



Inclusion Through Diversity

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March 1, 2011
TWO PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **March 1, 2011** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Legislature Renews Request for Authorization to Increase Mortgage Recording Tax

The Legislature, by a vote of 11-3, once again asked the State Legislature to approve legislation which would authorize the County to increase the county mortgage recording tax by 0.25% if it so desires. (Legislators Mike Lane, Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, and Frank Proto voted no; Legislator Nathan Shinagawa was excused.) The County first requested the home rule authorization in 2009, but the request was embargoed by Senate leadership late last session, along with all other local home rule requests, after having been approved by the Assembly. In discussions and correspondence with members of the State Legislature, the County has repeatedly urged that the home rule authority be granted. The action only requests the authorization to consider the increase; if granted, the Legislature would still need to vote on whether or not to increase the mortgage tax.

Budget chair Jim Dennis said it would take a 2.4% increase in the property tax to produce the \$900,000 in annual revenue that a quarter-percent increase in the mortgage recording tax would generate. The increase, if adopted, he said, would raise the total mortgage tax to 1%., and that most upstate counties already have mortgage recording taxes of 1% or more. While supporting the renewed authorization request, Legislator Pam Mackesey cautioned she didn't know whether would vote for an increase in the tax if the Legislature gains the power to do so. Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera said she's reluctant to place too much pressure on the mortgage tax, but called the approach a "pragmatic and realistic response" to tough financial times.

If granted, the County's authorization to impose the tax would expire as of December, 2014.

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

Legislature Urges Extension of Tax Surcharge on the Wealthy

Stating its belief that "all New Yorkers should share in sacrifice in these difficult fiscal times, especially those most financially able to do so," the Legislature called for the State Legislature to temporarily extend the State's tax surcharge on the wealthy to provide additional revenues to the state and mitigate the substantial negative effect of proposed cuts in the Governor's budget on the most vulnerable New York residents. The final vote was unanimous (with Legislator Nathan Shinagawa excused), after three proposed amendments were debated regarding whether the Legislature should advocate temporary or permanent extension of the surcharge. The surcharge, enacted by the State on a temporary basis in 2009, increased the tax rate on those earning between \$300,000 and \$500,000 from 6.85 to 7.85%, and those earning more than \$500,000 to 8.97%.

The Legislature's action notes that refusal to extend the surcharge is projected to cost the state \$4 billion in lost revenue in the 2012 fiscal year, and that the Governor's budget disproportionately targets spending reductions for programs that serve the most vulnerable populations. Legislator Frank Proto was one who observed that the State's budget problems were a long time in the making and won't be resolved overnight, and that under the circumstances something is needed to help address the immediate problem. Legislator Peter Stein also said he could only support the continued extension as a temporary measure since the State faces "an absolute disaster" at this point, without money to provide basic services.

Contact: James Dennis, Chair, Budget and Capital Committee, 387-4058

Investigator Position Approved for D.A.'s Office

The Legislature, by a vote of 11-3, approved creation of a confidential investigator position in the District Attorney's Office. (Legislators Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, Brian Robison, and Mike Lane voted no; Legislator Nathan Shinagawa was excused.) The investigator will serve as a liaison between the D.A.'s Office and law enforcement agencies and will investigate matters initiated by the D.A.'s Office. District Attorney Gwen Wilkinson said the position is needed to address both the increase in local crimes and changes in the type of local crime. While acknowledging concern about adding a position at other than budget time, especially in light of the County's fiscal challenges, the D.A. said she sees the approach as "the most economical and efficient way to address the need." Existing funding in the D.A.'s budget will support for the balance of this year the position's salary and fringe expense, and Wilkinson said she would intend to support the position with outside funding, as much as possible, in 2012. The D.A. said work of the investigator could increase revenue, such as collection of \$300,000 in outstanding DWI fines.

Contact: James Dennis, Chair, Budget and Capital Committee, 387-4058

Legislature Supports Revised Guidelines for Meeting Minutes

Following many months of study and review by its Government Operations committee and a special subcommittee which reviewed the policy on minutes of meetings of the Legislature and its committees, the Legislature, by a vote of 10-4, approved interim guidelines for recording and maintaining minutes of the Legislature and its committees. (Legislators Dooley Kiefer, Will Burbank, Carol Chock, and Frank Proto voted no; Legislator Nathan Shinagawa was excused.) Under those guidelines, which will be in place until the formal policy update is fully vetted and approved by the Legislature, official meeting minutes of the Legislature and its standing and special committees will include only resolutions, motions proposed, and the actions taken. Staff who take meeting minutes will take notes as in the past, but only the action items will be presented for approval and become the official record, once approved. Notes will be kept on file for future reference, with Legislators permitted to submit comments on those notes.

The vote followed extended discussion, covering such concerns as whether meeting notes should be posted to the county web site, and whether action-only summaries would adequately communicate the flavor of a meeting. Legislator Dooley Kiefer expressed grave concern about changing the form of the minutes, calling minute taking and approval a core service and important in correctly conveying the official record.

Contacts: Michael Lane, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 844-8313 or 844-8440; Legislator Dooley Kiefer, 257-7453.

Among other actions, the Legislature

- Heard the annual State of the College Report from Tompkins Cortland Community College president Dr. Carl Haynes. Dr. Haynes told legislators the state of the college is strong—that the College has approached difficult fiscal challenges, most recently a 10% cut in aid in the Governor's proposed budget, in a strategic fashion that, while painful, has preserved core services for students.
- Approved a new five-year contract between the County and the Chamber of Commerce/Convention and Visitors Bureau for tourism services through the end of 2015. Funding to support the contract comes entirely through county Room Tax through appropriations made by the County Legislature.
- Held a public hearing to discuss general housing, public facilities, and economic development needs in the county, the first of two public hearings that will be conducted related to the County's application for funding under the Community Development Block Grant program.

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