HALIFAX

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Item No. 15.1.6
Halifax Regional Council
March 7, 2023

TO:	Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council
SUBMITTED BY:	*Original Signed*
	Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer
DATE:	February 28, 2023
SUBJECT:	**Hybrid Meeting Options**

ORIGIN

July 12, 2022 Regional Council motion (Item 16.1):

MOVED by Councillor Russell, seconded by Deputy Mayor Lovelace

THAT Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to prepare a report to determine what is required for HRM to host hybrid meetings:

    a.   in Council chambers,

    b.   for community council meetings, and

    c.   for other public meetings around the community, as well as a budget and an action plan to develop and implement this and return to Council with this report in three months. This report should consider personnel requirements, technical requirements, legislative requirements, and other requirements that may have an impact on our ability to deliver these services.

MOTION PUT AND PASSED.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter (*HRM Charter*), subsections 16A (1) and (2), and clause 20(1)(b), as follows:

16A   (1)   Where a procedural policy of the Council so provides, a Council meeting, community council meeting or Council committee meeting may be conducted by electronic means if

        (a)   at least two days prior to the meeting, notice is given to the public respecting the way in which the meeting is to be conducted;

        (b)   the electronic means enables the public to see and hear the meeting as it is occurring;

        (c)   the electronic means enables all the meeting participants to see and hear each other; and

RECOMMENDATION ON PAGE 2

(d)   any additional requirements established by regulation have been met.

(2)   Where a procedural policy of the Council so provides, a Council member or Council committee member may participate in a Council meeting, community council meeting or Council committee meeting through electronic means if

(a)   the electronic means enables the public to see and hear the member as the meeting is occurring;

(b)   the electronic means enables all meeting participants to see and hear each other; and

(c)   any additional requirements established by regulation have been met.

20   (1)   The Council may make policies

(b)   regulating its own proceedings and preserving order at meetings of the Council;

Administrative Order One, *the Procedures of the Council Administrative Order* (AO 1), section 41(A) Virtual Meeting and Virtual Participation Procedures, and Appendix 'B' Rules for Virtual Public Hearing, and Appendix 'C' Virtual Meeting and Virtual Participation Procedures.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer to develop a business case for:

1.   the software solution described as Option Four in Attachment 1: Council Hybrid Options Analysis;

2.   options to improve the functionality of meetings of the North West Community Council, including the option of a dedicated meeting space that includes webcast and other technology options. The business case should also address staff support and meeting requirements; and

3.   mobile technical support services from an external vendor that includes costing for webcasting and other applicable technology options provided by the service; and

return to Regional Council for further direction

BACKGROUND

On April 19, 2021, Bill 98 received Royal Assent adding section 16A to the *HRM Charter* (S.N.S, 2021, c. 14, s. 3*)*. This Bill amended the *HRM Charter* to add the procedures for virtual meetings of Council, Community Council and Committees of Council. Section 16A allows Council, by policy, the option to hold virtual meetings and to allow a member to participate virtually in a meeting.

On March 20, 2022, the Ministerial direction that enabled virtual meetings during the state of emergency ended, including ending the provision that allowed participation by telephone. At that point, virtual meetings were governed by section 16A of the HRM Charter.

On March 22, 2022, Regional Council adopted amendments to Administrative Order 1 (AO1) to incorporate procedures for virtual public hearings (Appendix B) and virtual meetings and virtual participation (Appendix C). As section 16A requires that any virtual meeting participant be seen and heard within the meeting, appearance by telephone alone was no longer as option.

As part of the March 8, 2022 staff report Council received an update on the status of hybrid meetings. At that time, none of the existing physical meeting locations (Council Chambers, Halifax Hall, and Harbour East Marine-Drive Community Council Chamber) had the technical ability to allow the public, staff, or members of Council to be seen and heard while participating virtually. The staff report noted that a

technology upgrade for videoconference, for the public only, was in progress for the Council Chamber, but was delayed due to global supply chain issues. Finally, it noted that at that time only in person meetings in the Council Chamber could be live streamed.

On July 12, 2022, Regional Council directed the Chief Administrative Officer prepare a report to determine what was required for HRM to host hybrid meetings.

DISCUSSION

Council Chamber Status

In late 2022, the technical solution to allow for videoconference was installed in Council Chambers. This device was installed to allow for members of the public to participate within meetings remotely, provided they could connect to the meeting using their personal technology. Using this solution, an operator would be able to display the remote participant on the screens in the Chamber when the participant speaks, include them in the meeting recording and in the live broadcast of the meeting. This upgrade is currently undergoing internal testing and training.

To allow for hybrid meetings, amendments will be needed to AO 1 to allow for an in-person meeting with virtual participation by the public. Staff will be bringing forward AO 1 amendments in a future Council report following additional testing and process review as hybrid meetings will become a new meeting type for the HRM. Currently AO 1 allows for either in person or virtual public hearings.

Revised procedural rules to accommodate virtual participants will be required: participation, including sign-up deadlines for public hearing and public participation, a process for calling three times during a public hearing, and instances where a participant becomes disconnected or cannot be heard or seen. These amendments are also being prepared for Council's consideration.

To be implemented, this option will require additional staff within meetings as well as during meeting preparation to provide support for the technology as well as public participants. Depending on the meeting, it is expected that as many as three additional staff could be required, representing an ongoing operational cost increase to support meetings within the HRM.

The existing solution in the Chamber was installed to allow the public to participate in meetings and was not designed to be integrated with Chamber technology for members of Council or staff to participate virtually. To allow this will require functional upgrades to the Chamber Technology. For example, the ability to have a member of Council participate virtually using this solution would come with a reduction in meeting functionality compared to participating in person. Access to request to speak, voting, Clerk's notes, and presentation screen would not be possible. If Council wished staff to explore this option further with the existing technology, additional amendments to AO1 would need to be done to outline procedures for voting and requesting to speak. Council will also need to consider whether any parameters will be placed on when members may participate virtually. This direction will be sought and developed through the review process for AO1.

An evaluation of options for Chamber technology upgrades has been provided in Attachment 1. The recommended approach to consider further in terms of upgrades is Option Four. This option is favourable because the market has seen recent off-the-shelf applications developed by software companies to deliver functionality which would likely meet our requirements. When physically present in the chamber, features such as the voters list, the request to speak, and screen overlays would integrate with existing audio and video hardware components. This type of software is managed, maintained and continually improved by experts in their domain so operation and IT maintenance is minimal compared to other options such as custom-built software or manually operated systems, which are outlined in Attachment 1, but not recommended to pursue further.

Harbour East-Marine Drive Community Council Chamber

A technical solution to be able to webcast meetings from the Harbour East – Marine Drive Community Council (HEMDCC) Chamber was ordered in 2021 and installed in late 2022. In early 2023, staff from the Clerk's Office and IT commenced testing and training and the first webcast was held on January 12, 2023. The webcasting solution is a simplified version and provides only a static wide shot of the HEMDCC Chamber seating area and can be used without an AV Operator which reduces resources needs and costs. There is no ability currently, to display PowerPoint presentations to the webcast, put up notification screens (such as "Meeting is In Camera") or views of the gallery but these are currently being explored. This solution is run via a webcam vs. streaming software so there is no ability to integrate CART captioning. The webcast will be live on HRM's YouTube channel.

As part this ability to webcast in this room, the Clerk's Office, through discussion with Chairs, will make this space available to other meeting bodies for their meetings should they wish to meet in person and be webcasted.

Further upgrades to this room would be required to allow hybrid participation in this space if direction is provided to implement hybrid participation at this location as they are not currently being looked at with the recent upgrades and possible enhancements noted above.

North West Community Council Chamber / Community Meetings

The North West Community Council does not have a permanent location and holds its meetings at locations within the community. At certain times, some other Community Council's and advisory committees have chosen to meet within the community and not in their home meeting locations.

The logistical coordination of North West Community Council meetings as well as meetings within the community are supported through the Clerk's Office and are hosted using a mobile audio visual unit. There is no ability to increase the technical support of these meetings with existing staff capacity. If additional technology is expected in meetings, it will require external technical staff who have training and experience with technical solutions, outside of the Clerk's Office. Expansion of the existing internal system is not recommended.

If a permanent North West Community Council meeting space was directed it would require funding as a capital project and would be constructed or an existing location identified to allow for meeting technology such as streaming and hybrid participation. Any additional space and meeting technology will require appropriate staffing to be implemented. The other option that can be explored would be a procurement process for an external AV vendor that could be booked to support these meetings at various locations.

It is recommended that a business case be done to outline options and return to Regional Council for direction.

Other Meeting Locations

As part of continued efforts to be able to increase meeting technology (e.g. webcast and hybrid) for all meeting types and locations, the Clerk's Office and IT will continue to explore technical options to be able to provide solutions; however at this time there are no other planned upgrades. Finally, all upgrades will be subject to budget availability and staff resourcing.

Conclusion

Since March of 2020, the Clerk's Office and IT have moved rapidly in response to the need to maintain meetings in the required formats via the use of technology. Due to circumstances, on many occasions this was done by adding on to existing systems to make necessary improvements to meet the needs during the pandemic. This report and recommendations seek direction from Council on the future of meetings, meeting formats, priority of projects, and the development of a number of business cases that will be required to further change the way meetings occur within the HRM. If approved by Council, when the results of the businesses cases are available, staff would return to Regional Council for further direction, as the cost and staff resources to support some of the items outlined in this report may be more than the current staffing complements would support and these projects are not considered in existing operating or capital budgets. There is no operational ability to increase the level of service within HRM meetings without adjustments to the staffing support levels for all meeting types.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The additional technology needed to install the hybrid solution in the Council Chamber was paid for in fiscal year 2021-22 by Information Technology at a cost of $15,360 net HST through cost centre A421-6204. This was an unbudgeted expense.

When the system is operational it is expected that there will be an additional cost to A121 as well as additional support staff required for these meetings which is still being assessed. There are also additional IT related costs to provide support and refresh the technology if required as outlined in Attachment 1. This will need to be assessed over the coming months to quantify the impacts.

RISK CONSIDERATION

There are inherent risks to meeting in a hybrid manner due to the provincial requirements of being seen and heard to participate within a meeting due to the increased complexity of virtual participation.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Meetings are advertised on Halifax.ca and include the format for how the meeting is held and how the public can participate.

From April 1, 2022, to February 1, 2023, the HRM held 206 meetings 85 included public participation (not including Board of Police Commissioners, District Boundary Review Panel or public hearings).

No community engagement was done as part of this report. However, when meetings that take place in the Council Chamber can accommodate virtual participation by the public for in person meetings, the Clerk's Office will ensure conversations are had with Corporate Communications in advance, pages on Halifax.ca are updated with useful information for the public, and all relevant agenda pages include information about this option and how to sign up to speak virtually.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

No environmental implications were identified.

ALTERNATIVES

1. Regional Council could choose to not approve development of a business case for the recommended options.

2. Regional Council could recommend that staff develop a business case on one of the other options outlined in Attachment 1 for the Council Chamber and/or give direction for other technology

improvements for other meeting locations (e.g. Harbour East Marine Drive Community Council) to be looked at through a business case process.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – Council Hybrid Options Analysis

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A copy of this report can be obtained online at or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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                           Iain MacLean, Municipal Clerk 902.490.4210
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Option	Option Description	Councilor Experience	Public Experience	Est. Timeline	Est. Budget	Additional HR Required
1 Public Inclusive **INSTALL COMPLETED – Testing & Training Phase Ongoing ****	Councilors are physically in Council Chambers, public are anywhere. • Devices are installed in Chambers to allow an integrated connection between the current Chambers technology and Zoom to allow external Public to be seen and heard remotely. • Hardware Purchase required.	Councilors are physically in Council Chambers using existing Chambers technology.	Public can be anywhere and those remote would log into Zoom as they have been over the pandemic.	2-6 months	$20k capital hardware investment.	1 additional operator will be required. Additional meeting support staff will be required.
2 Cloud-Based Only Software Solution	Councilors and Public are anywhere. • All participants join using a laptop, camera and headset and log into web-based software. • Functionality included: Request-to-Speak (RTS), voting, content sharing, screen overlays. • Functionality not included: Speaking timers and Clerk notes. • Hardware Purchase: Not Applicable. Would remove existing RTS and voting buttons in the Council Chamber as they are no longer required. • Essentially abandons existing hardware and software solution (would not use microphones or voting buttons in the Chamber). • Learning curve for users transitioning to new software. • Not a fully developed product yet.	Councilors are anywhere and join through a new web-based software application. Councilors physically in the Chamber are required to wear a headset to avoid sound issues.	Public can be anywhere and those remote would log into Zoom as they had over the pandemic. For the public and staff in the gallery in person there would be reduced audio and headsets may be required to hear meeting proceedings.	6-8 months	$100K - $150K capital investment plus $75K - $100K/year for licensing and maintenance.	1 additional operator required. Additional meeting support staff may be required.
3	Councilors and Public are anywhere.	Councilors are anywhere and vote by show of hands	Public can be anywhere and those remote	6-8 months	$300K-$400K capital investment plus	2 additional operators required

Option	Option Description	Councilor Experience	Public Experience	Est. Timeline	Est. Budget	Additional HR Required
Semi-Manual Operation	• Same as how Zoom meetings are now with some participants sitting in the Chamber. • Integration between Zoom and existing Council Chamber hardware is built. • Request-to-speak (RTS) is managed manually with operators monitoring the chat and adding speakers manually to the list. • Voting is done manually by show of hands. • Video switching between speakers and screen overlays are done manually with a separate operator. (Could require a re-configuration of the AV room operating table to accommodate additional operators.) • Speaking timer would only work for those physically in the Chamber. • Might need to rebuilt camera/mic switching system to override automated system currently in the Chamber.	and request to speak in Zoom chat. Those in Council Chambers use existing camera/mic. Those who are remote have same experience as they have had over the pandemic.	would log into Zoom as they had over the pandemic.		$75K - $150K/year for licensing and maintenance.	
4 Off-the-shelf Software **RECOMMENDED FOR HYBRID COUNCIL SOLUTION**	Councilors and Public are anywhere. • Out of the box (COTS) software purchase to integrate with existing hardware. • Functionality included: All requirements *seem* to be met with voting, RTS, content sharing, screen overlays. • Functionality not included: None. • Hardware Purchase: Uses existing hardware except have to change out microphone system as current system is at end of life.	Councilors are anywhere. T*hose in Council Chambers have same experience as they do today.* Those who are remote will use COTS software on Android or iOS tablets, so voting, RTS, etc is done via	Public can be anywhere and those remote would log into a platform similar to Zoom, as they had over the pandemic.	12-14 months	Rough estimate of $300K - $500K capital investment plus $75K - $150K/year for licensing and maintenance.	May need 1 additional IT staff to manage connection issues for online participants

Option	Option Description	Councilor Experience	Public Experience	Est. Timeline	Est. Budget	Additional HR Required
		virtual buttons to replace physical buttons.				
5 New Custom Software integrated to existing software &hardware	Councilors and Public are anywhere. • A completely customized software solution is built from scratch to integrate Zoom and existing CMEETS software in Chambers. • Functionality included: All requirements (integrated RTS, camera/mic switching, voting, etc) would be met. • Functionality not included: None. • Hardware Purchase: Uses existing hardware. • Learning curve for users transitioning to new software. • It's not recommended that we would run a custom software solution due to the complexity and effort in maintaining it, which would need to be outsourced to the vendor who creates the software.	Councilors are anywhere. Those in Council Chambers have same experience as they do today. Those who are remote will use custom software, so voting, and RTS is done via virtual buttons to replace physical buttons.	Public can be anywhere and those remote would log into Zoom as they had over the pandemic.	12-24 months	$500K - $1.5 Million capital investment plus around $25K/year additional support and maintenance.	Possible 1 human operator required, TBD. Probable 1-2 IT staff required to maintain custom code.
6 Fully Manual Operation	Mimic Nova Scotia Legislature approach and start over. Remove all hardware and software currently in the Chamber and create a broadcast control room environment. New hardware. New software. This is a complex, manually switched broadcast solution. Essentially it is a fully outfitted television production studio with all the flexibility that entails. The operators re-configure the switching and control for each meeting depending on the requirements.	Councilors are anywhere.	Public can be anywhere and those remote would log into Zoom as they had over the pandemic.	18 months	Rough estimate of $1.5 Million	Estimated 4 operators to manually produce meetings.