

The Regional Municipality of York

Regional Council
March 24, 2022

Report of the Commissioner of Corporate Services and Regional Clerk

Continuation of Electronic Participation and Resumption of In-Person Council Meetings

1. Recommendations

1. Sections 22 (Committee of the Whole) and 24 (Other Committees) of Procedure Bylaw 2018-59 be amended as shown in Attachment 1 to have all meetings of Committees of Council held electronically, with Regular and Special Council meetings to be held in-person.
2. The boards of directors of the Region's three Corporations be encouraged to meet electronically on a permanent basis.

2. Summary

This report responds to direction from Council on [December 16, 2021](#) to report back with options outlining the potential format of Council and Committee of the Whole meetings upon the lifting of the remaining public health and workplace safety measures. It considers four options and provides one recommended format for future meetings.

Key Points:

- Electronic meetings have been successful in advancing Council business and maintaining public participation during the pandemic and should continue in some form post-pandemic
- Electronic meetings also deliver environmental and other benefits
- Overall, more people are watching, more people participated, and Council considered more items during electronic meetings than was typically the case pre-pandemic
- Making all meetings either fully in-person or fully electronic is likely to attract criticism either way
- The “blended” hybrid option, where participants choose to attend either in-person or electronically, is the most flexible but presents logistical and resourcing issues
- The “structured” hybrid option provides the flexibility and other advantages of electronic meetings while providing opportunity for face-to-face interaction. The

structure imposed by this option provides certainty for participants and mitigates meeting management and other issues

- Regular Council meetings being fully in-person and all other meeting types being fully electronic provides a version of hybrid meetings with none of the associated logistical or resource challenges

3. Background

On September 24, 2020, Council amended its Procedure Bylaw to permit electronic participation at any time and asked staff to report back on the impact of electronic meetings

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 to be provided regarding the impact of this new method for holding a meeting.

On December 16, 2021, Council considered a report examining the electronic meeting experience since 2020 and requested options regarding the format of future meetings upon the lifting of health and workplace restrictions

At its [December 16, 2021](#) meeting, Council determined the resumption of in-person Council and Committee of the Whole meetings would be aligned with the Provincial timetable for lifting the remaining public health and workplace safety measures. Additionally, the Region’s advisory committees and task forces, as well as, the boards of directors of the three Corporations, would continue to meet electronically for the remainder of the 2018-2022 Council Term.

The Regional Clerk was directed to report back with options outlining the potential format of Council and Committee of the Whole meetings upon the lifting of the remaining public health and workplace safety measures.

Staff continue to investigate and modify the way meetings are delivered to optimize the experience for all participants

Since the first Regional Council meeting was held electronically on April 2, 2020, staff have continued to investigate and modify the way these meetings are delivered to ensure an optimal experience for all participants. Originally, “ZOOM Meeting” format was used. While it provides the “waiting room” function, which is used by other municipalities, this was found to adversely impact public participation as deputants were unable to see or hear what was taking place during the meeting when in the “waiting room.” In June 2020, the Region

switched to using “ZOOM Webinar” which enables Members of Council to fully participate in the meeting and allows deputants to observe the proceedings. Since that time, [ZOOM has released information](#) indicating their “Webinar” platform is the recommended format for municipal council meetings.

Electronic meetings promote participation and provide environmental and financial benefits

Table 1 is from the December 2021 report and shows a comparison of the fifteen months preceding the pandemic with the fifteen months following its onset. Overall, more people were watching, more people were participating, and Council considered more items.

Table 1
Comparison of 15 Month Periods In-Person Versus Electronic Meetings

	In-Person January 2019 - March 2020	Electronic April 2020 - June 2021	Difference
Total Viewers of Meeting Web-stream	14 224	35 449	+21 225 (+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

With most Council Members switching from hard copy paper agendas to accessing an electronic version, the Region saved an estimated \$57,000 in avoided printing costs over the first 15 months of the pandemic. This resulted in an approximate 85% reduction in the amount of paper used for agendas during this time. The 357,552 sheets of paper saved equates to approximately 40 trees.

As shown on Table 1, 49 electronic 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.

The potential for an even greater reduction in emissions will be realized when Council and staff fully transition to electronic agendas

Fifteen tonnes of the deferred CO₂ relate to printing and delivering Council and Committee of the Whole agendas. To capitalize on these demonstrated benefits, as of the start of the next Council term, Council can consider going fully paperless for all meetings.

All Members of Council and staff will be directed to access 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. A PDF version of each agenda package will be available for those who prefer to print their own copy.

This report considers four options for the future format of Council and Committee meetings

While electronic meetings during the pandemic have been successful, this report provides a complete range of options for Council to consider. The options are:

1. Fully in-person
2. Fully electronic
3. “Blended” hybrid – participants choose when to attend in person or electronically
4. “Structured” hybrid – some meetings are fully in-person and some are fully electronic

4. Analysis

OPTION 1 – FULLY IN-PERSON

This option is easy to implement but lacks flexibility

Returning to fully in-person meetings essentially means a return to the format of meetings prior to the pandemic. All Members of Council, staff and the public, would attend meetings in either the Council Chambers or other meeting rooms.

Implementing this option would be straightforward. However, requiring all attendees to participate in-person takes away some flexibility and the benefits of electronic meetings. The [December 16, 2021](#) highlighted some of these benefits, including reduced travel time and associated greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, electronic meetings have been better attended by Council Members and the public than was historically the case for fully in-person meetings.

For these reasons, staff do not recommend a return to fully in-person meetings.

OPTION 2 – FULLY ELECTRONIC

While easy to implement, conducting all meetings electronically will likely see some opposition

A continuation of this format would be easy to implement. However, staff is aware some Council Members would prefer to return to in-person meetings at least some of the time. Additionally, some members of the public prefer face-to-face interaction. To date, staff is not aware of any municipality committing to fully electronic meetings all of the time.

For these reasons, staff do not recommend a fully electronic approach to all meetings, except in emergency circumstances.

OPTION 3 – “BLENDED” HYBRID

This option refers to meetings that permit Members of Council, staff and the public to participate as they choose. Some may attend in person while others may participate electronically.

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

The vast majority of municipalities conducted fully electronic meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as public health measures are easing, municipalities are beginning to reintroduce in-person meetings, or a mix of electronic and in-person participation. Table 2 shows the current state of meetings in the local municipalities.

Table 2
Comparison of Local Municipal Approach to In-Person and Electronic Meetings

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

Existing technology can accommodate blended participation at meetings held in the Council Chambers, but the meeting experience will differ for in-person and electronic participants

The Council Chamber’s existing audiovisual configuration can accommodate blended hybrid meetings. However, one consideration for this type of meeting is “visual equity”, or the ability for participants and attendees to simultaneously view all participants.

Using the existing setup, any electronic participants or attendees will be able to easily see other electronic 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. An example of how this would potentially look is included as Attachment 2.

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

Given the number of people typically attending a Regional Council meeting, Members might find it difficult at times to discern what is taking place depending on the method they use to participate in the meeting.

No meeting rooms except the Council Chambers have the necessary setup to accommodate blended hybrid meetings. Should Council wish to introduce blended hybrid to advisory committees and boards, additional hardware will need to be installed.

Technology upgrades would be required to provide a more equitable experience for all meeting participants

“Visual equity” could be partially provided by having all Council Members log into the electronic meeting whether they are attending electronically or in-person. This allows electronic 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 electronic 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.

Should Council wish to implement an approach to provide for “visual equity”, a further report would need to be brought forward outlining exact cost implications as well as additional meeting procedures required to manage the blending of the two meeting formats.

Implementing a hybrid mix of electronic and in-person participation presents additional challenges when meeting attendance is increased

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.

Attachment 3 provides a visualization of hybrid meetings at the three local municipalities that to date have adopted this format. The number of participants shown on the screen typically did not exceed nine people with the average being five. This is one-quarter of the average number of people who are shown on screen during a Regional Council or Committee of the Whole meeting.

The size of Regional Council means it could become challenging to manage a meeting depending on the split of in-person and electronic participants. Keeping track of requests to speak and counting votes will be awkward and support staff will effectively be supporting two different simultaneous meetings – one in-person and one electronic – as support requirements will be different for each type of participant.

Blended hybrid meetings should have a threshold of in-person attendance otherwise the meeting is instead conducted electronically

To balance logistical and resource challenges, some municipalities, for example, the City of Richmond Hill, have established a minimum required number of in-person participants otherwise a meeting will be held electronically.

For the blended hybrid option, staff similarly recommend that Council establish a default that all meetings are conducted in person. If the number of confirmed in-person participants is below a defined threshold then the meeting will instead be conducted electronically. This threshold could be quorum or a lower or higher number depending on Council's preference.

To create certainty, Members will need to provide advance notice of how they plan to attend a meeting

Establishing an in-person threshold ensures resources are used effectively and prevents, for example, the need to provide in-person support to only one or two members who attend in person. However, it creates uncertainty as to what will be the meeting format for any given meeting.

To mitigate the uncertainty, Members will be required to notify the Regional Clerk by no later than 12:00 noon two days prior to the meeting indicating their desire to participate electronically. Based on numbers, the Regional Chair will determine if the meeting will be held electronically. This timing ensures members of the public, deputants and other attendees will have adequate notice should a meeting be switched from in-person to electronic.

Council may wish to consider the extent to which it permits the use of the blended hybrid option

In the blended hybrid model, Members of Council can select their preferred method of participation for any given meeting. This potentially means that one Member could attend every meeting of Council and Committee in-person and another Member may never attend in person for the entirety of the term.

The *Municipal Act* provisions around electronic participation permit the scenario outlined above but Council may wish to consider whether it imposes its own limitations. A potential measure could be a requirement that each Member must attend at least every third Council meeting in-person.

Blended hybrid provides the most flexibility but is not recommended due to the logistical and resourcing considerations

The blended hybrid option takes the most advantage of the flexibility created by the most recent amendments to the *Municipal Act, 2001* around electronic participation.

However, as outlined in the preceding paragraphs, blended hybrid has logistical and resourcing challenges, such as "visual equity", meeting management challenges and the

difficulty in managing two different types of simultaneous meetings. For these reasons, staff do not recommend the blended hybrid approach.

OPTION 4 – “STRUCTURED” HYBRID (RECOMMENDED OPTION)

This option provides flexibility in how meetings are conducted, while establishing enough structure to manage some of the issues surrounding blended hybrid.

This option establishes that certain meetings are always electronic while others are always in-person

For this option, staff propose that all meetings of Committees of Council are conducted electronically, while all Regular and Special Meetings of Council meetings are conducted in-person. The Procedure Bylaw would retain the flexibility to conduct a Council meeting electronically should the Chair determine it to be appropriate due to an emergency, adverse weather or other similar circumstance.

Council can also encourage the boards of directors of the Region’s three corporations to continue meeting electronically.

This option is recommended because it provides different participation options but is sufficiently structured as to be relatively easy to manage

This approach takes advantage of the benefits of electronic meetings, set out earlier in this report, reduces travel time for Members of Council and other attendees and provides complete certainty for all attendees as to the format of any given meeting. By conducting Council meetings in-person, this option preserves the ceremonial nature of Council meetings and its status as the ultimate decision-making body.

Table 1 shows the growth in the number of deputations, implying electronic participation makes it easier for members of the public to attend meetings. In 2021, the vast majority of deputants attended a Committee of the Whole meeting and, under this preferred option, deputants could continue to participate electronically. On the other hand, for those deputants who prefer to interact face-to-face, they would generally have the opportunity to do so at Council meetings, subject to some specific Procedure Bylaw requirements.

For Members of Council, the requirement to only attend approximately 10 regular Council meetings per year in-person significantly reduces travel time to the Regional Administrative Centre as compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, if a member is unable to attend one of the in-person meetings, where applicable, they could take advantage of the Alternate Members of Council Policy.

For almost 50 years, York Region has successfully managed in-person meetings and for the last two years, it has successfully managed electronic meetings. Under this option, each meeting will be either fully in-person or fully electronic, which is much easier to manage for participants and support staff than a blended model.

5. Financial

There are no financial implications associated with the preferred option in 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 blended hybrid participation. 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

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

Additionally, electronic meetings also averted over 26 tonnes of GHG emissions and the switch to electronic agendas saved approximately 40 trees. A significant portion of the positive environmental impacts will be sustained by only resuming in-person Regular Council meetings and by potentially discontinuing the production of hard copy paper agendas.

Due to the benefits of electronic meetings, staff do not recommend reverting to fully in-person meetings post-pandemic. On the other hand, Council Members and the public likely desire some face-to-face interaction so staff do not recommend continuing with fully-electronic meetings post-pandemic.

Blended hybrid, where Members and other attendees, can choose whether to attend in-person or electronically, from meeting-to-meeting, provides a great deal of flexibility but presents logistical and resourcing challenges. These include "visual equity", meeting management, meeting support requirements and uncertainty as to the meeting format for any given meeting.

The preferred option, structured hybrid, balances the benefits of electronic meetings while creating enough structure to make meeting management much easier. By establishing that some meetings are fully in-person and others are fully electronic, they become much easier to manage while still providing different participation options.

If Council approves the recommended approach, it can be implemented as soon as the remaining health and safety restrictions are lifted. Staff could report back to a future meeting to gauge Council's ongoing satisfaction with the format of meetings and propose any necessary modifications.

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.



Recommended by:

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Attachments (3)
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