

---

## 2024 Local Government Election – Returning Officer Review

### ISSUE

The 2024 local government election was held on November 13, 2024, for the offices of mayor and city councillor, and trustees for both the Saskatoon Public School Board (SPS) and Greater Saskatoon Catholic Separate School Board (GSCS) for the next four-year term 2024 - 2028.

Historically, the Returning Officer has presented a review report of the election to the Governance and Priorities Committee (GPC).

### BACKGROUND

The [2024 Election Modernization Strategy](#) report of the City Clerk's Office, considered by City Council on May 31, 2024, granted approval to Administration to enter into an agreement with Elections Saskatchewan, including for technology and information sharing to establish a voters list.

At its March 27, 2024 meeting, City Council granted approval for the amendment of Bylaw 8191, *The Election Bylaw, 2012* (Bylaw), as outlined in the [report of the City Clerk](#), to accommodate changes resulting from amendments to *The Local Government Election Act, 2015* (LGEA) and for operational efficiency of the civic election.

### CURRENT STATUS

The 2024 general election operated smoothly due to the implementation of significant process improvements, including an electronic voters list, more voting options for regular and alternate polls, easy access to election information, and a free transit program. The goal was to make voting easy, convenient and accessible to all eligible voters.

The City of Saskatoon (City) provided a total of 93 hours of scheduled in-person voting. There was additional voting opportunity via mail-in ballot. The total number of ballots cast for the election was 68,762, which represents a 35.07% turnout with registered voters of 196,084. The voting options offered, and the breakdown of votes is as follows:

Poll Type	Ballots Cast	Description
Regular Polls  (12 hours on election day)	41,235  (representing 59.97% of total votes)	67 election day polls were established with voting hours from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Up to 100 facilities were checked for suitability to host a poll in the spring of 2024. Assessment checks included technology, accessibility and safety. Two of the election day polls were designated as city-wide super polls, where any voter could vote irrespective of their ward or qualifying address.

2024 Local Government Election – Returning Officer Review

Advance Polls (32 hours over 4 days)	19,505 (representing 28.37% of total votes)	10 advance polls were hosted from November 1 to 4, 2024, with one in each of the 10 civic wards. The polls all had concurrent open voting times (12 noon to 8:00 p.m.). The advance polls were very popular and busy as they were all city-wide and eligible voters could vote at any of the advance poll.
Advance Post-Secondary Poll (21 hours over 3 days)	786 (representing 1.14% of total votes)	Polls were established at post-secondary institutions, to provide opportunity and ease of voting for voters at the University of Saskatchewan (November 5 and 6) and Saskatchewan Polytechnic (November 7)
Advance Drive-Through Poll (8 hours)	1,060 (representing 1.54% of total votes)	A drive-through poll was held on November 9, 2024, at the City Hall parking lot, a central location. The drive-through poll provided the option for voters to cast their ballot from the ease and convenience of their vehicles and was well received by voters.
Mail-in Ballot	4,013 (representing 5.84% of total votes)	Voters were able to apply either through the online portal, by email, or in-person at the elections office. It enabled voters to cast their ballots at their convenience from any location that had postal service. Paper ballots were mailed to voters, who completed the ballots and mailed them back to the elections office. The mail-in ballot process improved with the incorporation of the election management system (EMS), and voters were able to check the status of their application through different stages. Mail-in ballot drop-boxes were placed in seven locations across the City to facilitate early and easy returns of completed mail-in ballot kits.
Special Polls	2,163 (representing 3.15% of total votes)	In-person voting was conducted at 41 seniors and care homes. They were held from November 5 – 8. 12 poll workers (forming 3 teams) administered the special polls. The special polls have varying durations based on the number of residents in each facility.
At-Home Voting		Available for voters and caregivers who were unable to leave their home to vote at an established poll due to an illness or mobility issues.
Hospitals		Election day voting was facilitated for eligible voters that were in-patient at the five hospitals in Saskatoon – Royal University Hospital, Jim Pattison Children’s Hospital, Saskatoon City Hospital, and St. Paul’s Hospital.

The civic election administration is one of the mandates of the City Clerk’s Office, and the core election administration team was made up of staff from the City Clerk’s Office

with team members assigned a portfolio/program to expand on their organizational skills, leadership roles and supervisory opportunities. Other City departments played supportive roles for the election.

The Returning Officer introduced several process improvements, some of which were implemented for the first time in Saskatoon’s civic election, including:

1. Technology improvement with the use of an electronic voters list and over 250 ePoll books deployed for the election.
2. Monitoring the number of recorded voters live and in real-time from the election office.
3. Transparency in the tallying of results – manual copies posted at City Hall for viewing as the polls were closed, allowing for candidates/agents to view the process before they were uploaded to the online results viewing webpage.
4. Blind draws for candidates order on the ballot for offices with more than five candidates nominated – a process improvement allowing for an even contest, and no candidate is disadvantaged due to their name when the order is made in alphabetical order.
5. Cybersecurity response plan put in place to mitigate any potential threat.
6. Candidate observation process document distributed to all candidates.
7. Election logistics/supplies pick-up decentralization reduced the number of vehicles at the election office on election morning.
8. “Youth at the Booth” campaigns to get more youths involved as election workers.
9. Ten (10) advance polls open concurrently – one (1) in each of the civic wards and dedicated advance polls at post-secondary institutions.

These enhancements contributed to a smoother and more efficient election process.

The communication and promotions for the civic election were comprehensive and carried out within three streams – vote, run, and work highlighting messaging on the different ways Saskatoonians could participate in the election, by exercising their right to vote if they were eligible, by running as a candidate in the election, and by participating as a paid election worker.

This was communicated through various media outlets, including utility bill inserts; distribution of the voter guide to all households within the City and to Libraries/public buildings; online digital ads and digital billboards throughout the City; election messaging on transit buses; radio ads; media interviews with the Returning Officer; free transit on election day.

### **DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS**

The areas for review of the election where continuous improvement has been identified may require either legislative amendments to current provincial legislation (LGEA), *The*

*Local Government Election Regulations* (LGER) or any of the City’s election-related bylaws. Administrative process/procedure changes may also be required.

1. Election Date: Municipal elections are governed by the LGEA. Beginning in 2020, the provincial government set the date for local government elections for all municipalities in the province to the second Wednesday in November, less than two weeks after the provincial election. This close timing created challenges similar to those in 2020, as the elections team had to compete with the province for resources such as advertising, election workers, stakeholders, and training dates.

The proximity of the two elections also led to frequent confusion among external stakeholders. For example, facility administrators often struggled to differentiate between the two elections when booking voting locations.

2. Nomination Day: Nomination day is currently the fifth Wednesday before election day as prescribed in clause 73(1)(a) of the LGEA. Notwithstanding clause 73(1)(a), subsection 73(2) of the LGEA permits a municipality to establish a nomination day up to seven weeks before election day through its general election bylaw. A seven-week period between nomination day and election day would provide for more time to finalize election preparations post-nomination day which includes proofing ballots to meet both legislative and technical requirements before mass production, as well as conducting pre-poll logic and accuracy tests on the vote tabulating machines. A longer timeframe would also allow sufficient time to process and send out mail-in ballots. Consultation with other municipalities will be done, and further reporting may be presented to GPC and City Council if there is merit in considering a Bylaw amendment to provide for an earlier nomination day.
3. Feeding of Ballots of polls without a Tabulator: Section 13 of the Bylaw provides the procedure for counting ballots after the close of polls on election day. The ballots include those from drive-through polls, special polls, mail-in ballots and at-home voting where ballot boxes have been used. Thousands of ballots were required to be fed into the tabulators on election night, which was both resource and time consuming, thereby delaying the counting/tallying of election results on election night. The Returning Officer and election team will conduct research and bring further reporting to GPC and City Council, proposing Bylaw amendments for the efficient counting of ballots from these polls.
4. Closing of Advance Polls Tabulators: Automatic vote tabulators have been used for civic elections since 1997 and are routinely deployed to advance polls.

Currently, the vote count data from these tabulators cannot be finalized until election night so as not to compromise or influence the election outcome. This delay, however, significantly slows down the reporting of election results. A modified procedure is being investigated to allow advance poll tabulators to be closed earlier while ensuring votes remain confidential and not tallied until all polls close on election night.

5. Election Night Reporting: At the close of polls, poll staff from all the voting locations transport the vote tabulators to the Count Centre (City Hall), where the tabulator is closed, and the data is generated on paper tapes. While this ensures transparency, it is both time and resources consuming and there may be other efficient ways of tallying the election results, such as electronic transmission to City Hall from the polls. This ensures that the election outcome is reported timely, while still maintaining the same level of transparency. Having followed up with other municipalities and the tabulator service provider, improvements in both technology and process have been identified that will assist in faster results reporting for future elections. The Returning Officer will work with the service provider and City IT staff on technology enhancements, and in combination with Solicitors, applicable bylaw and process changes may be brought forward for Council review and consideration.
  
6. School Support Eligibility: The City has an agreement with the Saskatoon Public Schools and the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Separate Schools to administer the election for the trustees of both school boards.

The LGEA outlines eligibility for voting for a separate school board trustee. It states, in addition to other criteria, that voters must be of the minority faith that established the separate school board, in this case, only individuals of the Catholic faith are eligible to vote for a Catholic school trustee. While this is set by legislation and poll officials are obligated to ask voters to confirm their Catholic faith verbally, some voters perceived this as a very personal question to ask. The Returning Officer will explore additional ways to enhance the voting experience. This may include collaborating with the school board to improve targeted communication to this group of voters and offering more training opportunities to poll workers.

7. Election Day Poll Duration and Configuration: Section 100 of the LGEA provides for the duration of polls and provides that polls must be open for voting by 9:00 a.m. and gives flexibility for the Returning Officer to open polls earlier on election day. In Saskatoon, polls have traditionally opened at 8:00 a.m. With the EMS in

place, an analysis of voting data will be conducted to determine if opening of polls by 8:00 a.m. improves voter turnout versus opening the polls at 9:00 a.m. During advance voting, voters were able to vote at any of the ten established advance polls; while on election day, voters were only able to vote in their neighbourhood poll for their qualifying address. As all voting locations in a ward use the same ballot style, with the implementation of the EMS, it could allow voters to vote at any polling station in their ward.

8. Housekeeping Improvements for Consideration: Additional areas for improvement include the enforcement of election sign regulations and enhancing poll staff training by offering on-demand videos to supplement the in-person, hands-on training. Additionally, increasing pay rates for poll staff to more competitive levels are being considered to support recruitment and retention.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The election was estimated to cost about \$1.2 million and funds available from the election operating cost and election reserve. Based on the existing cost-sharing agreement for administering the school trustee election, \$1,116,091.78 of the final election cost is shareable with the school boards. The sharing formula is computed from the assessment data as of January 1, 2024. The City will recoup a total sum of \$558,045.89 and contribute to the election reserve fund after billing the school boards. The breakdown is shown in Appendix 1.

Shared Expense	City Portion (50%)	SPS Portion (38.2%)	GSCS Portion (11.8%)
\$1,116,091.78	\$558,045.89	\$426,347.06	\$131,698.83

The cost incurred by the City will include 50% of the City's shareable portion, the cost for the destruction of election records as prescribed by the LGEA, auditor's fee reimbursement to mayoral candidates, costs for closing the election office and storage of reusable election supplies.

### **OTHER IMPLICATIONS**

There are no privacy or environmental implications identified.

### **NEXT STEPS**

City Council may decide to write to the provincial government to consider changing the election date to its previous fourth Wednesday in October or any date in the spring or a shift in the provincial election date.

Further reporting will be brought to the City Council with recommendations for proposed changes, including legislative changes and bylaw amendments for process improvement after the City Clerk's Office engages with the City Solicitor's Office, technology partners and other municipalities.

**APPENDICES**

1. Election expenses breakdown

Report Approval

Written by: Charles Ogbede, Elections and Appeals Manager  
Reviewed by: Shellie Bryant, Returning Officer and Director of Legislative Services  
Approved by: Adam Tittermore, City Clerk

Admin Report - 2024 Local Government Election – Returning Officer Review.docx