

Staff Report To Council

From: Vicki McDonald, Clerk
Date: January 13, 2025
Report: CL-01-25
Subject **2026 Municipal Election Voting Method**

Recommendation

That Report CL-01-25 2026 Municipal Election Voting Method be received;

That council direct staff to bring forward a by-law to authorize internet and telephone voting as the voting method for the 2026 municipal and school board election; and

That staff be directed to proceed with engaging an election service vendor.

Background

Pursuant to the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996*, (MEA) municipal and school board elections must be held every four years and are administered by the Clerk as Returning Officer. The next municipal election will be held Monday October 26, 2026. Attached to this report as Schedule 'A' is a list of key dates in the 2026 municipal election.

The MEA was amended in 1996 to permit the use of alternate voting methods and equipment, enhancing the opportunity for electors to exercise their right to vote without having to attend a voting place within the municipality. The MEA stipulates that a by-law authorizing an alternative voting method must be adopted by-law by May 1, 2026. For staff to effectively prepare for the 2026 election, it is essential that preparations begin in 2025. Accordingly, direction from council on the alternative voting method to be used for the 2026 election is being sought.

The Town employed internet and telephone voting in the 2018 and 2022 elections with great success. It was convenient, provided improved accessibility, eliminated spoiled ballots, enabled an accurate count, and allowed for quick reporting.

Ensuring that the municipal election is open and accessible to all members of the community continues to be an important priority for the municipality.

2026 Voters List

There have been challenges concerning the completeness and accuracy of the voter list in previous municipal elections. In 2024, the Chief Electoral Officer (Elections Ontario) assumed responsibility for the preparation of the voter list from the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC). Elections Ontario will now manage a single register of electors for both municipal and provincial 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.

Discussion

The principles of the *Municipal Elections Act, 1996* include the following:

- maintaining the secrecy and confidentiality of the voting process and individual votes;
- providing an election that is accessible to the voters;
- providing an election that is fair and non-biased;
- ensuring the integrity of the process is maintained throughout the election;
- ensuring the results of the election reflect the votes cast, and that valid votes be counted, and invalid votes be rejected so far as reasonably possible; and
- ensuring voters and candidates are treated fairly and consistently within the municipality.

With these principles in mind, an analysis of voting methods that staff consider to be appropriate for Hanover was completed. Understanding these methods is important for promoting transparency, optimizing efficiency, and ensuring informed decision making.

The methods include:

1. Internet/Telephone Voting (ITV);
2. Vote-by-Mail (VBM); and
3. Combination of Internet and Vote-by-Mail.

1. INTERNET/TELEPHONE VOTING

Internet voting has been increasingly implemented across Ontario municipalities since its introduction. Internet voting modernizes the election experience for voters by offering a convenient, accessible and secure way to cast a vote without the need to attend a physical voting location and thus offers flexible voting times by allowing an elector to vote anywhere, anytime. It is designed to meet the specific needs of electors to ensure independence, dignity, integration, and an equal opportunity to vote.

How ITV Works

- In early October, each elector receives a personal voter notification letter containing information to access the voting system. The letter will include access credentials (e.g., a unique identification number/PIN); the secure voting platform address/URL and telephone number; voting information such as the candidates running for office, the location of help centres, legal requirements to vote, contact information for inquiries, etc.
- Electors access the voting system wherein they confirm that they are entitled to vote; enter their access credentials (secure two factor authentication protocol) ; follow the prompts to vote; and confirm their selections.
- Help Centres to assist voters would be available. As well, on-site assistance would be provided at long term care and retirement homes. Help Centres promote the election and assist voters with the following services: adding electors to the Voters' List; providing information on the election process; offering access to computers for voting on-site; and assisting electors with voting where requested.

- Voting closes at 8:00 p.m. on Election Day. Anyone already in a Help Centre or in the ITV system will be able to complete their voting session.
- Results are provided at the close of polls.

Benefits of ITV

- Provides flexibility, convenience, and increased opportunity for participation by voters.
- Supports accessibility by affording independence, dignity, integration, and equal opportunity to vote as voters can use their personal telephones or computers with individualized accessibility features to cast their ballot.
- Electors can vote with independence in the privacy of their own home or anywhere in the world.
- Allows for a longer voting period (10 days) and 24 hours/day voting until the close of voting at 8:00pm Monday, October 26, 2026.
- Help Centres would be available in accessible locations with 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. In 2022 Help Centres were located at the Civic Centre, Library and on specific dates at the retirement and long term care homes.
- This method removes the need for proxies and enables absent voters to exercise their voting right by themselves.
- A longer voting period removes the need for advance polls and offers more time for voting. Electors can vote 24/7 during the entire voting period.
- Timely results are available due to automated calculations.

Security

- Risks are mitigated with comprehensive security controls, including secure data centres, access controls, data confidentiality and data integrity.
- A two-step authentication process is used for voter access.
- Once an elector has voted they are automatically struck from the voters' list and are unable to log into the system again.
- When access credentials are issued to a voter, any previously issued credentials are automatically deactivated.
- Voting platforms provide an audit trail for the ballot as well as provides a means for the elector to verify that their vote was cast accurately.
- No significant attempts at voter fraud or other process challenges which would sufficiently influence the outcome of an election have been reported by Ontario municipalities using ITV. The Town did not receive any allegations of voter fraud in either 2018 or 2022.
- Testing and auditing are performed throughout the various stages of implementation to ensure the validity and accuracy of the system is maintained.

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 is 100% 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.

Resources, Staffing and Climate Change

- ITV is the most economical method due to lower staffing and postage costs and paperless format.
- The voting could be managed with existing staff and minimal training.
- Reduces the amount of paper as there are no printed ballots or voter kits.
- Reduces the reliance on transportation as only a small portion of voters travel to vote.

Drawbacks with ITV

- Access to computer or similar electronic device to vote online.
- Potential concerns by electors of security or privacy.

2. VOTE-BY-MAIL

Vote by Mail (VBM) is a voting method that allows electors to receive and cast their ballot by mail. It offers relative convenience as electors can vote in the privacy of their home at any time, up to the guaranteed return date (the date the declaration and ballot must be mailed to be received by the close of voting). VBM was last used by Hanover for the 2014 election.

This method requires the use of tabulators (optical scan units) which read and record how the ballots are marked. The number of vendors supplying vote tabulators is limited, which may impact availability of equipment. This method involves significant staff resources on election day to open and process the ballots. VBM is a more convenient and accessible option compared to attending a voting station to cast a paper ballot on election day, however it does not provide the same level of accessibility as ITV.

How VBM Works

- Electors receive a Voting Kit in late September. The kit includes a voting instruction sheet, a composite ballot, a ballot secrecy envelope, a Voter Declaration Card with bar code, and a return envelope with prepaid postage.
- 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 to the Civic Centre.
- There is a “guaranteed mail return date” after which electors are advised to use personal delivery of the return envelope to ensure receipt of ballot by close of voting on Election Day.
- As return envelopes are received, the Voter Declaration Card is scanned which automatically strikes that voter off the Voters List. The secrecy envelope is then placed in a ballot box for safe keeping until Election Day tabulation.
- On Election Day, eligible ballots are opened and manually fed into the 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 of VBM

- VBM can enhance the convenience and flexibility of voting for electors. Some may find it less convenient as there will be a “guaranteed mail return date” prior to election day to ensure receipt ballot by close of polls.

- Electors can complete the ballot in the privacy of their home. A means to return the envelope containing the ballot to a post office/postal box for collection or to the civic centre is necessary.
- Removes the need for proxy voting and advance polls.
- Electors are struck from the voters list as returned envelopes are received. There is however a lag time between mailing and updating the voters list.

Drawbacks of VBM

- VBM may be more or less accessible than a traditional paper ballot, depending on an electors' abilities. There is still a requirement to find a means to deliver the return envelope to the post office or community mail box.
- Candidates will have access to less accurate lists of electors who have voted due to the lag in mailing time;
- Potential for rejected ballots due to voter declaration not being returned with ballot, voter errors such as over-voting or not clearly/sufficiently marking the ballot.
- VBM is paper intensive as the voter kits require multiple envelopes, a page of instructions, voter declaration form and a ballot.

3. HYBRID INTERNET AND VOTE-BY-MAIL

- Combining voting methods is possible, but it will add complexities and costs to the election. Combining internet and vote-by-mail, for example, would essentially result in conducting two separate elections simultaneously. Electors wanting to vote by mail would be required to contact the municipal office to request a vote by mail kit or fill out an online request/registration form. This process would need to be completed prior to the printing of the Voter Information Letter or Vote By Mail kit to ensure each elector received the appropriate credentials to exercise their preferred voting method.

Benefits of Hybrid Internet and VBM

- This method would capture 100% of eligible voters in terms of accessibility. Voters wanting to vote by mail would be required to contact the municipal office to request a vote by mail kit, or fill out an online request/registration form.

Drawbacks of Hybrid Internet and VBM

- Significant staff time and resources would be required to administer a hybrid election and operate two distinct voting systems.
- Cost - Would still require a full VMB system in addition to internet voting platform regardless of number of electors using each system. This would significantly increase expenses.
- Logistical challenges to administer a hybrid voting system.

4. ANALYSIS

Research studies and surveys conducted by Canadian universities, and municipal organizations such as the Association of Municipalities demonstrate that the use of alternative voting methods by municipalities is growing with the most popular alternative being internet voting.

Canadians of all ages have demonstrated a year over year trend trend of living an increasingly more online lifestyle according to a 2023 Statistics Canada Study on Internet

Use. In 2022, internet use among Canadians reached 95 percent and almost 94 percent had a smart phone. Hanover staff have observed a migration of users from traditional transaction methods to online options of communication, e-billing, registrations, applications etc.

Researchers from the University of Toronto and the Centre for e-Democracy conducted an in-depth study regarding the use of internet voting as an alternative voting method. 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.

Ensuring that municipal elections are open and accessible to all members of the community continues to be an important priority for the Town of Hanover and supports the strategic objective of open and responsible government.

As noted, the 2022 election employed internet and telephone voting for the second time. Feedback from the public was primarily positive and many commented on the ease and convenience of internet voting. Telephone voting is a lengthier process due to the repetitive nature of the process. Even so, comments from voters who used telephone voting indicated improvements to the clarity and ease of this method. Voice prompts were designed to be as clear as possible to ensure the greatest understanding for voters when casting their ballot by telephone.

The internet and telephone voting method was selected for previous elections primarily for its accessibility advantages. Some of the accessibility advantages include:

- ✓ Electors can vote from the privacy of their own homes without the need to travel to a polling station.
- ✓ Electors can independently cast their ballot with the use of their personal assistive tools and devices.
- ✓ Internet voting offers menu options that are clear and easy to follow. The font size can be enlarged, screen brightness and contrast can be altered, a screen reader can be used.
- ✓ The system meets *Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)* accessibility standards imposed by the Province.
- ✓ Ballots can be filled out either with a standard computer or a touch screen device such as an iPad to allow individuals to vote in a manner most comfortable to them and from anywhere internet service was available.
- ✓ Telephone voting allows for volume adjustments, use of assistive devices and TTY (teletypewriter). Instructive message prompts walk the individual through the process of casting their votes.

For those that prefer to “vote in person” during the voting period or do not have the means to vote electronically, a help centre is available for the duration of the voting period. A computer and iPad are located at the Civic Centre as well as public Wi-Fi and computers at the Hanover Library for voters to electronically cast their ballot. As well, election officials attend Revera, The Village Retirement Residence and Long Term Care Home and the Hanover Care Centre where assistance to residents would be provided if required.

Alternative voting methods such as internet and telephone voting are the least expensive and most customer service-oriented method for the elector. A paper ballot election or hybrid 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 in the 2018 and 2022 elections, staff recommend that Council adopt internet and telephone voting again for the 2026 election.

Financial Implications

Below is a cost estimate based on preliminary quotes received to date. Both estimates were provided by Canadian based companies with demonstrated experience in conducting municipal elections. It should be noted that many municipalities have secured a vendor of choice for the provision of election services and timeliness of a decision on a preferred voting method would ensure Hanover can engage the services of a vendor with a secure and quality voting platform at a reasonable cost.

Actual costs may vary somewhat based on the service provider selected, subsequent to the Request for Quotation process, postage rates and number of registered electors.

Item	Vote By Mail	Internet and Telephone Voting
Voting Services	\$13,800	\$12,500
Election Management System VoterView	\$2,062	\$2,062
Tabulators	\$1,390	-
Voter Kits	\$17,616	\$2,700
Postage (voter kits, return mail)	\$12,469	\$6,250
Printing & Advertising	\$1,700	\$1,700
Travel/Training	\$2,600	\$1,000
Election Assistance	\$2,500	\$2,500
Total Estimate	\$54,137	\$28,712

* Postage to increase by 0.25 cents to \$1.24 as of Jan 13, 2025

Link to Strategic Plan

This report supports the indicated Strategic Goals and Action Plans of the Town of Hanover.

Goal 1: Safe and Reliable Infrastructure

Build, maintain and continuously improve our municipally owned properties, buildings, and equipment.

Goal 2: Healthy and Welcoming Community

Care for our natural environment and provide an enviable quality of life for everyone who calls Hanover “home”.

Goal 3: Strong and Vibrant Economy

Refresh downtown Hanover and retain and attract local economic investment and jobs.

Goal 4: Balanced Growth

Work together to create a community we can all be proud of.

Goal 5: Open and Responsible Government

Deliver services in a friendly, efficient and effective manner while providing an exceptional working environment for our employees.

Respectfully submitted,

Concurrence,

Vicki McDonald
Clerk

Sherri Walden
CAO