



The Corporation of the
City of Sault Ste. Marie
COUNCIL REPORT

March 29, 2021

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

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to request Council approval to conduct a community engagement initiative related to vote-counting equipment, alternative voting methods, and voting locations.

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.

Voter turnout in Sault Ste. Marie was 40.3% in the 2018 municipal election. This turnout is consistent with the provincial average that has ranged from 40-45% between 1988 and 2014.¹ Provincial data for the 2018 municipal election is not available at this time.

The next municipal election will be held on Monday, October 24, 2022.

¹ Association of Municipalities of Ontario. 2018 Municipal Election - Fast Facts.
<https://elections.amo.on.ca/web/en/stats>.

Section 42 (1) of the *Municipal Elections Act* provides that:

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;
- (b) authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method, such as voting by mail or by telephone, that does not require electors to attend at a voting place in order to vote. 1996, c. 32, Sched., s. 42 (1).

The *Municipal Elections Act* requires municipalities to decide on the use of vote-counting equipment and/or alternative voting methods by May 1 in the year of the election. Staff would like to provide a recommendation to Council in 2021 to ensure procurement options (if required) are available to the City.

There are several ways in which votes can be made and counted, and a brief summary is provided below:

In-person manual count – Eligible voters physically attend a specified voting location to cast their ballot. Once the ballot is given to the voter, their name is struck off the voters list. Once the ballot is cast, it is placed into a secure box for manual counting once voting is closed.

In-person tabulator count – Eligible voters physically attend a specified voting location to cast their ballot. Once the ballot is given to the voter, their name is struck off the voters list. Once the ballot is marked the voter feeds the ballot into a tabulator. The tabulator scans and interprets the ballot, and the vote is cast. The ballot is deposited into a secure ballot box. The tabulator provides a cumulative total of all votes cast once voting is closed.

Vote by Mail – Eligible voters receive a ballot package in the mail that includes instructions, voter declaration card, a ballot, secrecy folder, and a postage pre-paid return envelope. Once returned, the voter's name is struck off the voters list, and the secrecy envelope containing the ballot is placed in a secure ballot box until Voting Day. Votes may be counted manually or by use of tabulators once voting is closed.

Vote Online – Eligible voters cast their vote on a specified website. Voters receive voting credentials (e.g. identification number and PIN) and use them to receive an electronic ballot. The voter makes their selection(s) and casts their ballot over the Internet. Once the ballot is cast, the voter's name is struck off the voters list. Once voting is closed the results are generated and provided to the Clerk.

Vote by Phone – Eligible voters cast their vote by calling a designated telephone number. Voters receive a PIN and may be required to answer a security question. Once validated, an audio version of the ballot is presented to the voter. Once the selection(s) is made and confirmed the vote is cast and the voter's name is struck off the list. Once voting is closed the results are generated and provided to the Clerk.

The City of Sault Ste. Marie has historically used paper ballot/manual count. In the 2018 election the City also provided a home visit program, where eligible voters could register to have a ballot box brought to their home. It was a very successful program that provided greater accessibility for voters. In 2018, 66 voters participated in the Vote from Home program.

Analysis

Staff would like to pursue a community engagement initiative in order to gauge public feedback on vote-counting equipment, alternative voting methods, and voting locations. This would include an invitation to the public to complete a survey and to participate in a virtual forum/open house. Voting locations will be included in the scope of the project given that suitable voting locations are becoming increasingly scarce.

The City Clerk's office will review demographic and geographic information related to voter turnout during the 2018 election locally, and reach out to communities with higher voter turnout to research any best practices that could be applied locally. This information will be combined with survey results to assist staff in developing a strategy to engage more voters to participate.

In light of the current pandemic and the uncertainty of impacts to the 2022 election, remote voting options are also being considered. There are a number of reasons eligible voters may not be able to cast their ballot in person, including but not limited to, health concerns, mobility limitations or being out of town.

Evaluating the use of vote-counting equipment and alternative voting methods for the 2022 election will include accessibility considerations, community feedback, estimated costs, ability to administer, *Municipal Elections Act* principles, and election trends.

Financial Implications

There are no anticipated costs to complete the community engagement initiative. Any financial implications that are recommended as a result of the initiative will be brought back to Council for consideration.

Strategic Plan / Policy Impact

This report is linked to the Commitment to Citizens and Community Corporate Value.

Recommendation

It is therefore recommended that Council take the following action:

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Resolved that the report of the Deputy City Clerk dated March 29, 2021 concerning Voter Engagement be received and that Council authorize staff to pursue a community engagement initiative regarding vote-counting equipment, alternative voting methods, and voting locations.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Madison Zuppa". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' and 'Z'.

Madison Zuppa
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