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**Item No. 15.1.5**  
**Halifax Regional Council**  
**February 6, 2024**

**TO:** Mayor Savage and Members of Halifax Regional Council

**SUBMITTED BY:** Original Signed

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Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

**DATE:** January 29, 2024

**SUBJECT:** Council Chamber Hybrid Technology Option

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**ORIGIN**

March 7, 2023 Regional Council motion Item 15.1.6

MOVED by Councillor Russell, seconded by Councillor Cleary

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 of the staff report dated February 28, 2023: 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.

**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
  - (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 identify funding options for hybrid participation technology enhancements for the Council Chamber.

### **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 an 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.

On March 7, 2023, staff returned to Regional Council with a recommendation report recommending that Halifax Regional Council direct the Chief Administrative Officer develop a business case for Council Hybrid Options (the recommended option was "Off-the-shelf-software – Councillors and Public are anywhere" (option 4 from the staff report dated February 24, 2023), options for North West Community Council in person meeting space, a mobile technical support service, and to report back to Regional Council for future direction.

Following the March 7, 2023 Council meeting, staff and the vendor also identified that the Council Chamber technology requires a refresh prior to the end of 2024 as the technology is reaching end of life and will be outside the maintenance agreement with our support vendor.

On November 14, 2023 following amendments to Administrative Order 1 on August 22, 2023, meetings held in the Council Chamber allowed for the public only to participate virtually at an in person meeting. Prior to the end of 2023, three hybrid meetings for the public only were successfully held for meetings in the Council Chamber.

### **DISCUSSION**

This report addresses part 1 of the motion from March 7, 2024. Subsequent staff reports will come forward in the future to address the other motions regarding North West Community Council.

The existing technology solution in the Council Chamber was installed in early 2019 as the previous technology was at end of life and to introduce improvements such as: graphics, speaker list for amendments, and automation. AV technology typically has a lifespan of 5 years so therefore a full refresh is required prior to the end of 2024 to upgrade and to keep the existing maintenance agreement with our support vendor.

The current system was designed to enable Councillors and the public to participate in meetings exclusively in-person. To implement a Council Chamber Hybrid solution, the technology would need to be replaced.

Given the Regional Council direction to assess technology options to allow a hybrid participation by members of Council, a decision is required imminently on whether to redesign the technology to enable hybrid participation to align with the refresh that is required in late 2024.

The hybrid option included in this report is based on Option 4 from the March 7, 2023 Regional Council meeting. This option would ensure there is no degradation in the current functionalities and capabilities for those participating in meetings from within the Chamber or remotely.

To proceed with hybrid participation for members of Regional Council in Council Chambers an additional operational and capital investment is required, as it exceeds the budget set aside for a Council Chamber refresh in the 2024/25 budget and current meeting support capacity. For this to be considered additional staffing will be required to address the current staffing compression that is being experienced due to the increasing technology demands on all meeting types and to deliver the service. Additional staff resources are required to maintain existing technology support for meeting or before any additional service levels can be considered from the Office of the Municipal Clerk.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Estimated total project capital cost for Council Chamber Hybrid solution, which includes a replacement of the existing Audio-Visual hardware & software is \$654,540. There is \$500,000 in the Capital Budget under Capital Project BT35, with the remaining funding to be reallocated from other capital projections based on changing funding priorities.

If the Hybrid option is selected, the outstanding ~\$155,000 in capital funding will be reallocated from an existing capital account within the Business Systems capital budget. A report will be presented to the Audit and Finance Committee outlining from where funds are being removed and seek approval for their reallocation to this initiative.

Operating Budget A743-6706 contains existing funding of \$65,900 to cover the operating costs for ongoing support and maintenance. Estimated support and maintenance costs for Council Chamber Hybrid solution are \$83,480 (net tax), which would result in an annual operating budget shortfall of ~\$17,600 in A743-6706.

The Hybrid solution in addition to the other technology currently used for meetings, is estimated to required two new FTEs as dedicated technical/production resources, is an annual estimated operating cost of \$200,000.

Total operating shortfall is estimated to be \$217,600 annually, and \$108,800 when prorated for fiscal 24/25. Funding for fiscal 24/25 can be accommodated within the proposed 24/25 operating from capital budget but will require a permanent budget lift for fiscal 25/26. In fiscal 25/26, the approximate average residential bill impact is \$0.81.

Hybrid Option - Capital (one-time) Costs:

Category	Costs
Replacement Hardware	\$303,133
Hybrid Specific Hardware	\$139,418
Vendor Implementation Fees	\$52,240
Project Management Services - Implementation	\$102,000
Contingency (Implementation)	\$30,848
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$627,639</b>
Net Tax	\$26,900
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$654,539</b>

Hybrid Option - Annual Operating Costs:

Category	Costs
Annual System Support & Maintenance	\$80,049
Dedicated technical / production resources	\$200,000
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$280,049</b>
Net Tax	\$3,431
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$283,480</b>

**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 and the increased complexity of virtual participation.

The Council Chamber technology requires a refresh prior to the end of 2024 as the technology is reaching end of life and will be outside the maintenance agreement with our support vendor. This project cannot be deferred as it would affect the maintenance agreement.

The technology and staff required to support the technical operations of Regional Council and Committee meetings has expanded exponentially since 2020. Since 2020, the use of Zoom for virtual meetings has been introduced and maintained as a regular feature, the Council Chamber has gone through various iterations to allow for virtual participation of the public, and the HEMDCC Chamber has been upgraded to include the ability to webcast meetings. This technology requires regular testing, maintenance, and upgrades to remain operational for meetings of Council and Committees. Due to the increase, and projected future increase of technology needs and enhancement for meetings of Council, it is no longer sustainable to be supported by existing FTEs in the Clerk’s Office or IT.

**COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

No community engagement was done as part of this report.

**ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS**

No environmental implications were identified.

**ALTERNATIVES**

Regional Council could defeat the motion in which case staff would not pursue a hybrid technology for the Council Chamber at this time.

The required technology refresh would still be pursued and funding for this is included in the 2024/25 capital budget and the two FTEs to support meeting technology would still be pursued in fiscal 2025/26.

**ATTACHMENTS**

None

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A copy of this report can be obtained online at [halifax.ca](http://halifax.ca) or by contacting the Office of the Municipal Clerk at 902.490.4210.

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