



Inclusion Through Diversity

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THREE PAGES

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Highlights of the December 17, 2013 meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

As Legislative Term Ends, Chair Reflects on Challenges and Accomplishments

At the final meeting of the 2010-2013 legislative term, Legislature Chair Martha Robertson took the opportunity to reflect on how the County has addressed the many challenges it has faced over the past four years, and its accomplishments in meeting those challenges. Among those challenges: addressing the worst economic collapse in a generation that caused an abrupt drop in aid and revenue, and an equally rapid rise in demand for services. Chair Robertson noted that the County's used a measured and balanced response, involving shared sacrifice, tough choices, and fact-based decision-making, then adapted to the "new normal" of a stable, but smaller, county government. As of now, she said, unemployment is the lowest in New York State, reserves are strong, the County's AA1 credit rating is almost the best in the state, and Tompkins County is ranked by the Comptroller as the third-most fiscally stable county in New York State. "We've adjusted to our era of constraint and are providing quality services to the community."

Among other challenges met addressed, according to Chair Robertson, was addressing the County's space needs—including a new Health Department building, responding to the State Court system's demand for additional space, and fulfilling the desire to vacate the Old Library to put it to more productive use. This produced a new home for the County Office for the Aging, relocation of Legislature Chambers and offices, and the decision to move the Day Reporting program to the Human Services Building.

Among other accomplishments cited—initiation of the intermunicipal health benefits consortium and fostering ongoing cooperation among municipalities through the Tompkins County Council of Governments; extending broadband access within the county; updating the County's 20-year Capital Improvement Plan; and continuing to improve the County's ability to realize the goals of a diverse and inclusive government.

Looking ahead to 2014, Robertson said that among important issues to address will be selection of a developer for the Old Library, attention to returning Airport business to the record levels experienced before sequestration, and addressing relations with New York State, as well as how to address large and growing demands for human services within the County's constrained budget.

Contact: Martha Robertson, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434 or 272-0584

Departing Legislators Thanked and Recognized

This was the final meeting for three Legislators who are departing the Legislature—Pamela Mackesey, leaving after eight years; Pat Pryor after four; and Frank Proto, the Legislature's most senior member, after 29 years of service. All thanked their colleagues and staff and said that serving had been an honor and a privilege. Legislator Proto, who began service when the late Harris Dates was chair, recounted the changes he'd seen over the years—in part, describing his long-time service as Chair of the Health and Human Services Committee as "a labor of love." Again and again, by their colleagues, the three departing members were thanked for their hard work, commitment to service, and what they had added to the culture of the Legislature. County Administrator Joe Mareane expressed his deep appreciation to them all. Legislators also thanked outgoing Chair Robertson for her service as chair for all four years. Robertson has indicated she will not seek the Chair's position next year.
Contact: Legislator Frank Proto, 277-4875; Legislator Pam Mackesey, 273-6203; Legislator Pat Pryor, 319-0507.

Funding Approved to Assist Expansion of Access to Broadband Service

The Legislature authorized appropriation of up to \$15,000 in contingency funding to help address gaps in broadband Internet coverage in the Town of Caroline—areas initially planned for inclusion in the county plan to improve broadband access for unserved and underserved areas of the county through the Legislature’s Special Committee on Broadband, but that were subsequently unable to be covered due to the level of funding received in the Connect NY Broadband grant allocation received to support the project. The cost to extend broadband access to nearly all residents in those difficult-to-reach areas of Caroline is estimated at \$218,000, and the Town has raised public, private, and grant funding commitments for \$156,000 to date. The Town had requested \$8,000 in County support to help fill that gap, but Legislator Pam Mackesey advocated increasing that amount to up to \$15,000, maintaining that is consistent with the County’s goal of providing access to broadband to all residents of Tompkins County. The amendment was supported by a margin of 11-4; then the appropriation at the higher funding level supported by a vote of 13-2, Legislators Brian Robison and Jim Dennis dissenting. Both praised and recognized the Town’s actions and commitment, but said the Legislature should at this point approve the amount the Town was asking for.

Budget chair Dennis and several other legislators said they would be interested in considering future fund requests to address other similar service gaps, such as in the southern portion of the Town of Enfield; Legislator Robison also noted a gap in his district, in the Groton City area. Several legislators likened the broadband access issue to a moral obligation—to ensure that all households in the county have high-speed Internet access, in line with the goals of the Legislature’s Broadband Committee. Broadband Committee Chair Pat Pryor said, “In reality, what we are doing is to find a way to complete a county-initiated project,” and finishing the work the Legislature started four years ago—a project some legislators noted had initially been projected might require as much as \$4 million in county funding to implement.

Contact: James Dennis, Chair, Budget, Capital and Personnel Committee, 387-4058; Patricia Pryor, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 319-0507

Legislature Urges Passage of Producer Responsibility Legislation

In two separate actions, the Legislature called upon the New York State Legislature to enact state legislation to expand producer responsibility for the costs of managing certain difficult-to-handle products, such as toxic materials, at the end of their life. Solid Waste Manager Barbara Eckstrom told legislators the measures support overriding State legislation where producers would take the responsibility for the recyclability and the actual recycling of these materials, such as establishing a system whereby people would be able to return such materials to the point of purchase at their end of their useful life.

By unanimous vote, Legislators urged the State to enact the extended producer responsibility legislation, and by a vote of 14-1 (Legislator Frank Proto dissenting) that such legislation be enacted for paint recycling. That measure expresses the Legislature’s support for a statewide paint collection system that would require the paint industry to be responsible for collecting and managing leftover paint in New York. Manager Eckstrom noted that paint represents 56% of the materials collected in her department’s Household Hazardous Waste program, with the county solid waste fee paying for the cost of disposal.

Contact: Barbara Eckstrom, Solid Waste Manager, 273-6632; Peter Stein, Chair, Facilities and Infrastructure Committee, 266-7579.

Grant Accepted to Support Solarize Tompkins Project

The Legislature, by unanimous vote, authorized County acceptance of an \$80,000 grant from the Park Foundation to support the *Solarize Tompkins* project. The project, to be supported by the Planning Department, is focused on changing community perceptions of solar power through grassroots mobilization, public education, and bulk purchase of solar photovoltaic systems to reduce financial and technical barriers and produce community momentum. Planning Commissioner Ed Marx recognized the grassroots effort that has built the *Solarize* effort within the county so far.

Contact: Ed Marx, Commissioner of Planning, 274-5560; Carol Chock, Chair, Planning, Energy, and Environmental Quality Committee, 273-9007

Legislature Supports Conservation Easement for Yellow Barn Road Property

The Legislature, by unanimous vote appropriated \$5,500 from the County's Capital Reserve Fund for Natural, Scenic, and Recreational Resource Protection to secure a conservation easement to protect 98 acres of forest land on Yellow Barn Road in the Town of Dryden, in partnership with the Finger Lakes Land Trust. The parcel, adjacent to the Yellow Barn State Forest, is located within the Emerald Necklace Greenbelt. The Legislature's resolution notes that the parcel "provides an important connection between State Forest, Cornell Natural Areas, Cornell Plantations Natural Areas, and Finger Lakes Land Trust preserves. The Legislature also determined that the action would not carry adverse environmental impact under State law.

Contact: Scott Doyle, Senior Planner, 274-5560; Carol Chock, Chair, Planning, Energy, and Environmental Quality Committee, 273-9007

Legislature Approves Transfer of Ulysses Parcel to State Parks

The Legislature, also without dissent, authorized transfer of a vacant four-acre parcel on Taughannock Boulevard north of Perry City Road in the Town of Ulysses, which had been withheld from foreclosure, to the New York State Office of Parks and Recreation. The State has offered \$30,000 for the property, below its fair market value, to preserve the natural area and serve as a buffer to the Black Diamond Trail. The County is responsible for payment of more than \$12,000 in back taxes for the property. Proceeds after payment of back taxes will be directed to the Capital Reserve Fund for Natural, Scenic, and Resource Protection.

Contact: Scott Doyle, Senior Planner, 274-5560; Carol Chock, Chair, Planning, Energy, and Environmental Quality Committee, 273-9007

Among other business:

- Responding to the report issued last week by the Governor's Tax Relief Commission, which included proposals including a two-year freeze on property taxes, County Administrator Joe Mareane told legislators he would next month present an alternate proposal in response. He said that while the freeze proposal, based on the County's 2014 budget, would have required a more than \$300,000 reduction in spending while providing minimal tax relief, a meaningful realignment of how state services are supported in New York would result in a historic reduction in property taxes by having the State pay its own bills.
- Following a public hearing, the Legislature adopted a new Local Law that authorizes the leasing of real property no longer needed for public use for a term of up to 99 years. County law had set the maximum lease term at five years, but the an opinion of the State Comptroller ruled that a municipality may enter into leases for a term of longer than five years, if the municipality authorizes such leases by local law. Under New York State Municipal Home Rule Law, any local law that changes a provision of law relating to leasing of real property is subject to permissive referendum. The Legislature's resolution notes that the Legislature may in the future desire to lease real property declared surplus for a term that exceeds five years.
- The Legislature reallocated more than \$24,000 from the Arts and Culture Organizational Development Grant Program, funded entirely through County Room Occupancy Tax, to the Community Arts Partnership to partially offset financial loss from closure of Ticket Center Ithaca. The reallocation was recommended by the county's Strategic Tourism Planning Board.
- The Legislature authorized acceptance of a more than \$57,000 grant from the State Department of Transportation, as the State's share of a \$1.1 million project for perimeter security fence improvements at Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport. 90% of project cost is borne by funding from the Federal Aviation Administration.

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