

**From:** "Johnston, Sadhu" <Sadhu.Johnston@vancouver.ca>

**To:** "Direct to Mayor and Council - DL"

**CC:** "City Manager's Correspondence Group - DL"  
"Penney, Tina" <Tina.Penney@vancouver.ca>

**Date:** 6/2/2020 3:25:02 PM

**Subject:** Memo: e-Petition: An Approach to Improving Resident Participation

**Attachments:** Electronic Petitions Memo.pdf

Dear Mayor and Council,

Attached is a memo from the Acting City Clerk, Rosemary Hagiwara, on e-petition as an approach to improving resident participation.

At the December 19, 2018, Standing Committee on Policies and Strategic Priorities meeting, Council instructed staff to explore the use of technology for improving participation in civic affairs including the use of electronic petitioning.

- This memo provides a review of current e-petition programs in six jurisdictions.
- It includes an analysis of the various systems and the costs and strategies for implementation.
- It includes a benefit/drawback analysis.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Tina Penney at 604.829.99726 or at [tina.penney@vancouver.ca](mailto:tina.penney@vancouver.ca)

Best,  
Sadhu

**Sadhu Aufochs Johnston** | City Manager  
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Pronouns: he, him, his



*The City of Vancouver acknowledges that it is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh peoples.*

VanRIMS No.: 08-2000-01

## MEMORANDUM

June 1, 2020

TO: Mayor and Council

CC: Sadhu Johnston, City Manager  
Paul Mochrie, Deputy City Manager  
Karen Levitt, Deputy City Manager  
Lynda Graves, Administration Services Manager, City Manager's Office  
Rena Kendall-Craden, Civic Engagement and Communications Director  
Anita Zaenker, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office  
Neil Monckton, Chief of Staff, Mayor's Office  
Alvin Singh, Communications Director, Mayor's Office  
Tina Penney, Deputy City Clerk

FROM: Rosemary Hagiwara, Acting City Clerk

SUBJECT: Electronic Petitions - An Approach to Improving Resident Participation

At the December 19, 2018, Standing Committee on Policies and Strategic Priorities meeting, Council instructed staff to explore the use of technology for improving participation in civic affairs including the use of electronic petitioning.

### **SUMMARY**

The purpose of this memo is to provide a review of current e-petition programs in six jurisdictions, including an analysis of the various systems and the costs and strategies for implementation. As a result of COVID-19 pandemic, other technology options were implemented to enable virtual meetings allowing the public to participate at council meetings and public hearings. These options will likely continue post-COVID.

The six jurisdictions reviewed are:

- New Zealand Parliament,
- UK Parliament,
- Quebec National Assembly,
- Canadian Parliament,
- Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly, and
- City of Wellington,

## **BACKGROUND**

This memo will focus solely on examining the feasibility of electronic petitions. Other parts of the December 19th motion are being or have been dealt with in isolation of this electronic petitioning part.

### ***Current Petitioning Procedure***

The City of Vancouver receives petitions signed by residents and these in turn are provided to Council for their information. Currently, these informal petitions are considered a form of correspondence, in that they are used to comment and/or communicate to Council.

However, formal petitioning for property owners is provided for under Section 506 of the Vancouver Charter. This legislation establishes petitioning thresholds (that is, a certain percentage of owners and a certain percentage of property value must be achieved before Council can consider the petition). This present legislation may be helpful in establishing thresholds in the implementation of electronic petitioning, should Council decide to do so.

## **DEFINITIONS**

An e-petition is an electronic document that addresses a specific issue of public concern in a formalized manner. Unlike informal petitions, which are received as correspondence, a formalized e-petition is usually sponsored by an elected official, has a minimum signature threshold, and is debated formally by the governing body rather than simply received for information. For example, an e-petition that is submitted to a municipal government may call for more budget allocation for a proactive and aggressive city-wide street and sidewalk upgrade program.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Interviews were conducted with representatives from the six jurisdictions mentioned above to understand how their respective e-petition programs were implemented:

- Alyson Groves – Parliamentary Officer, Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, New Zealand Parliament.
- Ben Sneddon – Clerk, Petitions Committee, United Kingdom.
- François Arsenault – Director General, Parliamentary Affairs, Québec National Assembly.
- Jean-Philippe Brochu – Deputy Principal Clerk, Parliamentary Information Directorate, Canadian House of Commons.
- Cyrus Frear – Senior Democracy Advisor, Governance, Wellington, New Zealand City Council.
- Danielle Mager – Manager, Public Affairs and Communications, Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly.

Interviews were also conducted within the City of Vancouver: the Office of the City Clerk, the Office of the Chief Information Officer, and the Communications Department. Additionally, research findings and interviews from Ottawa's PROC (Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs) report on electronic petitions are used throughout this report. These jurisdictions were selected for interviews as they are quoted in the PROC report and seemed open to questions. This list is a select sample and is not exhaustive.

### ***E-PETITIONS AS A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT TOOL***

E-petitions are one approach among many to civic engagement. While no feedback system will increase engagement across all of the city's demographics, e-petitions will make public contributions to Council decision-making more inclusive and accessible than traditional petitioning strategies, provided they are promoted alongside educational tools to guide users through the process. As discussed later in this memo, an e-petition communications plan would be needed to be of value in developing and implementing a public education strategy.

In our summary of the potential drawbacks of e-petitions (below), we noted that other jurisdictions have indicated that the success of an e-petition system is partially contingent upon ensuring the public is aware of how to use it effectively and what to expect from it.

### ***E-PETITIONING MODELS***

This research into six jurisdictions presented five e-petition models that may be useful as the City of Vancouver considers e-petitions. They are all alike, but vary slightly in terms of process and signature thresholds. After the description of these models, tables are provided for ease of reference and comparison.

#### **MODEL ONE (New Zealand Parliament)**

- Individuals as well as organizations can petition Parliament.
- Each submitted petition is checked by the Office of the Clerk to make sure it follows the rules of Parliament.
- Once it is approved, it is posted on the petitions website and opened for signatures. The signature stage is created to give residents the ability to sign petitions, but only one signature is needed.
- Next, the petition must be sponsored by an MP. Once a petition has approval from an MP, it is sent to a select committee which will write a report, suggest recommendations, and then provide it to the house to be debated.

#### **MODEL TWO (UK Parliament)**

- There is a five-signature threshold before the petition can be sent to the Petitions Committee for moderation.
- The Committee either accepts, rejects, or proposes changes to it. If accepted, it is posted on the petitions website and will be open to the public for signatures.
- At 10,000 signatures the petitioner receives a response and at 100,000 signatures it is considered for a three-hour debate in Parliament (set in a reserved slot on Mondays in Westminster Hall so as not to interrupt normal meetings).

- In the event that a petition receives less than 10,000 signatures no further actions takes place leaving the petitioners nowhere.

### **MODEL THREE (Québec National Assembly)**

- To start an e-petition, a petitioner has to secure a Member of National Assembly (MNA) who will present the petition to the Assembly.
- The MNA then sends a notice to the Secretary General of the Assembly stating that he or she intends to present an e-petition.
- Within seven days after the notice is received, the Speaker rules on whether the petition is in order and compliant. If the petition is in order, it is posted on the Assembly website and opened for signatures.
- The number of signatures collected is automatically updated by the Assembly until the end of the signing period.
- The MNA who sponsors the petition must present it at one of the first three Assembly sittings after the date on which the signing period ends.

### **MODEL FOUR (Canadian Parliament)**

- There is a five-signature threshold before an MP can sponsor the petition.
- Once an MP signs off on it, the petition is reviewed by the Clerk of Petitions. Only if the petition passes both of these steps is it opened for public signatures.
- The requirement for MP sponsorship establishes concrete commitment between the petitioner and the elected official, who will lead and advance the petition to its next steps.
- If it receives the minimum 500 required signatures, it is certified by the Clerk of Petitions and then presented to the House.

### **MODEL FIVE (City of Wellington, New Zealand)**

- The system used in Wellington is similar to the UK system. It has been included here because it is a municipal system. The others are either federal or provincial.
- Once an e-petition is submitted, with a threshold of at least one signature and agreement from an elected official to sponsor it, staff will process it through a preapproved verification policy.
- If it is verifiable, it will be posted and opened for signatures.
- After the petition has closed, it will be presented together with a staff report to a committee that will respond and possibly make recommendation to act upon it.

## **SUMMARY**

**Table 1: Signatures and Thresholds**

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Signature threshold for approval</b>	<b>Screened by government prior to publication</b>	<b>Signature threshold for government response</b>	<b>Support from Elected Official required</b>
New Zealand Parliament	1	Office of the Clerk verifies.	1 for Presentation	Yes.
UK Parliament	5	Reviewed by Petitions Committee for	10,000 for response 100,000 for	No.

		moderation.	debate	
Quebec National Assembly	1	Speaker rules if petition is in order.	1	Yes.
Canadian Parliament	5	MP sponsors; Clerk verifies	500 for Presentation	Yes.
Municipality of Wellington	1	Checked by Council staff.	1 for Presentation	No.

### **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

The following figures are separated into upfront and ongoing costs of a system and resources. Implementation costs of petitions system vary and are discussed in more detail under “Implementing E-Petitions: Technology Options” below.

**Table 2: Project Implementation Costs**

<b>Government</b>	<b>System Type</b>	<b>Cost of System</b>	<b>Ongoing Costs</b>
New Zealand Parliament	Built in-house	\$381,000	One full-time staff plus upkeep and tech support
UK Parliament	Built in-house using a pre-existing platform (GitHub)	\$137,000	Approx. \$68,000 per year; plus staffing supports. Tech. and upkeep are additional
Québec National Assembly	Built in-house	Information not available	Technology fixes, upkeep and a full-time Clerk
Canadian Parliament	Built in-house	\$100,000 - \$200,000 (estimated)	One full-time clerk. Upkeep and tech support identified est. 30,000 annually.
City of Wellington	Built in-house	Information not available	One Petitions Officer, upkeep and tech. support.

### **IMPLEMENTING E-PETITIONS: TECHNOLOGY OPTIONS**

There are three main e-petition implementation options employed by the jurisdictions we interviewed. While the table above reveals how some of these options are used, below is a general outline of potential cost implications for each. If Council directs staff to pursue this possibility, these technology options and their associated costs can be more closely examined.

- **Low cost option:** *A third party system created to the jurisdiction’s specifications.* While this option was the more affordable one in the cases studied, it also proved to be the riskier option due to the unreliability on the part of the third-party provider, as was the case evidenced by the NWT. That third party provider

breached their contract and withdrew their services leaving no immediate option to NWT to continue with e-petition activities.

- **Medium cost option:** *An in-house system that is built from the ground up not utilizing any translation features.* While this would be less expensive than the option below due to eliminating any costs associated with translation services, it also would correspondently place the onus on individuals, who require translations, to provide their own.

*A system built by in house staff from a pre-existing GitHub.* This is similar to the UK, who made their e-petitions system public and free on GitHub, a software hosting company. Governments can use an in-house technician to alter a GitHub system to required specifications. This is an alternative to creating a system from scratch and it would save money up front. The ongoing costs would be similar to an in-house option.

- **High Cost option:** *An in-house system.* This would be built from the ground up that uses translations for languages commonly spoken in the City of Vancouver. This is more expensive due to the associate costs related to translation services but allows greater accessibility for the diverse language speaking public ensuring that civic participation is accessible to all.

### **GENERAL IMPLICATIONS OF AN E-PETITION SYSTEM: CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS**

The jurisdictions that were interviewed provided common advice; namely, to ensure that an e-petition system functions smoothly, it needs to be completely accessible and intuitive. Hence to establish such a system, a jurisdiction must invest in additional staffing to implement and monitor the system, educate the public about how it works and do what is needed to make it reachable and useable by everyone. With such supports in place, the benefits of e-petitions are clearly evident and the drawbacks can be mitigated. To ensure adequate support is in place, staffing requirements should be considered based on lessons learned from other jurisdictions.

**Table 3: Staff in other Jurisdictions**

<b>Government</b>	<b>Staff Required</b>
New Zealand Parliament	1 full-time petitions officer and IT support
UK Parliament	7 full-time employees and IT support (hiring 2 more staff in next budget cycle)
Quebec National Assembly	1 full-time petitions clerk and IT support
Canadian Parliament	1 full-time petitions clerk and IT support
City of Wellington	1 full-time petitions Officer and IT support

### **Translation**

Other jurisdictions found that the issue of translations may affect personnel decisions as well. Translating e-petitions into other languages commonly spoken in the City is an important step in ensuring that public civic participation is accessible to all. Policy regarding translations for e-petitions varies across jurisdictions. Depending on how many

petitions are received in languages other than English, it may need to hire multiple full-time staff or alternatively hire a third party translation service.

One of the potential drawbacks of an e-petition system, which is outlined in the section below, is the possibility of citizens not understanding the functions or outcomes of these petitions. To mitigate the problems caused by such misunderstandings, many jurisdictions develop a communications plan to support the introduction and ongoing education needs of e-petitions. Such planning ensures the public receives the necessary information to use the system, but notably it requires additional staff time and materials.

### ***Benefits of e-petitions***

All of the research conducted for this memo indicates that e-petition systems increase levels of public engagement. They give residents the ability to air grievances, fight for change, express opinions, and rally the support of fellow community members. In most cases, they also facilitate the interaction between the public and elected officials.

The jurisdictions we surveyed largely reported positive public feedback on their e-petition system and indicated that the systems increased public participation in civic processes.

### ***Drawbacks of e-petitions***

Those interviewed have indicated that in order for e-petitions to be effective, government bodies must ensure that petitioners are aware of how the system functions and whether/when they can expect a government response. For example, during the first three years of the UK's e-petitions program, approximately half of the petitions it received were inadmissible. Of those that were admissible, only a small fraction (145 of 28,500) received a government response, and only 25 reached the stage of Parliamentary debate. As noted in the introduction to this memo, in order to manage expectations, it is crucial that the public is educated about the various possible outcomes for petitions. The section on staffing (above) suggested the use of formal communications planning in ensuring the public has all the necessary information.

Overloading current Council meeting capacity is another issue. If Vancouver decided to use a system in which a Council member sponsors petitions, it may be wise to follow the UK's example and create a scheduled meeting time where Council can debate petitions that have been sponsored and submitted. This would prevent bogging down current council processes.

New Zealand Parliament expressed difficulties with their translation system due to how the word count limit on petitions detrimentally affects petitions submitted in Maori. Given the many languages spoken in Vancouver, we might encounter a similar issue if we accepted petitions written in other languages. In addition, and as observed earlier, staffing levels must increase when a jurisdiction accepts petitions in multiple languages.

The platform or system chosen for hosting the e-petition tool needs careful consideration and could have some drawbacks particularly if selected solely based upon affordability. In some circumstances, like those of the Northwest Territories, the third-party e-provider simply withdraws. This leaves the jurisdiction in a difficult position, since it would be challenging to create another system or hire another provider within a short timeframe. Users of the system would therefore suddenly lose access, a change that could create distrust, displeasure, and even result in the unintended consequence of decreasing civic



participation. This instance within our small sample of case studies, amplifies the need to select a platform designed to the user's needs and ensuring all necessary supports are properly considered when selecting and establishing a system.

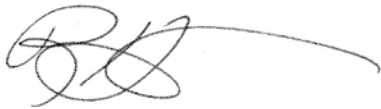
## **CONCLUSION**

The five case studies and six jurisdictions we surveyed indicate that, overall, an electronic petitions system is a good way to engage the public. It should, however, be well established along with proper provision of resources to support it. Done this way, it can prove to be an effective, high-functioning system that users have good experiences with. The expectation can be an increase in engagement levels and provision of yet another channel for residents to interact with elected officials. An initial financial commitment to implement an e-petition system is evident.

Furthermore, on a long-term basis there will be maintenance costs (in terms of staff and financial output) and ongoing translation requirements including additional associate costs needed to meet the City's diverse demographic. The case studies also noted that an electronic petitioning program properly done will increase time and the need for greater capacity at meetings for the purpose of hearing and possibly debating the business.

If you have further questions, please don't hesitate to contact Tina Penney, Deputy City Clerk at 604.829.9726 or, [tina.penney@vancouver.ca](mailto:tina.penney@vancouver.ca)

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RH', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rosemary Hagiwara  
Acting City Clerk

Cross-Jurisdictional Scan Matrix:

Government	Population	Petition Types	System Type	Setup Time	Languages	Staff Type Required	# Staff Needed	Cost of System	Ongoing Costs	Public Response
New Zealand Parliament	4,794,000	Online	Made in house	Several months	English, Maori	Regular	1 full-time staff member	\$381,000	The cost of maintenance IT support, and Employee salary	Positive
UK Parliament	65,640,000	Online	Made in house	6 months	English	Regular	7 full-time employees, looking to hire 2 full-time staff	\$137,728	\$70,000/year plus costs for: staff, technical staff, and ongoing consulting support.	Positive
Quebec National Assembly	8,160,000	Online	Made in house	2 months	French, English	Regular	1 full-time petitions clerk	Not Available	The cost of maintenance IT support and employee salary	Positive
Canadian Parliament	36,710,000	Online	Made in house	6 months	French, English	Regular, translation	1 full-time procedural clerk	Not Available	The cost of maintenance support of IT and employee salary	Positive
City of Wellington	215,400	Online	Made in house	Not Available	English, Maori	Regular	Not Available	Not Available	The cost of maintenance IT support, and Employee salary	Positive
Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly	44,720	Online	Third Party	3 months	French, English	Regular	1 full-time employee	\$8,000	\$800/year and salary of employee	Positive, (before contract breach)

## Links:

The following links will direct the user to e-petition sites.

- UK Parliament: <https://petition.parliament.uk/>
- Quebec National Assembly: <http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/exprimez-votre-opinion/petition/signer-petition/index.html>
- Parliament of Canada: <https://petitions.ourcommons.ca/en/Home/Index>
- New Zealand Parliament: <https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/petitions/>
- Wellington City Council: <https://wellington.govt.nz/have-your-say/epetitions/overview>

Other links referred to in this memorandum:

- UK Parliament's GitHub: <https://github.com/alphagov/e-petitions>
- PROC Report: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/41-2/PROC/report-33/>