

Town of Pelham Council Report

Wednesday, April 16, 2025

Subject: 2026 Municipal and School Board Election – Alternative Voting Method Recommendation Report

Prepared By: Sarah Leach, Acting Town Clerk

Department: Clerk's Office

Recommendation:

BE IT RESOLVED THAT Council receive report 2025-0007 2026 “Municipal and School Board Election – Alternative Voting Method Recommendation Report,” for information;

AND THAT Council approve the use of vote-counting equipment such as optical scanning vote tabulators for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;

AND THAT Council approve the use of online voting as an alternative voting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;

AND THAT Council approve the use of advanced voting for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;

AND THAT Council direct staff to work with Niagara Regional local municipalities regarding a joint procurement of election voting equipment;

AND THAT the Clerk be directed to prepare the necessary By-law for voting, vote counting equipment and alternative voting methods for Council's consideration prior to May 1, 2026.

Background:

The 2026 Municipal and School Board Election (2026 Municipal Election) takes place on Monday, October 26, 2026.

Pursuant to the *Municipal Elections Act*, R.S.O 1993, c. M.53 (MEA), the Clerk is responsible for conducting the municipal election, except for certain matters requiring Council's direction.

Section 42(1) of the MEA states that prior to an election:

The Council of a local municipality may pass by-laws:

- a. authorizing the use of voting and vote-counting equipment such as voting machines, voting recorders or optical scanning vote tabulators; and
- b. authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method, such as voting by mail or by telephone, that does not require electors to attend a voting place in order to vote.

By-laws authorizing the use of vote-counting equipment, alternative voting methods, and the circumstances under which the Clerk will conduct a recount must be enacted by May 1, 2026. Enacting these by-laws well in advance gives the Clerk ample time to finalize all necessary arrangements and initiate the communication campaign required for voters and candidates. Early action also ensures that vendors can be secured to provide the necessary services and creates an opportunity for the Town to benefit from potential shared service agreements with other local area municipalities.

The Clerk must carefully consider several criteria before making a recommendation to Council regarding vote-counting equipment and alternative voting methods. The primary criterion is whether the option aligns with the principles outlined in the MEA. Although these principles are not explicitly identified in the legislation, they generally reflect the following:

- a. The secrecy and confidentiality of the voting process;
- b. The integrity of the voting process, ensuring that the results of the election accurately reflect the votes cast;
- c. Accessibility for electors and candidates.

On September 4, 2024, Council received Report 2024-0104 2026 Municipal Election Voting Methods, for information. The report provided an overview of various alternative voting methods that could be utilized in the 2026 Municipal Election, outlining their advantages and disadvantages.

Analysis:

Prior Elections

The 2020 By-election marked Pelham's first use of the alternative voting method, "Special Ballot on Demand Mail-in Ballots" (referred to as "vote-by-mail" hereafter). This alternative voting method replaced proxy voting to minimize in-person contact during the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 20 voters utilized this method.

The 2022 Municipal Election utilized a hybrid approach, combining in-person voting with vote-by-mail. As in 2020, voting by mail was the alternative voting method, replacing the traditional use of proxy voting. A total of 52 electors voted by mail, accounting for 1.1% of the total voter turnout. In-person voting saw 5,127 voters, representing 99% of the turnout. The Town's overall voter turnout for the election was 32.62%.

Additionally, 1,782 voters participated during one of the three advanced voting days in 2022, making up 34.41% of the total turnout.

In the 2022 municipal elections across Ontario, 217 municipalities, representing 48.87% of all municipalities, utilized online voting. This reflects a significant increase of 42 municipalities (24%) compared to the 2018 election. In addition, 71 municipalities adopted postal voting as an alternative method. This demonstrates a clear and growing shift toward online voting, a trend that is expected to continue in future elections. Notably, this shift is not new—online voting was first introduced in Ontario in 2003. Over the years, online voting has become an established practice, with proven processes and reliable data supporting its continued use.

Survey Results

In collaboration with the Communications Specialist, the Clerk's Office launched a community survey to gather feedback on preferred voting methods for the 2026 Municipal Election. The survey was open from October 1, 2024, to December 1, 2024, and garnered 116 responses to the multiple-choice questions, including 37 detailed responses to the open-ended question.

Survey respondents represented an engaged voter group, with 99.1% having previously participated in elections and still eligible to vote in the upcoming election. Of those who had voted, 57% utilized advance polls.

To better understand preferences for voting methods, respondents were presented with options for consideration through a multi-selection function. Hybrid voting options were intentionally excluded to gain insight into the standalone appeal of each method. The following voting methods and their estimated costs were presented:

- In-Person Voting: Estimated cost \$125,875.50 (selected by 62 respondents).
- Postal Voting: Estimated cost \$84,932.06 (selected by 23 respondents).
- Online Voting: Estimated cost \$35,390.00 (selected by 78 respondents).

Online voting emerged as the most favoured option, selected by 78 respondents, followed by in-person voting with 62 respondents. Postal voting was significantly less popular, with only 23 respondents selecting this method.

Open-ended Survey Feedback

Respondents were invited to provide additional comments on their selection, or lack thereof.

Regarding online voting, respondents identified convenience, cost-effectiveness, and alignment with modern practices as key factors for favouring this method. Many drew parallels to other secure digital systems, such as online banking. However, concerns were raised about accessibility for specific demographic groups and potential cybersecurity risks. There was strong support for implementing enhanced security measures, such as multi-factor authentication.

In-person voting was valued for its perceived security, familiarity, and ability to reduce fraud. Some respondents also noted the potential for in-person voting to provide opportunities for social interaction and serve as an educational experience for children. Despite these positive remarks, concerns about the high cost of in-person voting were raised. Suggestions for reducing costs included introducing "super polls" and/or consolidating polling locations and dates.

While postal voting was the least popular method, it was recognized as a valuable option for individuals with accessibility needs or those unable to attend in person on election day. Security concerns, perceived inconvenience, and the potential impact of a concurrent postal strike were cited as reasons for its lower popularity.

Many respondents also emphasized the desire for hybrid voting options to maximize efficiency and accommodate the community's diverse preferences. Overall, the survey results provide valuable insights into community preferences and priorities. Online voting emerged as the most favoured option, offering cost savings and convenience. However, the strong support for in-person voting highlights the importance of maintaining traditional methods while exploring strategies to reduce costs and improve accessibility.

2026 Voting Options:

For the 2026 Municipal Election, the Clerk's Office is presenting Council with four potential options that align with the principles outlined in the MEA, while also considering community preferences, accessibility, security, and cost-effectiveness.

Option One: In-Person Voting with Proxy Voting Alternative

Option one represents the most traditional voting method, requiring voters to attend a polling station in person, either during an advance polling date or on election day. All registered voters would receive a voter card by mail, outlining the locations of both advance polling stations and election day polling stations. Non-registered voters would have the opportunity to register either in advance or at the polling station.

Historically, voters could cast their ballots at any advance voting location and were assigned a designated polling station on election day to ensure proper ballot distribution. However, should this be Council's preferred option, the Clerk's Office would like to explore the implementation of 'super polls' on election day. These centralized voting locations, such as the Meridian Community Centre, would allow voters from any ward to cast their ballots at a centralized, convenient location.

Completed ballots would be processed using vote tabulators, a technology that has been used in Pelham for previous elections. Extensive logic and accuracy testing are conducted before use to ensure that the tabulators scan and record votes accurately. It's important to note that a fully in-person voting election would increase the number of vote tabulators required.

Should Council choose to proceed with option one as an alternative to the recommendation, the Clerk recommends that Council authorize proxy voting as the alternative method. This would enable electors who are unable to attend any in-person voting opportunity to designate another individual as their proxy. Proxy voting is the most traditional and widely recognized form of alternative voting.

Option Two: In-Person Voting with Online Voting in Advance (Recommended)

Option two offers in-person voting using vote tabulators, as described above, alongside the option for voters to cast their ballots online in advance. Online voting would involve issuing each elector unique credentials to access a secure voting website during a designated voting period (e.g., 10 to 20 days). Voters could vote from a personal computer, tablet, or smartphone, from any location with internet access. All voters would receive this information and would not be required to pre-register or indicate their preferred voting method in advance. If voters choose not to use the online voting option, they could simply proceed to an in-person polling station.

Staff recommend implementing online voting exclusively for advance voting, rather than on election day. This recommendation is not a reflection of any lack of trust in the system, but rather stems from past experiences where internet service strain caused delays. The goal is to expedite the voting process and ensure that results are published in a timely manner. To complement online voting, staff also plan to offer in-person voter assistance centers where individuals can attend a designated location to vote online using devices provided by the Town. These voter assistance centers would require fewer staff members than a traditional advance poll and would serve as an opportunity for staff to guide residents through the process. This approach is considered essential, especially for the first election in which online voting is introduced.

Clerk's staff are aware that introducing this voting method will require thoughtful integration into the Town's established voting framework. Despite the additional effort

required, staff believe it is a valuable step to begin incorporating online voting, as it is anticipated to grow in popularity for future elections across all levels of government.

Some advantages to this option:

- Enhanced convenience for voters, allowing them to vote from any location with an internet connection.
- Reduced costs associated with voting locations and fewer temporary election officials.
- Able to vote 24 hours a day within the defined voting period.
- Faster results due to the automation of vote tabulation.
- Greater accessibility for individuals with disabilities or those who require additional assistive devices, which may already be compatible with their personal electronic devices.

Some disadvantages to this option:

- Perception of security concerns.
- Reliable access to the internet.
- Unsupervised voting.
- Voter cards containing voting credentials may be intercepted (it is noted that internet voting vendors have taken comprehensive measures to address security concerns, and the use of multi-factor authentication has been successfully implemented across several platforms to address identity verification concerns).

Staff are also aware of the potential risks and public concerns associated with online voting. By collaborating with other municipalities, best practices have been identified. Leading up to the voting period, a comprehensive series of tests and thorough reviews of the technology will be conducted to address potential risks and develop solutions. This proactive approach will help ensure a secure, reliable, and positive voting experience for all electors.

A joint procurement process with other Niagara Regional municipalities will help maintain consistency in practices, procedures, and testing across all users of online voting. Furthermore, it is possible that the selected vendor will have previously worked with a neighbouring municipality, adding an extra layer of familiarity and confidence in the system's implementation.

While testing can help build confidence before the election, technology inherently carries risks beyond security concerns. In the past two municipal election cycles, technical issues have affected jurisdictions using internet voting on election day. In 2018, a vendor experienced bandwidth limitations caused by a subcontracted service

provider. In 2022, another vendor suffered a server failure that temporarily disrupted voting.

Even with thorough security testing, such incidents can impact election service levels and raise broader concerns about the integrity of the process. It is important for Council to recognize that while the use of technology in elections is both recommended and increasingly adopted, it is not without risks. Relying on technology for an event as critical as an election requires an acceptance of potential disruptions.

This consideration influenced the recommendation to avoid offering online voting on election day. Instead, utilizing these services during less trafficked periods and over an extended timeframe will reduce dependence on internet connectivity at peak times, mitigating potential disruptions.

Option Three: In-Person Voting with Special Ballot on Demand

Similar to the 2022 Municipal Election, this option would allow for in-person voting using vote tabulators, as described in option one, while also providing voters the opportunity to request a vote-by-mail kit. This differs from postal voting, where kits are automatically mailed to all eligible electors.

Voters who request a kit must complete their ballot and submit it before the designated deadline to ensure it is processed. They may do so by depositing it into a designated vote deposit box or by delivering it to Town Hall by a specified time on election day. The kit would include detailed instructions, a ballot, a declaration card, and a return envelope, assembled in the same manner as in both 2020 and 2022.

In the 2022 Municipal Election, 52 out of 57 returned kits were successfully processed. The remaining five were either not returned, submitted late, or missing a declaration card, rendering them ineligible for processing. While the overall process had a high success rate, voter participation in this alternative voting method remained low.

Some advantages to this option:

- Enhanced convenience for voters, allowing them to vote from any location with postal access.
- Provides an audit trail.
- Greater accessibility for individuals with disabilities or those who require additional assistive devices.

Some disadvantages to this option:

- Reliant on the mail distribution through Canada Post.

- Voters must apply for a vote-by-mail kit early in the election process to meet mailing deadlines.
- Ballots may be rejected (i.e. errors, over-voting) without the option for correction as a result of not following the written instructions.
- Ballots may not be received in time for counting due to potential mail delays.

Option Four: Postal Voting

This option would implement a full vote-by-mail system, eliminating in-person voting. The advantages and disadvantages outlined in option three would similarly apply to this approach. Under this system, all eligible electors would receive a vote-by-mail kit without requesting a kit, as in option three. Completed kits could be returned by mail, deposited in a designated vote deposit box, or delivered to Town Hall by the specified deadline on election day.

Though identified as an option, a full vote-by-mail system has not been widely popular and was clearly identified as a non-preferred option in the community survey. Given the low participation in vote-by-mail during the past two elections, it is unlikely that this would be considered a favourable option.

Regional Clerks

Local area municipalities plan to present their reports on alternative voting methods to Council between Q1 and Q3 of 2025. During preliminary discussions, many municipalities expressed interest in exploring online voting as a potential alternative method. In late 2024, the Area Clerks convened as a group to attend presentations from online voting providers and agreed that should municipalities receive direction to pursue online voting, a unified approach to selecting an online voting provider would be beneficial. This approach would promote consistency in processes and procedures across municipalities and address public perceptions regarding why one municipality might select a different provider than another.

A few Niagara municipalities have prior experience with online voting, and their insights will be invaluable in shaping future decisions. Below is a summary of voting methods utilized by local area municipalities during the 2022 election:

Municipality	Internet Voting	Proxy Voting	Postal Voting	In-Person Voting
Fort Erie				√
Grimsby	√		√	√
Lincoln	√	√		√
Niagara Falls			√	√
Niagara-on-the-Lake		√	√	√
Pelham			√	√

Port Colborne		√	√	√
St. Catharines			√	√
Thorold	√			√
Wainfleet			√	√
Welland		√		√
West Lincoln	√	√		√

Voting Machinery

The Town currently owns vote tabulation machines that were acquired second-hand from the former Clerk in 1999 and have been used in every election since. These machines are outdated and in need of replacement. The Town's vendor is unable to support them, and replacement parts are no longer available. With each election, the number of functional machines has decreased, and the vendor has advised that they will be unusable for any future elections.

Following the 2022 Municipal Election, Corporate Services conducted a financial analysis comparing the long-term costs of renting versus purchasing new voting machines. Based on cost projections extending through 2042, renting was determined to be the more financially prudent option. For the 2026 Municipal Election, the estimated cost to rent a sufficient number of tabulators to support a completely in-person voting model is approximately \$31,000 (all inclusive). However, this cost may be reduced depending on the alternative voting method selected, as fewer tabulators will be required.

While owning voting machines is generally desirable—particularly in the case of a by-election or to avoid concerns over securing machines for a regular election—it would require an upfront financial commitment of approximately \$160,000, along with ongoing maintenance to ensure the equipment remains operational.

The Clerk's Office recommends proceeding with renting voting equipment as needed. Renting ensures that up-to-date machines are delivered in working condition for each election. Given the rapid pace of technological advancements, it is unlikely that newly purchased equipment would remain viable for 20+ years and servicing outdated machines could become difficult. Additionally, voting methods across the province are evolving. While it is reasonable to assume that the Town will continue to offer some form of in-person voting in the foreseeable future, the possibility of an online election or other changes in voting technology could significantly reduce the need for voting machines. Renting allows the Clerk's Office to assess needs for each election and secure only the necessary number of machines, ensuring both flexibility and cost efficiency.

Financial Considerations:

Funds have been allocated in the annual budgets to cover costs associated with the 2026 Municipal Election. Since the 2022 Municipal Election, annual transfers have increased to account for inflation, the procurement of voting equipment, and the potential acquisition of new software to support an alternative voting method. The 2022 Municipal Election cost approximately \$92,000, and the Election Reserve is expected to comfortably cover the costs associated with the 2026 Municipal Election.

Should Council approve the proposed recommendation, the Town will need to secure an online voting vendor for the 2026 Municipal Election, likely through a joint procurement process with Niagara Regional municipalities. While the exact costs are currently unknown, the introduction of an alternative voting method may result in higher initial expenses compared to a strictly in-person election. However, implementing online voting could generate cost savings in other areas, such as reducing the number of in-person advance voting locations, thereby lowering staffing expenses, machine rental fees, and the need for temporary election workers.

In 2022, staffing costs for polling station workers totalled \$27,888.50, excluding Clerk's Office staff and the temporary Election Coordinator. Staffing levels were adjusted compared to previous elections to balance cost-effectiveness and operational efficiency, adequately informing future staffing needs. Wages covered training, staffing, and stand-by workers.

At the time, Pelham's election wages were slightly below those of other local area municipalities but generally aligned with federal and provincial election rates, as many staff worked across all three levels of government. Since then, both the living wage in Niagara and Ontario's general minimum wage have increased, with further increases expected by October 2026.

If Council opts for an all in-person election, staffing costs are expected to increase due to wage adjustments. Alternatively, incorporating online voting could reduce staffing requirements, as fewer polling locations and advance voting opportunities would be necessary. It is anticipated that the proposed voter assistance centres associated with online voting could be staffed exclusively by the Clerk's department rather than relying on temporary election staff.

Additional technology requirements include renting voting equipment, which, based on a quote received in 2025, is estimated at \$31,000 for a strictly in-person election. Additionally, the Town routinely rents laptops for managing the voters' list and intends to do so again for the 2026 election.

Alternatives Reviewed:

Options one, three and four are alternatives to the recommendation.

For more details on pros and cons of various voting methods, please refer to report 2024-0104 2026 Municipal Election Voting Methods (September 4, 2024).

Strategic Plan Relationship: Enhancing Capacity and Future Readiness

Through continuously reviewing and refining election processes, the Town is proactively modernizing processes to improve efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility. Investing in technology, such as upgrading vote tabulators and exploring online voting, supports innovation and ensures the election process remains adaptable to future advancements. Alternative voting methods also improve accessibility by providing more options for residents facing barriers to in-person voting. Additionally, incorporating online voting and reducing in-person polling locations can enhance operational efficiency by lowering staffing and equipment rentals costs.

Collaboration with local area municipalities through a joint procurement process strengthens regional partnerships, promotes consistency in election administration, and leverages collective bargaining power to secure cost-effective solutions. Furthermore, by transitioning to a more flexible voting system, the Town is proactively mitigating risks and preparing for potential challenges, such as public health concerns or disruptions to traditional voting methods.

Consultation:

Local Area Clerks
Election Vendors

Other Pertinent Reports/Attachments:

2024-0104 2026 Municipal Election Voting Methods (September 4, 2024)

*Not attached by available for reference

Approved and Submitted by:

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