To: **David Creery, Chief Administrative Officer**

From: **Jeff Bunn, Manager of Legislative Services/Deputy City Clerk**

Re: **Alternative Forms of Voting Methods for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election – Additional Information Report**

AIM

The purpose of this report is to offer Council further details on the implementation and estimated costs of online voting, as well as a hybrid voting option that combines traditional in-person paper ballots with online voting, based on voter preference.

BACKGROUND

During the Regular Council meeting on September 5, 2024, staff presented a report entitled *Alternative Forms of Voting Methods for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election* which outlined various voting methods that Council could consider. Following the discussion, Council provided direction to report back with additional information relating to the implementation and cost of online voting, and the option to vote either in-person through a traditional paper ballot or online.

> *Moved by Councillor L. Wismer-Van Meer*
> *Seconded by Councillor B. Martin*
>
> *That Woodstock City Council support Option 2 and 3 as the vote casting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;*
>
> *And further that Staff be directed to prepare a report outlining the proposed election details and budget.*

COMMENTS

The City Clerk, as Returning Officer under the *Municipal Elections Act* (hereafter "*MEA*"), is responsible for the delivery of a democratic, fair, accessible and legally binding election. Like elections across Ontario, the City of Woodstock's 2026 Municipal Election will be guided by the generally accepted principles of the *MEA*:

- The secrecy and confidentiality of the voting process is paramount;
- The election shall be fair and non-biased;
- The election shall be accessible to the voters;
- The integrity of the voting process shall be maintained throughout the election;
- There is to be certainty that the results of the election reflect the votes cast;
- Voters and candidates shall be treated fairly and consistently; and,
- The proper majority vote governs by ensuring that valid votes are counted and invalid votes are rejected so far as reasonably possible.

The *MEA* authorizes the Municipal Clerk to determine the method of voting for Municipal Elections and requires Council to pass a by-law for alternative voting methods including the

use of vote tabulators and online voting platforms. Specifically, Section 42 (1) of the *MEA* prescribes that Council may, by May 1st of an election year, pass by-laws:

    (a) authorizing the use of voting and vote-counting equipment such as voting machines, voting recorders or optical scanning vote tabulators;

    (b) authorizing electors to use an alternative voting method, such as voting by mail or by telephone, that does not require electors to attend at a voting place in order to vote.

Once the alternative voting method(s) have been established by Council, Section 43 (3) states that the Clerk shall:

    (a) establish procedures and forms for the use of,
          (i) any voting and vote-counting equipment authorized by by-law, and,
          (ii) any alternative voting method authorized by by-law; and,

    (b) provide a copy of the procedures and forms to each candidate when his or her nomination is filed.

Given the procurement requirements for election equipment, staff is requesting Council's direction to allow enough time for the Request for Proposals (RFP) process, contract evaluation and award, as well as the development of necessary procedures, forms, and a targeted communication plan.

The balance of this report will provide Council with additional information regarding the implementation and estimated costs of a fully online election and a hybrid model consisting of in-person and online voting options. The costings presented are based on high-level informal quotes provided by various election service providers and are dependent on variables such as the preliminary list of electors and any additional services deemed necessary to execute a democratic, fair, accessible, and legally binding election.

For reference to the estimated costs outlined in this report, the total cost for the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election was $154,383.44. A preliminary cost estimate (adjusted for inflation) for a traditional paper-based election, similar to that in 2022, using vote counting technology (i.e., tabulators) in 2026, would be approximately $160,000.

Online Voting Model
Simply put, online voting enables eligible electors to cast their vote on a smart device such as a cell phone, tablet, computer, etc., that has an internet connection. Online voting is accessible and provides electors with greater access to the democratic process by eliminating barriers that might reduce an elector's opportunity to vote. The next section will outline the online voting model to provide a general understanding of what electors could expect the process to be.

Sample Online Voting Model

Eligible electors are mailed a Voter Information Package a few weeks before the start of the Advance Voting period. The Package provides general election information, instructions on how and when to vote, and unique login credentials to access the online voting system, including a voter ID number and password/pin combination for authentication.

Alternatively, many municipalities, including the City of Hamilton for its upcoming Ward 4 byelection, have implemented a process that requires eligible electors to pre-register and create an online voting profile before they are given access to an electronic ballot.

Electors may start voting online at the start of the advance voting period, as determined by the Clerk in accordance with the *MEA* (Section 43(2)(a)). Those dates would be set in early 2026.

Once the elector has cast their online ballot, their name will be automatically stricken from the Voters' List.

During the advance voting period and on Voting Day, Voter Help Centers would be open at various locations within the City to assist electors with casting their electronic ballot. For electors who do not have access to the internet or electronic equipment (such as a tablet, personal computer, or phone), the Voter Help Centers would be equipped with voter kiosks that would enable them to cast their digital ballot. Moreover, the Voter Help Centers would provide electors with the nostalgic and familiar experience of voting at a physical polling location which they are accustomed to as part of the traditional democratic process. As such, to soften the amount of change faced by electors, staff recommend maintaining four physical voting locations for the first online election (referred to as Voter Help Centers).

In addition, a dedicated phone line and email account would be established to provide electors with quick and easy access to support during the polling period.

With respect to online voting at institutions, such as retirement or long-term care homes, an iPad or similar technology would be brought to the facility for use by eligible electors. In cases where the technology may be difficult for the electors to use, sworn election workers would be present to assist the elector in casting their vote in accordance with the provisions of the *MEA*.

Following the close of polling, the votes cast will be tallied electronically and made available on the City's website. Anecdotally, results from an exclusively online election are generally made available efficiently and quickly after polls close, barring any technical issues.

Analysis of Online Voting

As previously reported, online voting is not new to the Ontario municipal election landscape. Slightly under half of the 444 municipalities in Ontario (217) offered online voting in the 2022 municipal and school board election, a 24% increase from the 2018 municipal and school board election. Locally, the Town of Tillsonburg and the Townships of East Zorra-Tavistock, South-West Oxford, and Zorra voted online in 2022.

Advantages
- **Increased accessibility and voter participation** as electors will have the ability to cast their ballot from anywhere at any time throughout the voting period.
- **Online security measures**, such as multifactor authentication and encryption help support a legitimate and secure voting process.
- **Lower costs** given the elimination of costs associated with printing ballots, additional temporary election workers, and operational costs (supplies, etc.).
- **Quicker turnaround for election results** as ballots will not need to be tabulated manually or by vote counting equipment.
- **Reduced environmental footprint**.

Disadvantages
- **Cyber security risks**, including the risk of hacking the election system or attempting to interfere with the voting process.
- **Technical issues** including website crashes or bandwidth limitations, voter authentication and verification challenges.
- **Lack of trust** may exist among voters due to past municipal experiences, misinformation or disinformation.
- **Digital divide** exists as not all electors including those living in rural areas, older adults, or those who have lower incomes, have equal access to technology (such as a computer, tablet or phone) or the internet.

Like all voting processes, there are inherent risks associated with voting technology. The risks associated with online voting have previously been identified by the City of Vaughan[1], which in preparation for the 2022 municipal election, conducted a comprehensive assessment (with the assistance of two consulting firms) of the technical landscape and security risks associated with online voting. The results of the City of Vaughan's comprehensive analysis have been reviewed and summarized below to provide Council with information relating to the risks and suggested mitigation techniques that could be adopted should Council wish to proceed.

1. Cyber Risks

   1.1. Phishing Attempt with Online Registration Emails

   Bad actors could attempt to send electors fake emails to gather personal information or to try and intercept their vote and vote for them.

   Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy for 1.1.: The City would provide elector education on how to spot illegitimate emails and communicate key election dates to manage elector's expectations of when emails would be sent from the City.

   1.2. Unprotected / Infected Endpoint Computers

   The personal computers and other digital technology used by an elector could already be infected with malware that may cause voting to be stolen.

   Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy for 1.2.: The City would encourage electors who are concerned about their personal devices to attend a Voter Help Center to vote using

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[1] 2022, Alternative Voting Methods for the 2022 Municipal Election: Remote Internet Voting, City of Vaughan

City provided technology. Technology used at the Voter Help Center should be scanned for malware and have anti-malware software installed.

1.3. <u>Fake Websites Posting as Election Pages</u>

Bad actors could create fake websites that look and seemingly operate as a legitimate election website aimed at stealing electors' information.

<u>Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy for 1.3.</u>: The City would educate electors of legitimate city-approved registration methods and channels. Electors would be encouraged to only use information provided by the City in their Voter Information Package, including any unique voter pins and website URLs.

1.4. <u>Flaws in the Voting Application (Website)</u>

<u>Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy for 1.4.</u>: Upon delivery of the voting technology by the vendor, City Staff would undertake extensive testing of the software before rollout to electors.

2. <u>System Overload</u>

2.1. <u>Unexpectedly High Voter Turnout</u>

Higher than expected load on the voting infrastructure leading to performance issues (e.g., slow or lagging system, unresponsive applications, etc.).

Ontario municipalities have faced this issue in previous municipal elections. Most notably, in 2018, over 50 municipalities were required to extend their voting hours due to a mistaken limit placed by a service provider on incoming online voting traffic.

<u>Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy for 2.1.</u>: The City would work with the vendor to load test the voting application at maximum capacity to identify performance issues that could be mitigated prior to the commencement of advance voting and Voting Day. The City would also work with the vendor to monitor the voting platform through advance voting and Voting Day (at various peak periods) and have election resources (including that of the vendor) ready to address issues as they arise.

2.2. <u>High System Utilization for Voter Encryption</u>

A strong encryption algorithm impacting system performance.

<u>Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy for 2.2.</u>: See mitigation strategy for Risk 2.1.

2.3. Improperly Designed Software

Outages or performance issues with online systems resulting from incorrectly sized, load balance, or resilient systems.

Potential Risk Mitigation Strategy for 2.3.: See mitigation strategy for Risk 2.1.

3. Digital Marginalization

3.1. Electors With Limited Access to Digital Services

Exclusion of voters without access to high-speed internet or the latest computer or mobile technology, thereby causing a barrier to voting.

Potential Mitigation Strategy for 3.1.: Voter Help Centers have been proposed that would provide electors with an option to vote both in person with vendor provided technology.

3.2. Electors Not Technically Inclined and Require Assistance

Overly complicated online voting processes may be difficult for less technology savvy electors.

Potential Mitigation Strategy for 3.2.: Voter Help Centers have been proposed that would provide electors with an option to vote both in person with/without the assistance from a sworn election worker.

4. Voter Fraud

4.1. Coercion or Vote Buying

Given online voting occurs outside of controlled voting locations, there is a chance to privately pressure a voter to vote in a certain way.

Potential Mitigation Strategy for 4.1.: The City would educate voters on their rights under the *MEA* and would encourage electors who do not feel comfortable voting remotely with their personal devices to vote in person at a Voter Help Center. The City, along with the vendor, would also monitor suspicious activities such as high numbers of failed login attempts.

5. Complex Voting/Support Issues

5.1. Online Support Issues

Ensuring that online software has enough support teams available to answer questions without lengthy delays.

Potential Mitigation Strategy for 5.1.: The City would expand the number of support services available to electors, including training additional staff who can troubleshoot issues quickly and without needing to escalate the issue to the election management

team. The City would also ensure that the vendor provides live support on demand for elections within peak voting hours.

Aside from cyber risks, there is a risk that a Voter Information Package could be mailed to a wrong address or even to a deceased individual. In cases where Voter Information Packages are mailed to an incorrect address, or to an address where the elector no longer resides, the City will advise the recipient:

- not to open the letter or forward it;
- that it is illegal to tamper with mail, including opening a Voter Information Package that is not addressed to them;
- to mark the envelope as "Return to Sender" and drop it in a mailbox, or return it to City Hall; and,
- it is an offense under the *MEA* to use another elector's voting credentials (such as a Voter ID and Voting PIN) to vote, carrying a maximum fine of $25,000 or up to six months in jail.

To address this issue, staff will focus on encouraging electors to confirm their voting address and details online in 2025, well ahead of the 2026 municipal election. With the recent merger of the Elections Ontario and Municipal Voters' List, the City is anticipated to have access to a more accurate and up-to-date voters list with fewer errors than in previous years.

In addition to the cyber risks associated above, online voting also means less control over the technical implementation, and a complete reliance on third-party vendors for support with voter authentication issues, online interface changes, the management of cybersecurity threats, and technical issues at the close of the voting period. With this said, many vendors have made significant technological enhancements to the security architecture of online voting, including the implementation of digital audit trails, multi-factor authentication, and encryption. Of course, Council will need to weigh the benefits of online voting with the potential risks identified above.

Given the 2026 election would be the first online election for the City of Woodstock, a robust communication plan would be developed to inform electors of the technology and new voting process. In addition to communicating standard election information to electors, the communication plan would also need to address the spread of disinformation and misinformation relating to the integrity of the voting process. To augment the communication plan, staff envision the creation of an Election Street Team that would attend community events and focus their attention on engaging electors to share information as it's made available relating to the next municipal election. The Election Street Team will emphasize voter's list registration in 2025 and both voter registration and explain the online voting process through 2026.

Cost Estimate of Online Voting

An exclusively online election requires significantly less resources to administer than other traditional voting methods. Anecdotally, it's understood that online elections require less supplies and equipment, in addition to reduced staffing needs and physical polling locations. Still, as with the last election, hiring a temporary Election Coordinator would be required to oversee the day-to-day project management and planning necessary for the delivery of the election. An Election Coordinator, hired for a 9-month contract from March until October, would be critical in 2026 for an online election, as online voting would be a new approach for

the City. The existing policies, procedures, and forms would largely become outdated due to the technological shift, requiring the development of entirely new frameworks to successfully conduct the election.

A preliminary budget for online voting in 2026 has been outlined below:

Online Voting Platform	$48,500
Voting Kiosks	$13,500
Voter Information Letters and Mailing	$51,000
Voters List Management Software	$12,500
Communications/Advertising	$10,000
Supplies	$2,500
Election Coordinator	$50,000
Temporary Election Workers	$14,500
Training	$2,000

As such, the total estimated cost of an online voting model would be approximately $204,500.

Hybrid Election Model (Paper Ballots and Online Voting)

A hybrid election model provides electors with a choice between voting using a traditional paper ballot at a physical polling location or casting their ballot online. According to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO)[2] 37 of the 217 municipalities offering online voting across Ontario used a hybrid election voting model for the 2022 Municipal Election. Some of those municipalities include Brantford, Burlington, Cambridge, Kingston, Markham, North Bay, Pembroke, Peterborough, Pickering, Richmond Hill, Sarnia, Thorold, Thunder Bay, Timmins, and Vaughan.

To better understand electors' preferences regarding voting models and support evidence-based decision-making, City staff surveyed the 37 municipalities that implemented a hybrid election in 2022. These municipalities were asked to provide the percentage of voters who voted online versus those who used traditional paper ballots. The summarized responses are outlined below:

Municipality	Online	Paper Ballots
East Gwillimbury	47%	53%
Georgina[3]	48%	52%
Halton Hills[4]	49.18%	50.82%

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[2]https://www.amo.on.ca/sites/default/files/assets/DOCUMENTS/Elections/Municipal/2022%20Municipal%20Elections%20-%20All%20Internet.pdf

[3] The 2022 election was the first time The Township of Georgina used online voting, in combination with tabulators

[4] Additional information provided by the Town of Halton Hills: Halton Hills did online voting for 2 weeks in advanced polling only. Halton Hills had kiosks set up at various locations to help people learn how to vote online and also did 2 days of paper ballots for the advanced voting at one location only. They decided to close the online voting the day before election day to avoid any issues on Election Day itself, and to give people the opportunity to still go to the polls and vote with paper ballot should the online voting not have worked for them. In 2026, Halton Hills is not planning on having any paper ballots during the advanced period; they're proposing online voting only again, with paper ballots on Election Day only.

Kingston[5]	49%	51%
Newmarket[6]	98.59%	1.41%
Pickering	79%	21%
Prince Edward County[7]	61%	39%
Sarnia	77%	22.9%
South Stormont	63.60%	36.40%
Thorold	40.70%	59.30%
Thunder Bay	37%	63%
Timmins	72%	28%
Vaughan	60%	40%

This data indicates that predicting the preference for one voting method over another is challenging. On a broader scale, it suggests that electors have been fairly divided between the available voting options.

The next section will outline the hybrid voting model to provide a general understanding of what electors could expect the process to be.

<u>Sample Hybrid Election Voting Model</u>

Much like the online voting model, a hybrid model would see eligible electors mailed a Voter Information Package that would contain:
- Information relating to the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election,
- A Unique Voter ID and Voting PIN,
- Instructions on how to confirm voter identification and how to cast votes electronically, and
- the location, dates, and operating hours of physical polling locations where electors could attend to cast a traditional paper ballot.

As outlined under the Online Voting Model, electors may cast their ballot online at the start of the advance voting period.

Under a hybrid election model, staff proposes combining traditional voting locations with Voter Help Centers (as outlined previously in this report) to create Super Polls. At these locations, electors could receive assistance with online voting or casting a paper ballot. To minimize the impact of change on electors, staff recommend maintaining four physical voting locations (referred to as Super Polls).

With respect to voting at institutions, a team of roving poll workers will bring physical ballots and ballot boxes to the institution to facilitate voting by residents of that facility. In cases where an elector may have difficulty marking their ballot, a sworn election worker would be present to assist the elector in casting their vote in accordance with the provisions of the *MEA*. Those marked ballots would be tabulated on Voting Day, using a vote tabulator, at a time to be established by the Returning Officer as part of the election procedures.

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[5] Additional information provided by the City of Kingston: 6 days of in person voting (5 advance voting days and voting day on October 24).

[6] Additional information provided by the City of Newmarket: In person voting by on demand paper ballot and tabulator was available only at the Municipal Offices during the full 10-day voting period.

[7] Additional information provided by Prince Edward County: Total voter turnout was 47.5%, 28.8% of which was online and 18.2% of which were paper ballots.

Following the close of polling, online ballots cast would be tallied electronically through the voting software. The paper ballot vote tabulators would be closed, and results generated. Both result tallies would be merged, and the results would be made available on the City's website.

Analysis of a Hybrid Election

The risks associated with online voting have been provided under the *Analysis of Online Voting* subheading. An additional concern that arises with hybrid elections is whether there is a chance that an elector could vote twice; once online and then again in person. Using live-time voter strike-off technology, the municipality will know when an elector has cast their ballot either in person or online the moment the ballot is handed to the elector (in the case of in-person voting), or the electronic ballot is submitted (for online voting). This eliminates the risk that an elector could stand in line at a physical polling location and attempt to cast a physical ballot. As a reminder, it is illegal to vote more than once in a municipal election. The offense under the *MEA*, carries a maximum fine of $25,000 or up to six months in jail.

Advantages
- **Increased accessibility and voter participation** as electors will have the ability to cast their ballot from anywhere at any time throughout the voting period and would have choice in the voting method most comfortable to them.
- **Familiar voting experience** for those who choose to vote in-person.
- **Online security measures**, such as multifactor authentication and encryption help support a legitimate and secure voting process.

Disadvantages
- **Cyber security risks**, including the risk of hacking the election system or attempting to interfere with the voting process.
- **Technical issues** including website crashes or bandwidth limitations, voter authentication and verification challenges.
- **Higher costs** given the need to procure two types of voting technology, print ballots, hiring additional temporary election workers, and traditional operational costs (supplies, etc.).
- **Lack of trust** towards online voting may exist among electors due to past municipal experiences, misinformation or disinformation.
- **Digital divide** exists as not all electors including those living in rural areas, older adults, or those who have lower incomes, have equal access to technology (such as a computer, tablet or phone) or the internet.

A hybrid election model would require significantly more resources than an exclusively online or in-person election. In addition to securing an online voting platform, the city would need to procure all the necessary equipment, supplies, and materials required for a traditional paper-based voting process. This includes purchasing enough paper ballots to ensure that any eligible voter who wishes to vote in person can do so. While the City may explore vendors that offer pre-registration for online voting, municipal competition, the potential for delays in ballot printing across Ontario, and the risk of disenfranchising electors who change their minds from voting online to voting in person, make it crucial to ensure an adequate supply of resources, including ballots, on Voting Day.

To support the implementation of a democratic, fair, accessible and legally binding hybrid election model, the recruitment of two temporary Election Coordinators, both on a 9-month contract from March until October, will be required to manage the project planning and execution of the election. The role of these Election Coordinators will be particularly essential in 2026, given the City will be implementing online voting for the first time and using paper ballot tabulators, effectively running two elections concurrently. As a standard good practice, existing policies, procedures, and forms will need to be reviewed and updated based on past election experience and election case law. In contrast, new ones must be created to address the new voting technology that needs to be implemented. This will require the development of an entirely new framework to ensure proper due diligence, the successful administration of the election, and avoid the possibility of a controverted election.

As 2026 would be the first time Woodstock electors would have a choice in their preferred voting method, a communication plan would be developed to appropriately inform electors of the technology and available options for voting. As previously explained, in addition to communicating standard election information to electors, the communication plan would also address the spread of disinformation and misinformation relating to the integrity of the voting process. Again, to augment the communication plan, staff envision the creation of an Election Street Team that would attend community events and focus their attention on engaging electors to share information on the two voting methods. The Election Street Team would be critical to connecting and educating electors leading to the 2026 election.

Cost Estimate of Hybrid Election

A preliminary budget for a hybrid voting model in 2026 has been outlined below:

Online Voting Platform	$48,500
Tabulators	$32,400
Ballots	$12,500
Voter Information Letters and Mailing	$51,000
Voters List Management Software	$12,500
Communications/Advertising	$10,000
Supplies	$3,500
Election Coordinator (Online Focus)	$50,000
Election Coordinator (Paper Based Focus)	$50,000
Temporary Election Workers	$19,750
Training	$2,500

As such, the total estimated cost of a hybrid election would be approximately $292,650.

Financial Summary

Though not the primary focus of this report, as a comparator, and if Council were interested in replicating the tabulator and paper-based election model of past elections, an estimate based on the 2022 Municipal and School Board Election is outlined below:

Tabulators and Ballots	$55,000
Voter Information Letters and Mailing	$3,837
Voters List Management Software	$12,084
Communications/Advertising	$5,720
Supplies	$2,439
Election Coordinator	$50,000
Temporary Election Workers	$23,528
Training	$2,084

As such, the total approximate cost of the 2022 Municipal School Board Election was $154,380. When factoring inflationary costs between 2022 and 2025, the estimated cost of a paper-based election with the use of vote tabulators would be approximately $157,300.

When considering the cost difference between an online or hybrid election model, and the 2022 Municipal Election, it's important to highlight that a large difference in the overall budget is related to the costs for preparation and mailing of Voter Information Letters. In 2022, staff were able to maximize greater cost efficiencies by mailing each household a Voter Information Letter, rather than to each individual election. This is because the information on the Voter Information Letter was generic and non-specific to all electors. In the case of an online or a hybrid election model, each elector will need to receive a specific letter that would provide them with a unique personal identification number (PIN) to facilitate access to the online voting platform. The cost of printing and postage for these letters adds a significant cost (i.e., approximately $41,000) to the overall budgets for online and hybrid elections, as compared to the paper-based vote tabulator model.

The following is a summary of the estimated costs for each election model identified in this report, including a traditional paper-based election (like 2022):

Traditional Paper-Based Election	$157,300
Online Election	$204,500
Hybrid Election	$292,650

Currently, the City's Revenue Budget allocates $40,000 a year into an Election Reserve to limit the budgetary impact of an election within an election year. The $40,000 allocation is based on the anticipated costs of a traditional paper-based election using vote tabulator equipment. Should Council choose an alternative voting method such as online or a hybrid model, the allocation of funds to the Election Reserve would be adjusted accordingly in the 2025 Revenue Budget.

RECOMMENDATION
THAT Woodstock City Council receives the Alternative Forms of Voting Method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election Additional Information Report as information; and,

THAT Woodstock City Council adopts _____ as the voting method for the 2026 Municipal and School Board Election;

AND FURTHER THAT the City Clerk be directed to bring forward a by-law to authorize the alternative voting method supported by Woodstock City Council to the next regular meeting.

Authored by: Jeff Bunn, Manager of Legislative Services/Deputy City Clerk

Reviewed by: Chris Gratton, Chief Information Officer/Director of Technology Information

Approved by: Amy Humphries, Deputy Chief Administrative Officer & City Clerk

Approved by: David Creery, Chief Administrative Officer