



Inclusion Through Diversity

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THREE PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **June 3, 2014** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Legislature Approves Public Safety Building Renovation Project

Culminating close to a year of consideration of the issue, the Tompkins County Legislature tonight voted to proceed with renovation of the County Public Safety Building, authorizing up to \$910,000 in bonding to underwrite capital improvements that will construct a covered outdoor recreational structure and convert the current interior rec. space to dormitory space for seven additional jail beds. The increased jail capacity is expected to significantly reduce the nearly quarter-million dollars the County spends each year to board-out inmates to jails in nearby counties. Both the bond resolution and designation of the design for the outdoor recreational structure were approved by 11-3 votes, with Legislators Carol Chock, Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, and Kathy Luz Herrera voting no.

The outdoor recreational structure design was that suggested by Sheriff Ken Lansing and recommended by the Public Safety Committee—an east-facing structure located on the west side of the current recreation yard. The design incorporates a fourth wall on the east, made up of glass block on either end, with a large center opening that could be covered by a roll-down metal door in the event of inclement weather. Total cost of the renovations, incorporating that favored design, is estimated at about \$896,400; about \$70,000 more than a steel-frame west-facing alternative that had also been considered. The bond resolution also includes expense for needed repair of a jail security system.

During 45 minutes of public comment, Legislators heard from nine members of the public who again expressed their deep concern about the project, maintaining that it is misdirected and not needed. The added capacity, they maintained, will only serve to incarcerate more people, aggravating racism and classism in the corrections system—the money, they said, should be focused on additional alternatives-to-incarceration, not additional jail beds. OAR Director Deb Dietrich, Suzi Cook, Chair of the County Criminal Justice/Alternatives to Incarceration Board, and Bill Rusen, Director of Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services, all spoke in support of the jail project, maintaining that keeping inmates here in our own jail, rather than boarding them out to other counties will enable them to receive the many services the County has in place. Susan Begg, who had been incarcerated in the jail, also voiced support for the renovation and the outdoor recreation design. She said that, in some cases, such as hers, jail is needed for people before they move into other treatment. She said efforts to reduce jail population long-term need to come at the State level.

Among legislator comments during more than an hour of thoughtful discussion, Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne said that, while she agrees with the need to stop inmate board-outs, she still believes that any decision should wait until after the Jail Alternatives Task Force hands up its recommendations for additional incarceration alternatives that could affect the jail population. Legislator Nathan Shinagawa said that support for incarceration alternatives and the jail renovations is not an either-or proposition, and many of his colleagues echoed that sentiment. He said, “I plan on supporting alternatives-to-incarceration programs as strongly as I have in the past...and also support this program because it will serve the people we are trying to help.” Legislator Will Burbank was one who thanked and credited the community for raising issues that positively affected the project and legislative review, and that with the complexity of the issues involved, he supports the project as being needed now, and is confident that there is more in the way of alternatives that the County can do. Crediting both staff for their ongoing efforts on the project and the activists who raised concerns, Legislator

Kathy Luz Herrera said that, in opposing the project, she is being part of the solution, in view of her deep concerns about racism and poverty related to the corrections system, which she termed a “broken” system that those who are working hard on alternatives are trying to fix. Legislator Martha Robertson thanked members of the community for adding tremendous value to the process through their thoughtfulness, study, and compassion. Legislator Carol Chock, who unsuccessfully sought to incorporate provisions related to the County’s ongoing strong support of incarceration alternatives and a commitment by the Legislature to consider additional alternatives once savings from reduced board-out costs may be realized, said that without that link, she ultimately could not vote in favor.

Under the anticipated schedule, the renovation project is scheduled to be put out for bid before the end of next month, the construction contract awarded in September, and the project completed by April of next year.
Contact: Brian Robison, Chair, Public Safety Committee, 351-3601.

Legislators Set “At-Cap” 2015 Financial Goal, Guidelines for Departments and Agencies

Nearly a month after it was first considered, the Legislature established a 2015 financial goal as the first step in the County’s 2015 budget process. The Legislature approved the goal that County Administrator Joe Mareane and its budget committee had recommended, directing the Administrator to prepare a recommended budget that could be supported by a tax levy increase of no more than 2.36%, the estimated level of the County’s State-imposed Property Tax Cap. When first considered May 6, the proposal passed 7-6, with one Legislator excused—one vote short of the eight votes required for approval. This time, the Legislature approved the goal, by a 9-5 vote (Legislators Dan Klein, Carol Chock, Will Burbank, Dooley Kiefer, and Martha Robertson. voted no.) Legislator Robertson said she voted against the goal because she believes it should be lower. Legislator Kathy Luz Herrera noted that, had she been voting earlier, she would have supported a lower goal, but that as of now, in considering funding needs in this community, she was willing to vote for a higher goal, knowing that Legislators will consider needs carefully during the upcoming budget process.

The levy increase just over a million dollars from the County’s 2014 levy requires a more than \$400,000 reduction in spending and translates into a tax increase of just over \$6.00 for the median-value \$165,000 county home.

In a separate, but identical, 9-5 vote, the Legislature also approved associated spending targets for departments and agencies to use in preparing their budgets, consistent with preliminary instructions already provided to budget units by the Administrator. The tentative spending targets will require departments to reduce their spending by 1% from their 2014 adopted budgets, after adjustments for uncontrollable items such as changes in fringe benefit costs. In the County’s budget process, departments can also request supplemental appropriations called “over target requests” that are considered separately by the County Administrator and County Legislature. Agencies receiving direct funding from the County will be held to a 1% increase above this year’s allocation. None of the fiscal targets include any one-time funding granted as a part of the 2014 budget. Legislator Chock noted that, in view of the tough choices involved she does not like the approach of across-the-board reductions as part of the Administrator’s budget.

Budget Chair Jim Dennis noted that the financial goal and guidelines represent a starting point in the 2015 budget process. As in the past, departments and agencies may submit over-target requests for consideration, first by the Administrator, then by the Legislature during deliberations this fall.

Tax cap override law approved:

Also related to the 2015 budget process, the Legislature approved a Local Law that permits the Legislature to override the 2015 tax levy limit, if it opts to do so as a result of the 2015 budget process. Passage of such a law, which has been done every year since the Property Tax Cap went into effect, would not mean that the Legislature intends to exceed the cap, but would provide the flexibility to exceed the cap if deemed necessary, and would protect the County if it meets the cap, as calculated, but inadvertently exceeds it due to clerical or technical errors. The Local Law was approved by an 11-3 vote, with Legislators Robertson, Michael Sigler, and Peter Stein dissenting. Mr. Stein said his vote stemmed from principle, that he thinks the Legislature should

attempt to comply with the cap, even though he is a “fierce opponent” of it. As in the past, he said that any action on an override of the cap is coming too early in the budget process.

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

State Urged to Reject Legislation That Would Limit Local IDAs

Acting on the recommendation of its Economic Development Committee, the Legislature is urging the State Legislature and the Governor to reject proposed legislation, entitled the “Just and Open Business Subsidies (JOBS) Act of 2014,” that would take away the autonomy of local Industrial Development Agencies and require benefits provided through those IDAs to go through the State’s regional Consolidated Funding Application process. Officials maintain that change would cause significant delays and would undermine the local economic development process. The measure was approved by a vote of 13-1, with Legislator Carol Chock voting no.

The resolution states that the legislation, if enacted, “will further bureaucratize the economic development process, off-load local decision-making to regional councils appointed by the Governor that meet periodically and are not responsible to local communities, and create disincentives to businesses that may negate the incentives the State’s economic development programs are intended to provide.” County Administrator Mareane said that the abrupt end-of-session consideration by the State Legislature has commenced with little or no notice to local governments and has prompted serious concern within the economic development community. Legislator Martha Robertson, former chair of the Tompkins County IDA, predicted the regulation, if implemented, with its requirement for additional approvals, would stop deal flow. “What this would mean, I’m sure, is that nobody would ever bring a project to the IDA again,” she said. Legislator Chock said she still needed more time to review the matter and would have supported tabling the measure were there more time before the end of the State legislative session.

Contact: Will Burbank, Chair, Economic Development Committee 272-7555; County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.

Among other business, the Legislature

- Authorized Federal Transit Administration two grant applications and a grant amendment reflecting nearly \$5 million in federal transit funds for transit and mobility management, equipment, facility improvements, as well as purchase of nine replacement buses and ten rural bus shelters.

- Authorized a consultant agreement with C&S Engineers, Inc. in the amount of \$470,700, to be paid through passenger facility charges, for design and bidding services related to a terminal expansion and security improvements at Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport to accommodate new baggage screening equipment and space for Transportation Security Administration (TSA) staff.

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