Minutes – Executive Policy Committee – April 21, 2021

REPORTS

Item No. 5 Use of the Vote Information System at City Council Meetings

EXECUTIVE POLICY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:

The Executive Policy Committee concurred in the recommendation of the Winnipeg Public Service and recommended to Council:

1. That the City Clerk be directed to use the Vote Information System as a means for Members of Council to vote at City Council meetings when a recorded vote is called for.

2. That the City Clerk be directed to report back to Council in 180 days with a review of the use of the Vote Information System at Council meetings and provide recommendations in regards to expanding the use of the system or any other improvements required.

3. That the Proper Officers of the City be authorized to do all things necessary to implement the intent of the foregoing.

DECISION MAKING HISTORY:

Moved by Councillor Browaty,

That the recommendation of the Winnipeg Public Service be concurred in and forwarded to Council.

Yea:	Bowman, Allard, Gillingham, Gilroy, Rollins	5
Nay:	Browaty, Mayes	2

Carried

ADMINISTRATIVE REPORT

Title: Use of the Vote Information System at City Council Meetings

Critical Path: Executive Policy Committee - Council

AUTHORIZATION

Author	Department Head	CFO	CAO
A. Poitras	M. Lemoine	N/A	M. Ruta, Interim CAO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Vote Information System (VIS) was developed by the Innovation, Transformation and Technology Department in consultation with the City Clerk's Department. It was initiated as a means to streamline the voting process and to provide greater access to voting records.

In September 2020, the Executive Policy Committee (EPC) began using the VIS at its meetings. Since this initial rollout, numerous improvements have been implemented including the ability for committee members to use the VIS while participating remotely via Zoom, an integrated display in the live YouTube feed to allow vote results to be viewed, and display screens in the Council Chamber to allow those present in the gallery to view vote results during the meeting.

Voting results from EPC meetings since September have been incorporated into the meeting minutes and are populated automatically into the Voting Record database found in the Decision-Making Information System (DMIS) as well as the City's Open Data website. The voting results for recorded votes from the three Council meetings which took place in 2021 have also been incorporated into the Voting Record database.

Usage of the VIS at EPC meetings since September has provided an excellent trial period to allow issues for the public service and elected officials to be worked out. No changes in technology or resourcing would be required to implement use of the VIS at Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That the City Clerk be directed to use the Vote Information System as a means for Members of Council to vote at City Council meetings when a recorded vote is called for.

2. That the City Clerk be directed to report back to Council in 180 days with a review of the use of the Vote Information System at Council meetings and provide recommendations in regards to expanding the use of the system or any other improvements required.

3. That the Proper Officers of the City be authorized to do all things necessary to implement the intent of the foregoing.

REASON FOR THE REPORT

On March 25, 2021, City Council directed the Public Service to hold information sessions on the Vote Information System for all members of Council and report back in 30 days with a plan to implement the system for use at City Council meetings including options for the creation of a database of recorded votes other than using the Vote Information System as a voting method at Council.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATIONS

If adopted, the City Clerk's Department will begin using the VIS as a means for Members of Council to vote on matters when a recorded vote is called at Council meetings.

HISTORY/DISCUSSION

Background

At the 2018 State of the City address, to further strengthen accountability and improve city services, Mayor Bowman committed to the introduction of electronic tracking of how each elected member of Council votes at community committees, standing policy committees, and Council meetings. The City Clerk's Department and the Innovation Department began to review options to track recorded votes electronically and how the data related to recorded votes could be made easily accessible and searchable. Upon review of the needs and the off-the-shelf systems available, it was determined that the best approach would be to develop a system in-house by Innovation Department staff.

During the discovery process for this project it became apparent that electronic vote systems are used by a number of Canadian municipalities. Notable cities include Calgary, Edmonton, Hamilton, Toronto and Vancouver. Of those cities, the City of Toronto appeared to provide the most accessible data. Through their website, they offer a simple to use voting record database that allows users to quickly search and filter vote results by date, meeting, member and term. The Toronto system can viewed at http://app.toronto.ca/tmmis/getAdminReport.do?function=prepareMemberVoteReport

The focus in developing Winnipeg's system was to create something that was not only easy to use for Members of Council and City Clerk's staff, but also a system that provided the data in a simple to use format that could be accessed by all users including citizens.

The VIS requires minimal interaction by Members of Council during meetings. It utilizes existing agenda information from DMIS for voting purposes, uploads vote results to the Voting Record website and the City's Open Data Portal after a meeting, and it is compatible with Jaws screen reading software to allow for text-to-speech output.

Vote Information System

Trial use of the Vote Information System began in September 2020 at the Executive Policy Committee. Since then the system has been used at nine committee meetings and has

facilitated the vote for more than 250 agenda items. Throughout this period there have been a number of improvements made to the system. Some of the upgrades include the following:

- Ability for committee members to vote remotely when participating via Zoom.
- Integrated display for the public to view the vote status and results in real-time while viewing the live YouTube feed which is the same feed provided to public television providers.
- Use of display screens in the Council Chamber to allow members of the public, media and City staff to view vote results.

The system serves two main functions. The first is to facilitate and record the outcome of a vote at the meeting and the second is to process that data and make it available to elected officials, the public service and citizens after the meeting.

To facilitate a vote, Members of Council are simply required to open the VIS link on their computer at the start of the meeting. Once a Member has opened the system it will run in the background throughout the meeting. When a vote is called a notification is sent to all Members who are then required to select "Yea" or "Nay" and then confirm their vote. Once all votes have been tabulated the system instantly generates the results which appear on the Members computer, the YouTube feed, and on the display screens in the Council Chamber.

Once a meeting has concluded the vote results are incorporated into the minutes and the data is released to the Voting Record on DMIS and the City's Open Data Portal. The Voting Record uses the voting data obtained at meetings and compiles it in a simple, easy to use database. Users can search by meetings, members, date, committee and topic to view vote results. The results also offer a direct link to the official minutes in DMIS should the user wish to see more specific details on the matter. The Open Data Portal allows users to download raw Voting Record data and do further research and analysis using excel or other database analysis tools. The Voting Record data continues to grow with each meeting, offering greater ability to analyze long term trends in voting and other patterns.

Information Sessions

Prior to its implementation at EPC, an information session was held with members of the committee to allow them to utilize the system in a test environment and become familiar with the system prior to implementation. On March 25, 2021, City Council directed the Public Service to hold information sessions with Members of Council on the recorded Vote Information System. The City Clerk's Department offered two sessions which provided Members the opportunity to view and use the system, provide feedback and ask questions. The session also provided members with an overview of the Voting Record database and the City's Open Data Portal.

Next Steps

Should the recommendations from this report be adopted by Council, the Public Service will expand the use of the Vote Information System to Council and this will become the voting method whenever a recorded vote is called for.

The Public Service sees no issues related to implementation of the system at Council. No additional human or fiscal resources are required for implementation at Council.

Based on the experience at EPC meetings, there are few expected issues in regards to rollout at Council. As with any new technology rollout, there will be a learning curve for some users.

This was true for Zoom and other technologies rolled out recently. However these issues dissipated quickly for members of EPC as the VIS was used.

Similarly, there is the ability to improve the system as the rollout occurs. This occurred with technologies such as Zoom, which is operating much more smoothly today than when first rolled out and has had additional features added, such as screen sharing for delegates and French language translation, which were not initially available. This has also been the case with the VIS. Since the initial implementation at EPC, features such as usage by remote participants, including the vote results into the YouTube feed and in-Chamber screens have all been added. As the system was developed internally it is much easier to implement changes than an off-the-shelf product. Should additional needs be identified at Council, these can likely be added.

Benefits expected from the usage of the system at Council include some increase in speed of voting. Recorded votes at EPC using the VIS take approximately 20 seconds versus approximately 60 seconds at Council for a standing vote. Other benefits include the addition of the vote results in YouTube. The YouTube feed is available live and remains in place and can be watched at any time. The media would often contact the public service during or directly after a meeting to determine what the results of a vote was at EPC; with the results in YouTube, they are able to watch the meeting and pause when the vote result for the vote of interest appears on the screen. Finally, the main benefit from usage of systems such as the VIS is the creation of a database of recorded votes. While this information exists in the minutes, populating a database allows elected officials and citizens to easily and quickly access data and perform analysis.

As per the March 25, 2021 Council recommendation, voting results were incorporated from 2021 Council Meetings into the Voting Record database. This was able to be done easily and quickly through manual entry into the system. All recorded votes are currently captured in table format in the Council Disposition document. Should Council decide not to utilize the VIS at Council, but still wish to have votes from Council included in the database, Clerk's will work with the Innovation Department to create a method to directly import the vote tables from the Council Disposition directly into the Voting Record database.

The second recommendation before Council calls for a review of the system and report back in 180 days with options on whether or not to further expand the use of the VIS. This may include a review of the Procedure By-law to determine when the system is used. Currently, the system will only be used if a recorded vote is called for, which is as specified in the Procedure By-law. A review could be done to determine if this should be changed to utilize the system for all substantive votes at Council. This is the norm in most jurisdictions where a VIS type system is used. The other option would be to expand the use of the VIS to other committees including Standing Committees, Community Committees and ad-hoc committees. There is an additional burden to utilizing the system on the City Clerk's department, requiring at least two clerks at the meeting and having an additional audio-video technician present. This can be accommodated at Council and EPC both now and in the future as there has always been additional staff in place for these meetings. For other committees, there are currently additional staff in place to assist with the technology needs of Zoom. Previously there had been only 1 clerk at SPC, Community Committee and other meetings. Funding for these two additional positions has been provided in the 2021 budget to enable Zoom. If either Zoom or VIS is expected to be used at these additional meetings after 2021, budgeting for these additional two positions will be required.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Financial Impact Statement

Date: April 8, 2021

Project Name:
Use of the Vote Information System at City Council Meetings

COMMENTS:

There are no financial implications associated with the recommendations in this report.

Electronically signed by T. Yanchishyn
Tanis Yanchishyn
Manager of Finance (Campus)
Corporate Finance Department

CONSULTATION

This Report has been prepared in consultation with:

Innovation, Transformation and Technology Department

OURWINNIPEG POLICY ALIGNMENT

The recommendations contained in this report align with OurWinnipeg Direction 1: Provide efficient and focused civic administration and governance.

WINNIPEG CLIMATE ACTION PLAN ALIGNMENT

N/A

SUBMITTED BY

Department: City Clerk's
Prepared by: Andrew Poitras
Date: April 8, 2021