



Inclusion Through Diversity

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THREE PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **September 17, 2013** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Administrator Releases 2014 Recommended Budget

Tompkins County Administrator Joe Mareane has delivered to the County Legislature a 2014 Recommended County Budget that maintains (but does not expand) County services, addresses funding challenges at several partner agencies, maintains the County's fiscal health, and can be supported by a tax levy increase of 3.54%--less than the 4% levy goal set by the Legislature. County taxes would rise by \$21 for the owner of an average home.

"The recommended budget ensures continuity of essential County services at a time when the economy is improving, but dependence on County services remains high" Administrator Mareane states in his budget message to the Legislature. "It strengthens the County's fiscal health by reducing our reliance on one-time revenues, keeping our reserves safely above the County's 10% fund balance goal.

"The budget proposes a slight increase in the County workforce to address critical areas of need, but keeps the roster 7.5% below where it stood five years ago," the Administrator continues. "In accordance with our new Capital Improvement Plan, the Budget commits \$317,000 in additional funding—the equivalent of a ¾% increase in the property tax levy—to maintain our infrastructure. Importantly, the Budget marks significant progress in addressing large structural deficits that have been looming in several County-sponsored agencies."

The Recommended Budget supports total expenditures of \$170.2 million (a 2.85% increase over 2013) and local dollar spending of \$81.6 million (an increase of 1.6%). The 3.54% tax levy increase, which is below the target set by the Legislature, is above the State's 2.3% property tax cap. The property tax rate would rise by 13 cents to \$6.93 per \$1,000 assessed value, resulting in the \$21 increase to the owner of an average \$160,000 home. (The increase for total spending in part reflects pass-through of new mortgage tax revenue and anticipated debt expense to be offset by federal reimbursements.)

Positive influences on the budget include some pension relief—a slight decline in the pension rate that represents the first decrease since 2009—and a more than half-million-dollar reduction in the budgeted cost for mandated programs, much of that attributed to anticipated Medicaid savings associated with implementation of the federal Affordable Care Act. (It was the nearly \$300,000 impact of the pension rate decrease that enabled the Recommended Budget to come in below the Legislature's levy target.)

Allocations to stabilize sponsored or partner agencies represent one of the key goals of the budget, and result from detailed analysis and study over the past year regarding budget challenges for these agencies. Among the allocations are the following:

- An \$81,000 (3%) increase in support for Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3). County support has risen by only 1% over the past four years, which has required a series of spending reductions by TC3 and a greater cost share for students.
- A 315,000 (12%) increase in support for the Tompkins County Public Library, including \$175,000 in ongoing "target" funds and \$140,000 in County reserves—to begin to address the Library's growing imbalance between revenues and expenses, despite significant spending cuts the Library has made.

- \$680,000 in new Mortgage Recording Tax revenue to Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit (TCAT), with \$120,000 in Mortgage Tax funding retained by the County to apply toward its partner share contribution to TCAT—the new revenue stream expected to stabilize both partner contributions and rider fares.
- \$218,000 in support to Tompkins County Area Development (TCAD)--\$150,000 from local room tax and \$68,000 in target funding. The allocation reflects a workgroup's recommendation that the County fund approximately one-third of TCAD's budget, in part through room tax, through 2018.

“I wish to thank the County department heads and their staffs for their professional approach to the challenges that mark every budget,” Mareane states. “All exercised the restraint we requested, and continue to find ways to maintain service levels provided at high quality to the community.” The Administrator also recognizes the Legislature for establishing clear policy guidance and instilling a culture of fiscal discipline. “When times were the toughest, the Legislature refused to engage in the nearsighted fiscal gimmicks so many others employed,” he notes. “As a result, today we are able to maintain services, stabilize our sponsored agencies, and maintain our strong fiscal health.”

Legislators will review the recommended budget in detail at the first meeting of the County's Expanded Budget Committee (any legislator may participate) on Monday, September 23, beginning at 5:30 p.m. in Legislature Chambers, Governor Daniel D. Tompkins Building, 121 E. Court Tioga Street (Park Entrance), Second Floor, Ithaca—the first in a series of meetings that will continue through September and October. At these meetings, departments and agencies will have the opportunity to explain their budget requests and how programs would be affected by the recommended budget.

Initiatives to inform the public about the budget and gather input while the Expanded Budget Committee's deliberations are in process will include the County's annual public information meeting on the Tentative Budget October 17. The formal public hearing on the amended Tentative Budget will be scheduled in November, prior to the final budget adoption vote.

Public copies of the 2014 Recommended Budget are available at the County Administration office, 125 East Court Street, and at the Office of the County Legislature, 121 East Court Street. The document also will be posted on the County website at www.tompkins-co.org (Click on “County Budget.”)
Contacts: County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551; James Dennis, Chair, Budget, Capital, and Personnel Committee, 387-4058; Martha Robertson, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434 or 272-0584.

Legislators Hear Comment on Livable Wage Issue

The Legislature heard from nearly a dozen citizens who, following up a rally in DeWitt Park, voiced their strong support of requiring County contract agencies to provide a livable wage for their employees, saying the living wage is a moral and societal imperative. One of those was former Ithaca Town Supervisor Cathy Valentino, who maintained that all employees in Tompkins County should be paid a living wage, and the Legislature should take a leadership role in requiring this for contract workers, as an investment in the community. One speaker, Nancy Werany, who is running for County Legislature, countered that it is actually up to employers, and the market, to determine wages.

Many legislators expressed thanks to those who addressed the Legislature for their concern and their engagement, and expressed their general support and commitment to the living wage and doing what they can. Government Operations Chair Pat Pryor, whose committee later this month will begin reviewing the report of the County workgroup on this issue, said the issue will be balance: what the County can do in the context of what taxpayers, a number of whom as struggling, can afford.

Budget chair Jim Dennis, who served on the workgroup, said the County has been a living wage employer for many years, and that a large majority of those the County contracts with pay a living wage. He promised that the County can and will do something, but cannot do it all at once, and urged all to keep listening and remain involved.

Contact: Patricia Pryor, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 319-0507.

Legislature Urges Preservation of Regional Mental Health Services

The Legislature, by unanimous vote, followed the recommendation of its Health and Human Services Committee and urged that the State to preserve inpatient mental health services in the Southern Tier/Finger Lakes region and refrain from closing the Elmira Psychiatric Center and the Greater Binghamton Health Center as part of its proposed mental health services reorganization plan. (Chair Martha Robertson was excused.) The Legislature calls upon the State to establish a Southern Tier Office of Mental Health region, with a center to serve the Southern Tier and portions of the Finger Lakes, to provide “continued access to child adolescent, and adult inpatient and community services, managed under a locally responsive rural model.”

Health and Human Services Committee Chair Frank Proto said, “Leaving the entire Southern Tier without a facility is unacceptable” and that it leaves the region “in a very precarious position.” Legislator Nate Shinagawa agreed that the issue is significant. “Proximity is very important in the healing process,” he said. “It’s important that we fight to get as many of these centers as close to us as possible.”

Contact: Frank Proto, Chair, Health and Human Services Committee, Frank Proto, Chair, Health and Human Services Committee, 277-4875.

Construction Funding Agreement Authorized for Hanshaw Road Reconstruction Project

The Legislature, without dissent (Chair Martha Robertson was excused) authorized a construction funding agreement with the State Department of Transportation (DOT) for the Hanshaw Road reconstruction project. In accordance with DOT regulations, the County must appropriate the full project cost (\$5.3 million from the project’s Capital Account), then file for federal and state reimbursement for their project shares. With the funding agreement, construction costs will be largely reimbursed by federal and state sources—80% Federal and 15% State, with the Town of Ithaca, Village of Cayuga Heights, and Cornell University also participating in the project.

Contact: Highway Director Jeffrey Smith, 274-0300; Peter Stein, Chair, Facilities and Infrastructure Committee, 266-7579.

Among other actions:

- The Legislature approved a budget transfer to reimburse from the Highway fund balance \$81,000 in materials cost expended for recovery from damage caused by last month’s heavy rains August 8 and 9. Total storm recovery cost is estimated at more than a quarter-million dollars. Action was taken to avoid delay of planned 2013 road improvements.
- The Legislature approved three resolutions related to perimeter security fence improvements at Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport—authorizing a consulting agreement with C&S Companies for construction observation and contract administration services, accepting a Federal Aviation Administration grant for that and other projects, and awarding the bid to construct the improvements. Legislator Carol Chock was one who expressed serious concern that the more than million dollar cost (only 5% of it local expense) was just too high. The replacement of the two miles of fence, which must go deep in the ground to prevent animal burrowing, includes removal of the deteriorated current fence and drainage improvements, and must be done to FAA standards.

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