

ELECTION OUTREACH – IMPROVING ELECTION ACCESSIBILITY AND THE VOTER EXPERIENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Returning Officer was asked by Council to report on the planned initiatives that will make voting more accessible. The result will be an improved voter experience during the upcoming General Election of 2017. The Returning Officer is consistently seeking ways that voting can be made more accessible and convenient to voters within the existing legal framework of the Local Authorities Election Act and the Calgary Election Regulation. Whenever new possibilities present themselves, they are implemented after careful consideration and research. This was the case when the legislation enabled much broader access to the Advance Vote, which to date has been the greatest catalyst for accessibility and convenience for voters. Similarly, the introduction of the mail-in ballot and its subsequent ease of use led to greater access to elections. Among more innovative approaches that did not require legislative changes was the introduction of the Advance Vote Bus – a measure that brought the voting station to where people were already appearing in large numbers.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That Council receive Report PFC2017-0259 for information, and the Election Outreach and Improved Accessibility measures, outlined under the Investigation section of this report.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

City Council referred report NM2016-30 on 2016 November 7, which directed Administration to “determine any potential actions and required funding to improve voter turnout in the 2017 Election” and report back by the end of the First Quarter.

Council at its meeting held, September 28, 2015, adopted the recommendations contained in report C2015-0480, as follows:

That Council:

- “1. Receive for information;
 - a) The research and analysis contained in this report,
 - b) The commencement of development of an election outreach program in accordance with the approved 2015-2018 Action Plan, and
 - c) The Returning Officer's decision to use existing funds to expand multi-cultural communication for the 2017 General Election; and
2. Direct the Returning Officer to report to Council, no later than June 2018, on an evaluation of the above initiatives to include the impact on voters and future budget implications.”

Accordingly, the Returning Officer will be reporting on the initiatives included in report C2015-0480 and included in this report no later than June 2018.

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The Local Authorities Election Act and the Calgary Election Regulation confer independence and guarantee freedom from obstruction to the Returning Officer when performing the duties related to the administration of an election.

BACKGROUND

As we witness declining voter participation rates throughout Western democracies, the need to reach out to potential voters and address the possible causes for a lack of participation has been of utmost importance. Studies have shown that the most often cited reasons for non-participation include: lack of support for available candidates, lack of information about candidates and platforms or means of voting and indicates belief that ones vote does not make a difference. The cited reasons predominantly point towards inadequate voter engagement as the primary cause of low voter turnout. Additional, less prominent causes include: lack of time to vote, injury or illness and the absence of information on where and when to vote. The second set of reasons for non participation point towards deficiencies in voter accessibility and inadequate dissemination of information as well as ineffective election related communication. Addressing any one of the causes listed above is undoubtedly not a panacea for the declining voter participation facing society today. However, consistent and systematic improvements in all of these areas will most certainly yield a better voter experience and increased voter participation over time.

INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

In addition to the new measures identified for the 2017 Election, the Returning Officer will continue to offer convenience and accessibility measures from past elections, such as:

1. Mail-in ballot – available to all electors who believe that they will be outside of the jurisdiction during the election, or due to physical incapacity and election workers;
2. **Advance Vote** – available to all eligible electors at Advance Vote stations city wide;
3. Incapacitated elector voting – available to anyone unable to attend a voting station due to a temporary or permanent physical incapacity, election staff make home visit;
4. Institutional voting – available to electors who are confined to a hospital or nursing home during the election, election staff go bed-to-bed to receive all ballots cast;
5. All voting stations wheel chair accessible and free of barriers;
6. Advance Vote stations at University of Calgary, Mount Royal University and SAIT;
7. "Where do I Vote" application on mobile devices and website;
8. Voting instructions translated into 18 languages at all voting stations;
9. Blind Voter template available at all Advance Vote stations.

As a result of the research conducted and the stakeholder engagement, the Returning Officer will undertake to implement the following initiatives for the 2017 General Election:

1. Introduce Candidate Profile Pages on the Elections Calgary elections website – this will include information about the candidate and their platform;
2. Significantly expand the number of **Advance Vote** locations, focussing on convenience and voter accessibility such as libraries and leisure centres;

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3. Expand the **Advance Vote Bus** program to include locations other than C-Train stations, such as the Drop In Centre;
4. Increase Election Communication and Outreach starting July 1st 2017 when mail-in ballot requests can be received;
5. Celebrate Voters – “I Voted” stickers accompanied by a social media campaign;
6. Revamp the Election Calgary website to include more information for voters and candidates alike including outreach to New Canadians, minority groups, members of groups that have real or perceived barriers to participating in elections, under-represented groups of voters such as Millennials;
7. Produce an Election Day Free transit ticket for voters to be printed in the Election Brochure that constitutes statutory advertising of the election as per the Local Authorities Election Act. Calgary Transit will honour the ticket for voting adults who obtain it from the brochure and will provide statistics on number of tickets used. This would make the initiative more manageable, yielding measurable statistics as to how many people took advantage of the Election Day Free transit ticket initiative.
8. Improved efficiencies for voters at voting stations, partly achieved through increased voter registration initiatives
9. Increased voter engagement and communication at events during the summer, such as outreach activities during the Canada Day, Calgary Stampede, Folk Fest and Global Fest.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

The Elections Office engaged with various stakeholder groups, including Councillors and the Office of the Mayor, Calgary Transit, Communications, YYC Innovation Lab with an internal and external challenge, Calgary Public Library, and Access Calgary. Research conducted is outlined in Attachments 1 and 2. In addition to the academic research, a review of election related initiatives were explored which included outreach to other jurisdictions across Canada, such as Edmonton, Saskatoon, Regina, Toronto, British Columbia and Nova Scotia found in Attachment 3.

Strategic Alignment

A well run City has been identified as a Council priority, with Strategic Action W5 calling for greater collaboration and encouraging public participation in City decision-making and W7 calling for a continued transformation towards citizen focussed delivery of service. Voter participation is the most fundamental way that citizens have to ensure their voice is heard when choosing the elected officials to lead the City. The right to vote is one of the most fundamental rights that Canadian Citizens have bestowed upon them. The Returning Officer is tasked with ensuring that elections are conducted in a fair and impartial manner, free from obstruction and interference.

Social, Environmental, Economic (External)

There are numerous factors that impact voter turnout which are beyond the influence and control of the Returning Officer, most notably voter engagement and weather conditions. It is believed that by implementing the identified actions; which will lead to improvements in voter accessibility and convenience; that voter turnout will be positively impacted. Success in

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improving the voter experience and encouraging greater voter engagement is a long term undertaking which may not yield the desired outcome at the outset.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget:

The identified actions do not require any additional funding to implement and can be accommodated within the City Clerk's Office Operating Budget.

Current and Future Capital Budget:

The recommendations do not have any Capital Budget implications for the City Clerk's Office.

Risk Assessment

There are no risks associated with the implementation of the identified actions.

REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S):

Reasons for the implementation of the identified measures include research conducted, as outlined in Attachments 1-3. Engagement with stakeholders has identified several areas having an impact on voter turnout that would stand to see improvement.

ATTACHMENT(S)

Attachment 1: Trends in Voter Turnout
Attachment 2: Voters and Their Motivations
Attachment 3: Voting Initiatives