

City of Port Moody

Report/Recommendation to Council

Date: June 27, 2016

File No. 01-0550-01/2016

Submitted by: Corporate Services Department – Legislative Services Division

Subject: Electronic Participation in Council Meetings

Purpose / Introduction

To provide further information on Electronic Participation in Council Meetings for discussion.

Recommended Resolution

THAT the report dated June 27, 2016 from Corporate Services Department – Legislative Services Division regarding Electronic Participation in Council Meetings be received for information.

Background

The Information Services Division presented a report on Electronic Participation at Council Meetings at the Regular Council Meeting held on April 12, 2016, which provided the following three options for Electronic Participation:

1. Acquire an enterprise solution that allows for two remote participants at a cost of \$44,000;
2. Use auxiliary staff to control existing consumer-level Skype program at the cost of approximately \$30 per hour; and
3. Acquire an enterprise solution that allows for one remote participant at a cost of \$34,000.

Council received the report for information and passed the following resolution:

THAT options #1 and #3 as presented by the Manager of Information Services at the Regular Council Meeting of April 12, 2016 be brought back for discussion at a future Committee of the Whole Meeting.

This report provides further information on the risks and benefits of introducing the option of Electronic Participation in Council Meetings, and outlines the procedures and policies required for allowing for Electronic Participation in Council Meetings.

Discussion

It should be noted that the electronic participation referred to in this report does not include electronic meetings, in which all meeting attendees participate through electronic means, such as by conference call, or through an online meeting platform (e.g. WebEX, GoToMeeting). Electronic meetings are held in cases when urgent Council business must be conducted, but it is not possible to achieve quorum at a physical location due to extenuating circumstances, such as during emergencies, pandemics, or natural disasters. The option of holding Electronic Meetings aligns with the Council Strategic priority of Service Excellence, and is already provided for in the existing Council Procedure Bylaw.

Electronic participation refers to a member's participation in a meeting that is being held at a specific location at which other members are physically present. At the Regular Council Meeting held on February 9, 2016, Council made the following resolution:

THAT electronic participation at meetings be deferred until such time as City staff can implement an electronic participation system that is effective, reliable, and does not distract or detract from the formal proceedings of Council meetings.

As the Manager of Information Services pointed out at the April 12, 2016 Regular Council meeting, the quality and reliability of the remote participant's feed is limited by the quality of the connection at the remote participant's end. As such, the performance of the proposed enterprise solution is affected by factors outside of the City's control, and cannot be guaranteed. To ensure that Council Meetings are not disrupted by the technological challenges inherent in Electronic Participation, such as loss of connection or intelligibility, Electronic Participation should only be allowed when a quorum of members are physically present, and policies should dictate that, if connection or intelligibility is lost, the remote participant will be deemed to have left the meeting. This requirement makes it possible to continue Council Meetings without disruptions should technological issues arise.

Since Electronic Participation should only be allowed when a quorum of Council is physically present and business can be conducted without the attendance of the remote participant, adding the option for Electronic Participation should be considered a teleworking initiative, as its purpose is to facilitate attendance by members while they are away. Teleworking is increasingly considered a feature of the modern workplace, and has the benefit of reducing travel costs, reducing environmental cost to society by eliminating the need to travel, and reducing real estate costs by eliminating the need to physically accommodate workers.

Balancing the benefits of teleworking are some of the following challenges with Electronic Participation in Council Meetings:

- Loss of real human contact – the lack of physical presence of the remote participant results in a loss of real human contact; eye contact and sharing a direction of gaze are an important part of gathering information from communication partners;

- Loss of control of the setting – the remote participant may be attending in a location that is unsuitable for a Council meeting, or that has persons who may interrupt the meeting whether intentionally or unintentionally. Aside from the undesirability of introducing outside environments into the Council Chambers, it is also inappropriate to introduce Closed Council meetings into uncontrolled environments, which include both the physical location of the remote participant, as well as the potential for unauthorized interception of the feed;
- Community expectations – the *Community Charter* sets out attendance requirements for members of Council, and the community has expectations that members of Council will physically attend Council Meetings;
- Creation of expectations – the availability of the option to participate remotely may create expectations that all members will attend all meetings regardless of the fact that they cannot physically attend; and
- Telework divide – conflict may arise when there is greater demand than capacity for Electronic Participation. Those who are barred from remote participation due either to qualification for Electronic Participation or to the maximum capacity having been reached may feel excluded.

Should Council wish to proceed with the introduction of Electronic Participation, it is recommended that a Council Procedure Bylaw Amendment and a Corporate Policy be drafted to include the following:

- Requiring that a minimum of four participants physically attend the meeting. This allows the meeting to continue uninterrupted in cases where connection or intelligibility is lost;
- Restricting the maximum number of meetings in which a member may participate electronically each year. This ensures that the expectations of the community regarding physical attendance at meetings are met;
- Including criteria for determining eligibility for electronic participation. This allows for a fair determination of priority for electronic participation in situations in which demand outstrip capacity;
- Restricting Electronic Participation to meetings that are open to the public. This ensures that Closed Council meetings are securely closed to the public;
- Specifying requirements for the physical location of the remote participant. This ensures that undesirable environments and interruptions are not introduced into the Council Chambers;
- Specifying that, once connection is lost, the remote participant is deemed to have left the meeting and will be recorded as such in the minutes. This allows meetings to continue with minimal disruption; and
- Specifying the minimum level of intelligibility (e.g. speech must be clearly heard without time lag) for a member to continue participating remotely. This will allow the Presiding Member to determine when it would be appropriate to disconnect a remote participant to allow the meeting to continue without disruption.

During the discussion on the enterprise system, Council requested information on whether there are other purposes that the system could serve, such as bringing in remote presenters for staff training, or conducting other meetings with remote participants. As the enterprise system is designed specifically to allow for remote participation in Council Meeting context, and is location-specific in its set-up, there are limited uses outside of Electronic Participation in Council Meetings. Other remote videoconferencing solutions are likely to be more suitable for business meetings. It is also unlikely that the system could be used by other similar public bodies as part of facility rentals, as the use of the system would have to be included in their procedure bylaws.

Other Options

THAT staff be directed to introduce policies and bylaw amendments to allow Electronic Participation in Council meetings, and acquire an enterprise system at a cost of \$45,000, with the cost referred to the Finance Committee to determine an appropriate funding source.

Financial Implications

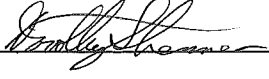



Should Council opt to introduce Electronic Participation in Council meetings, a budget will have to be approved for implementation. The cost of the enterprise system has since increased as the promotion at the time of the initial proposal has ended. The updated costs are \$45,000 for Option 1 and \$35,000 for Option 3.

Communications / Civic Engagement

Should Council choose to introduce the option of allowing Electronic Participation at Council Meetings, it may be advantageous to issue a media release outlining the rationale for doing so.

Council Strategic Plan Objectives

The introduction of teleworking initiatives align with the Council Strategic Plan Value of being responsive and adaptive to change.

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Reviewed for Form and Content / Approved for Submission to Council:	
City Manager's Comment/Concurrence  Acting City Manager	
Corporate Review	Initials
Corporate Services – Information Services	RP
Corporate Services – Communications and Engagement	
Financial Services	