



**Municipality of Port Hope**  
56 Queen Street  
Port Hope, ON  
L1A 3Z9

**REPORT TO:** Corporate Services Committee

**FROM:** Brian Gilmer, Director, Corporate Services / Clerk

**SUBJECT:** Council Meeting Format

**DATE:** September 7, 2021

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**RECOMMENDATION:**

That a resolution be presented to Council in support of one of the options below:

1. That all meetings of Council, Committee of the Whole, and Public Meetings under the Planning Act continue to be held virtually without alteration until such a time that further direction is provided by Council.

**(Option 1 – Status Quo)**

or

2. That all meetings of Council, Committee of the Whole, and Public Meetings under the Planning Act continue to be held virtually but in a hybrid format with Members present in the Council Chambers along with the Chief Administrative Officer, Clerk and Deputy Clerk and streamed live to the public with the ability for delegations, staff and the public to participate electronically.

**(Option 2 – Hybrid)**

or

3. That staff be directed to prepare a report for the next meeting of the Committee of the Whole identifying a roadmap to return to in-person meetings that identifies practical timelines, budget estimates, health and safety options, and legislated requirements.

**(Option 3 - In-person)**

**BACKGROUND:**

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic the Municipality has been committed to reducing the impact this pandemic will have on our employees, volunteers and residents. This has been achieved by taking a coordinated and balanced approach that ensures reasonable precautions are taken to:

- protect staff and residents from a health and safety perspective;
- prevent (further) transmission of COVID-19 in our workplace and community;
- maintain continuity of our business operations and critical services; and
- limit unnecessary pressure on our healthcare system and providers

As part of the Municipality's response measures Council has amended the procedural by-law several times throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to enable virtual Council, Committee of the Whole, and public meetings under the Planning Act. All meetings have been held virtually since April 2020. This format has been generally well received and has provided ample opportunity for residents to participate in meetings safely. Advisory Body (committees, working groups, etc.) were paused for a short time during the early stages of the pandemic but resumed virtually in September 2020. The Municipality has continued to deliver services to the general public throughout the pandemic and meeting access and participation has been no exception.

The pandemic continues to impact day to day life and transmission numbers are unfortunately on an upward trajectory at the date of this report but throughout Canada municipalities are beginning to return to some level of 'normal' and many municipal Councils have begun to deliberate what exactly that will mean for meetings. There is no one standard or best practice. Many municipalities have decided to continue to deliver meetings virtually and have committed to reassessing in 2022. Other municipalities have returned to in-person Council meetings and a large percentage have moved to a hybrid of in-person and virtual meetings.

This report is intended to enable Council to begin a discussion about returning to a more traditional manner of facilitating meetings of the Municipality of Port Hope. There has been some informal conversation about options and timelines but to date there is no identified path forward with respect to the question of how meetings are carried out.

This report and its proposed recommendations does not intend to limit the options available for consideration. With such a wide range of approaches it is impossible to identify every option for Council's consideration. Council can amend or alter the options presented as they see fit. The options presented are simply those that staff have given preliminary consideration to and are achievable in a relatively short period of time.

Staff have provided a high-level breakdown of each of the identified options:

### **Option 1 – Status Quo**

The first option for consideration is simply to continue with virtual meetings as they are being delivered today. All meetings of Council, Committee of the Whole, and Public Meetings under the Planning Act would continue to be held electronically without alteration until such a time that further direction is provided by Council.

Potential modifications to this option could include Council identifying a date at which the Municipality will reconsider options for returning to in-person or a hybrid model.

This is the by far the safest method of delivering meetings while the pandemic continues. No changes would be required.

## **Option 2 – Hybrid**

Understanding that there is a general desire to begin transitioning back to a traditional delivery of meetings, Option 2 would be to continue with virtual meetings but have Members back in Council Chambers and deliberating in-person. A number of staff would also be required to be in attendance in person including the Chief Administrative Officer, Clerk, Deputy Clerk and potentially support staff as necessary and determined by the CAO.

The meetings would be streamed live, and members of the public would have the ability to participate virtually much the same as they do currently. The rest of staff and all delegations would continue to participate virtually through the same meeting software utilized since the beginning of the pandemic. Members of the public would continue to participate virtually and continue to be offered the opportunity to ask questions during question period as they have been since meetings transitioned online.

Some administrative and physical controls would be required to ensure that Council and staff are able to meet in this small group safely and in compliance with pandemic health and safety best practices. Adjustments to the audio-visual equipment in Council Chambers would likely be required depending on how the in-person setup is adjusted. Staff would run through mock meetings in advance to ensure a smooth operation going forward but it is anticipated that due to the nature of the hybrid meeting that members would need to adjust to the technical requirements associated with this format. It is worth noting that some municipalities that committed to a hybrid model earlier during the pandemic have abandoned or postponed that move further upon identifying technical challenges.

Potential modifications to this option could include Council identifying a date at which the Municipality will move to the hybrid model if there is a desire to stage or delay this transition. Other options could include identifying specific meeting types that will utilize the hybrid option. For example, through an amendment Council could identify that Public Meetings under the Planning Act continue entirely virtually if there is a desire to hold different types of meetings depending on the format.

This option would commit the Municipality to a transition back to a more traditional model of meeting but would also ensure the general public's continued safety.

Under this option, it is practical to move to a hybrid meeting model by the October 19<sup>th</sup> regular meeting date but the date is dependent upon further technical review.

## **Option 3 – In Person**

The third option for consideration is returning to in-person meetings. This option would see meetings moved back to the Council Chambers with Council, staff, delegations, and the general public in attendance. There are a considerable number of considerations that would need to be made with respect to this option and staff have only given this preliminary review.

Limiting in-person attendance to municipal meetings is a simple concept that can be easily achieved through administrative and physical controls. But, the impact of limiting attendance calls into question as to whether or not the meetings are truly open to the public. Maintaining physical distancing in the chambers with a 2 metre buffer would see capacity drastically reduced. Port Hope has routinely conducted meetings at or near capacity in its recent history.

Public meetings under the Planning Act in particular pose a difficult question about ensuring the participation of the public with this option. Should a public meeting held in a traditional format but with limits on attendance occur and have that attendance exceed the reduced capacity number this could potentially prejudice someone from participating in the planning process and lead to a challenge under planning legislation. A first come first served attendance model at in-person meetings with reduced capacity could also be difficult to manage and not meet the needs of the public.

In-person meetings would continue to be streamed live to the public. The Municipality does not currently have a practical means to facilitate public participation electronically in an effective manner while also having a public audience in attendance in person at the council chambers. Broadcasting to the council chambers speakers for those in attendance and to the live stream at the same time present some additional technological challenges that have not yet been sorted out by staff. Upon direction related to this option, further review of the audio-visual equipment would identify any challenges and be identified in the report from staff.

Potential modifications to this option could include Council identifying a date at which the Municipality will move to the in-person model if there is a desire to delay this transition. Other options could include identifying specific meeting types that will utilize the in-person option. For example, through an amendment Council could identify that only meetings of Council and Committee of the Whole will be held in-person.

Because of the many considerations associated with the in-person option, staff would require time following direction to prepare a report for consideration that outlines practical timelines, budget estimates, health and safety options, and legislated requirements. Staff would work with local health authorities to determine the best path forward and identify to Council what those plans would look like in greater detail. Staff have not given serious consideration to particular aspects of the in-person option including whether or not it is practical for the Municipality to enforce a vaccination requirement for attendees.

This option would have the most associated risk. If members of the public wish to participate in the meeting via question period or a delegation they would be required to attend in person due to current technical limitations. All council members would also have to attend in person under the current audio-visual setup in council chambers.

Under this in-person option, it is practical to produce a report regarding the specifics of such a move by the September 21<sup>st</sup> meeting of the Committee of the Whole. Staff would anticipate meetings could potentially return to a modified in-person model by the November 2<sup>nd</sup> regular meeting date.

As always, with the above options, Council could choose to defer consideration of this report and this question to a later date to be named. Council, as always, could also choose to refer this topic back to staff and seek additional information as they may require.

### **Advisory Bodies**

At this point in time, it is not advisable to alter the format of Advisory Body meetings (as defined by the Committee By-law 05/2021) and staff recommend virtual meetings continue. As the Municipality looks to return to a more traditional meeting delivery a staged approach to resuming all meetings is advisable. It is anticipated that Advisory Body meetings will follow suit with the decision about Council meetings after a period of time to be determined in alignment with staff resources and practical considerations.

### **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

Continuing to deliver meetings virtually under the status quo model will result in no additional expenses. The cost of the software license required to hold virtual meetings is nominal and easily accounted for in the regular operating budget.

The hybrid option would require adjustments to the audio-visual equipment in the council chambers and may require the purchase of additional equipment to facilitate the online element of the meeting. Mock meetings held by staff to work out any potential technical challenges would likely identify further requirements such as head-sets or additional audio equipment to ensure a smooth meeting.

Should the option to return to in-person meetings be selected staff will need to identify all physical controls required and prepare the Council Chambers accordingly. Plexiglas barriers would likely need to be erected in numerous locations. Other considerations under this option may result in additional expenses that have not been identified at this time. Staff members would likely be required to attend meetings to help facilitate the arrival and exit of members of the public and ensure guidelines are being followed.

It is unlikely that the resource implications associated with the options at hand will be a determining factor given the subjectivity of the question. Weighing the factors and seeking a solution that balances public safety with the democratic processes associated with open meeting requirements will ensure a safe and effective start to returning to a new normal.

### **CONCLUSION:**

It is understood that the pandemic has changed the way we do business and will have longstanding impacts on the Municipality. Staff will be considering changes to the procedural by-law in the near future that will enable a certain level of virtual participation for Council members moving forward regardless of how the meetings are conducted in the future.

This report provides for an opportunity for Council to begin considering a change in meeting formats that recognizes that the pandemic continues, but that municipalities across the country are moving to a new normal as restrictions are lifted. Staff have

identified three practical options for consideration. Should the Corporate Services Committee wish to provide a different direction other than the options identified staff that is their prerogative.

Respectfully submitted,

Brian Gilmer,  
Director, Corporate Services / Clerk