



**The Corporation of the
City of Sault Ste. Marie**

C O U N C I L R E P O R T

June 28, 2021

TO: Mayor Christian Provenzano and Members of City Council
AUTHOR: Madison Zuppa, Deputy City Clerk
DEPARTMENT: Corporate Services
RE: Voter Engagement Update

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide Council with an update on voter engagement for the 2022 municipal election.

Background

The following resolution was passed on December 10, 2018:

Moved by: Councillor M. Shoemaker

Seconded by: Councillor D. Hilsinger

Whereas the 2018 Sault Ste. Marie municipal election saw a voter turnout that was just barely above 40% of eligible electors; and

Whereas high voter turnout is crucial to a democratic process; and

Whereas the City of Sault Ste. Marie should strive to be a leader in voter turnout across the Province;

Now Therefore Be It Resolved that staff bring forward recommendations on steps that can be taken in 2022 to improve voter turnout, potentially including a municipal advertising campaign encouraging electors to vote.

On March 29, 2021, Council supported the implementation of a community engagement initiative to gather public input on vote-counting equipment, alternative voting methods, and voting locations. Staff launched a survey and held two virtual information sessions to gather input.

Voter Engagement Survey

The public was invited to complete an online survey between April 9 and May 15, 2021 resulting in 843 individual responses. A summary of results is attached as Appendix A. Given the pandemic and the stay-at-home order the survey was delivered online. It is recognized that this may have had an influence on participation and results. Paper copies were available upon request, and feedback was also accepted via email and telephone. This survey represents 1.5% of eligible voters and is not being considered statistically significant, but rather viewed as general insight.

Virtual Information Sessions

Two virtual voter information sessions were held on April 20 from 3-4 and 6-7 p.m. A low number of participants joined in the live sessions; however, there have been 92 subsequent views of the recordings. The recordings were made available on the City's YouTube channel, website, and social media outlets.

Promotion of the survey and virtual information sessions included: media releases published by several local media outlets; print ads in the Sault Star and Sault This Week; Sault Star and Sault This Week feature article; banner ads through sootoday.com and saultonline; and a social media campaign.

Village IQ – sootoday.com

Village Media ran two polls over the same time period as the City's survey, and they have generously shared their analytics, which are attached as Appendix B.

Accessibility

Accessibility is not only a legislative requirement, but also a corporate value. On March 19, 2021, the City Clerk and Deputy City Clerk met with the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC) to discuss alternative voting methods. City staff received valuable feedback from the AAC including: no two individuals are the same; more options are better; ensure that officials are available during the election to field technical questions in a timely manner; communication regarding the voting method is critical; ensure transportation to voting locations is available, including parabus; and ensure seating is available at voting locations.

Analysis

The City survey and Village IQ both returned very similar results with 63% and 64% of respective respondents answering yes to the following question:

“Considering the COVID-19 pandemic, would you be more likely to vote remotely in the 2022 Municipal Election if the option was available?”

Participants were asked to rate their understanding of various voting methods. In-person manual count was the most understood of all methods presented with vote by phone as the least understood. Vote by mail was the most understood remote voting method.

Online voting was the most popular remote voting option (60%), followed by vote-by-mail (16%), and finally vote by phone (4%); however, 15% of respondents chose “none of the above” and 5% were “unsure”. Village IQ responses to a similar question trended in the same way.

Reasons for being in favour of online voting included: easy; convenient; fast; secure; modern; accessible; vote from anywhere and anytime of day; and due to the pandemic.

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Reasons for being in favour of vote-by-mail included: preference for a paper ballot; physical ballot can be recounted; convenient; easy; private; confidential; safe; and secure.

Reasons for being “unsure” or choosing “none of the above” included: voter fraud; lack of trust; and security concerns.

Voter Turnout

Voter turnout from the 2018 municipal election in Sault Ste. Marie (Appendix C) reflects a need for increased engagement efforts in Wards 4 and 5.

Voter turnout in 2018 was lowest among those aged 18 through 45, which is consistent with past federal elections trends.¹

Other Northern Ontario communities cited additional voting options, a mayoral race and an aggressive media campaign as reasons for higher than average voter turnout.²

Barriers

The survey results indicate that 15% of respondents identified as a person with a disability, and 7% of respondents experienced barriers to voting. Barriers can be physical, but also invisible. For example, some respondents indicated that the pandemic has had an impact on their comfort level regarding attending voting locations. Disability, mental health, transportation, and timing were also cited by respondents as barriers to voting. These reasons are similar to those cited by non-voters for the 2019 federal election, which included being too busy, illness or disability, out of town, and not interested in politics.

Communications

Once a voting method is chosen by Council a communications strategy will be developed to engage as many eligible voters as possible.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications resulting from the community engagement process.

Strategic Plan / Policy Impact

The Voter Engagement Update report is linked to the corporate value – commitment to citizens and community.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that Council take the following action:

Resolved that the report of the Deputy City Clerk dated June 28, 2021 concerning Voter Engagement Update be received as information.

¹ Statistics Canada. 2021. Labour Force Survey. Available at: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200226/dq200226b-eng.htm>.

² Ibid.

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Respectfully submitted,

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