



Inclusion Through Diversity

Marcia E. Lynch, Public Information Officer
607-274-5555, Office
607-227-2152, Cell
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THREE PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **November 19, 2013** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Legislature, by Unanimous Vote, Adopts 2014 Tompkins County Budget

After two months of budget deliberations, the Tompkins County Legislature adopted the County's 2014 budget and its capital program for the next five years. After an hour's discussion, including on two proposed amendments, Legislators ended up making no changes to the budget, and approved the plan without dissent, with Legislator Nathan Shinagawa excused.

The \$170.2 million adopted budget, including \$81.4 million in local dollar spending, increases the County tax levy by 2.95% and the countywide average tax rate by approximately 1.34% to \$6.89 per thousand, an increase of \$14.89 for the median county home assessed at \$163,000.

Before the adoption vote, Chair Martha Robertson advanced a proposed amendment that would have reduced the County's contribution to debt service in 2014 by \$100,000, in light of reduced debt service expense from a favorable interest rate achieved in the refinancing of 2004 debt, a change that would have reduced the levy increase to 2.72%. The proposal failed by a margin of 6-8—several Legislators stating that proceeds from the bond sale would best be retained in the capital budget to be used toward future capital projects. An alternate proposal, advanced by Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, to move the \$100,000 to the Contingent Fund failed by a vote of 4-10.

After the adoption vote, Chair Robertson, Budget Chair Jim Dennis, and County Administrator Joe Mareane thanked all of those involved in the 2014 budget process, Robertson thanking the entire staff for their work all year long and for departments' careful balancing of needs of their clients and taxpayers. Administrator Mareane recognized the investment of time and compassion by all members of the Legislature. All communicated special thanks to Executive Assistant Kevin Sutherland, who is moving on to Ithaca City government, for his work over the past several years to recraft and manage the county budget process, which Legislator Dennis said "has helped bring the process into light for legislators and the public."

In a separate action related to the annual budget process, the Legislature also set the 2014 Solid Waste Annual Fee, which holds the fee steady at its current rate of \$56.00 per billing unit. Approval came by a vote of 13-1, with Legislator Frank Proto dissenting.

Contact: Martha Robertson, Chair of the Legislature 274-5434 or 272-0584; James Dennis, Chair, Budget, Capital, and Personnel Committee, 387-4058; County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.

Legislature Authorizes Nursing Home Transfer

The Legislature authorized the transfer of title for Ithaca's Beechtree Care Center to the Tompkins County Development Corporation, a procedural step to facilitate sale of the facility to the private company that has been operating the home under receivership. The vote was 13-1, with Legislator Pam Mackesey voting no and Legislator Nathan Shinagawa excused. No one spoke at a public hearing preceding consideration of the issue. Before considering the transfer, the Legislature voted to determine that the transfer will not result in adverse environmental impact under provisions of the State Environmental Quality Review Act.

BTRNC, which operates Beechtree under receivership, is awaiting State approval to become the permanent operator. An affiliated entity, 318 South Albany Street, LLC, has negotiated purchase of the facility with Housing and Urban Development-guaranteed financing for that purchase. Although the County does not own, and never has owned, Beechtree (formerly the Reconstruction Home), its role in the process stems from an action nearly 30 years ago that enabled the facility to secure tax-exempt financing, which required the County to take title to the property when the financing was paid off. Since that debt will be fully repaid as part of the ownership transfer, title will then transfer to the County.

Much of the discussion centered on wording in the resolution that, if approved, would have noted that some legislators believed that due diligence on behalf of taxpayers would have best been served by requiring a phase one environmental assessment. That provision was not included, the amendment failing by a 4-10 margin. Legislator Mackesey said she felt strongly about the issue, that she sees it as a responsibility to taxpayers, and, therefore, that the wording should be included. The resolution was amended, however, to include wording noting that the environmental review is not being required, and that the buyer has agreed to indemnify and defend the County against any possible claims that might result from environmental contamination.

With the approved transfer to TCDC, that entity, through its standard procedures, will transfer the property to the new owners. As part of the process, the new owner will assume a \$4 million debt.

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

County to Request Expressions of Interest for Old Library Property

The Legislature, by a vote of 13-1, authorized the release of a Request for Expressions of Interest (RFEI) for the County's Old Library Property, at the corner of Ithaca's Cayuga and Court Streets in the DeWitt Historic District. (Legislator Frank Proto voted no; Legislator Nathan Shinagawa was excused.) The RFEI, to be released next month, will invite expressions of interest from prospective developers who would purchase or lease the property for redevelopment, as a first step of considering redevelopment options before soliciting complete proposals from selected respondents. All those interested in making a proposal to redevelop the Old Library property must participate in the RFEI process. Responses are due in March 2014.

The RFEI document states the County's interest in selling or leasing the property "at fair market value for redevelopment that will make a positive contribution to the community that is not only compatible with, but also will strengthen and enhance the quality of the surrounding neighborhoods." As part of the discussion, wording of the document was modified to detail examples of the types of public and private uses that might be proposed. Legislator Proto, a member of the Capital Plan Review Committee, expressed concern about that deviation from more general wording that he said had been carefully crafted by the committee.

The RFEI approach, recommended by the Capital Plan Review Committee, is seen as what County Administrator Joe Mareane has described as a "filtering" process. Proposals will first be reviewed by the County's Planning Advisory Board, then by the appropriate committee of the Legislature (yet to be determined), which will forward all responses to the Legislature with its recommendations regarding which respondents should be invited to submit proposals in response to a formal Request for Proposals (RFP), to be issued by the County. The intended review schedule for sale or lease of the property projects selection of a developer before the end of 2014.

Contact: Michael Lane, Chair, Capital Plan Review Committee, 844-8313 or 844-8440; County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.

Among other actions

- Legislators again heard from community residents deeply concerned about a capital project that, if approved for bonding, would renovate the Public Safety Building to add an outdoor recreation area and seven beds at the county jail, many of those individuals maintaining that the project would be part of a system of building infrastructure to support and perpetuate a racist, classist system and should be approached as a moral and ethical issue. Public Safety Committee Chair Brian Robison again invited all

concerned to attend the December 9 Public Safety Committee meeting, for a detailed presentation and full discussion of the project, involving those representing the many elements of the county criminal justice system.

- The Legislature, without dissent, requested the State Department of Environmental Conservation to extend the period of time for review of permitting regulations for liquefied natural gas facilities, urging that the comment period (recently extended by 30 days to December 4) be extended further to a total of 180 days to enable a thoughtful and thorough review of the proposed regulations and their impact by elected officials and staff.
- The Legislature awarded more than \$30,000 in Fall 2013 tourism grants, in the categories of Community Celebrations, Tourism Marketing and Advertising, and New Tourism Initiatives—all funded entirely through county Room Occupancy Tax.

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