SUBJECT: Follow up to Councillors Request regarding Customer Service – Telephones (FCS05100) (City Wide) - Referred from Corporate Administration Committee on February 16, 2005

RECOMMENDATION:

a) That Report FCS05100 be received.

b) That the issue of follow up Customer Service – Telephones on Outstanding Business of the Corporate Administration Committee be identified as completed and removed from the Outstanding List.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

On February 16, 2005, staff were requested to review the possibility of requiring that telephones in all City departments have the capability of zeroing out to a live person, in order to address concerns with the use of voice mail. Following a review of the resources and possible staffing implications of this alternative, it was determined that this suggestion may not improve the service for customers. Additional education to staff and best efforts of departments to address the concerns will be undertaken as an alternative.

BACKGROUND:

On February 16, 2005, Councillor Ferguson requested that staff report back on the implementation of a corporate policy which would require that telephones in all City
Departments have the capability of defaulting to a live person, as opposed to voice mail, should the caller wish to leave a message.

In a follow-up conversation with Councillor Ferguson, he noted his concern that both internal and external callers are often greeted with voice mail, and that there should be an alternative available in the form of a live answer.

**ANALYSIS OF ALTERNATIVES:**

The possibility of a zero out option has been reviewed and could be either a zero out to a departmental or divisional centre or a corporate centre. Both cases would require that in every department or division there is a location that is never left unattended and that has the capacity to answer all calls/take all messages. As departments are not structured to facilitate this option, it is expected that this option would result in the addition of a number of staff. Capacity does not exist in the Customer Contact Centre either to handle this additional volume of calls. This would also require a significant effort to implement, requiring the changing of programming on 3500 phones and 3500 associated voice mailboxes, which would be significant task for IT to implement, requiring an estimated 4-6 weeks of dedicated staff time for implementation, and additional staff resources to maintain ongoing changes to the zero out capabilities.

In terms of customer service, this option does not necessarily result in an improvement to customer service. Should a zero out option be implemented across the organization, either departmentally or centrally, the callers would find themselves zeroing out to a representative who quite likely would not know the whereabouts or estimated return time for the staff person they were looking for. Generally, this information is easily managed and available only in small work groups, and there would be considerable administrative difficulty in achieving this level of information across the organization, or even across a department, or division. Different work locations also make this sharing of information difficult. In the end, the caller would not receive better service, but another person to talk to who would not be able to help them.

The use of voice mail, if set up and used properly, should actually provide one of the best options for the callers. Callers can leave a message with details of the nature of their call; this should enable the return call to provide the information or assistance requested in most cases. There are a few situations which arise, however, that do not provide good service. These circumstances happen when the voice mail message does not provide the caller with enough information or options to facilitate good customer service. Ideally, each voice mail message should indicate the name of the person who has been reached, if they are away, when they expect to return, and an alternate contact extension for someone who would probably be able to assist the caller over an extended absence or in an urgent situation, and who would be frequently available.

Good use of telephone etiquette, including not transferring of callers into a voice mail box without offering to find them someone else to assist them would help. Prompt return of voice mail messages within a reasonable amount of time is also important.
Taking ownership of the calls we receive, and assisting callers to find the correct contact also provides for good service.

In order to address the issues of customer service expressed, staff will undertake to establish telephone and voice mail protocols, ensure that staff are educated on them and that departments use best efforts to ensure that their staff identify available alternative staff members and extension numbers in voice mail messages to ensure an option is available for callers.

**FINANCIAL/STAFFING/LEGAL IMPLICATIONS:**

It is anticipated that there would be significant staffing, and corresponding financial implications if we were to implement a corporate zero out process. The recommended alternate of a best efforts commitment and education to staff will not require financial resources or increased staff resources.

**POLICIES AFFECTING PROPOSAL:**

N/A

**CONSULTATION WITH RELEVANT DEPARTMENTS/AGENCIES:**

Technical and costing information was provided by the IT Division of the Corporate Services Department.

**CITY STRATEGIC COMMITMENT:**

This initiative supports the City’s commitment to becoming a Great City in Which to Live, A City Where People Come First and A City that Spends Wisely and Invests Strategically, through the provision of quality services in an accessible way addressing community needs and supporting the community’s quality of life.