

TOWN OF SHREWSBURY MASSACHUSETTS



REPORT OF THE TOWN MEETING ELECTRONIC VOTING STUDY COMMITTEE April, 2019

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BACKGROUND

As approved by Town Meeting on May 21, 2018 (Article 15), the Electronic Voting Study Committee (EVSC) has been tasked with studying the viability, cost, and applicability of using electronic voting for Town Meetings.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The committee was tasked with making a full review of the electronic voting process. In doing so, the committee reviewed how other communities used this technology, solicited information from vendors and online sources, and conducted several in-depth presentations on the specific capabilities of three of the top vendors currently being used in the Commonwealth: Voatz, Options Technologies (OTI), and Padgett Communications (PCI).

Each system was reviewed using several criteria; viability, capability, ease of use, functionality, and cost. Although not choosing a technology per se, the committee still wanted to make a comparative analysis of the value of each system. Each of the presentations highlighted potential benefits to the voting process. In the final assessment, the committee concluded that the benefits of such a system do not justify the cost at this time. The technology continues to evolve and the committee recommends revisiting the implementation of electronic voting at a future date.

SUMMARY OF COMMITTEE WORK

- convened 8 times from October 25, 2018 through April 4, 2019
- studied Electronic Voting Study Committee reports and supporting materials of other Massachusetts Town Meetings
- consulted three electronic voting vendors to obtain functionality, security, and pricing information (PCI, Voatz, OTI)
- visited Acton Town Meeting to observe electronic voting
- explored benefits and costs for various methods of using electronic voting in Shrewsbury's Town Meeting

CONSIDERATIONS

Accountability to Voters (primary benefit)

Of the benefits offered by electronic voting, one of the most significant is voter accountability. Our committee concluded that making recorded votes available to Town Meeting members and all citizens is a benefit.

An electronic voting system has the ability to show immediate voting results, roll-call information, and attendance at the meeting from a central screen. These results can then be published on the Town Website for reference.

Reduction in Voting Time (not a factor)

The committee considered the ability of electronic voting to reduce the time required at town meeting. Given that Shrewsbury is a representative Town Meeting, and the majority of votes taken are voice votes, the committee concluded that electronic voting would not provide any material time savings.

Accuracy (not a factor)

The committee concluded that electronic voting could provide greater accuracy, but not significantly more accuracy than our current process. Standing votes are used effectively at Town Meetings when the accuracy of a voice vote is questioned.

Protection Against Unauthorized Voting (not a factor)

Electronic voting systems employ uniquely identified handsets to enter votes and other protections to prevent unauthorized use. The committee concluded that electronic voting would not affect unauthorized voting either way.

Cost (primary concern)

Every department has a reliance on technology to be more efficient and to keep the overall cost of government operations down. Whenever a department is considering a technological solution, the benefits of that system must be weighed against its cost. One potential model of electronic voting would carry an estimated \$20,000/year price tag (more if we have more meetings that year).

The committee concluded that at this time, the benefits of an electronic voting system do not outweigh the cost, particularly in light of other technology requests in the upcoming budget for town departments, public safety and the school system. Current budget constraints can not support justifying an electronic voting system this year.

Acceptance (not a factor)

The committee acknowledged that there may be different levels of comfort with technology among Town Meeting Members, but concluded that overall acceptance would not be a factor.

Impact to Town Staff (a factor to consider)

The committee was concerned that electronic voting may negatively impact department operations. The committee determined that a leasing model could address this concern, as support and maintenance is often covered in this model. Impact to town staff and resources must be considered in any final determination.

ADA Compliance (a factor to consider)

The committee wanted to ensure that any electronic voting system considered must be in ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliance. During the evaluation process the committee found no immediate concerns, but ADA compliance must be a factor in any future consideration.

Dependence on Outside Vendor (a factor to consider)

The committee reviewed both purchase and lease options for an electronic voting system. In either model, there is a concern about dependency on an outside vendor for scheduling, training and operational support. Each of the vendors consulted were confident in their availability and gave examples from other communities. The committee concluded that over dependence on any outside vendor should be mitigated in any future consideration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Committee recommends that the Town does NOT pursue an electronic voting system at this time.
2. The committee recommends that the Town reconsider electronic voting in the future.
3. If an electronic voting system is considered in the future, the committee recommends having a pilot session at a Town Meeting to further evaluate the technology.
4. If a pilot of an electronic voting system is considered, the committee recommends a survey be sent to Town Meeting Members after the pilot for feedback.

CONCLUSION

Electronic voting is being used in several Massachusetts communities. These systems provide the potential benefits of accountability and efficiency. Given the Town's current budget climate, and with competing priorities among all departments, the committee concluded that the benefits of an electronic voting system do not justify the costs.