



Inclusion Through Diversity

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TWO PAGES

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Highlights of the **May 4, 2010** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

#### **In Split Vote, Legislature Sets 5 Percent Tax Levy Increase Guideline**

As a starting point toward preparing a 2011 County budget, the Legislature set a financial goal of achieving a tax levy increase of no more than 5% in 2011. But Legislators stressed that, with little certainty now about what conditions in New York State will be this fall, the goal at this early stage should be considered as a tool for the County Administrator to use in preparing a budget and not necessarily as the Legislature's goal by the time budget deliberations begin in earnest this fall.

After 45 minutes of thoughtful discussion and a series of votes, Legislators ultimately followed the recommendation of Administrator Joe Mareane and the Legislature's budget Committee to support the 5% goal. The final vote was 8-6, with Legislators Kathy Luz Herrera, Mike Lane, Pat Pryor, Pam Mackesey, Peter Stein, and David McKenna voting no; Legislator Brian Robison was excused. The Legislature's action "directs the County Administrator to prepare his recommended 2011 budget using a maximum tax levy increase of 5% as a guideline."

According to current projections, \$2 million in spending reductions or new revenue will be required to meet the 5% levy goal, which the administrator notes will still be difficult. With the County facing a projected \$3.9 budget gap in 2011, Mareane has cautioned that the County would have to increase the tax levy by 10.2% to maintain current programs, with the 5% goal seeking to address the challenge through a balanced approach. Among expected 2011 budget drivers: a near \$1.5 million increase in employee pension expense (reflecting an increase from 11.5% to 16.1% of payroll in 2011), a more than \$900,000 rise in health benefit costs, and about \$1 million more to support increased expense for Medicaid and other mandates. Potential risks the administrator cites include assumptions of no reduction in State aid, \$500,000 in sales tax growth over the revenue projected for 2010, and State approval of an increase in the county mortgage tax. The 5% target translates to an average county tax rate of \$6.39 per thousand dollars assessed valuation, an increase of 6.5%, or a \$39.00 increase for a \$100,000 home, assuming no change in assessed value.

Before the final vote, Legislators considered alternatives to set the goal at a lower level. A proposed amendment to set the goal at 0% failed by a vote of 3-11, with Legislators Peter Stein, Pat Pryor, and Mike Lane voting in favor. All of them characterized the 5% goal as much too high as a starting point. Stein urged the 0% level as reasonable in these hard economic times and a move that would make the County's levy increase over the past three years consistent with the rise in the cost of living. Both Stein and Pryor said that, as new legislators, they wanted to see the effect of no levy increase, so that they could justify to themselves and their constituents why any increase was needed. A motion to set the goal at 2.5% failed 5-9, with Legislators Kathy Luz Herrera, David McKenna, Lane, Pryor, and Stein voting in favor; a proposal to set the goal at 3% failed by a 6-8 vote, Legislator Pam Mackesey adding her support.

Legislators Frank Proto, Dooley Kiefer, Carol Chock, Legislator Will Burbank, Budget Chair Jim Dennis, and Legislature Chair Martha Robertson all voiced support the 5% goal as a starting point. Legislator Nathan Shinagawa noted that in past years, the Legislator used fund balance to cushion the levy increase and called the 5% goal "very ambitious" and "a strong, stringent goal" considering the County's current cash position. Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne said that, while 5% is difficult for her to support, she would support that

level of increase but no more. Legislator Luz Herrera said the Legislature must guard against “budget creep” this year and remain rigorous in its budget deliberations.

*Contact: James Dennis, Chair, Budget, Capital and Finance Committee, 387-4058; County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.*

### **Legislature Supports Proposed Environmental Law Change to Clarify Local Government Authority**

The Legislature, by unanimous vote of those present (Legislator Brian Robison was excused), endorsed a bill introduced by local Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton that would amend state environmental conservation law to clarify the role of municipalities in governing oil, gas, and solution mining development within their jurisdictions. Currently, the resolution notes, New York State reserves to itself the regulation of oil, gas, and solution mining activity, while land-use authority, such as adoption of zoning ordinances, is in the hands of towns, cities, and villages.

The proposed legislation would amend state environmental law to clarify that local governments are empowered to enact and enforce laws and ordinances that regulate location, construction, and use of buildings and land within municipalities, as delegated by the state constitution. The Legislature’s action notes the prospect of heavy truck traffic that the Marcellus shale hydrofracturing process could generate, which could damage local roads not designed for heavy-duty truck usage. The Legislature urges the New York State Senate to sponsor similar legislation and urges the New York State Association of Counties to support its passage.

*Contact: Michael Lane, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 844-8313.*

### **Legislature Hears Presentation on Enfield Wind Farm Proposal**

Project manager Marguerite Wells provided legislators an overview of Enfield Energy LLC’s proposed Black Oak Wind Farm project, which would develop a 50 megawatt wind farm on Black Oak Road in the Town of Enfield, described as the windiest place in the county. Enfield Energy projects the 50 megawatts of generating capacity would produce 122 megawatt-hours of electricity annually, supplied to the electric grid using 20 wind turbines, said to be enough power to nearly 56,000 homes over the course of a year. Project cost is estimated at \$105-120 million. Wells reported that the Town of Enfield has created a local law specific to wind energy, the county’s Environmental Management Council has supported the project, and the environmental review process is beginning. The organization is working to secure a financial partner and to identify customers who would be interested in buying power. The site would include a renewable energy education and research component, which would teach the public about renewable power sources and provide research opportunities for local organizations. Legislature Chair Martha Robertson called the project a great opportunity for the community.

*Contact: Martha Robertson, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434 or 272-0584.*

### **Samantha Wood Recognized as Distinguished Youth**

The Legislature recognized Newfield high school senior Samantha Wood as the latest Tompkins County Distinguished Youth. In his nomination letter, school counselor Rick Pawlewicz praises Samatha as “poised, mature, with a quick, incisive mind...a young woman with an impressive range of interests and the drive to nurture them and enable her natural talents to take root.” He describes her as “engaged and energetic thinker who can handle highly theoretical and abstract material,” who is able to “elicit and utilize critical feedback.” With a nearly 97% cumulative average throughout high school, and earning a score of 90% or more on every Regents exam and more than 27 concurrent credit hours through Tompkins Cortland Community College while in high school, Pawlewicz ranks Samantha among the top of the most capable students he has seen as 16 years as counselor. The counselor also praises the nominee as “a trusted and loyal friend,” a leader and involved in athletics and activities—“goal-oriented, task-focused and persistent to be the best that she can be in everything she does.”

The Distinguished Youth Award is cosponsored by A&B Awards and Engraving, Bangs Ambulance Service, Purity Ice Cream, and Cayuga Radio Group.

*Contact: Legislature Office, 274-5434.*

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