



Inclusion Through Diversity

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May 17, 2011
TWO PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **May 17, 2011** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Legislature Adopts 2012 Financial Guidelines, But Many Express Reluctance

Anticipating the likelihood of a State property tax cap, the Legislature followed the recommendation of its budget committee and directed the County Administrator to prepare two budget scenarios for 2012—one showing what could be supported within the limits of a 2% cap, the other a recommended budget that could be supported by a 5.4% increase in the tax levy.

The vote was 12-2, with Legislators Pat Pryor and Peter Stein voting no. (Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera was excused.) Legislator Stein said the Legislature should set a recommended guideline of lower than 5.4%; Legislator Pryor said Legislators have done nothing since last year's budget process to address priorities for the County. Even several of those who voted in favor said they are not totally satisfied with it—Legislators Pam Mackesey, Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, and Frank Proto all joined in expressing concern about the need to set priorities, Legislator Mackesey said her reluctant support reflects her view that the recommendation is a work in process and observed that, without priorities, the Legislature is “slowly bleeding our departments dry.” Legislator Proto expressed concern about how, without firm priorities, any new initiatives will be weighed against needs of existing programs. Both Legislators Mike Lane and Brian Robison said that, while they are not happy with the 5.4% figure, they support examining the 2% impact, which they said should be the basis for budget discussions.

The 5.4% levy increase guideline reflects the impact of increased costs for State-mandated and controlled programs such as Medicaid and retirement system contributions, as well as debt service obligations; the New York State Association of Counties (NYSAC) has urged that such expenditures be exempted from any property tax cap. The 5.4% increase option will require a more than \$3 million (or 7.8%) cut in locally controlled spending; the 2% option a \$4.5 million (or 11.2%) program reduction. To maintain all current County programs, the County would have to increase the tax levy by 13% or cut spending by more than 13%. Under a 5.4% scenario, the tax rate would increase to \$6.82 per thousand, and the tax bill for the average \$160,000 county home would rise by about \$56 to \$1,091.

The tax levy guideline is adopted as a tool to set initial parameters for the Administrator to use in working with departments and agencies to prepare a budget for the Legislature to consider and does not necessarily represent what the Legislature's goal will be at the time of budget deliberations this fall.

Budget committee chair Jim Dennis observed that it will be a very challenging budget process. “This is a different year, a different time, the ‘new normal.’ We have a really big responsibility, and we have less and less money to carry out those responsibilities.”

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

Financing Approved for Two Capital Projects

The Legislature approved bonding to cover construction cost of two capital projects, approving issuance of up to \$2.5 million in serial bonds and notes to pay for part of the cost of improvements at the County Solid Waste and

Recycling Center, and issuance of up to \$750,000 in bonds and notes toward capital improvements at the new Human Services Annex, to house the County Office for the Aging. Both bond actions were approved without dissent, with Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera excused. It's hoped grant funding will be able to defray the cost of the Solid Waste Center improvements. Budget chair Jim Dennis pointed out that, as an enterprise operation, the Solid Waste Division is generally able to support its expenses without a burden on taxpayers. Improvements to convert the building located in the 200 block of West Martin Luther King Jr. Street/West State Street to the Human Services Annex will enable the Office for the Aging to vacate the County Courthouse, as directed by the NYS Court System, to provide needed space for Court programs. The building is also expected to house another non-profit tenant.

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

Legislature Declines Request for State Legislation Related to D.A. Investigator Position

A proposal to request home rule authority from the State Legislature to adopt a 20-year retirement plan for the new investigator position in the District Attorney's Office failed by a vote of 5-7 (Legislators Jim Dennis, Pat Pryor, Peter Stein, Pam Mackesey, and Chair Martha Robertson voted in favor; Legislators Kathy Luz Herrera, Dooley Kiefer, and Nathan Shinagawa were excused.) The action would have asked for approval by the State Legislature to authorize the County to amend the Social Security and Retirement Law to extend to the position retirement and disability benefits after 20 years of service without regard to age, as authorized for other law enforcement and investigator positions. Public Safety chair Stein said without such authority, the County, would not have the authorization to provide a police officer who entered the position the ability to earn credit toward retirement. It is possible the action will be reconsidered at a future meeting.

Contact: Peter Stein, Chair, Public Safety Committee, 266-7579.

Among other actions, the Legislature

- Approved a construction funding agreement with the State Department of Transportation to support bridge painting throughout the County, advancing \$871,000 in up-front funding to cover the design and construction phases of the project. The project is supported 80% by federal funds, with more assistance possible from the State. The County will file for reimbursement of eligible project costs.
- Approved a supplemental funding agreement in the amount of \$195,000 with the firm of Clark, Patterson, Lee, of Rochester, for design and right-of-way services related to the Coddington Road reconstruction project. The original agreement, approved in 2004, authorized \$900,000 for the project
- Authorized a supplemental consultant agreement with C&S Companies, of Syracuse, in the amount of \$78,000 for photographic mapping and survey services as part of the 20-year Sustainable Master Plan for Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport. Nearly all funding comes from federal and state sources, with local share of \$1,950 coming from the airport operating budget.
- Approved, by a vote of 10-1 (Legislator Pam Mackesey dissenting), a five-year extension of the long-standing agreement with Cornell University for discount parking at Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport (Legislators Kathy Luz Herrera, Nathan Shinagawa, Dooley Kiefer, and Peter Stein were excused. Mackesey unsuccessfully proposed reducing the extension to three years, maintaining the contract term was too long to offer a 25% discount.

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