Standard Operating Procedure

Vote by Mail

Department: City Clerk's Office

Division: ELE - Elections

SOP Number: 023

Effective Date: January 1, 2022

Last Revision Date: May 19, 2026

Purpose

To establish procedures for the use of vote by mail as an alternative voting method consistent with the principles and requirements of the Municipal Elections Act (MEA), 1996.

Application

This procedure applies to all eligible electors, candidates, scrutineers and election officials.

Procedure

In accordance with Sections 42 (1) and 42 (3) of the Act the Council of the City of Guelph passed By-law (2024)-20952 on June 25, 2024, which authorizes the use of vote by mail for the 2026 Municipal Election.

Requesting a vote by mail kit

An eligible elector may only vote once in the City of Guelph, regardless of the number of properties they own, lease or rent. Eligible electors who own, lease or rent more than one property and reside in Guelph must vote where they reside.

To be eligible to vote by mail, an elector must be:

- On the voters' list; or
- Able to apply to add themselves or update their information on the voters' list and provide a copy of acceptable identification. Additions or updates must be made prior to requesting a vote by mail kit.

A vote by mail kit can be requested from September 1, 2026, at 8:30AM to October 9, 2026, at 4:00PM by completing a registration on the municipal election webpage.

Only the elector or an individual authorized by the elector may request to vote by mail. Candidates and third party advertisers cannot make requests or register on behalf of electors.

The elector will first be required to use the online voters' list tool to verify that they are on the voters' list.

The elector is required to upload a scan or photo of acceptable identification, so election officials can verify they are on the voters' list, before issuing the elector a ballot through a Vote by Mail kit.

If found on the voters' list and all elector details are correct, the elector's request will be recorded and placed in the vote by mail request queue for fulfillment by an election official.

If not found on the voters' list, or if found on the voters' list but with incorrect details, the elector will be:

1. Directed to add or update their information on the voters' list;
2. Required to upload a scan or photo of acceptable identification; and
3. Placed in the voters' list amendment queue for review and approval by an election official.
4. Once the amendment to the voters list is approved, automatically placed in the vote by mail request queue for approval.

Processing a vote by mail registration

Once the registration period for vote by mail kits has begun on September 1st, 2026, an election official will review the voter's list amendment and vote by mail request queues daily.

1. If a request is complete and uploaded identification is acceptable, an election official will approve the amendment request and place the elector in the vote by mail request queue. Any uploaded identification will be automatically deleted after the request is approved.
2. If a request is incomplete, identification is illegible, not uploaded or it is not a piece of acceptable identification, the election official will deny the amendment request. The election official will contact the elector to inform them of the reason for the denial and explain what needs to be corrected before the elector can restart the process.

The election official who approves a vote by mail request will add a note for each approved elector stating "registered to vote by mail" on the voter's list.

Once the registration period to vote by mail closes on October 9th, 2026, the online registration form will no longer be available, and no new requests will be accepted.

Voting by mail

Each vote by mail kit will contain:

- A ballot
- Instructions for returning the ballot, with a detachable declaration form, which contains the City of Guelph return address and the pre-paid postage label, that the elector must sign and return with their marked ballot
- A blank secrecy envelope, for inserting the marked ballot
- An outer return envelope, with windows for inserting the declaration form with pre-paid postage, and the sealed secrecy envelope

To vote, the elector will:

1. Mark the ballot indicating their preferred candidates.
2. Sign the declaration form.
3. Place the marked ballot in the blank secrecy envelope and seal the envelope.
4. Place the sealed secrecy envelope into the outer envelope
5. Place the signed declaration in the front of the return envelope, so the address and postage are visible through the envelope window
6. Seal the outer envelope and return the kit to the City of Guelph before the deadline

Re-issuing a vote by mail kit

Election officials may re-issue a vote by mail kit if an elector contacts the City Clerk's Office indicating that they have not received their kit within a reasonable time frame after it is mailed out.

Before a vote by mail kit is re-issued, an election official will verify that no ballot had been received by the elector and that they are not struck off the voters' list.

Re-issued kits may be mailed or picked up at City Hall by the elector.

Return of vote by mail kits

The elector will return their completed, pre-paid mail-in voting package by:

1. Placing the kit in any Canada Post mailbox for receipt by election officials; or
2. Dropping off their package at the ServiceGuelph counter during business hours by; or
3. Dropping off their package in a secure drop boxed at an Advanced Voting location; or
4. Placing the package in a secure drop box located outside the front of City Hall.

It is the electors' responsibility to ensure that their vote by mail kit is received by election officials no later than 8:00 p.m. on October 26, 2026. Any kits received after this cut-off will not be opened or tabulated. They will be stored separately in a box labelled "Late VBM Kits".

Kits must be received by election officials at City Hall. Kits will not be accepted if they are dropped off at an advanced voting day location or any other City facility.

Only the elector or an individual authorized by the elector may return a completed vote by mail kit. Candidates and third party advertisers cannot collect or return completed vote by mail kits on behalf of electors.

Vote by mail kits returned by mail will be delivered by Canada Post to the City Clerk's Office, Guelph City Hall at 1 Carden Street, Guelph ON.

Election officials will collect returned vote by mail kits that have been deposited into the secure drop box in front of City Hall on a daily basis during business hours. They will be delivered to City Clerk's Office staff and stored in a secure location.

Election officials will open vote by mail kits as they are received to verify that they are complete and are ready for tabulation. Kits will be opened in the presence of at least one other election official as a witness.

1. If the declaration form is missing or unsigned, all items will be returned to the outer envelope and the package will be placed in a box labelled "Rejected – Unsigned Ballot Declaration" and securely stored. The ballot will not be tabulated.
2. If the declaration form is signed, it will be returned to the original outer envelope with the sealed secrecy envelope and placed in a ballot box labelled "Approved Vote by Mail Kits to be Tabulated" and securely stored until they are fed through the vote tabulator.
3. Using the elector barcode on the declaration form, the election official will find the elector on the voter's list.
4. If the elector has not already been marked as having voted, the election official will now strike the elector off the list and mark that they have voted.
5. If the elector has already been marked as having voted, the designated election official will write "Rejected – Marked Voted" on the outer envelope, and sign and date it. The vote by mail kit will be placed in a box labelled "Rejected Mail-In Ballots" and securely stored. The ballot will not be tabulated.
6. If the marked ballot is found to have been left loose in the outer envelope instead of having been sealed in a separate secrecy envelope, the election official will place the ballot in a new secrecy envelope.

The election official will update the note on the voters' list for each elector to indicate "vote by mail kit received".

Processing and tabulating returned vote by mail kits

The City Clerk will pre-determine dates, times and locations for vote by mail ballots to be tabulated.

Candidates and scrutineers are permitted to attend the tabulation of the vote by mail ballots. The City Clerk will provide advance notice to candidates of the scheduled times and the location.

Election officials will separate the declaration forms, open the sealed secrecy envelopes and tabulate the ballots following these steps:

1. Election officials will retrieve the “Approved Vote by Mail Kits to be Tabulated” box from secure storage. They will remove all contents from the outer envelopes. The declaration forms will be placed in a file folder, and the sealed secrecy envelopes will be placed in a box labelled "Vote by Mail Ballots".
2. A separate team of designated election officials will retrieve the box labelled "Vote by Mail Ballots" and remove the ballots from the secrecy envelopes and then run the ballots through a vote tabulator one at a time. Ballots will be fed face down into the tabulator.
3. Should a vote tabulator reject a ballot during the tabulation process, it will be re-fed through the tabulator a second time. If the tabulator rejects the ballot again, the ballot will be placed in a box labelled “For Adjudication”.

Adjudication of ballots

An election official will remove ballots from the “For Adjudication” box for examination.

1. If the election official concludes that the elector intent is unclear, or if the ballot is unmarked, known as a blank ballot, or over-voted, the ballot will be re-fed into the tabulator and will be counted as marked. The ballot will be tabulated but a blank or over-voted office will not be counted.
2. If the election official concludes that elector intent is clear, they will prepare a replacement ballot in full view of any candidates or scrutineers, mark the ballot in accordance with their interpretation of the elector’s intent, and initial the replacement ballot.
3. The original and replacement ballots will be displayed side-by-side for candidate and scrutineer inspection.
4. The original ballot will be placed in a box labelled “Adjudicated Ballots – Original” and the replacement ballot will be fed through the tabulator.

If a candidate or scrutineer objects to the designated election official’s interpretation of elector intent, the City Clerk or designate, if required, will:

1. Examine the ballot and make the final determination of elector intent.
2. Write “candidate or scrutineer objection” on the back of the original ballot and, if necessary, the replacement ballot.
3. Continue with the tabulation process.

When all ballots have been fed through the vote tabulator, all tabulators, memory cards, ballots, and other election supplies will be returned to secure storage.

The vote by mail results will not be accessed or generated until after the close of voting on election day. The mail-in voting results will be incorporated into the City's results system and published with the rest of the election results.

Storage and security

All tabulators, memory cards, ballots, vote by mail kits and election supplies will be securely stored at the designated location upon arrival. They will be secured in the same way before and after use in tabulation in line with Act requirements for the keeping of election records.

Retention of election documents

The City Clerk will securely store ballots, documents and related materials and retain them in the same manner as is provided for in the Act for the keeping of election records.

Recounts

If a recount is held, the votes will be counted in the same manner as the votes were initially counted or in accordance with recount requirements under the Act.

Definitions

Acceptable identification means identification showing name and qualifying address to vote as listed in Ontario Regulation 304/13: Voter Identification

Act means the Municipal Elections Act, 1996, S.O. c 32 as amended.

Advanced voting period means the period of voting prior to voting day in accordance with the Act.

Ballot means a ballot prepared under subsections 41(1), 41(2) and 41(6) of the Act.

Candidate means a person who has been nominated under section 33 of the Act.

City Clerk means the Clerk of the municipality, responsible for conducting election duties as outlined in the Act.

Election official means any individual appointed by the City Clerk, where powers and duties in relation to an election are delegated.

Election webpage means the 2026 Municipal Election webpage www.guelph.ca/vote.

Elector means a person who meets the qualifications as determined under the Act and appears on the voters' list or is added to the list during the revision period.

Memory card means a removable device where all tabulated ballot totals are stored.

Vote by mail kit means the package containing a ballot, instructions for returning the ballot, the declaration form, a blank secrecy envelope and an addressed outer envelope with pre-paid postage.

Vote tabulator means a machine that digitally scans the ballots to read the votes and tabulate results on a memory card.

Election Day means the day on which the final votes will be taken in accordance with Section 5 of the Act. This Municipal Election voting day is October 26, 2026.

Resources

Municipal Elections Act, 1996.