Region of Peel
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REPORT TITLE: **Technology Support for Council Chambers**

FROM: Gary Kent, CPA, CGA, ICD.D, Chief Financial Officer and Commissioner of Corporate Services

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RECOMMENDATION

1. **That staff proceed to upgrade technology support for the Council Chambers as described in the report of the Chief Financial Officer and Commissioner of Corporate Services, listed on the May 26, 2022 Regional Council agenda titled "Technology Support for Council Chambers"; and**

2. **That the hiring of four additional staff in the IT Operations division in the amount of $154,000 in 2022, funded with a draw from the Tax Rate Stabilization Reserve, be approved to provide technology support as described in the subject report.**

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

- The technology in the Council Chambers is at the end of its useful life and needs to be replaced.
- The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to improve our existing Council Chambers technology and supporting governance structure. As a result of the convenience that electronic meetings provide, there is likely to be a preference by some Council members and members of the public to participate in Council and Committee meetings virtually post pandemic.
- Technology has become a significant issue in relation to Council Chambers. There have been several issues with the current technology which affected the Chamber audio, video and live streaming functionality and caused disruptions during Council and Committee meetings.
- A scan of Mississauga, Brampton and Caledon's Council Chamber structures was completed. The preferred model for Peel is a dedicated team to strategically plan, manage and operate Council Chambers.
- The Peel Council Chambers team would consist of dedicated staff from IT (four) who have, or will have, in-depth knowledge of the overall technology environment in the Council Chambers and its use together with a Council Chambers Specialist from Clerk's who has experience with Council and committee procedures and meeting protocols.
- The two full-time positions and two contract positions will be hired on a contract basis in 2022 and included in the 2023 Budget for Council's consideration.

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DISCUSSION

1. **Background**

    In July 2020 the *Municipal Act, 2001,* was amended to permit electronic participation, in open and closed meetings outside of an emergency. Since March 2020, members Council and the public have participated in Council and Committee meetings virtually or through a hybrid model (a mix of virtual and in person attendance).

    The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to improve our existing Council Chambers technology and supporting governance structure. Most of the audio-visual equipment, voting and related technology systems in the Council Chambers were designed for in person attendance but were quickly modified to permit electronic participation during the pandemic when remote meetings became a necessity. As a result of the convenience that electronic meetings provide, there is likely to be a preference by some Council members and members of the public to participate in Council and Committee meetings virtually post pandemic. The Council Chambers and its technology are also used by the Peel Police Services Board for its meetings.

2. **Existing Council Chambers Technology Support**

    Currently the Council Chambers technology is supported by staff from Communications (Audio/Visual), Clerks (principal user) and IT (chambers technology).

    There is no in-house expertise or dedicated resources as it relates to the Council Chamber technology or on what may be needed to operationally sustain the existing technology, anticipate and resolve issues when they occur, and monitor new and emerging trends in municipal meeting environments.

    In October of 2020, the vendor that assisted with Council Chambers capital initiatives, as well as regular operations of the technology system and who designed and installed several technology components and equipment in the chambers, declared bankruptcy. The quick departure of the vendor created other challenges in that they held the source code for some of the systems, expertise and other documentation needed to properly manage the existing technology. The current vendor was secured quickly to replicate the essentials and to keep the existing system running, which has been proven to be inefficient.

3. **Issues with the Current Council Chamber Technology**

    There have been several issues with the current technology which affected the Chambers' audio, video, and live streaming functionality and caused disruptions during Council and Committee meetings. These issues also affected the ability to deliver a seamless meeting experience for members of Council and staff.

    Some of the existing technology is at or near end of life. A comprehensive assessment is needed to ensure this technology is replaced to prevent meeting interruptions. Having appropriate technology ensures that the meetings remain open and accessible to the members of the public to connect and participate in Council/Committee meetings, which is a legislated requirement.

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Expertise is required to find and implement permanent technology solutions for managing Council and Committee meetings in the virtual and/or hybrid scenario. Significant areas of complexity need to be addressed as meetings progress to a hybrid model, including voting (having the existing Council Chamber technology interface with those attending virtually); utilizing the request to speak feature (how to facilitate requests to speak in the order in which they are received when the requests are being placed using two different systems, in chambers vs. remotely) and having a dependable live stream as the public will most likely continue to "attend" via the livestream given the flexibility it provides.

The evolution of management of Council meetings through technology has been exponential over the past decade and there continues to be advances made to keep up with the changing nature of meeting management and the expectations of Members of Council in the services we provide through technology. Expertise is needed to evolve and keep pace with the ever-changing technology landscape.

A consultant will be retained to complete a comprehensive assessment of the current technology, its expected life cycle and to provide recommendations to the Director of IT Operations to address any technology needs. The cost of the assessment will be accommodated from within the existing IT Operations budget. The assessment is expected to be completed by July 2022 and would also assess the corporation's Audio Visual (AV) needs.

4. **Proposed Direction**

a) **Preferred Model- Dedicated Council Chambers Team**

A scan was completed of the Cities of Mississauga and Brampton and the Town of Caledon to determine their management model for Council Chambers. All three local municipalities have dedicated in-house IT and Audio-Visual teams that work collaboratively to support, operate, maintain, and manage the AV systems and other technology in the Council Chambers. The teams also assist with designing, evaluating, and upgrading the technology, where required. It was determined that the teams at the local municipalities do not exclusively support Council Chambers, but Council Chambers is the priority, and the teams provide dedicated support for Council and Committee meetings. After reviewing the models of the local municipalities, the preferred model for Peel is a dedicated team of resources who can effectively plan, manage, and operate Council Chambers technology.

The Peel Council Chambers Team would consist of a member with a background in council and committee procedures and meeting protocols from Clerk's. The Team would also include four dedicated staff with technological, audio visual and application expertise for a total five-person team. The Team would be responsible for integrating the various components (i.e. eScribe, meeting software, cameras, recording, streaming) for their intended use of meeting management, operating the Council Chambers technology, maintaining and upgrading the technology as required for state of good repair and meeting ongoing and emerging needs in a strategic and proactive manner.

Administratively, one member of the Team would reside in the Clerk's division and the balance of the Team would reside in the IT Operations division.

The Full Time Equivalent (FTE) complement for the Council Chambers Specialist/member from Clerk's could be facilitated from existing Clerk's division

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complement based on a reorganization of roles and responsibilities and as such, there is no budgetary impact for that position. Currently IT Operations only supports the technology minimally using three staff from existing FTE that have other responsibilities and is impacting service delivery. The positions from IT would therefore require additional budget and complement. Staff propose starting with two Full Time and two Contract positions, with performance and resource requirements to be assessed after one full year of operation.

An important function of the dedicated Team is to be a liaison with the local municipal teams. Staff have worked with the local municipal teams during COVID to provide coordinated technical support to the Members of Council, especially during meetings. Having coordinated technology, proactive engagement for future needs and consistent user experience is important to meet the needs and expectations of Members of Council.

Establishing a Council Chambers Team will ensure that the Region has the necessary inhouse expertise to operate and maintain Council chamber technology with minimal vendor requirements. The value of inhouse expertise includes not just a potential cost savings, but also the added benefit of not being dependent on third parties and vulnerable to their business models. Further, having inhouse expertise allows for: proper life cycle planning for the technology; development and maintenance of policies relating to Council Chambers; sustainability of operations and management of Council Chambers; and timeliness of attention/response to Council Chambers issues (particularly important preparing for and during Council/Committee meetings).

The goal would be to have the Team recruited by September 2022, to ensure that they are trained and ready to provide support prior to the commencement of the new term of Council. A new technology solution would be anticipated to be implemented in the summer of 2023 unless we engage an expedited process.

b) **Use of Vendors**

Vendors may be required for certain services, but the goal is sufficient inhouse expertise to reduce the dependency on vendors. Each of the local municipalities also utilize Vendors for limited purposes. There will also be the requirement of subscription/licences fees for some of the technology or services.

RISK CONSIDERATIONS

Beyond the dollars and cents is the lost opportunities and reputational risk when the technology fails or requires immediate attention, and we are unable to meet the intended use of the Council Chambers. Being proactive with responding to emerging and anticipated needs and expectations will be important for an efficient and effectively run Council Chambers. Having a sustainable resourcing model with expertise and policies in place will significantly reduce the risks of an unmanaged Council Chambers.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The FTE complement for the Council Chambers Specialist/member from Clerks will be facilitated from existing Clerk's division complement based on a reorganization of roles and responsibilities and as such, there is no budgetary impact for that position.

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The four new positions in IT are estimated to have an annual budget impact of up to approximately $460,000. This amount will be partially offset by the annual cost currently paid to the AV vendor of approximately $25,000.

For 2022, the cost for the four staff from September to December will be approximately $154,000 and is proposed to be funded from the Tax Rate Stabilization Reserve.

For the additional IT positions, staff will be proposing two full-time and two contract positions through the 2023 Budget for Council's consideration and will assess the two contract positions after one full year of operation.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need to improve our existing Council Chambers technology and supporting structure. The proposed Council Chambers model will ensure Peel has a reliable, properly designed, installed, operated, and managed Council Chambers. The recommended model will also ensure consistency with the local municipalities and the forward thinking and expertise required to react to changes in legislation and technology.

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