



The Corporation of the Town of Milton

Report To: Council

From: Meaghen Reid, Director, Legislative & Legal Services/Town Clerk

Date: May 26, 2025

Report No: CORS-008-25

Subject: 2026 Municipal and School Board Election - Voting Methods

Recommendation: **THAT the necessary by-law be adopted to support the use of vote tabulators in the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;**

AND THAT the necessary by-law be adopted to support the use of vote by mail as an alternative voting method in the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The purpose of this report is to provide a recommendation about voting methods for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election, which will take place on October 26, 2026.
- Staff recommend the continued use of vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election since this method offers opportunities for efficiency and consistency in the vote counting process, is familiar to Milton voters in previous municipal and provincial elections and has well-established procedures and industry standards.
- Vote by mail is recommended as an additional remote voting option for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election to support voters who are unable to vote in-person at a voting location.

REPORT

Background

The purpose of this report is to provide a recommendation about voting methods for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election, which will take place on October 26, 2026.

Section 42 (1) of the *Municipal Elections Act (MEA), 1996, as amended*, states that by May 1 in the year of an election (ie. before May 1, 2026), the Council of a local municipality may pass by-laws that authorize:

- the use of voting and vote-counting equipment; and,

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- the use of alternative voting methods that do not require electors to attend at a voting place in order to vote.

In 2021, Council received Staff Report CORS-053-21 and approved the staff recommendation to continue the use of paper ballots with vote tabulators for the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election for Advance Voting and voting on Election Day.

Vote by Mail was also approved for use in the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election based on the staff recommendation to provide a remote voting option in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and to align with the vote by mail option that had been offered by Elections Ontario and Elections Canada in previous provincial and federal elections.

Discussion

The *Municipal Elections Act (MEA), 1996, as amended*, governs the administration of local elections in Ontario, in a fair and transparent manner. Within the MEA, the Town Clerk is responsible for conducting municipal elections, which includes preparing and administering elections in an independent manner.

The Town Clerk conducts elections for the municipal council, regional council and school boards according to the established principles of the MEA, which are the following:

- the secrecy and confidentiality of individual votes is paramount;
- the election should be fair and non-biased;
- the election should be accessible to the voters;
- the integrity of the process should be maintained throughout the election;
- there is to be certainty that the results of the election reflect the votes cast;
- voters and candidates should be treated fairly and consistently; and
- a proper majority vote decides the election by ensuring, so far as reasonably possible, that valid votes be counted and invalid votes be rejected.

In preparing recommendations to Council about vote counting equipment and alternative voting methods for municipal elections, staff take into consideration: previous and current municipal election practices, options for voting methods and voting options in provincial and federal elections. Staff have reviewed the previous use of vote tabulators, as well as remote voting options below and highlighted the factors taken into consideration when developing a recommendation.

Paper Ballot Using Vote Tabulators for Vote Counting - Recommended

A vote tabulator (also called an optical scan unit or tabulator) reads and records how ballots are marked. The ballots are inserted into the vote tabulator and the tabulator reads and stores the information. At the close of voting on Election Day, the vote tabulator will produce

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the cumulative totals of all of the votes cast and the totals will be compiled to produce the final election results.

- **Familiarity from previous municipal, provincial and federal elections**

The Town of Milton began using optical scan vote tabulators at voting locations in 2003 and has continued its use in each subsequent municipal election. This method has become a widely-adopted vote counting approach across Ontario, endorsed by both municipal and provincial electoral authorities for its efficiency, speed, and accuracy in tabulating results.

Voters within the Town of Milton would be familiar with paper ballots with the use of vote tabulators by Elections Ontario within the 2025 Provincial Election and the 2024 Provincial By-law Election for the Milton riding.

The use of vote tabulators offers opportunities for efficiency and consistency in the vote counting process. The use of vote-counting equipment allows for increased consistency in vote counting over the use of a manual counting process. Due to the complexity relating to the number of contests for municipal and school board offices often included within municipal election ballots, the use of vote tabulators could reduce human error in tabulating ballots. The use of vote tabulators could also support timely reporting of unofficial election results. Logic and accuracy procedures have been established and used in previous elections to ensure that vote tabulators are scanning and recording vote counts accurately prior to use at a voting location.

- **Established procedures and industry standards available**

The Town of Milton, like many other Ontario municipalities, has developed election procedures for the use of vote-counting tabulators and has incorporated best practices for the use of paper ballots and vote tabulator technology.

In addition, an established vote tabulator standard has now been developed to provide a clear framework for municipalities and vendors. The Chief Electoral Officer of Ontario, in partnership with the Digital Governance Standards Institute, established the Advisory Committee on Standards for Voting Technologies. The Committee developed two Product Standards that set out the minimum requirements for the technical design of vote tabulators and electronic poll books. The Committee developed a set of Recommendations for Management Standards for vote tabulators and electronic poll books and completed this work in 2023. This standard covers the design, installation, operation, and maintenance of vote tabulators and their systems, ensuring they uphold key democratic principles such as accessibility, integrity, vote equality, secrecy, transparency, and accountability.

Despite the Town's established procedures already in place, election staff ensure that the industry standards are reviewed and incorporated where needed into election procedures to further our efforts to meet the principles of the MEA.

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Staff recommend the continued use of vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal and School Board elections since this method is well-established, offers opportunities for efficiency and consistency in the vote counting process and is familiar to Milton voters in previous municipal and provincial elections.

Alternative Voting Methods

There are also alternative voting method options available for administering the 2026 municipal and school board elections, including:

- vote by mail;
- internet voting;
- telephone voting;
- a combination of these above voting methods.

The MEA allows municipalities to adopt alternative voting methods to conduct municipal elections. Alternative voting methods have been explored by Ontario municipalities to provide accessible options for voting and to engage eligible voters who may reside outside of the municipality.

In addition to continuing the use of vote tabulators with paper ballots, staff recommend that Council approve one remote voting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election. A remote voting option provides eligible voters with the ability to cast their own ballot if they opt to or are not able to attend a voting location. Elections Canada and Elections Ontario offer a remote mail-in ballot option when in-person voting options are not sufficient for a voter to cast their own ballot.

Staff acknowledge that offering more than one remote option would require additional budget considerations and additional resources due to manage necessary procedures and specific considerations for each option. Ensuring that processes are in place for alternative voting methods to mitigate risk, maintain security and preventing fraudulent voting, are part of the Clerk's role and is a priority in conducting elections.

The following alternative voting methods are discussed below: vote by mail, internet voting and telephone voting.

Vote by Mail - Recommended

Vote by mail was introduced to the Town of Milton for the first time in 2022 as an alternative voting method. During the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election, 385 Town of Milton voters choose this option to vote.

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With vote by mail, voters who request to vote with a mail-in ballot receive their ballots through the mail in a voter kit. The voter then completes their voter declaration, completes their ballot remotely and returns their completed voter kit, including the ballot, via mail by a prescribed date to the Town Clerk's election team.

- **Familiarity from previous municipal, provincial and federal elections**
Vote by Mail is an established remote voting method used by Elections Canada and Elections Ontario, so it is familiar method for many electors. This option may enhance access to voting by removing the barrier of voting in-person at a poll.
- **Can be supported with existing resources**
Based on data from the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election, it is estimated that a vote by mail option would cost approximately \$25,000, which may fluctuate based on the number of voters who would be estimated to use this remote option. This additional cost would include the cost of vote by mail kits, related vendor services and postage. At this time, these additional costs can be funded through the current estimated budget.

Staff recommend that vote by mail be approved as an alternative voting method offered to voters in the 2026 Municipal and School Board election due to its familiarity for voters and to support voters who are unable to vote in-person at a voting location.

Internet Voting

Internet voting offers a convenient and accessible way to cast a vote on a computer or other device, without the need to attend a voting location in-person. Internet voting vendors offer solutions to automate voter identity verification, ballot receipt and counting of votes.

As staff explored voting methods for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election, internet voting has continued to be a topic of interest and discussion in the municipal sector. According to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), 217 of 417 (lower-tier) municipalities used internet and/or phone/combined as alternative voting methods within the 2022 Municipal Election.

- **Potential security risk**
Although there have not been any reported instances of an internet voting system being hacked or having interference from a malicious actor, municipalities have recently been targets for ransomware cyberattacks. This has involved municipal information and data being held for ransom by a third party, malicious actor. Such recent experiences in the City of Hamilton, the Toronto Public Library and the City of Huntsville have been reported in the media. This increasing concern has raised questions for election administrators about the measures required to ensure the security of online voting in elections and to ensure trust of the voters in the election.

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- **Need for industry standards**

Internet voting is still mostly unregulated and does not have established, industry standards in Ontario. This means that election administrators and online voting vendors are responsible for ensuring that internet voting is secure and that the integrity of the voting system is maintained. Outside of municipal election procedures, there is not an established framework for how online voting should be set-up, monitored, or verified.

The Digital Governance Standards Institute (DGSi), is in the final stages of developing and approving voluntary national standards for online electoral voting, aimed at guiding its use in Canadian municipal elections. It is anticipated that these standards will outline technical design and operational requirements for online voting platforms and recommend best practices for election administrators to enhance security, protect ballot secrecy, and ensure auditability. Final approval of the standards could be released as early as late 2025. However, current preparations for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election are already underway and voting system agreements with vendors will need to be secured as soon as possible.

- **Lack of a paper-based audit trail**

The lack of a paper-based audit trail with online voting has been raised as a significant concern for trust and integrity of the voting process. Conducting recounts could be made difficult with no paper ballots to verify results.

- **Cannot be supported with existing resources**

With the current staffing resources and estimated operating budget taken into consideration, it is estimated that internet voting could cost approximately \$400,000 in additional funding for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election. It is anticipated that a new Technical Support Coordinator position for the municipal election would be required, as well as a third-party risk assessment with ongoing penetration testing. This estimated, additional funding would also include additional software costs required to support internet voting.

Internet voting is not recommended by staff for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election given the potential risk, the lack of industry standards for internet voting, considerations relating to audit trail and the need for additional funding required to support internet voting.

Vote by Phone

Vote by phone allows the voter to use a touch-tone phone to call a number provided on their voter notification card to cast their vote. The voter is prompted with scripted, audio telephone instructions to verify their identity, make their ballot selections and confirm their selections

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before casting the ballot with digital voting software. Vote by phone allows voters to cast a ballot without attending a physical voting location.

- **Potential security and connectivity risk**
Like internet voting, vote by phone may be vulnerable to threats by a third party, malicious actor. Also, since this alternative voting method is reliant on external systems, connectivity issues outside of the control of the Town could impact the voting process.
- **Potential challenges for voter experience**
Vote by phone could require more time for the voter to cast their ballot digitally due to the automated phone scripts to verify the voter and to assist with making voting selections. This length of time to make voting selections could result in a frustrating experience for the voter.
- **Need for industry standards**
Outside of municipal election procedures, there is not an established framework for how vote by phone should be set-up, monitored, or verified.
- **Lack of a paper-based audit trail**
The lack of a paper-based audit trail with vote by phone is also a concern for difficulties for conducting recounts with no paper ballots to verify results.

It is estimated that Vote by Phone would cost approximately \$24,500, which may fluctuate based on the number of voters who would opt to use this remote option. At this time, these additional costs can be funded through the current estimated budget.

Vote by Phone is not recommended as an alternative voting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election due to the considerations outlined above.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Staff recommend the continued use of vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election since this method offers opportunities for efficiency and consistency in the vote counting process, is familiar to Milton voters in previous municipal and provincial elections and has well-established procedures and industry standards.

Vote by mail is recommended as an additional remote voting option for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election to support voters who are unable to vote in-person at a voting location.



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Financial Impact

The 2026 Operating Budget will include the costs of the municipal election, estimated at approximately \$1,000,000, including the recommended use of tabulators and vote by mail remote option. The Town maintains an Election Reserve to mitigate budget pressures resulting from the expenditures of a municipal election. Annually, one quarter of the estimated costs of the election are transferred to the Election Reserve and drawn upon in the year of the election. The anticipated result is that the costs of the election are relatively evenly distributed over four years.

Respectfully submitted,

Kristene Scott
Commissioner, Corporate Services

For questions, please contact: Greta Susa, Manager of
Legislative and Legal
Services/Deputy Clerk

Phone: Ext. 2131

Attachments

N/A

Approved by CAO
Andrew M. Siltala
Chief Administrative Officer

Recognition of Traditional Lands

The Town of Milton resides on the Treaty Lands and Territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation. We also recognize the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat and Haudenosaunee people. The Town of Milton shares this land and the responsibility for the water, food and resources. We stand as allies with the First Nations as stewards of these lands.