

City may put voters online, on the phone

Deputy mayor says move would boost normally dismal turnout

By AMY PUGSLEY FRASER City Hall Reporter



More people would take part in the next municipal election if they could mark their X by computer or by phone, says Halifax's deputy mayor.

"I think it would be a benefit," Sue Uteck (Northwest Arm-South End) said Sunday night.

While federal elections routinely bring out 60 to 65 per cent of voters in Nova Scotia, only about 35 per cent of eligible voters in Halifax turn out for municipal elections, which are held every four years.

Regional council is set to discuss the enhanced voting options for the 2008 election when it gets together for a committee meeting Tuesday morning at city hall.

The deputy mayor said adding phone and computer voting — as well as mail-in ballots — would mean that candidates would have to learn a new way of campaigning in future elections.

"It opens up a whole new game," she said, noting that candidates would need to "get the word out" by computer as well as regular old knocking on doors.

"It changes the dynamics."

Her district — home to both Saint Mary's and Dalhousie universities — includes a lot of voting age students, most of whom would be computer savvy.

"That's probably a good thing for me, but in a rural area, I don't know, it just presents a different campaign."

That's because some rural areas of HRM still aren't hooked up to high-speed Internet.

But that could change in the next few months, says Coun. Steve Streach (Eastern Shore-Musquodoboit Valley).

"We are hopeful that very soon we are going to be embarking upon a project that will connect all communities to the broadband (high speed) Internet service here in HRM," he said Sunday.

The councillor says he would welcome an increase in numbers at the polls.

"I'm in favour of whatever option is going to allow and encourage the most people to participate."

However, he doesn't want technology to hamper old-fashioned voting methods.

"I would not want to encourage any reduction in the number of normal polling stations."

Voters in Nova Scotia need all the help they can get, he says, noting he's become "increasingly disappointed" with voter turnout over the years.

That's especially true after this weekend, he said, when few people showed up to vote for the African-Nova Scotian seat on the South Shore regional school board.

Coun. Gary Meade (Hammonds Plains-St. Margarets) agreed that making voting easier for people is "the way to go."

He's interested in learning about recent elections in eight Ontario municipalities that used computer voting customized by Dartmouth-based Intelivote Systems Inc.

"They were sort of the guinea pigs," Mr. Meade said Sunday.

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