



Inclusion Through Diversity

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THREE PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **May 6, 2014** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Legislature Considers, But Fails to Set 2015 Financial Goal

The Legislature tonight delayed taking the first step in developing the 2014 County budget, failing to muster the eight votes required to establish a 2015 financial goal. Both County Administrator Joe Mareane and the Legislature's Budget committee had recommended establishing the financial goal at the estimated level of the State-imposed Property Tax Cap—an approach that would have directed the County Administrator to prepare a budget that could be supported by a tax levy increase of no more than 2.36%, a levy increase of \$1.06 million over the County's 2014 level that would require a more than \$400,000 reduction in spending and mean a tax increase of just over \$6.00 for the median-value \$165,000 County home.

Expressing concern about establishing a goal that would provide more latitude in the Administrator's budget to address needs such as preserving the safety net, Legislator Carol Chock first proposed that the goal instead be set at 2.8%--at about the midway point between the "cap" level and the 3.24% increase that would be needed as maintenance of effort. Legislator Will Burbank also sought to amend to set the goal at the 3.24% maintenance-of-effort level. Both alternate proposals failed by identical votes of 5-8—Legislators Chock, Burbank, Dooley Kiefer, Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, and Dan Klein voting in favor. (Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera was excused.)

When original "at-cap" proposal was considered, it drew a majority of votes—7 to 6—but fell short of the 8 votes required for passage. Those who had supported the earlier failed amendments (Legislators Chock, Burbank, Kiefer, McBean-Clairborne, and Klein) voted no this time, joined by Legislator Martha Robertson, who noted that she had voted against all three proposals, since she views all three proposed levy increases as too high.

In discussion, Legislators who supported the alternates maintained the County should examine and focus on its own needs, not the artificial level of the cap. Legislator Peter Stein cautioned, however, that the forces are becoming greater and greater, and the matter of the tax cap assumes increased prominence today.

The matter will now return to the Budget committee for consideration—Budget Chair Jim Dennis expressing hope that when that review is complete, the committee will return with the same number at the next meeting, and the issue can move forward.

In a separate action, the Legislature voted to schedule a public hearing for its next meeting regarding a proposed Local Law that would permit the Legislature to override the 2015 tax levy limit, if it opts to do so as a result of the 2015 budget process. The vote was 10-3, with Legislators Nate Shinagawa, Peter Stein, and Martha Robertson voting no. The proposed law, while not predictive of the final tax levy, would provide the Legislature flexibility to exceed the Property Tax Cap if deemed necessary, and would also serve to protect the County if it meets the cap, as calculated, but inadvertently exceeds it due to clerical or technical errors. The public hearing will take place Tuesday, May 20, 5:30 p.m., at Legislature Chambers, Governor Daniel D. Tompkins Building (second floor), 121 E. Court Street, Ithaca.

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

Legislature Approves Allocation to Allow FoodNet to Return to Living Wage Standard

The Legislature, by a 12-1 vote, approved \$16,500 in supplemental funding to the County Office for the Aging to, in turn, enable Foodnet (Meals on Wheels) to once again achieve the living wage standard for all employees, as recommended by the Government Operations Committee. This is the first allocation from the \$100,000 set aside in the 2014 Contingency Account for potential support of efforts to increase the level of attainment of the County's Living Wage goal by contractors providing services to the County.

Based on his examination of County service contracts, County Administrator Joe Mareane had recommended the allocation, noting that Foodnet traditionally had been a living wage employer, but could not accommodate the May 2013 8% increase in the Alternatives Federal Credit Union Living Wage standard (\$12.62 per hour) in light of cuts in the agency's federal revenues.

Legislator Dan Klein was the only dissenting vote (Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera was excused), saying he was regretfully voting no since what he sees as a "piecemeal" approach doesn't go far enough. With the calculation that it would take \$1.8 million to bring all contract employees to a living wage, he said that he'd be happy to give Foodnet employees a living wage, but that to provide that to them, and not to others, is not a fair way to approach it. Legislator Mike Sigler countered that he sees it as appropriate that cases are being considered on an individual basis. But both he and Legislature Chair Mike Lane questioned whether the Legislature would be expected to take similar action in response to any future reductions. The Legislature then approved an amendment that indicated that nothing in the action should be interpreted as a commitment by the County to offset any reductions or adjustments in the future.

Several Legislators characterized the allocation as a start to address the issue to demonstrate the Legislature's commitment to address the issue, and both Legislators Jim Dennis and Leslyn McBean-Clairborne thanked residents Stanley McPherson and Milton Webb for bringing the issue forward, even though they will not benefit from tonight's Legislature action. Mr. Dennis said, the County is in the position to begin the process of addressing the living wage contract issue, not end it.

Contact: Nathan Shinagawa, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 280-7557; Legislator Dan Klein, 272-7582.

Legislature Approves Assessment Relief Law

The Legislature, by a 12-1 vote, approved a new Local Law that enacts provisions of the Mohawk Valley and Niagara County Assessment Relief Act, included in the 2014 State Budget bill. The Act gives a municipality, through Local Law, authority to adopt provisions of the act, which would allow the Department of Assessment to effectively "move" the taxable status date for an affected property owner to take into account any damage that occurred from the severe weather that occurred between June 20 and August 9 of last year. Local impact appears to be very minimal—perhaps only one property owner affected that might result in an adjustment of \$85 on the tax bill. Adoption of the Local Law followed a public hearing, which no one attended. When the hearing was scheduled last month, Legislator Dooley Kiefer said she could not support the initiative in view of the very limited benefit involved. Legislator Kiefer was the sole dissent in tonight's vote; Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera was excused.

Contact: Nathan Shinagawa, Chair, Government Operations Committee, 280-7557.

Among other actions:

The Legislature, by unanimous votes (Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera was excused), approved bonding resolutions to authorize up to \$275,000 in bonds and notes for bridge repair, and up to \$925,000 in bonds and notes toward highway improvements, such as resurfacing, throughout the county, projects that are included in the County's capital improvement program.

The Legislature approved resolutions establishing the annual salary for the elected positions of County Clerk and County Sheriff for the years 2015 through 2018. The County Clerk's salary shall remain at \$72,507 for 2014, and the Sheriff's at \$89,290. For the next four years, the percentage salary increase for each position shall

be the same as the percentage increase, if any, for the County's Management group. The resolutions were approved by votes of 12-1, Legislator Dooley Kiefer dissenting (Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera was excused.)

The Legislature endorsed the efforts of the Tompkins County Sustainability Team (a team of County employees charged by the County Administrator eight years ago with developing an action plan to promote sustainable practices by Tompkins County government), and accepted the Tompkins County Sustainability Strategy, advanced by the Team. The Sustainability Strategy sets out a coordinated approach to integrating sustainable practices in County government operations – organized under eight categories: Leading by Example; Social Equity; Transportation; Facilities and Grounds; Purchasing; Sustainable Materials Management; Protection of County Lands; and Employee Engagement.

The Legislature, by 12-1 votes (Legislator Dooley Kiefer dissenting, and Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera excused) authorized the County to execute an agreement with Cornell University on replacement of the Game Farm Road Bridge, where the University will provide funding of \$250,000, and with Cornell and the Town of Ithaca regarding the Pine Tree Road Bike and Pedestrian Paths Project. Cornell's Share of that project is \$200,000; the Town's and the County's \$35,000 each, as part of the \$1.4 million project, otherwise supported through federal and state funds.

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