Council Direction:

At the Public Works Committee meeting of June 15, 2009, Councillors expressed concern and frustration on behalf of their constituents and their offices, with respect to the manner that e-mails are handled through generic e-mail addresses to the City. It was noted that the current system is not customer friendly, nor is there any accountability for someone to respond. It was noted that although the issue was raised at the Public Works Committee, it is an issue that exists across the corporation.

Staff were asked to bring forward a report on how departments could deal with e-mails on a more personal level rather than responses from unidentified sources. On September 14, 2009, this matter was referred from the Public Works Committee to the Audit and Administration Committee.

In follow-up discussions, it was also noted that members of Council do not know who or how to follow-up in the event a constituent was not responded to in a timely manner.

Information:

The concerns expressed with respect to e-mail responses reflect a lack of service standards and over all coordinated and consistent approach to e-mail contact in the organization. There are approximately 80 generic e-mail addresses (and hundreds of personal email addresses) in the public domain, reflecting various programs, projects or functional areas. Due to the fragmented nature of the current email contact, further work...
is required to gain an understanding of the volume of e-mail received from each email address, response rates, timeliness of responses, and the workflow processes attached to each of these generic e-mail addresses.

During the 2009 budget deliberations, possible duplication and inefficiencies in call handling was raised, and a study was undertaken to look at rationalization of call handling. The review was led by staff in the Office of the City Manager, with the involvement of a Call Handling Rationalization Review Committee including Councillors Collins, McHattie and Whitehead.

Two of the primary objectives of the review were as follows:

- To identify efficiencies for call handling services at the City of Hamilton to ensure they are operated in a cost efficient and effective manner while not degrading current levels of service.
- To provide the City with a plan to eliminate any duplication in call handling and to improve citizen service, while identifying areas where savings can be generated.

The same objectives would be appropriate for addressing the handling of generic corporate e-mails. Citizen contact whether via generic telephone or e-mail requires similar information required to respond – and is often done by the same staff. Creating service improvements and efficiencies in the handling of telephone calls will create similar improvements to handling of e-mails.

As a result of the discussion of the review with the Call Handling Rationalization Review Sub-Committee, the following direction was given:

That the Call Handling Rationalization Review Sub-committee continues in its current structure.

That under the direction of the City Manager, a Corporate Implementation Team be established with a mandate to develop an implementation strategy for consideration, including required resources, timelines and cost, in order to move the City of Hamilton to a fully consolidated customer contact centre, taking into account the relationship between telephone calls, counter service and the City's website; and report back to the Call Handling Rationalization Review Sub-committee. The committee will consist of representatives from all Departments and Human Resources.

Given the direction to consider improvements in customer service through various channels of service delivery, the matter of reviewing the e-mail channel of service delivery will be undertaken at the same time as the implementation of the Call Handling recommendations. The call handling review recommendations include proposed ways to improve information flows to Councillors and their staff - including how to aggregate
information about the number and nature of ward-related calls and requests, and ways to improve formal contact between Councillors’ offices and customer service representatives.

From a citizen’s perspective, having access to information and service through e-mail in a consistent, timely and responsive manner would be advantageous. Consolidating e-mails as we work to consolidate the 18 call centres and 167 other publicly listed telephone numbers will not just create efficiencies and cost savings but consistent service standards with clearer accountabilities to citizens, the business units and Council. E-mails are also critical inputs into prioritizing and improving online information and service – which is an important goal in helping to drive down service costs. Ultimately, whether the service is provided in person, on the phone or over the web, the City must provide it in a high quality, responsive and consistent manner.