ONLINE MUNICIPAL VOTING

The success of businesses in B.C. is directly impacted by the policies of our municipal and provincial governments such as:

- Business tax levels, including income taxes, capital taxes, commodity taxes
- Property tax levels, including the relative proportions to individuals and businesses
- Various regulations that impact the efficiency of doing business in the Province and/or community i.e. employment standards, health and safety standards, environmental standards, insurance regulations

As a Province, we are looking to create a more successful business environment and economy. Measures such as cost reductions, improving efficiency and reducing red tape are measures to facilitate such success. The current voter participation levels in municipal and provincial elections are extremely low and signal very poor engagement of the constituents. Province wide,, in the 2014 municipal elections, turnout according to CivicInfoBC was 33.3%, *hardly a clear representation of public input*. CBC News posted on November 19, 2011 that, "*Municipal voter turnout in BC has dropped to the lowest in Canada*." Overall, statistics from Elections BC show a decline in provincial voter participation from 77.66% in 1983 to 50.99% in 2009 (voter turnout in 2013 was slightly higher at 55.32%).

This low turnout poses the following risks:

- Lack of government accountability to implement policies that positively impact business success
- Implementation of policies that do not represent the will of the majority of constituents, i.e. biased by minority views
- Further voter apathy as voters feel less ability to influence the public policy process

Internet voting is a method that reduces many potential barriers and therefore can positively impact engagement. Internet voting has strong public support1. Other municipalities in Canada have previously conducted municipal Internet voting. For example, for the 2014 municipal election, the City of Kingston introduced remote voting (online and phone) for advanced voting purposes only, and saw a 33% increase in advance voting, leading to a 2.8% increase in voter turnout overall2. This experience demonstrates the desire of Canadian voters to use technology for the elections process. It also suggests that there is potential over time for further gains in voter turnout. Furthermore,in BC, both major political parties have already endorsed the concept by using online voting options for party members in leadership votes since 2011.

Internet voting can provide the following direct and indirect benefits:

- provide easier access to time constrained voters
- reduce overall apathy as voters feel their vote is accurately counted and does in fact have an influence
- allow business owners, particularly sole proprietors, to improve their accessibility to voting
- enables people with disabilities to vote by themselves, easily and in secrecy
- It is expected that e-voting leads to more reliable results since human error is excluded

Internet voting has not been implemented within BC to date because of concerns such as:

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1 Elections Canada has shown considerable support for online voting, as noted in a 2009 report on the matter.

2 City of Kingston: Report to the Administrative Policies Committee (Report Number AP-15-009)

- Internet hacking;
- Technical difficulties; and
- Difficulty in verifying voter identification
- Lack of evidence that internet voting will increase the turnout at the polls

In this day and age of technology, the internet is an accepted method of communicating sensitive and confidential information safely. The business community transacts routinely via the internet with security. Municipalities in Ontario have already demonstrated their ability to design effective and secure systems, and this is constantly improving with audit and verification procedures. In October 2014, about one-quarter of the municipalities in Ontario (98 out of 414) offered internet voting in municipal elections3. Voters could choose, which voting channel they wanted to use. The municipality of Markham has already effectively dealt with voter identification with a system that required login to the system prior to registering. The voters were issued an access code and had to provide their address and date of birth to mitigate this difficulty, similar to applying for a homeowners grant.

There may exists new risks with internet voting, but all systems have risks and generally these risks can be addressed and mitigated over time.

In 2012, the Chief Electoral Officer formed the Independent Panel on Internet Voting following an invitation of the BC Attorney General to examine opportunities and challenges related to the potential implementation of internet-based voting as a channel for provincial and municipal elections in BC4. The panel recommended that the Province not implement internet voting at this time. However, it did conclude "that internet voting has the potential to provide some benefits for administering local government elections and provincial elections in British Columbia, and that the most significant potential benefit of internet voting is increased accessibility and convenience for B.C. voters." Although, current evidence does not consistently demonstrate a significant increase in voter turnout with internet voting, there is not sufficient data to negate the potential positive benefits. In fact, technology adoption has commonly occurred on a bell curve, with limited early adoption before the majority follows. Internet voting is likely to follow the same model, provided that good communications tools are in place to support the success of early adopters. With regards to security, the issues can be overcome with a focus on secrecy of the vote, verifiability, and voter authentication.

The Panel's report stated that "weighing the benefits and challenges to implementing internet voting in specific circumstances is the role of policymakers." The Chamber believes that the panel did not take a long term view in its report. The panel also provided useful recommendations on how the Province can implement internet voting:

- Take a province-wide coordinated approach to internet voting.
- Establish an independent technical committee to evaluate internet voting systems and support jurisdictions that wish to implement approved systems.
- Evaluate any internet voting system against the principles established by the panel (which includes Accessibility, Ballot anonymity, Individual and independent verifiability, Non-reliance on trustworthiness of the voter's device(s), One vote per voter, Only count votes from eligible voters, Process validation and transparency, Service availability, and Voter authentication and authorization).

If we are committed to reduction of red tape and generating efficiencies, on-line voting can be an effective tool to facilitate such success. By maintaining the current legislation and processes under

3 According to Ace Project: http://aceproject.org/ace-en/focus/e-voting/e-voting-opportunities
4 http://www.internetvotingpanel.ca/docs/recommendations-report.pdf

Elections BC we are effectively avoiding the opportunities to eliminate unnecessary labor costs and streamline the overall voting timeline process (from ballot creation to completion of count verification and reporting). This could save a significant amount of tax dollars and public resources.

Conclusion
The potential benefits of internet voting can reduce barriers to access and positively align the voting system with other preferred technology increasingly being used by a large component of the population.

THE CHAMBER RECOMMENDS

That the Provincial Government:

1. commence a plan to implement a province wide approach to an electronic ballot system for the 2018 municipal elections;

2. amend the appropriate legislation to allow for the option of electronic ballots in municipal elections; and

3. establish an independent technical committee to evaluate internet voting systems to ensure the Elections BC criteria are met (i.e. accessibility, Ballot anonymity, Individual and independent verifiability, Non-reliance on trustworthiness of the voter's device(s), One vote per voter, Only count votes from eligible voters, Process validation and transparency, Service availability, and Voter authentication and authorization)