals, but higher than internet and telephone voting due to the high cost of postage and voter kits;
- If there was a postal strike these costs would increase, as a robust advertising campaign would be necessary to explain where and how to return voter kits and additional locations around the Municipality would need to be secured and staffed for the return of voter kits;
- By 2026, the election reserve balance will be approximately \$50,000, meaning that there will be an insufficient amount of funds available to conduct a vote by mail election without increasing taxes in 2025 and 2026 to make up the approximate \$40,000 shortfall.

### **Paper Ballots**

Staff do not recommend that Council adopt paper ballots as staff consider this method to be inferior to internet and telephone voting and vote by mail. This position is based on the high-cost implications; the additional resources and full-time and part-time staff required; the challenges associated with recruiting, training, and managing a large election staff; the climate change impact, the risk of spoiled ballots, and later/delayed election results.

This is the method that was used in 2014. While the election was a success, recruiting skilled workers for the 80+ positions was a major challenge. The other challenge was finding accessible space that offered ample parking and could accommodate large crowds.

In a paper ballot election, electors must first confirm they are on the voters' list. In early October of an election year, each elector receives a voter notice advising of voting options and identification requirements. Electors may vote at an advance poll or at any voting location on Election Day. Electors are provided a ballot and secrecy envelop and are stricken from the voters' list. Electors mark their ballot and have it fed through a tabulator. At the close of polls, the tabulators are closed and each provides a tally that, combined, are the election results. Results in 2014 were provided within a few hours of the close of polls.

## **Benefits and Drawbacks of Paper Ballots:**

### **Customer Service and Accessibility**

- Provides less flexibility and opportunity for participation than internet and telephone voting;
- Provides a very limited voting period (Election Day and select advance polls);
- Electors must travel to a voting location;
- More difficult for non-resident electors to participate;
- Requires persons with disabilities to bring an aide or ask for assistance or use assistive voting equipment available at only one voting location i.e. voting paddles or sip and puff devices.

### **Staffing and Resources**

- A very large election staff is required to support voting activities, and all of them require significant training;
- This method requires highly skilled staff members who are comfortable working in excess of a 12-hour day, have exceptional attention to detail, and have superior customer service skills. This skill set is very difficult to find in large numbers for such a short contract;
- This method significantly impacts the capacity of staff in the Clerks department, as well as finance and other human resource functions. It is important to note that the large number of staff involved makes this election method far more labour-intensive. An election coordinator would be needed to address the additional workload to ensure that staff can maintain their day-to-day responsibilities;
- Voting locations need to be rented/leased, assembled, and dismantled.

### **Proxies and Advance Voting**

- Proxies will be needed for this method and advance poll dates will be selected.

### **Accuracy of the Count**

- Use of tabulators provides some controls by confirming when a voter has over-voted, voted in an unclear manner, or left a contest blank on the ballot – if an error is discovered, the voter may revise the ballot or direct the tabulator operator to cast the ballot “as is”.

### **Voter Education**

- With the last two elections using internet and telephone voting, additional voter education will be required.

### **Climate Change Initiatives**

- This method is the least supportive of climate change initiatives as it relies heavily on paper and requires all electors to travel to a polling location.

## Security

- Paper ballots offer a strong audit trail;
- The high number of staff increases the potential for human error.

## Costs

- This is the costliest method with an estimate for 2026 of \$130,000.
- This high cost is due to the large number of election staff and related training, equipment, and supplies.
- By 2026, the election reserve balance will be approximately \$50,000, meaning that there will be an insufficient amount of funds available to conduct a vote by mail election without increasing taxes in 2025 and 2026 to make up the approximate \$80,000 shortfall.

Staff consider vote by mail to be inferior to internet and telephone voting for West Grey. There is a shortened voting window due to the mail-in date, a significantly higher estimated cost, greater risk for spoiled ballots, and full reliance on the postal system (a third party with no contractual obligations to the Municipality) which undertook rotating strikes during the 2018 election period.

## Financial Implications:

The financial implications for the 2026 election are outlined throughout the report and will be determined by the method chosen by Council. The estimated costs for each voting method are shown below:

|                        |           |
|------------------------|-----------|
| Internet and telephone | \$50,000  |
| Vote by mail           | \$90,000  |
| Paper ballot           | \$130,000 |

The estimates above include contingencies for legal advice, compliance audits and other costs that may or may not be required. For instance, in 2022 it cost West Grey \$46,000 to conduct the election because there were no complex legal issues or compliance audits.

Funds are placed in an election reserve each year. In 2023 and 2024, \$12,500 was placed in reserve each year. If this amount continues to be reserved in 2025 and 2026 the election reserves for the 2026 election will be \$50,000.

Should Council opt for vote by mail or a paper ballot election, a significant increase to election reserves in 2025 and 2026 will be required.

## **Communication Plan:**

The decision of Council will be integrated into a communication plan for the municipal and school board elections and may include media releases, flyers with municipal mail-outs, a dedicated website, voter information sessions, and advertisements in the newspaper and on the radio.

## **Consultation:**

Chief Administrative Officer

Director of Finance/Treasurer

Clerks at various Ontario municipalities

## **Attachments:**

- AMCTO 2022 Post Election Survey Report
- Election 2026 Key Dates for Candidates

## **Recommended by:**

Jamie Eckenswiller, AOMC, AMP

Director of Legislative Services/Clerk

## **Submission approved by:**

Michele Harris, Chief Administrative Officer

For more information on this report, please contact Jamie Eckenswiller, Director of Legislative Services/Clerk at [clerk@westgrey.com](mailto:clerk@westgrey.com) or 519-369-2200 Ext. 229.