



Inclusion Through Diversity

Marcia E. Lynch, Public Information Officer
607-274-5555, Office
607-227-2152, Cell
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Information Presented on Jail Renovation Plan

In a nearly three-hour-long session, the Legislature's Public Safety Committee presented information and responded to questions on the County's plan to renovate the County Jail and how that relates to county history regarding the jail and Legislature's commitment to alternatives to incarceration. The \$900,000 project, which has not yet received final funding approval, would replace little-used indoor recreation space with a sheltered outdoor facility, adding seven jail beds that will reduce inmate board-outs to other counties, a project that in recent weeks has drawn concern from some community members who oppose an increase in jail beds.

County Administrator Joe Mareane explained that the goal was to put the Legislature's decision to support the plan in the context of its history of working to reduce the jail population through alternatives. "This is a county that has committed itself to alternatives to incarceration," he said. Participating in the presentation, along with Administrator Mareane and members of the Public Safety Committee, were District Attorney Gwen Wilkinson; County Judge John Rowley; Sheriff Ken Lansing; Probation and Community Justice Director Pat Buechel; Deborah Dietrich, Executive Director of the organization Opportunities, Alternatives, and Resources (OAR); and Suzi Cook, Chair of the Tompkins County Criminal Justice Advisory/Alternatives to Incarceration Board.

For more than a decade, it was noted, the County consistently pushed back against State pressure to build a large jail, rejecting brick-and-mortar solutions and increasing its investment in alternatives, keeping the jail population relatively stable despite projections linear growth. Among elements of the local criminal justice system reported: arrest rates near the bottom of New York State counties; rapid assignment of competent legal counsel through the County's Assigned Counsel Program, with the County spending 20% more on defense than prosecution; ongoing County support of OAR and administration and replenishing of the OAR Bail Fund as needed; and a long-standing support and commitment to wide-ranging Alternatives to Incarceration programs administered by the Department of Probation and Community Justice, including the Day Reporting Program, where the County has committed \$1.5 million for a new Day Reporting Center in the Human Services Building to be built next year. Reflecting on a 25-year history with alternatives to incarceration in the county, Judge Rowley noted that, while poverty, racism, and sexism are at the core of the issue, the local criminal justice community has been working very creatively through alternatives for a long time, including innovations with drug treatment and compliance courts that operate invisibly in the community.

The result of these efforts, and support for related services, including youth development, mental health, and other human services, is a Tompkins County incarceration rate that is among the lowest in the state, Administrator Mareane noted.

With a projected annual debt service cost of \$65,000 over 20 years, the project is expected to save the County money, even if the cost of board-out of as few as three inmates is avoided. But many stressed that need for the project extends way beyond saving money. Judge Rowley said the issue is a human

rights problem—that inmates who are boarded out are deprived of visitation, of services, and of contact with their attorneys. “Failure to do this is a violation of the rights of Tompkins County citizens who end up in Tompkins County Jail,” he said. Sheriff Ken Lansing said the project will lessen the hardship of those in the jail population. OAR director Dietrich stated “OAR is supporting this project and the addition of those seven beds on humanitarian grounds. Those people (boarded out), largely women and juveniles, are people we can’t assist, and that’s unconscionable to us.”

Officials engaged in a wide-ranging discussion with members of the public. As part of that, Public Safety Chair Brian Robison and others thanked all who attended for their questions and their input. Judge Rowley noted that, while this county is financially supporting probation and ATI programs, he characterized the state prison system as “a disaster,” with no such options for judges to consider, and he noted that while mental health services are being provided in the jail daily, mental illness in the state prison system is “rampant” and “very tough.” District Attorney Wilkinson invited several attending to contact her to discuss a study she’s conducting on incarceration paradigms and DWI laws.

“This is not the last conversation we will have about this,” said Committee Chair Robison. “This is, and should be, a continuing dialogue.”

Legislature Chair Martha Robertson encouraged those concerned about incarceration practices to also extend their efforts to the town and village courts, to Albany, and to other counties. She said, “I think we have a really top-notch system (here), but maybe it could be better...I think it is a good time to do a reality check and see if there is anything else we can do...You have raised issues here. We are going to pursue them.”

The power point presentation on the Jail Renovation Plan is posted on the Tompkins County website at <http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/files/ctyadmin/Reports/JailRenovationPlanPresentation.pdf>.

The full meeting will be available for review on the Tompkins County Meeting Portal at <http://tompkinscountyny.iqm2.com/Citizens/Default.aspx>. (Click on “December 9, 2013 Public Safety Committee Meeting – Video.”)

Contact: Brian Robison, Chair, Public Safety Committee, 351-3601; County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.

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