



Meeting Date: January 11, 2022

Submitted by: James Hutson, Municipal Clerk

Report No: CLK-01-2022

Subject: 2022 Municipal Election Accessibility Summary Report

Recommendation:

THAT Report CLK-01-2022 re: 2022 Municipal Election Accessibility Summary Report be approved

Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to provide Council and the public with a follow-up report respecting the 2022 Accessible Elections Plan and specifically, the identification, removal and prevention of barriers that affected electors and candidates with disabilities in accordance with section 12.1(3) of the Municipal Elections Act, 1996.

Background:

The Municipality of Middlesex Centre worked collaboratively with the lower-tier Middlesex County municipalities, in consultation with the County of Middlesex Accessibility Coordinator, to develop an Accessible Elections Plan ahead of the 2022 municipal election.

In the lead up to the election, the proposed Plan was submitted to the Middlesex County Accessibility Advisory Committee for feedback. The intent of this document was to identify potential barriers that could be experienced by people with disabilities during an election, and to establish actions and methods to address any barriers that may arise.

When developing this plan, municipal staff referred to the principles found in the Municipal Elections Act, 1996, the Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2001, and the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, 2005.

Analysis:

The following overview identifies initiatives undertaken by the Municipality of Middlesex Centre during the 2022 Municipal Election with respect to the removal and prevention of barriers that affected electors and candidates with disabilities

Voting Methods

Similar to previous municipal elections, Middlesex Centre offered an alternative voting method, in the form of both internet and telephone voting which provided electors with the ability to cast their ballot at any time, or in any place, which was convenient to them.

As a further option, electors were able to cast a ballot at the Help Centre throughout the advance voting period and on voting day, as well as by attending local library facilities.

This hybrid approach allowed flexibility for electors with disabilities to select the method of voting that best suited their needs, allowed for the use of accessibility supports, and increased the ability of an elector to vote privately and independently.

Voter Help Centre

A Voter Help Centre was established at the Municipality of Middlesex Centre municipal administrative office located at 10227 Ilderton Road ahead of the advance voting period.

This Voter Help Centre was staffed by the election team and allowed for dedicated support to be offered to individuals seeking assistance with being added to the voters list or seeking information as to how to cast their ballot in the upcoming election

In addition to the core hours, operating hours were extended and the voter help centre was opened on the weekend of the advance polling period, allowing a further opportunity for individuals to visit this location beyond the core municipal operating hours

The physical location was fully accessible to the public with external and internal signage which was used to direct electors to the Help /Voting Centre. Accessible parking was also made available at the Voter Help Centre

In determining the set-up of the room, consideration was given to safety, voter privacy, flow of 'traffic', the need for extra seating, and table height, and turning radius for voting stations. Wires were secured to prevent tripping hazards.

Voting Assistance:

Election Officials were available at the Voter Help Centre throughout the Voting Period to provide support and assistance to any elector requesting support. Touch screen voting stations were established at the Help Centre and at local libraries, allowing individuals to attend in person to cast their vote electronically.

The election procedures established clear requirements to allow for an elector to receive assistance from either a support person/friend of the voter or an Election Official upon completing a declaration form.

Magnifying sheets and pen/paper were also available to support voting and effective communication for electors with hearing impairments or low vision.

In addition, a dedicated voter help telephone line and email contact was established which was staffed in the evenings and throughout the weekend. The Municipal Clerk personally attended to the voter help line each evening during the entirety of the advance voting period, offering support to individuals calling in or emailing up to 9:00 p.m. each day.

In addition to the above voting assistance, elections staff liaised with area long term care homes early in 2022 to establish a dedicated contact for information sharing. Staff then visited these locations in advance of the voting period to review voters list requirements and assist residents in the location with any questions. Ultimately, a dedicated polling station was established at this location during the voting period, ensuring residents could attend to cast their ballot and obtain assistance as needed from election officials.

The goal of this outreach was to connect with electors in the way? and at the time which they were most comfortable. Ultimately by providing an ongoing presence and prioritizing connectivity to election experts and staff, the municipality was able to meet the needs of electors in a variety of ways and leverage the investment in establishing dedicated assistance channels.

Communication and Outreach

Beginning in the fall of 2021, regular communication and outreach was done regarding important dates and information related to the upcoming 2022 municipal elections.

Communication in the fall of 2021 and Spring of 2022 focussed on the Voter Lookup tool, a self-service portal for Ontario voters to verify if their name appeared on a municipal voters list, update this information as needed and add their information if required. This tool allowed eligible voters to verify their information at their convenience, and ensure they would be eligible to vote in the upcoming elections.

The approach to communication expanded in the lead up to the nomination period to focus on information for candidates, third party advertisers and voters. This outreach was done through traditional print media, social media, the website, newsletters and posters/handouts at various facilities. Information was made available to candidates and voters in alternate formats upon request. No such requests were received.

Election Official Training:

The Municipal Clerk provided a comprehensive training program for municipal staff appointed to act as election officials. These staff have also participated in the accessible customer service training. The Administrative Assistant – Planning and Corporate Records was appointed as a Deputy Returning Officer, and three additional staff members provided support as voter help centre attendants. On election day, members of the Corporate Services team provided additional support to voters to ensure staff support was readily available.

Financial Implications:

Financial consideration related to accessible elections form part of the overall election budget allocation of approximately \$44,000.00

Strategic Plan:

This matter aligns with following strategic priorities:

- Responsive Municipal Government

Prioritizing the identification, removal and prevention of barriers that affect electors and candidates with disabilities ensures the municipality responds to the needs of the electorate while fulfilling legislative responsibilities under the Municipal Elections Act, 1996.

Attachments:

A1 - Election Accessibility Plan