

DATE: April 22, 2025

REPORT NO: LLS-02-2025

SUBJECT: **2026 Municipal and School Board Election Alternative Voting Methods**

CONTACT: Justin Paylove, Manager, Legislative Services/Clerk

OVERVIEW:

- This purpose of this report is to provide information with respect to the upcoming 2026 Municipal and School Board election being held on October 26, 2026 regarding alternative methods and other election related information.

RECOMMENDATION:

- (1) That Recommendation Report LLS-02-25, dated April 22, 2025 titled “Alternative Voting Methods, for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election”, be received; and,
- (2) That, Council approves of the following voting methods for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election.
 - Paper Ballots with Tabulators (traditional)
 - Internet Voting
- (3) That, a By-law be adopted to provide for the alternative voting methods and to permit advance voting as per the Municipal Election Act, 1996; and,
- (4) That, Council authorizes the Clerk to proceed in a Joint Municipal RFP process with interested local area municipalities for an election voting method and equipment for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election.

ALIGNMENT TO STRATEGIC PLAN:

Theme #6

Efficient, Fiscally Responsible Operations

- The Township of West Lincoln is a lean organization that uses sustainable, innovative approaches and partnerships to streamline processes, deliver services and manage infrastructure assets.

BACKGROUND:

Section 42 of the MEA requires municipalities to decide by May 1st of the election year (in this case May 1, 2026), the method and manner of voting and vote-counting equipment to utilize, and whether to employ alternative voting methods (such as voting by mail, telephone, or online).

In addition to the requirement for a by-law as noted, if Council authorizes the use of an alternative voting method, it is further required that Council authorize through by-law the use of advance voting and proxy voting.

As Council is aware, the establishment of voting method(s) to be used in a municipal election is the responsibility of Council, and the procedure and forms for the use of alternative voting methods and vote-counting equipment is the responsibility of the Township Clerk, as the Elections Returning Officer for the Township of West Lincoln.

While final costs were higher for the 2022 election compared to the 2018 election, West Lincoln saw a substantial 5.09% rise in voter turnout. The rest of the Niagara Region, and most Ontario municipalities, largely saw a decline in already low voter turnout. West Lincoln was the only municipality in the Niagara Region that saw a rise in voter turnout compared to the 2018 election. This was without a doubt largely to do with West Lincoln's investment in Online Voting, which was an outstanding success that saw 44% of voters choosing to vote online instead of traditional paper ballots.

While the deadline is May 1, 2026, for municipalities to establish their voting methods and/or use of vote-counting equipment, it is important that municipalities are proactive and determine their method in advance of this deadline. This will ensure that vendors are secured to provide the required service(s) and that the Township can potentially benefit from cost sharing with other local municipalities within Niagara Region.

CURRENT SITUATION:

The Clerk is tasked with reviewing all available voting methods, and recommending that Council adopt voting methods that would best serve the community. There are five (5) voting methods used in Ontario municipal elections:

- Paper Ballot with Tabulators (Traditional);
- Internet Voting;
- Vote by Mail;
- Telephone Voting; and
- Drive-Thru Voting

Below at a high level, is a synopsis of each voting method:

Traditional In-person voting has the advantages of confidentiality, maximum integrity, and a sense of democratic duty and event. It is a fact that errors and omissions in the

Voter's List can be amended and immediately rectified at the polling station. However, the negatives include voter investment of time & expense, bad weather's effect on voter turnout, and inconvenience for absentee landowners. Most importantly though, the goal of 'accessibility' is not achieved if a voter is homebound due to illness, old age, or physical impairment. Additionally, the health challenges and lessons learned during the pandemic are a detriment.

Internet voting simply cannot be beat for ease and speed for electors who have the required level of technology and skill. However, there exists a generational disparity in computer sophistication - which is unfair and biased. Additionally, there is a legitimate concern for rural internet challenges. This can be mitigated by only offering internet voting for the advance voting days only.

Phone voting is attractive due to the near universal presence of telephones in Canadian households, however an older style rotary phone would preclude this. Telephones certainly level the playing field with regard to technological comfort and familiarity. Further, it would be a speedy process for voters, and likely cost effective for the municipality. However, the absence of an opportunity to validate voter identification again reduces the integrity of the outcome as well as the inability for a manual recount due to the lack of having a paper ballot.

Vote by mail is a somewhat cumbersome process of two way mailing, and can be an expensive undertaking for the Township. It does have a high degree of confidentiality, and is time and cost efficient for voters as it is effectively vote from home. Some of these issues/costs can be overcome by offering an application process for vote by mail as the federal government did for the election held on April 28, 2025. In this way only those who want to vote by mail would be sent a package; money will not be wasted by sending every voter in the municipality a ballot kit. Admittedly there also exists the possibility of one person completing ballots for the entire household as well as the need to rely on the delivery of ballot kits and the ballot and declaration being returned to the municipality either prior to or on Election Day and ballots being lost or damaged in the mail.

Curbside/Drive Thru Voting allows eligible electors to attend a specified voting location (poll) and remain in their vehicle until prompted to drive up to the curbside registration desk. From the registration desk, election officials review all the elector's VIN and ID in the vehicle, striking each elector off the voters' list. The driver is then directed to a designated parking space where all electors in the vehicle will receive a ballot inside a secrecy folder and vote within the privacy of their vehicle. Electors then place their ballot in the ballot box presented to them at their window while exiting the voting location. All ballots collected curbside are fed into a tabulator at the end of Election Day. Curbside/Drive Thru Voting is a preferred option when municipalities are experiencing an emergency, such as the COVID- 19 pandemic.

The Election Returning Officer (Township Clerk) has several criteria to consider before making a recommendation on vote-counting equipment and alternative voting methods. The first is whether an option upholds the principles of the MEA and its regulations. These

principles, while not established as part of legislation, are generally recognized based on case law as:

- a) the secrecy and confidentiality of the voting process is paramount;
- b) the election shall be fair and non-biased;
- c) the election shall be accessible to the voters;
- d) the integrity of the voting process shall be maintained throughout the election;
- e) there is to be certainty that the results of the election reflect the votes cast;
- f) voters and candidates shall be treated fairly and consistently; and
- g) the proper majority vote governs by ensuring that valid votes are counted and invalid votes are rejected so far as reasonably possible.

Other criteria include community engagement, the ability to effectively administer and support an option, as well as what trends we are seeing in delivery of elections.

Guided by the above as well as the 2022 Municipal Election elector turnout, staff are recommending a hybrid approach for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election, using the following voting methods:

- Paper ballots with Tabulators (Traditional) (available during specified advance voting and election day);
- Internet Voting (available during specified advance voting only); and

The use of Paper Ballots with Tabulators (Traditional) in conjunction with Internet Voting is supported by the community at large when analyzing previous election participation.

Vote by mail, telephone voting and curb-side voting are not recommended, due to the increasing costing of these methods, accessibility and reliability concerns, as well as voter turnout feedback from other municipalities who have previously utilized these methods. It is in administrations opinion, that through effective communication and engagement, paper ballots with tabulators (traditional) and internet voting, will be another successful avenue for voters to cast their vote in the 2026 municipal election.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

A major focus of the 2026 Municipal and Schoolboard Election will be engaging the public and providing electors with election-related information in a timely manner and using as many means as possible (i.e. website, social media, tax bill inserts, newsletters, information nights, etc.). Residents are already being encouraged to ensure they are on the list of voters that is maintained by Elections Ontario.

Administration over the course of 2025 and 2026 to tailor an effective and well-timed engagement plan for Town of Lincoln electors. Administration will also continue to collaborate with the local area municipalities to ensure consistency in messaging, where possible.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

The 2022 Municipal and School Board Election cost the municipality in total \$141,909.37. Based on preliminary numbers to run an internet voting advanced vote, similar to the 2022 Municipal School Board election, the cost would approximately be \$25,000 to \$30,000. Administration anticipates the total cost of the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election, if the same voting methods are approved by this report, would be similar to the cost of the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election. Administration anticipates that while costs will go up for election related materials, the conduct of a joint RFP by area municipalities will help mitigate increased costs.

The anticipated 2026 election expenditures will be reflected in the 2026 budget and will be fully funded through a transfer from the Election Reserve.

INTER-DEPARTMENTAL COMMENTS:

This report was reviewed by the CAO, and Corporate Services Department.

CONCLUSION:

This report serves to provide some introductory information on the 2026 Municipal and School Board election, and seeks Council approval to enter into a joint RFP with neighbouring municipalities for the procurement of internet voting services for the 2026 Municipal and Schoolboard election.

SCHEDULES:

- A. 2022 Municipal Election – Percentage of Voter Turnout 2018 vs 2022**
- B. 2022 Municipal Election – Percentage of Voter Turnout**
- C. Draft By-law of Voting Methods**

Prepared & Submitted by:

**Justin Paylove,
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Approved by:

**Truper McBride,
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