

City considers e-voting option

One day we'll be able to cast civic ballot by phone or Internet

BY LEWIS KELLY, EDMONTON JOURNAL DECEMBER 12, 2011

The city is looking at the possibility of electronic voting in the next Edmonton civic election.

E-voting, which can mean casting ballots through the Internet or over the telephone, has been tried over the last decade in other parts of Canada and several European countries.

Staff expect to come up with proposals by next fall on options, including electronic ballots and touch screens, to properly prepare for e-voting in the 2013 election.

While they will discuss what can be achieved, costs and how the system could work, a report to be discussed by city council Wednesday says developing and testing Internet voting would take too long to be ready for the next campaign.

But Coun. Tony Caterina would like to further explore the potential for e-voting.

"I think it's a great idea," he said Sunday. "I think the generation that e-voting would appeal to is that younger demographic, and traditionally they're the lowest voter turnout."

More legally binding municipal elections have taken place in Canada using e-voting options than anywhere else in the world, the report says.

They've been held successfully in more than 30 Ontario municipalities and four Nova Scotia municipalities.

The report touts increased voter turnout as one potential benefit of Internet voting, pointing to places such as Estonia, where the practice began with municipal elections in 2005 and expanded to parliamentary elections two years later.

Voter turnout rose after it was introduced, although an Elections Canada workshop was told last year it's not clear whether e-voting increases overall turnout or youth participation in particular.

"The more we can encourage people to vote, the better," Coun. Kim Krushell said. "I don't have a problem with electronic voting, if that's what it demonstrates."

She's generally positive about the idea, but concerned about the expense. Estimates based on figures in the report indicate e-voting could more than quadruple Edmonton's election cost to \$7.9 million.

There have been problems in other countries.

The U.K. introduced test programs in 2002 involving voting via telephone, the Internet, text message and even digital television, but pulled the plug in 2007 amid security concerns and little change in voter turnout.

The Netherlands planned to allow Internet voting in parliamentary elections in 2006, but aborted the scheme after a group hacked the system on live television. The Dutch Council of Ministers banned electronic voting in 2008.

Brad Haines, an Edmonton hacker who makes his living through digital security consulting, worries about the risks of online voting.

"You're basically hoping that you get it right the first time and the democratic process isn't completely upended." Computer glitches and malicious hacking are equal threats, Haines said.

"You can think about a scenario where you introduce just enough doubt into an election that should it not go your way, you can complain to get the election result thrown out and get an effective do-over. That's not the way the democratic process is supposed to be."

Caterina also wants to be sure any security issues are addressed.

"We have to make sure that it can-not be manipulated in the technology part of it," he said. "That would be my only concern. If the technology is infallible, that would be terrific."

Coun. Ben Henderson is enthusiastic about the concept of online voting, but insists it must maintain faith in the election process.

"For a voting system to work, it has to be one that everybody will trust and believe," he said. "But anything that can make it easier or more attractive for people to vote, I think, is to be encouraged."

Turnout in Edmonton's 2010 election was 33 per cent, up from 27 per cent in 2007 but still below the 41-per-cent mark set in 2004.

"The major advantage of online voting is the convenience," Henderson said. "Somehow or other, we need to be able to achieve the convenience without undermining the validity of the voting system."

Civic politics could be a test for online voting before it goes to provincial and federal elections, he said.

"You just don't hear about the kind of shenanigans that you sometimes hear about in other places."

The city councillors said online voting in one form or another probably lies in Edmonton's future.

"I think this is something that will definitely be inevitable," Caterina said. "The timing, nobody knows for sure at this point, but I think that all three levels of government are probably looking at this."

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