

**Region of Waterloo**  
**Planning, Development, and Legislative Services**  
**Council and Administrative Services**

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**To:** Administration and Finance Committee  
**Meeting Date:** August 15, 2023  
**Report Title:** Council Electronic Participation Pilot Project Update

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**1. Recommendation**

That the Regional Municipality of Waterloo approve the continuation of electronic participation for members of Council for Council/Standing Committee Meetings as set out in Procedural By-law 22-051, Section 15, as amended, as outlined in report PDL-CAS-23-009, dated August 15, 2023.

And that the Regional Clerk be directed to provide a proposed cost estimate in the 2024 Regional Budget for Council Chamber technological upgrades to ensure the continuation of electronic participation as an option for both the Public and the Members of Council.

**2. Purpose / Issue:**

The purpose of this report is to review the in-person participation following a year trial basis as directed by Regional Council in August 2022. Additionally, if it is determined that electronic participation should continue, then the Committee should consider electronic upgrades to improve the quality and reliability of the electronic system in Council Chambers.

**3. Strategic Plan:**

This report supports Strategic Focus Area #5, Responsive and Engaging Public Service.

**4. Report Highlights:**

- Staff adapted swiftly to accommodate the need for electronic participation during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and have been conducting hybrid meetings since the summer of 2020. The ability to participate electronically has been beneficial to Council, delegations, and consultants.
- In August 2022, Regional Council approved in-person participation for Council members as the default method of participation, but permitted electronic

participation on a year trial basis.

- The last technological upgrade to Council Chambers was in 2018 and it did not anticipate the virtual meeting requirements. Clerk's staff were able to make modifications in 2020 to allow for hybrid meetings, but with uncertainty around the future of hybrid meetings resources were not allocated to upgrading the technology.

## 5. Background:

Following the amendments to the *Municipal Act*, due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Regional Council has successfully been holding hybrid meetings since the summer of 2020. With the removal of Covid-19 restrictions, it was necessary to decide on the future of electronic participation for Members of Council, the public, and staff.

In August 2022, Regional Council approved the continuation of electronic participation for both members of the Public and Council, with the stipulation that Council would review the electronic participation of Council Members following a one-year trial basis.

During the pilot project at least one Member of Council participated electronically in 49 of the 67 meetings. Most notably, on January 25, 2023 and February 22, 2023 there was severe weather that would have made in-person participation dangerous for some Members. It is also worth noting there were several Special Council meetings held to discuss time-sensitive matters related to labour relations, which would not have had quorum, without the use of electronic participation. Additionally, at the June 21, 2023 Council meeting the camera power supply failed in Council Chambers, so without an electronic participation option, the meeting would have been rescheduled or not webcast to the public.

The procedural by-law that was passed on October 12, 2023 currently allows for electronic participation and no changes are required to the by-law if the current rules remain in place.

## 6. Communication and Engagement with Area Municipalities and the Public

### Area Municipalities:

Staff contacted each municipality to provide an update related to electronic participation for Council/Committee meetings. The current status is as follows:

- **Cambridge:** Started hybrid meetings using their new technology at their November 29th, 2022 Council Meeting. There are no restrictions on Councillors participating electronically. Council approved the new Procedure By-law and Hybrid Meeting Procedure at its May 9th, 2023 Meeting. Their Advisory Committee's continue to meet fully virtually.

- **Kitchener:** The Pilot project is complete; they are preparing to amend the City's Procedural By-law to include the protocols approved last year. The default for Council meetings is still in-person, where members of Council are permitted to participate electronically when travelling for Municipal business, illness or infirmity, parental and caregiving requirement, or health and safety reasons. They are supposed to provide 24 hours notice for electronic participation.
- **North Dumfries:** Hybrid meetings with Councillors allowed to participate electronically for official business, illness, or health and safety. Councillors are also given 3 personal days per calendar year to be used to connect remotely to non-consecutive regularly scheduled meetings.
- **Waterloo:** In person participation only as the Chamber renovation is currently in process. There will bring a report to Council when the new system is functional and tested with recommendations. Advisory Committees have mostly returned in person with some choosing to remain electronic.
- **Wellesley:** Hybrid attendance is an option however, the default for Council meetings is still in-person, where members of Council are permitted to participate electronically in accordance with their Hybrid Meeting policy. There are plans to amend the Township's Procedural By-law to include the protocols approved. Council members & staff are supposed to provide 12 hours notice for electronic participation.
- **Wilmot:** Hybrid meetings with no restrictions on Councillor's participating electronically.
- **Woolwich:** Fully hybrid meetings, no restrictions on Councillors participating electronically, and they will continue to be fully hybrid and livestreamed indefinitely. Some Boards and Committees will move to hybrid in August, though few will be livestreamed.

**Public:**

Delegations continue to have the option to participate either electronically or in-person, as set out in the procedural by-law 22-51. In 2023, approximately one-third of delegations have utilized the electronic option and Staff have received feedback that the flexibility and accessibility of having both options available is ideal.

**7. Financial Implications:**

Supporting hybrid meetings requires more staff support than meetings that are fully in person or fully virtual. This has been covered within the Council and Administrative Services Budget since 2020 and is sustainable within the existing operating budget.

If the recommendation is approved, the Clerk's Office will provide a proposed cost estimate for Council Chamber electronic upgrades to be included in the 2024 Regional Budget. As part of any upgrade proposal, Staff will assess and include requirements for ongoing support costs.

**8. Conclusion / Next Steps:**

Staff support the continued use of electronic participation for both the Public and Council as it has provided flexibility in scheduling and for conducting meetings. If approved, Staff will prepare a cost estimate for upgrades to Council Chambers. The upgrades will aim to improve the reliability and quality of both in-person and electronic participation.

**9. Attachments:**

None.

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**Approved By:** Rod Regier, Commissioner, Planning, Development and Legislative Services