

The Regional Municipality of York

Regional Council
November 25, 2021

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Regional Clerk

Effectiveness of Virtual Council Meetings and the Future Resumption of In-Person Participation

1. Recommendations

1. The resumption of in-person Council and Committee of the Whole meetings be aligned with the Provincial timetable for lifting the remaining public health and workplace safety measures, which is currently projected as being March 28, 2022.
2. Council provide direction for the future format of Council and Committee of the Whole meetings and staff report back with associated technology requirements and/or Procedure Bylaw amendments.
3. The boards of directors of the Region's three Corporations be encouraged to continue to meet virtually for the remainder of the 2018-2022 Council Term.
4. The Region's advisory committees and task forces, that follow the Procedure Bylaw to conduct meetings, continue to meet virtually for the remainder of the 2018-2022 Council Term.

2. Summary

This report responds to direction from Council on [September 24, 2020](#) to report back on electronic meeting participation. It provides comparative participation statistics for in-person versus virtual Council and Committee of the Whole meetings. It also sets out considerations and options for transitioning from fully electronic meetings.

Key Points:

- Council requested information be provided in Fall of 2021 regarding the effectiveness of virtual meetings
- Virtual meetings have been as effective as in-person meetings and have seen increased participation
- Overall, more people are watching, more people participated, and Council considered more items than was typically the case pre-pandemic

- Council's Procedure Bylaw currently permits meetings to be fully-electronic, fully-in-person or a hybrid of both
- While public health measures remain in place, a limited number of Council Members could attend a meeting in person
- The Province has targeted [March 28, 2022](#) to lift the remaining public health and workplace safety measures
- Council can consider the future format of its meetings and the timing for resuming in-person attendance

3. Background

The *Municipal Act, 2001*, has been amended several times in recent years to permit varying degrees of electronic participation at meetings

On May 30, 2017, the Province enacted changes to the *Municipal Act, 2001* to allow Members of Council to electronically participate in a meeting, but they could not count towards quorum nor take part in private session.

On March 19, 2020, the Province enacted legislation to allow Council to participate electronically in open and closed meetings and count towards quorum during a declared emergency that covered all or part of a municipality.

On July 21, 2020, the *COVID-19 Economic Recovery Act* was enacted, which permitted municipalities to amend their Procedure Bylaws to allow for electronic participation at any time without the requirement of a declared emergency.

On September 24, 2020, Council amended its Procedure Bylaw to permit electronic participation at any time and asked staff to report back on electronic participation in November 2021

At the [September 24, 2020](#) Council meeting, the Procedure Bylaw was amended to enable Members to participate electronically in meetings at any time and provided the following authority to the Regional Chair:

“The Regional Chair may determine the extent to which any meeting will be conducted electronically, including whether any meeting shall be fully in-person or fully electronic.”

Council recognized the need for flexibility during the COVID-19 pandemic, but wanted further information presented in November 2021.

As the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, municipalities are considering returning to in-person meetings or a hybrid of in-person and electronic participation

The vast majority of municipalities conducted fully-electronic meetings since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as public health measures are easing, municipalities are

beginning to re-introduce in-person meetings, or a hybrid mix of electronic and in-person participation.

Table 1 shows the current state of meetings in the local municipalities.

Table 1
Comparison of Local Municipal Approach to In-Person and Virtual Meetings

	Current Number of Council Members	Hybrid or Virtual Meetings	Number of Members in- Person	Safety Measures Installed
Town of Aurora	7	Hybrid	5 Councillors	Yes
Town of East Gwillimbury	7	Virtual	N/A	No
Town of Georgina	7	Virtual	N/A	No
Township of King	7	Virtual	Only the Mayor	No
City of Markham	13	Virtual	1 Councillor	No
Town of Newmarket	9	Hybrid	5-6 Councillors	No, but physical distancing
City of Richmond Hill	8*	Hybrid	Minimum of 4 Councillors	Yes
City of Vaughan	9	Virtual	1 Councillor	Yes
Town of Whitchurch- Stouffville	7	Virtual	N/A	No

* Richmond Hill Council has nine members, however, the Mayor position is currently vacant

**As of November 10, 2021, no local municipality is permitting in-person deputations

4. Analysis

Public participation, and the volume of business conducted, in virtual meetings increased compared to an analogous period prior to the pandemic

Table 2 shows a comparison of the fifteen months preceding the pandemic with the fifteen months following its onset. The pre-pandemic time period coincides with the start of livestreaming Council and Committee of the Whole meetings, so it provides a good comparator with the current meeting experience.

The table shows a general increase in public participation since April 2020. Video viewership more than doubled from April 2020 to June 2021 as compared to in-person meetings and Council and Committee of the Whole received input from almost four times the number of deputants. This number does not include the written deputations which were the only means of providing a deputation for the first five months of the pandemic.

Council also considered 651 more items of business during the 15 months of virtual meetings as compared to the preceding in-person meetings. On average, Council and Committee considered approximately 32% more items per meeting.

Overall, more people were watching, more people were participating, and Council considered more items.

Table 2
Comparison of 15 Month Periods In-Person Versus Virtual Meetings

	In-Person January 2019 - March 2020	Virtual April 2020 - June 2021	Difference
Total Viewers of Meeting Web-stream	14224	35449	+21225 (+149%)
Number of Meetings (CW and Council)	39	49	+10 (+26%)
Number of Deputations*	56	202	+146 (+261%)
Number of Items Considered**	991	1642	+651 (+66%)

* While a number of these deputations spoke to issues related to the Pandemic, the majority attended in relation to planning and transportation items

**All correspondence received on a specific topic and the associated report was counted as one item

The nature of virtual meetings makes them easier to attend

While Council attendance is always very high, it increased further during the period of virtual meetings.

For the Council meetings held in the 15 months prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Members of Council had an overall attendance rate of 91%.

From April 2020 to June 2021, the average attendance rate at Council meetings was 98.5%, with no Member attending fewer than 91% of meetings.

The shift to virtual meetings has saved paper and reduced printing costs

Along with the move to virtual meetings, most Council Members made the switch from hard copy paper agendas to accessing an electronic version of the agenda either through the “Agendas, Minutes and Reports” page on the Region’s [website](#) or via the Region’s agenda management system, eSCRIBE.

This shift, as well as an associated reduction in the number of agendas printed for staff, reduced the average print cost per meeting by 81%, from \$994 to \$188. In total, over the past 15 months an estimated \$57,000 was saved in avoided printing for all meetings.

Consequently, there was an approximate 85% reduction in the amount of paper used for agendas from April 2020 to June 2021 as compared to in-person meetings. The 357,552 sheets of paper saved equates to approximately 40 trees.

Virtual meetings have had a positive impact on the environment and contribute to achieving Council’s greenhouse gas (GHG) reduction target

As shown on Table 2, 49 virtual Council and Committee of the Whole meetings were held during the first 15 months of the pandemic. By not commuting to the Regional Administrative Centre, Members of Council have collectively saved approximately 844 hours in travel time.

Savings in travel times, printing of agendas, and not having to deliver those agendas prevented approximately 26.8 tonnes of GHG emissions. This is the equivalent to the annual CO₂ absorption of 1230 mature trees or four times the annual emissions saved by the Region’s solar panel electricity generation.

Fifteen tonnes of the deferred CO₂ relate to printing and delivering Council and Committee of the Whole agendas. There is the potential for an even greater reduction in emissions if Council and staff fully transition to electronic agendas.

While virtual meetings have been successful, Council may wish to consider transitioning back to fully in-person meetings or to a hybrid mix of electronic and in-person participation

While the measures shown above indicate that virtual meetings have been successful in advancing Council business and maintaining public participation during the pandemic, Council may wish to consider whether such meetings continue.

In contemplating its options for the future, Council should consider the timing of any return to in-person attendance, the desired hybrid meeting experience as well as the degree of flexibility it permits for electronic participation for its Members and the public. Council could also consider different approaches for its advisory committees and boards.

Current public health guidelines place a limit on the overall capacity of the Council Chambers

The typical core attendance at Council and Committee of the Whole meetings is 50 people. This represents Council Members, senior staff and support staff. It does not include members of the public, deputants or other attendees.

However, current public health and organizational guidelines as well as the existing configuration of the Council Chambers would mean a functional capacity of much less than 50 people. Not all Members would be able to attend the meetings in-person at this time. Similarly, the reduced capacity would not accommodate all senior staff and required meeting support staff. The capacity pressure would be increased if members of the public are permitted to attend in person.

Additionally, while public health measures remain in place, Members attending the meeting would need to go directly to their designated seats upon arrival. Further, Members would be subject to screening, masking, and vaccination requirements. These measures would also apply to members of the public which would require additional staff in place to perform the screening. Members of the public may also be denied entry if the Chambers are at capacity.

For these reasons, staff recommend delaying any return to in-person meetings until after public health restrictions are lifted.

Hybrid meetings may require technology upgrades depending on the desired experience

The Council Chamber's existing audiovisual configuration can provide for hybrid participation. However, one consideration of hybrid meetings is "visual equity", or the ability for participants and attendees to simultaneously view all participants.

In the current setup, any virtual participants or attendees will be able to easily see other virtual participants on the livestream, but in-person participants would only be visible when they are speaking or during a wide shot of the Council meeting.

In-person participants or attendees would have the opposite experience – they would be able to easily see in-person participants, but virtual participants would only be visible on the big screen when speaking or between presentations.

"Visual equity" could be partially provided by having all Council Members log into the virtual meeting whether they are attending virtually or in-person. This allows virtual attendees to see all Members of Council and requires all Members to bring their own device to the Council Chambers or to install an appropriate device at each Member's seat. Even with this solution, members of the public attending in person will still have difficulty seeing virtual attendees.

Providing the necessary bandwidth to support the additional devices will require some modification to the Council Chamber's millwork. The cost for installing data ports and laptops at each of the Councillors' desks is estimated at approximately \$120,000 and could take up to 14 weeks to complete. Using Members' existing devices reduces the cost, but data ports

would still be recommended to ensure connectivity. Timelines for this project line up with the projected lifting of provincial public health measures.

Should Council wish to implement hybrid meetings, staff can report back with options and cost implications as well as additional meeting procedures required to manage the hybrid meeting process.

The degree of flexibility in hybrid meetings may require changes to the Procedure Bylaw and create resourcing implications

Council can consider a range of options for its future meetings. At one end, Council could disallow virtual participation in any circumstances or only during declared emergencies, and at the other end, it can provide total flexibility for Members of Council and the public to participate however and whenever they choose. In between the two extremes are other considerations such as virtual participants' ability to enter closed session, to vote, to count towards quorum, to provide a certain amount of notice before being permitted to attend virtually as well as potentially limiting the frequency of virtual participation.

Currently, the Procedure Bylaw is very flexible although the Regional Chair has authority to determine the extent to which any meeting will be electronic or in person. Should Council wish to limit virtual participation, bylaw amendments will be required. Staff can report back with suitable amendments following direction from Council on desired outcomes.

A highly permissive direction may require additional staff to be "on call" to simultaneously support virtual and physical attendees without notice. At a minimum, staff recommend that Council require Members of Council and the public to indicate how they plan to attend at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting. This ensures staff can make the appropriate arrangements to support either type of attendee.

Advisory Committees and Boards could continue to meet virtually

Council's advisory committees include members of the public as well as Council Members. Deputations and public attendance are typically very rare, and meetings are generally much shorter than Council and Committee of the Whole.

Advisory committee members seem supportive of continuing to meet virtually. A recent survey of the York Region Accessibility Advisory Committee suggested members have a desire to continue with virtual meetings in the future. Members of other advisory committees have also commented on the convenience of virtual meetings, noting the time-savings of not having to commute.

The Region's Boards are all comprised of Council Members, and, as with advisory committees, typically have limited public participation. Apart from the York Region Rapid Transit Corporation, board meetings are usually less than 90 minutes and are scheduled on different days than Council or Committee of the Whole. Continuing to hold these meetings virtually would generate considerable time-savings for Council Members by removing the need to travel to the Administrative Centre.

Additionally, the Council Chamber is the only meeting room currently equipped to manage hybrid meetings. Technology and audiovisual upgrades to other rooms would be required to enable advisory committees and boards to meet in a hybrid format.

Based on these considerations, staff recommend continuing with virtual meetings for advisory committees and suggest the boards should also maintain virtual meetings.

5. Financial

There are no financial implications associated with this report. However, depending on Council's direction on future meetings, funds may be required to upgrade the Council Chambers and/or additional meeting rooms to support simultaneous virtual and physical attendance. The cost to upgrade the Chambers is estimated to be around \$120,000 for data ports and other required hardware. The cost of upgrading additional meeting rooms with necessary audiovisual and other hardware is unknown at this time.

6. Local Impact

There are no direct impacts on the local municipalities associated with this report.

7. Conclusion

Virtual meetings have been as successful as in-person meetings and have not adversely impacted participation. A review of the first 15 months of virtual meetings has shown that overall, more people watched, more people participated, and Council considered more items than was typically the case pre-pandemic.

Additionally, virtual meetings also averted over 26 tonnes of GHG emissions and the switch to electronic agendas saved approximately 40 trees. A portion of the positive environmental impacts could be sustained following the resumption of in-person meetings through the continued use of electronic agendas as well as continuing virtual board and advisory committee meetings.

Due to the limitations that would be placed on Members of Council, and the public, staff recommend delaying any return to in-person meetings until after public health restrictions are lifted.

In contemplating its options for the future, Council should consider the timing of any return to in-person attendance, the desired hybrid meeting experience as well as the degree of flexibility it permits for electronic participation for its Members and the public.

Should Council wish to implement hybrid meetings, direction could be given to staff to investigate alternative options and report back with the cost implications as well as additional meeting procedures to manage the hybrid meeting process.

For more information on this report, please contact Christopher Raynor, Regional Clerk at 1-877-464-9675 ext. 71300. Accessible formats or communication supports are available upon request.



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