



Inclusion Through Diversity

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THREE PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **May 15, 2012** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Dr. Susan Romanczuk-Smelcer Appointed Mental Health Commissioner

The Legislature, by unanimous vote, confirmed the appointment of Susan D. Romanczuk-Smelcer, PhD., as County Commissioner of Mental Health Services. (Legislator Nathan Shinagawa was excused.) Dr. Romanczuk-Smelcer has served as Director of Community Health Services (mental health commissioner) for Tioga County since August 2009. Prior experience includes service as clinical social worker for United Health Services Outpatient Mental Health Clinic in Binghamton, program director for the Tioga County Mental Health Clinic, senior psychiatric social worker at the Broome County Mental Health Clinic, and hospice social worker at Lourdes Hospital in Binghamton.

Dr. Romanczuk-Smelcer holds PhD. and Masters of Social Work degrees from Marywood University and a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Development and Family Studies from Cornell University.

The new Commissioner was recommended through strong consensus of a 12-person search committee made up of legislators, Mental Health Board members, representatives of department management and labor, and stakeholders.

County Administrator Joe Mareane stated, "Dr. Romanczuk-Smelcer's selection follows a long and deliberative process that reflects the importance of this position in our community. Susan is a leader whom we are confident can guide us through a time of rapid change in the way mental health services are provided and funded. She will engage our community, and her department, to ensure that our tradition of providing quality care is maintained."

Noting that it is a challenging time for behavioral health and health care in general, the new Commissioner said she is honored to have been chosen, and paid tribute to her predecessor, the late Bob De Luca, saying she hopes she can fill his shoes.

Dr. Romanczuk-Smelcer begins service as Commissioner of Mental Health June 18.

((NOTE: The new Commissioner's name is pronounced "ro-MAN-chek-SMEL-sir.))

Contact: County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.

Local Law Adopted Opting Out of State Real Property Tax Law Solar-Wind Exemption

Following a public hearing, the Legislature adopted a new Local Law Opting Out of Section 487 of the New York State Real Property Tax Law, which allows for an exemption of any increase in value due to construction of a solar, wind, or farm-waste energy system. The vote was 10-4, with Legislators Frank Proto, Pam Mackesey, Carol Chock, and Dooley Kiefer voting no and Legislator Nathan Shinagawa excused. The Legislature's action notes that the opt-out measure comes in anticipation of development of the county's first large-scale commercial windfarm, Black Oak Windfarm, in the Town of Enfield, and that it is the Legislature's intent to encourage developers of such large-scale energy installations to negotiate payment-in-lieu-of-tax (PILOT) agreements in good faith with affected taxing jurisdictions. The Ithaca City School District and the Town of Enfield have already elected to opt out of the Section 487 exemption.

State law, it is noted, does not provide for a county to distinguish between small-scale residential and large-scale commercial power generation facilities related to such exemptions. Assessment Director Jay Franklin noted that, to date, there has been no documented effect on property value upon resale from installation of small-scale residential and commercial solar systems. The opt-out decision may be reconsidered, and potentially reversed, by the Legislature at its discretion in the future.

Five people spoke at the public hearing before the vote, expressing support of the windfarm project and concern about unintended consequences from opting out of the exemption. Legislature Chair Martha Robertson said the action will permit the PILOT agreement to be negotiated and approved before construction begins (which could happen by next year), then the opt-out provision could be reconsidered. Legislator Carol Chock suggested that staff investigate whether other measures could be developed to recognize installation of such residential alternative energy systems.

Legislator Kiefer had urged that the wording of the Local Law should be changed to more clearly state the Legislature's intent, and stressed that was the reason behind her "no" vote.

Contact: Dooley Kiefer, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 257-7453

Legislature Approves Tax-Exempt Revenue Bonding for Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services Projects

The Legislature authorized the Tompkins County Development Corporation to issue up to \$2.4 million in tax-exempt revenue bonds to refinance a number of Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS) multi-family rental properties located in the City of Ithaca. (The vote was 13 in favor; Legislator Nathan Shinagawa was excused; Legislator Carol Chock abstained.) The refinancing applies to such properties as the Henry St. John Building on South Geneva Street, Towerview Apartments on Floral Avenue, and other INHS properties on Floral Avenue, West Clinton, Elm, West Seneca, Esty, and Cascadilla Streets. The Legislature's approval of the bonding creates no indebtedness on the part of the County, but qualifies the interest payable on the bonds to be exempt from federal income tax under the Internal Revenue Code.

Contact: Will Burbank, Chair, Planning, Development, and Environmental Quality Committee 272-7555.

Legislature Supports Proposed State Legislation Regarding Invasive Species

The Legislature, by unanimous vote of t, supported proposed State legislation that would amend environmental conservation law relating to non-native animal and plant species, such as Hydrilla. The legislation would provide the State Department of Environmental Conservation with explicit authority to regulate the sale, purchase, possession, introduction, importation, and transport of invasive species, and establish penalties for those who violate such regulations. The measure notes that the County's first-hand experience shows that the cost of eradicating Hydrilla as one non-native species, is estimated to be in the millions of dollars over the next several years.

Contact: Legislator Pamela Mackesey, 273-6203; Legislator Will Burbank, 272-7555.

Legislature Joins in Urging State to Address Revenue Issues Related to Shale Gas Production

The Legislature, without dissent (Legislator Nathan Shinagawa was excused) joined in calling upon the Governor and State Legislature to develop a blend of revenue streams and taxation of natural gas extraction, and to establish "an accurate, transparent, and verifiable method of measuring and reporting shale gas production." Similar resolutions have been passed by the Tompkins County Council of Governments and several other county municipalities, cautioning that many revenue-related questions have yet to be answered as the State prepares for permitting for gas extraction from the Marcellus Shale, while local governments are already incurring related expenses.

Through its action, the Legislature strongly urges the Governor and the New York State Legislature to develop such diverse revenue streams and to provide funds for state and local governments when expenses are incurred. It also calls upon the Governor to direct the Office of Taxation and Finance to establish, through an open and transparent process, the Unit Production Value for assessment of shale natural gas like Marcellus, and urges that an accurate, transparent, and verifiable method be established for measuring and reporting shale gas production.

Contact: Dooley Kiefer, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 257-7453; Legislator Carol Chock, 273-9007.

Among other actions, the Legislature

- Renewed the Tompkins County Intermunicipal Recreation Partnership for another five years, adopting an agreement extending the partnership through the end of 2017;
- Amended earlier action that authorized the County to enter into a 15-year lease with Solar Liberty, of Buffalo, NY, for installation of 25 KW solar panels on seven County buildings. Now that restrictions regarding generating capacity for such municipal solar panel installations eligible for State grants have been increased from 25 to 50 KW, the County wishes to explore and, if structurally and operationally feasible, to proceed with installation of 50 KW panels. Aggregate annual lease cost shall not exceed \$16,250, with combined savings for the seven installations estimated to exceed the total lease expenses by \$9,000 or more per year over the cost of the lease, based on current energy costs and consumption patterns.

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