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**Item No. 9.1.3**  
**Accessibility Advisory Committee**  
**April 18, 2016**

**TO:** Chair and Members of the Accessibility Advisory Committee

**SUBMITTED BY:** Original Signed

Kevin Arjoon, Municipal Clerk and Returning Officer, 2016 Municipal & School Board Elections

**DATE:** April 12, 2016

**SUBJECT:** Accessible Services – 2016 Municipal and School Board Elections

**INFORMATION REPORT**

**ORIGIN**

At the conclusion of the 2012 Municipal and School Board Elections, staff appeared before the Accessibility Advisory Committee to garner feedback on the electoral event and the services provided to electors with disabilities. Based on the feedback received by the Committee, the 2016 Elections Team are creating an accessibility plan entitled “Improving Accessibility for Voters” (attached as Appendix A) which contains the accessibility initiatives for the 2016 Election. In creating this document, the Elections Team will be seeking input from the Accessibility Advisory Committee and community stakeholder groups.

**LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY**

Election processes are governed by the Municipal Elections Act. Section 62 (1), which addresses physical access to a polling station, and ballots, states: “A polling station shall be in premises with level access and shall contain an adequately lighted compartment where an elector may mark the elector’s ballot paper in secrecy.”

There are several sections within the Municipal Elections Act which indirectly addresses electors with disabilities; these sections will be taken into account in the planning and execution of the 2016 Municipal and School Board Elections.

**BACKGROUND**

After the 2012 Municipal and School Board Elections, staff appeared before the Accessibility Advisory Committee on December 3, 2012 to gain feedback on accessibility concerns. As a result of the discussion, four key themes were identified: Independent Voting; Communication; Equitable Hiring Practices; and Physical Accessibility. These themes were seen as a starting point for 2016 accessible election initiatives, and as such, have been incorporated into the Improving Accessibility for Voters document.

On April 11, 2015, the Elections Team hosted an interactive session on voter engagement, entitled “Your Ideas. Your Vote.” at the Central Library. The session was well attended, and was comprised of various

presentations and sessions, including one focused on accessibilities and voting methods. Participants throughout the session provided valuable commentary on 2012 initiatives that worked well and pointed out some of the gaps in the 2012 elector experience.

The December 3, 2012 Accessibility Advisory Committee meeting, and the 2015 interactive session have provided municipal election staff with suggestions to investigate, and potentially implement in the upcoming 2016 electoral event.

### *Independent Voting*

Concerns that voters with visual impairments were unable to cast a ballot in secret were brought forward. While advance e-voting can mitigate some of the issues, the same level of independence should be provided for in-person voting at the polls.

### *Communication*

Committee members indicated that it was unclear when e-voting and telephone voting closed, and that many voters found out about these alternatives after the fact. It was suggested that these alternate voting methods be widely advertised in a number of different formats and locations.

### *Equitable Hiring Practices*

In 2012, it was reported that individuals were discouraged from pursuing election positions due to hearing impairments. It was suggested that for the 2016 election well-documented tasks for all positions should be established and it should be left up to each individual to decide whether they wish to apply. All Committee members were encouraged to put their name forward for the next election as there are a multitude of positions available and accommodations for election workers will be employed wherever possible.

### *Physical Accessibility*

The provincial legislation governing municipal elections offers limited recommendations regarding site selection. The Election Office has expanded the criteria to ensure that accessibility is adequate for all electors. The criterion established by Elections Nova Scotia and through consultation with other electoral bodies has been incorporated into checklists to ensure that the best possible available locations are selected.

In addition to the themes discussed in 2012 and 2015, staff consulted with other electoral bodies regarding broader inclusivity. As a result, staff may also be implementing strategies to reduce barriers regarding literacy, language, mental health and societal.

## **DISCUSSION**

The 2016 Elections Team is guided by the principle that every elector should be provided with the opportunity to cast their vote independently. The creation of an accessibility plan is to document the initiatives implemented by the Team to remove barriers. In building an accessibility plan, and starting early in the election planning process, it is anticipated that the Elections Team will be mindful of accessibility concerns throughout the duration of the election. The plan is seen as a living document and thus will continue to develop as the electoral event unfolds. The Election Team is committed to being responsive to the needs of electors of all capabilities and will work to accommodate electors and employees with disabilities.

As of April 12, 2016, Halifax Regional Council has approved the following voting methods for the 2016 Municipal and School Board Elections:

- internet & telephone voting (e-voting) for ten (10) days,
- two (2) days of in person paper ballot voting for Advance polls, and
- in person paper ballot voting on Election Day.

The Improving Accessibility for Voters document attached as Appendix A is an initial draft and is presented to the Committee for discussion purposes only. The Elections Team will seek feedback through community consultation, and is also requesting suggestions of community groups, who could provide feedback on improving access and removing barriers for the 2016 Municipal and School Board Elections.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The financial implications associated with the accessible election plan are limited and will be within budget.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Public consultation on the 2012 election and voter engagement was conducted in winter 2012, and spring 2015. Staff are seeking input from both the Accessibility Advisory Committee and other community groups identified by the Accessibility Advisory Committee, which may be willing to provide suggestions on accessibility concerns for the 2016 Municipal and School Board Elections.

### **ATTACHMENTS**

Appendix A – Improving Accessibility for Voters (Draft Plan)

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A copy of this report can be obtained online at <http://www.halifax.ca/boardscom/index.php> then choose the appropriate Committee and meeting date, or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210, or Fax 902.490.4208.

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# Municipal & School Board Elections

## Improving Accessibility for Voters

### Prepared by:

Election Office  
March 2016

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## **Introduction**

One of the initiatives for the Municipal and School Board Elections is to ensure that all persons in the region have the opportunity to vote independently.

This plan has been created to facilitate the full participation of all citizens in the electoral process and to work towards the elimination of physical and attitudinal barriers facing persons with disabilities.

## **Independent Voting**

Public consultation conducted in the spring of 2015 identified that citizens are looking for more options to increase the ease and access to voting for all electors. The following outlines the range of options for voters, including those with disabilities, to vote in Municipal and School Board elections:

### **Internet and Telephone Voting**

Internet and telephone voting will be used during the advance voting period. The remote voting will allow for those who may prefer to vote from the comfort of their own home using their supportive technology or through public internet access locations such as libraries. Telephone voting can be accessed from any phone with touch tone service.

### **Products and Services at Polling Stations**

The Elections Office recognizes that many voters want to attend a polling place in person to cast their ballot. A number of actions have been taken to accommodate persons with disabilities at polling places.

#### ***Assistive Devices***

Election staff will make available assistive devices that will aid persons with disabilities to independently and privately mark their ballot. All polling stations will have the following supplies available on request:

- Pencil grips
- Magnifiers
- Tactile ballot templates
- Pad of paper and pens

#### ***Election Worker Training***

Approximately 1,500 temporary election workers will receive training on the voting process. Training will include etiquette and the use of “people-first” language in supporting people with disabilities at the polling locations.

#### ***Assistance at the Polling Station***

Electors can vote with assistance if they are blind, unable to read, or have a disability which prevents them from marking their ballot independently. An oath is required and a friend can

enter the polling booth with the elector in order to mark the ballot on the elector's behalf. Deputy Returning Officers (DRO) can act as a friend for the elector, if the elector requests.

## Communication

Effective communication with the electorate is essential to a successful election. The communications plan for the election will include references to accessible services and support. Election information will be made available through a range of channels and in diverse formats, including:

### Community Outreach

Building relationships across diverse communities will enable the Elections Team to disseminate relevant election information to a wide range of stakeholders. These relationships will also facilitate receiving valuable feedback from these stakeholders after the election.

### Voter Information Letters (VIL)

A VIL will be sent to each voter on the list of electors before advanced voting begins. In addition to other information, such as date and time of the election, individual PINs for e-voting, and candidate information, the letter will also inform voters if there are any accessibility concerns identified at their Advance Poll and Election Day locations, in which case the voter may request a transfer certificate (see below) if required. In addition, these letters can be sent via email to electors who have supportive technology at home to “read” or “listen” to the contents.

### Materials available in alternative formats

Voter information will be available in a range of formats, including electronic, audio and larger text format.

Additionally, all materials will be written in plain/clear language for electors, service providers, and others who may be providing assistance.

### Election Website

The municipal election webpages will be used as the primary tool to communicate to the public on the election. Efforts will be made to ensure that [Halifax.ca/Election](http://Halifax.ca/Election) is current and up to date.

Standards for the website are influenced by the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative and the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat Standard on the Accessibility, Interoperability and Usability of Web Sites and include:

- Graphics/Photographs - Alternate Text attributes will be used on all graphics with a short intuitive description.
- Text Alternatives will be provided for all time-sensitive media. At minimum a description of the media (audio or video, etc.) will be provided.

- Any uses of CAPTCHA will have text or audio alternatives that identify and describe the purpose of non-text content.

## **TDD Services**

This audio service enables persons with hearing loss to access information by telephone. TDD is currently available seven days a week between the hours of 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m. and will also be available through the HRM Elections public call centre during enumeration and the election period through this number TDD: 1.866.236.0020.

## **Feedback**

The Election Office welcomes all feedback on any accessibility concerns that may have arisen during a voter's voting experience. A link will be provided at [Halifax.ca/Election](http://Halifax.ca/Election) to email feedback, which will be used in future election planning.

## **Equitable Hiring Practices**

For the 2016 election each position has a brief description of tasks and requirements to help an individual to decide whether they wish to apply. There are at least 9 poll location positions available and various positions available at Elections Central throughout the election period.

Our hiring is in compliance with the human resources standards of the municipality and we encourage all persons who are interested in the election process to apply. As with all positions, where accommodations are possible we work with the employee to ensure a safe, productive environment.

## **Physical Accessibility**

The Municipal Elections Act states that "a polling station shall be in premises with level access and shall contain an adequately lighted compartment where an elector may mark the elector's ballot paper in secrecy". Level access is defined as "premises that are so located that a person may reach the premises from the street or roadway and enter the premises without going up or down any step, stairs or escalator".

Guided by Elections Nova Scotia accessibility standards, polling places are considered, visited, and evaluated based on the following accessibility criteria:

Allocated parking spaces close to entry for voters with disabilities

Level access to the building, on grade, or there is a ramp or elevator provided

Condition of parking lots and walkways

Access to transit routes



Doors and passageways comply with current width, clearance, and threshold requirements

Adequate interior and exterior lighting

Accessible washroom facilities

Additional requirements will be made available at each polling place including:

- Respite seating for those who may require relief;
- High contrast signage to identify the polling place; and
- Temporary accessible parking signage where none may normally exist at the polling place.

## **Transfer Certificates**

In the event that there is a polling place identified that prevents an elector with a physical disability from voting at a polling station where his/her name appears on the list of electors, a transfer certificate can be issued by the Returning Officer or Assistant Returning Officer. The transfer certificate is required to be issued by 5:00pm on the Wednesday before Election Day and it permits the elector to vote at another polling station within the polling district or at a polling station in another polling district within the municipality.

## **Regular Reviews of Polling Places during Voting**

A checklist will be provided to poll officials at all polling places. This will include confirmation that the site remains accessible and safe at various points while polls are open for voting.

## **Information Officers and Supervisory Deputy Returning Officers at Polling Locations**

Either or both of these staff will be at all polling places to provide directions and assistance to voters.