

2024 Municipal Election Modernization

ISSUE

The 2024 municipal election is officially scheduled in November 2024 and the City of Saskatoon is attempting to modernize how it conducts elections. Recent amendments to *The Local Government Election Act, 2015* (“LGEA”) provide clarity to permit municipalities greater use of various tools, namely with regards to voters lists and partnerships available with other entities, particularly Elections Saskatchewan. What approaches is the City of Saskatoon considering to modernize and enhance the ways in which it conducts future municipal elections?

BACKGROUND

The LGEA mandates that the next municipal election for the City of Saskatoon occurs on Wednesday, November 13, 2024. The City is committed to providing a fair and transparent election for municipal and school board elections. After every civic election, a review of process is undertaken to identify enhancements that can be made in future election cycles.

During the 2020 Civic election, there was a significant increase in usage of advance polls, going from 14,772 in 2016 to 19,666, and an uptake in mail-in ballots compared to previous elections, from 196 to 8600 in the same timeframe. These increases can partially be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, however based on statistics from recent provincial, federal, and municipal elections in other jurisdictions, it is expected that alternate, particularly mail-in, ballots, will continue to grow in popularity.

Considering lessons learned from the 2020 election and best practices from other jurisdictions, Administration has been working on modernizing practices for the 2024 election. This includes use of an election management system (EMS), and partnerships with other Canadian electoral authorities for use of information, technology, and hardware. Through these partnerships there is also potential for creation and use of a municipal voters list, in a way that is not cost prohibitive as has been the case in the past. The most notable partnership opportunity is with Elections Saskatchewan, which will enable many mutually beneficial improvements, including the ability to create a voters list and technological support.

Saskatoon has not utilized a voters list since the 1988 civic election. Following this, City Council resolved that a voters’ list would not be prepared for the 1991 election, and since then, there has been no voters list.

The Governance and Priorities Committee (GPC), at its meeting held on April 18, 2016, considered a report, “[Enumeration/Voters’ List/Voter Registry](#)”. At that time door-to-door enumeration was required by the legislation to create a voter’s list and the enumeration

cost was estimated to be between \$380,000 and \$500,000. City Council, [at its meeting held on April 26, 2016](#), adopted a resolution that voters be registered at the polls on the dates set for voting during the 2016 municipal and school board elections.

Current Status and Approach

For the 2020 election the City provided the following voting options:

- In-person voting on election day and multiple advanced voting days and locations;
- Mail-in ballot;
- Homebound voting;
- Hospital voting;
- Special location (care home voting); and
- Drive-through voting.

All voters were required to register at the polls, and voting occurred with physical ballots marked and the vote-counting process done using electronic tabulators. Vote tabulators must pass through a series of programming and logic/accuracy tests before deployment and have been utilized for civic elections in Saskatoon since 1997. No changes are proposed to the paper ballot and tabulator counting model.

Administration has developed the framework for a partnership with Elections Saskatchewan that is key for many of the proposed election improvements, including data sharing and creation of a municipal voters list. Pending Council endorsement, this would include entering into a formal information sharing agreement where the City would receive voter data which Elections Saskatchewan already owns and curates, to be used for the creation of the voters list. The legislative ability to enter into this agreement is included in the LGEA, as is the ability to use this information to create a voters list, rather than going through an enumeration process. There is little, to no cost in this partnership and it may result in financial savings in the overall election process.

Hardware, including vote tabulators for previous elections have been purchased or leased by the City, with support then being provided by contract from the vendor. Through partnership with Elections Saskatchewan and subsequently Canadian jurisdictions on opposite election cycles it is intended that procurement be undertaken differently, leasing equipment purchased by other cities/provinces. Support would continue to be provided by manufacturers, as in past elections. This has the benefit to the City of lower costs, access to more recent technology, and confidence in past successful use of the equipment. Increased specialized information technology needs required with a modernized system can also be sourced from these partner jurisdictions, particularly Elections Saskatchewan, where existing City capacity is not adequate.

Administration has undertaken a procurement process with election technology solution providers to use an election management system (EMS). There are a variety of programs that the City can use to manage an electronic voters list, mail-in ballot

application and fulfilment, candidate portal, voting location management, etc. These cloud-based applications will allow the City to more efficiently operate the election and increase the service and security level for candidates and voters. Regardless of whether a voters list is to be used, this technology is intended to be used for the 2024 election in some form.

Approaches in Other Jurisdictions

Several municipalities have acquired the services of an EMS provider and use a voters list for their elections. A review of some cities is listed in Table 1 below:

Municipality	Province	EMS	Voters List	List Manager	Last Election
Regina	Saskatchewan	Yes	No	N/A	2020
Prince Albert	Saskatchewan	No	No	N/A	2020
Vancouver	British Columbia	Yes	Yes	Elections BC	2022
Surrey	British Columbia	Yes	Yes	Elections BC	2022
Brandon	Manitoba	Yes	Yes	Elections Manitoba	2022
Winnipeg	Manitoba	Yes	Yes	Elections Manitoba	2022
Toronto	Ontario	Yes	Yes	MPAC; Elections Ontario – Jan 2023	2022
Ottawa	Ontario	Yes	Yes	MPAC; Elections Ontario – Jan 2023	2022
Hamilton	Ontario	Yes	Yes	MPAC; Elections Ontario – Jan 2023	2022
Calgary	Alberta	Yes	No	N/A	2021
Edmonton	Alberta	Yes	No	N/A	2021

Options – Voters List

Option 1 – No Voters List

This option would keep the status quo, with continuation of the process of registering all voters at the polls.

Given the opportunity to source a voters list through Elections Saskatchewan, the benefit of this option is limited. However, keeping many processes the same would be familiar to voters. Potential concerns with candidate access to voter personal information from a privacy/safety standpoint has been identified as a barrier in at least one jurisdiction.

With the City of Saskatoon not having utilized a voters list for many years, many challenges in registration at the polls have been mitigated as best as possible, however there are still advantages to consider.

Option 2 – Adopt the Use of a Voters List Through Partnership with Elections Saskatchewan

This option would adopt the use of a voters list and move forward with a partnership with Elections Saskatchewan that will give Administration access to their data, along with access to other election resources and technical training.

Advantages:

- It makes the voter's experience easier and faster by reducing lineups at the polling place, as registration for every voter is not required.
- It allows for an easier way to verify identity for alternative voting formats such as mail-in ballot.
- It serves to protect the integrity of the voting process by ensuring only eligible voters are given access to a ballot and are only able to vote one time.
- It integrates with an election management system
- Fewer poll workers will be needed to work at the polls.

Disadvantages:

- Inaccurate or incomplete data: There may be errors or omissions in the voters list. This can be mitigated by completing detailed review of voters list data to identify errors and having a process within legislated authority to allow voters to make changes to their information in advance of the election, or to self-register if not included on the list.

Should Council proceed with implementation of a voters list, the next decision point is with regards to mailing of voter information cards. These are an individualized document that would be mailed to all registered voters with information on where to vote and a card to present at the poll station along with acceptable identification. This is a practice that Elections Saskatchewan and Elections Canada presently utilize. Currently Administration is recommending not mailing voter information cards, for the following reasons:

- The cost of doing so for more than 100,000 eligible voters would exceed \$200,000.
- The benefit of direct information to voters on poll station locations does not outweigh the cost, with other methods of communicating election information being more cost effective.
- A voters list is finalized at a set interval in advance of the election date. Voter movement in the interim and other factors can result in inaccurate information being received directly, causing voter confusion.

In absence of a voter card, registered voters will need to provide acceptable identification that matches with voters list data, then will receive their ballot. This is the same identification that would need to be provided with a voter card, as the card itself does not allow an individual to vote without additional verification.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Partnerships with Elections Saskatchewan, including acquisition of voter data come at no cost. The EMS technology and associated hardware, including all listed modules and fulfillment of mail-in ballots is expected to come at a cost of approximately \$102,000. Should Council proceed with a voters list through this process this cost will be offset by less poll workers required, savings on printing and supplies, and staff time and resources associated with a more efficient election administration. Not accounting for in-kind City staff time and resources outside of poll workers, which has not been tracked for previous elections, the net increase is expected to be less than \$65,000, of which half would be funded by school boards as part of the agreement for the City to operate their trustee elections. This cost would be spread over four years through the City election budget process, resulting in annual costs of approximately \$8,000. If no voters list is utilized this cost would increase by approximately \$5,000 per year and should a mail out of voter cards occur this number increases significantly again. Vote by mail fulfillment comes with a per unit cost, however this is less than the per unit cost of completing this service in house.

RECOMMENDATION

That the Governance and Priorities Committee recommend to City Council:

1. That Administration enter into an agreement with Elections Saskatchewan, including for technology, and information sharing to establish a voters list; and
2. That voter information cards not be mailed to individuals on the voters list.

COMMUNICATION ACTIVITIES

A media release regarding formal partnership with Elections Saskatchewan would be arranged, and information on election modernization would form part of existing election communications plans.

Report Approval

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