

Municipalities reach out to young voters

Phone and Internet voting linked to higher turnouts

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NORTHUMBERLAND — In an increasingly online world, electronic voting is emerging as the next big thing in election technology.

"In the 20th century people have become more and more secure using computers," said Cobourg Mayor Peter Delanty, whose council recently voted in favour of full electronic voting for the upcoming municipal election in 2010.

"It's just part of the way we do business now and a part of the way we live."

Intelivote Systems Inc., which was hired to administer electronic voting systems for Cobourg in 2006, has helped numerous Ontario municipalities implement telephone and Internet voting.

"Offering choice is the theme we've been hearing a lot from municipalities," said Dean Smith, president and founder of the Nova Scotia-based company, on common reasons for going electronic.

"But the biggest issue we've seen is probably the cost perspective."



A traditional paper ballot, Mr. Smith explained, costs anywhere from \$4.50 to \$6.50 per eligible voter at the municipal level, and can go as high as \$13 for a federal election. With electronic voting the average cost becomes \$2 per voter. Costs related to polling stations, such as staffing, energy and materials, can be virtually eliminated.

In addition, the high accessibility factor has been credited with re-enfranchising segments of society that have traditionally posted a low turnout, such as students and elderly or disabled voters, who may have difficulty travelling.

"With many elections taking place in the fall, most students are away at university, and with older or disabled people, a lot of times they may have to rely on someone else to get them to the polling sta-

tion or find it difficult to travel outside the home," Mr. Smith said.

"Electronic voting presents an exciting opportunity for having older residents who really care about voting re-enfranchised, as well as the 18 to 25 age group, which is notorious for non-involvement."

Mr. Smith cited a recent by-election in Halifax which offered electronic voting and saw a 15 per cent rise in the number of voters between 18 and 25, and a nine per cent rise in voters over the age of 70. That increase is cited for Cobourg's switch to full electronic voting.

"As was the experience in 2006, it is anticipated that participation in the electoral process and voter turnout would increase as a result of more convenient, tried and tested methods," Cobourg clerk Lorraine Brace wrote in an October report to council recommending a totally integrated electronic voting system. The system differs from the 2006 election, which offered electronic voting in addition to a paper ballot option, by eliminating the need for traditional polling stations.

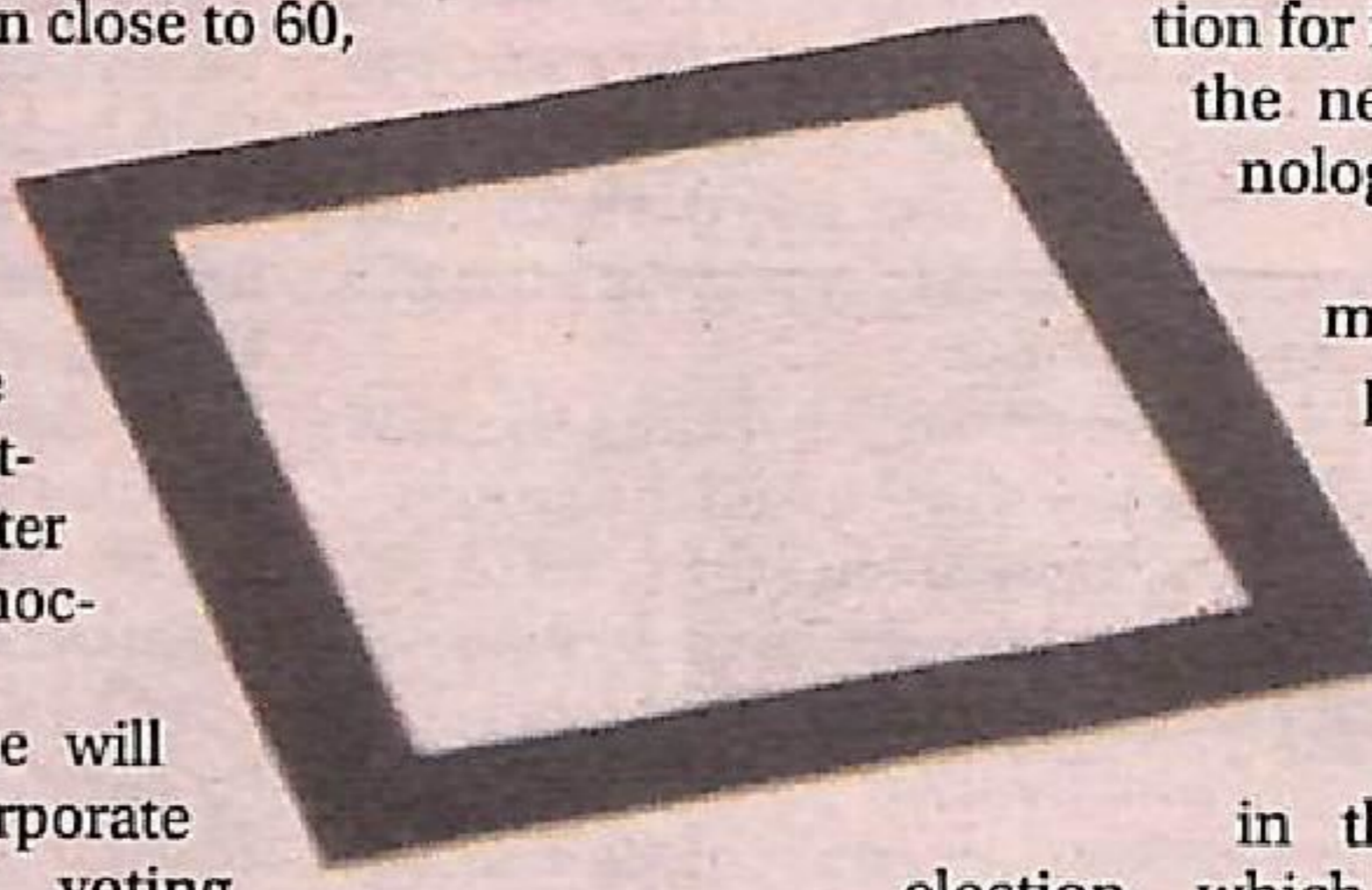
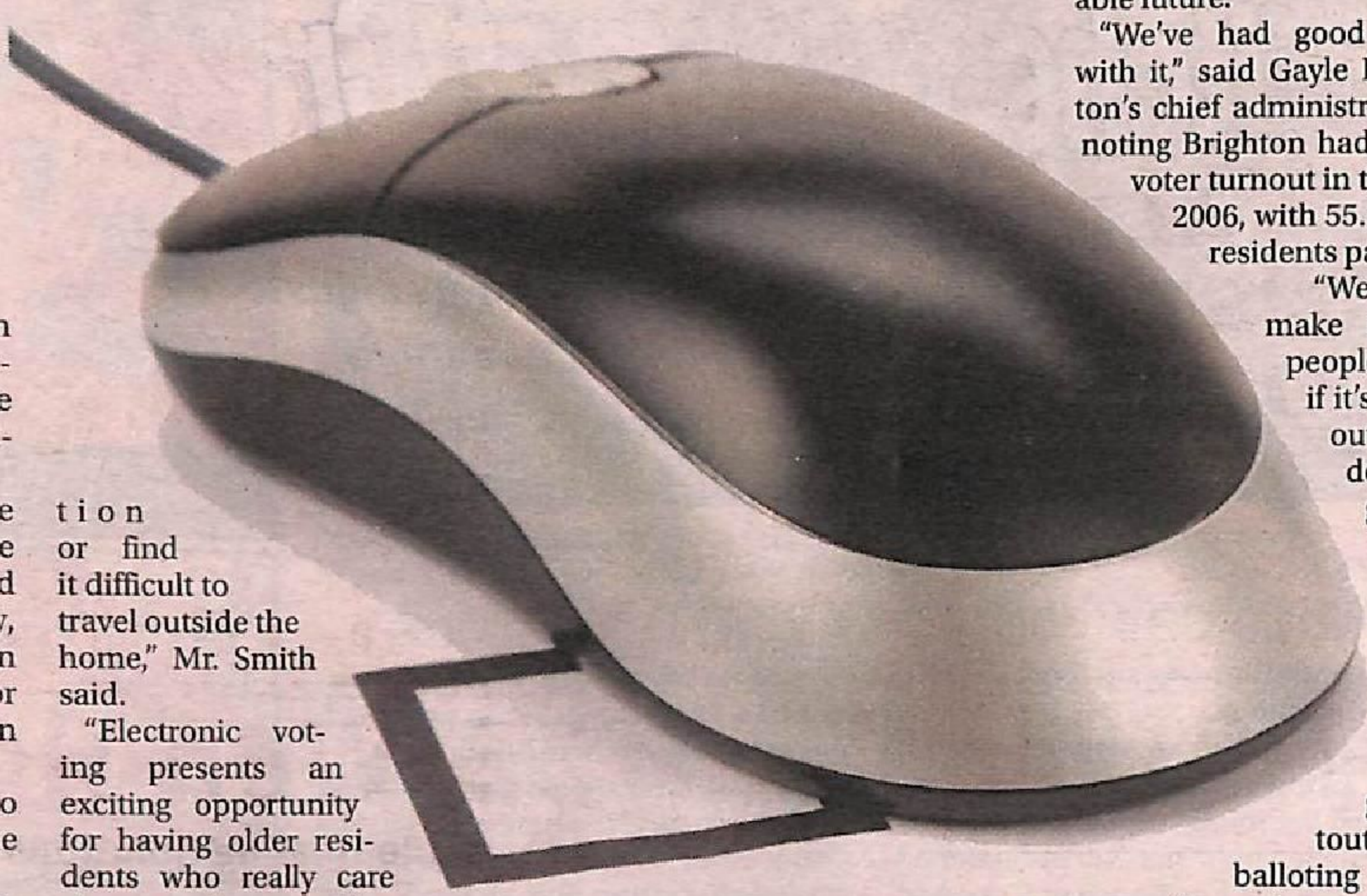
"What we're trying to provide is the most accessible means for voter turnout," Ms. Brace explained.

"We had good participation in 2006, and cost was also a factor in this decision."

Cobourg residents will have the option of telephone or internet voting, with one polling centre at the Cobourg Public Library where residents can get assistance with the new system.

"Our experience in 2006 by and large was very positive," said Cobourg Mayor Peter Delanty, who supported the decision.

"This is a democratic process, I want all residents to feel that they had a role in choosing their representatives. In 2006 the percentage of people voting went up quite a bit and I hope that will contin-



able future. "We've had good experience with it," said Gayle Frost, Brighton's chief administrative officer, noting Brighton had the highest voter turnout in the county in 2006, with 55.1 per cent of residents participating.

"We want to make it easy for people. This way if it's a nasty day out people don't have to go out to a polling station."

Trent Hills clerk Marg Montgomery also touts mail-in balloting for making the voting process accessible for cottagers and out-of-towners.

The Town of Markham became one of the first large municipalities in Canada to offer electronic voting for its advance polls in 2003. It was later awarded the Association of Municipal Managers, Clerks and Treasurers' (AMCTO) E.A. Danby Award for innovation for its use of the new technology.

The municipality went electronic again in the 2006 election, which saw a voter turnout of 37.6 per cent, compared to an average of 28 per cent in previous years. Town clerk Kimberley Kitteringham attributed the rise to both electronic voting and a comprehensive communications program. "We wanted to connect with

what we refer to as the 'new electorate,'" Ms. Kitteringham said, of the move to electronic voting, which was aimed at those residents who embrace technology in business and leisure.

"We felt Internet voting attracted a number of first-time voters and that it really piqued the interest of younger voters."

With new technology, however, comes new risk, and concerns have been raised about the security of online voting.

"Overall the electorate has been quite positive about Internet voting, but we have had concerns raised about security," Ms. Kitteringham said.

"We have a two-step procedure in place so a number of pieces of mail would have to be intercepted to steal someone's vote."

Prior to adopting the technology the municipality commissioned a risk assessment, carried out by a York University professor, which ranked voting methods according to their security. Electronic landed near the middle, while mail-in ballots came out as the least secure.

The Intelivote system employs a personal PIN as its main security, which is mailed to voters' home addresses prior to the election. Each voter must enter their PIN in order to vote. The code also acts as a forensic tool in the case of stolen votes, since the system can track where a vote was cast using the PIN.

"If election authorities want to question someone about how they got their hands on a stolen PIN and tried to vote with it, that capability is there," Mr. Smith explained, noting the company has only seen two issues of PINs being contested in its history.

"The level of security is actually higher than mail-in balloting, which has been around forever, and people seem to accept that level of risk."

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This is Part 2 of our 'Make a Difference' series, aimed to create involvement in municipal politics, leading up to the October 2010, municipal election.

WE ASKED

What method of voting do you prefer?

- (from left) ALAN RUSSELL -- 'Paper ballot. It just gives you a little more direct contact.'
- GORDON GRAY -- 'Internet, for convenience.'
- ELAINE BOLDUC -- 'Internet. I use it all the time. It's quick and easy.'
- DAVID HACKETT -- 'Paper ballot. It's more convenient.'

