



Inclusion Through Diversity

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THREE PAGES

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Highlights of the **September 2, 2014** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Administrator Releases 2015 Recommended Budget

Tompkins County Administrator Joe Mareane has delivered to the County Legislature a 2015 Recommended County Budget that preserves County services, fulfills several programmatic goals, and achieves the fiscal goal of remaining within the County's projected property tax cap.

The tentative budget would increase the County property tax levy by 2.34%, adding \$6.34 to the annual tax bill of the average County homeowner. Since the increase falls within the State-imposed property tax cap, that amount of increase would be returned to homeowners by the State under the new property tax freeze law. The recommended budget also includes a 7% reduction in the County solid waste fee. The budget maintains fiscal discipline, with minimal appropriation of County reserves and spending growth held to just 1.6% over 2014.

"The 2015 budget is characterized by continuity and restraint," County Administrator Joe Mareane states in his Budget Message to the Legislature. "Departments have done an admirable job of maintaining services while still complying with budget targets that required a 1% across-the-board cut in non-mandated local costs. The budget allows us to maintain vital services, increase our investment in County infrastructure, and set aside funds for modest wage growth for our employees."

The budget holds the number of employees steady—7% below the peak level of 2009—and addresses several emerging priorities, including temporary relief for the County airport; funding near-term recommendations of the Jail Alternatives Task Force; and continuing to address County living wage goals. The Administrator notes that, again this year, the budget is the product of contradictory trends—while some parts of the budget benefit from a growing economy, effects of the economic recovery have not extended to the demand for human service programs, where mandated expenses remain at a highly elevated level.

The Recommended Budget supports total expenditures of \$180 million (up 1.6%) and local dollar spending of \$83.3 million (an increase of 2.0%). The 2.34% tax levy increase is below the projected 2.65% property tax cap. Because property values are rising faster than the County's tax levy, the 2015 County property tax rate would decline by 5 cents per thousand, to \$6.84 per \$1,000. The combination of a lower tax rate and higher property values will mean that the owner of a \$165,000 median-valued home will pay \$6.34 more in County taxes next year, with the State rebate offsetting that increase. The County Solid Waste Fee also would decrease from \$56 to \$52, reducing the overall budget impact on the average county homeowner to \$2.34.

Regarding labor costs, the budget reflects reduced pension costs resulting from a projected decline in rates for the New York State Employee Retirement System, and a 5% increase in employee health care costs. All of the County's labor contracts will have expired at the end of 2014. Funds have been set aside to settle those contracts. The local cost of mandated programs remains relatively stable—up by 1% from the current year—with the local cost of Medicaid projected to decline. Medicaid will, however, remain the County's largest single program and, at \$11.7 million, and consume 25% of the County's property tax levy. Through the budget, the County continues implementation of plans approved for 2014 that stabilize sponsored and partner agencies, such as Tompkins County Area Development and the Tompkins County Public Library.

Among priority areas addressed in the recommended budget,

- **Basic infrastructure:** Investments in the 5-year Capital Program are targeted to keep existing roads, bridges, and County facilities safe and in good repair. A 0.5% increase in the tax levy is committed to support the County's 20-year Capital Plan.
- **Airport finances:** To stabilize Airport finances and foster measures to improve passenger levels, the budget recommends a three-year suspension of the \$126,000 payment made to the County for administrative services, to be offset by appropriation of reserves and not affecting property taxes.
- **Alternatives to incarceration:** The budget recommends funding of the near-term recommendations of the Jail Alternatives Task Force, including an allocation for an additional staff person at Opportunities, Alternatives, and Resources (OAR) to assist with the bail program and provide additional case management services.
- **Living Wage:** County funds are recommended to bring employees of one contract agency to the AFCU living wage; the Human Services Coalition, as part of the budget, is providing support for another agency to achieve the living wage standard.

The 2015 Recommended Budget is posted on the County website at www.tompkinscountyny.gov (Click on "County Budget and Financial Information.") Public copies are available for review at the County Administration office, 125 East Court Street (3rd Floor), and at the Office of the County Legislature, 121 East Court Street.

County Smoking Law Amended to Include E-Cigarettes

Following a public hearing, the Legislature voted to amend the County law restricting smoking in places of employment, restaurants, and taverns to also include electronic nicotine delivery systems, such as "e-cigarettes." The vote was unanimous (with Legislator Brian Robison excused). The action amends Chapter 72 of the County Code, to include prohibition of such delivery systems anywhere smoking tobacco is currently prohibited. The amendment notes that the as-yet-unregulated devices pose a potential public health risk. At the public hearing before the vote, two spoke in support of the amendment, two people (former smokers who said the devices have been crucial in enabling them to quit) spoke against. Health and Human Services Chair Peter Stein said that, while he believes that "real cigarettes" are a whole lot worse than e-cigarettes, that in considering situations like this, it's most important the effect on those in workspaces and public spaces who don't have a choice of being exposed to such substances, over those who have the choice of whether or not to use them. *Contact: Peter Stein, Chair, Health and Human Services Committee, 266-7579; Frank Kruppa, Director of Public Health, 274-6674.*

Legislature Requests Revision of Property Tax Freeze Look-Back Period

The Legislature, without dissent, asked New York State to revise the "look-back" period associated with the State's property tax freeze legislation. (Legislator Brian Robison was excused.) The Property Tax Freeze Credit reimburses qualified homeowners for increases in local property taxes on their primary residence and, after the first year, requires that taxing jurisdictions, as well as complying with the State property tax cap, also document how they propose to sustain savings equal to at least 1% of its property tax levy.

The measure notes that, while the property tax freeze legislation requires consideration of past efficiencies and does not specify a limit, the State Division of Budget "has chosen to exercise latitude in "an extremely narrow and limited manner," allowing only measures put in place since 2012 to be considered, a restrictive "look-back" period that "ignores the substantial and sustained property tax savings" associated with the many consolidations and shared services programs that Tompkins County, as a leader in shared services, has enacted before that time—such the Greater Tompkins municipal health benefits consortium, countywide assessment, the community college, TCAT, and other programs.

Concurring with the Tompkins Council of Governments that the longer period will afford more municipalities the opportunity to show that savings have been achieved through collaborations such as those sought by the State, the Legislature requests the State to move the "look-back" date to at least the beginning of 2000, so that local governments be rewarded, rather than punished, for initiating consolidations, shared services, and reforms in the past.

Contact: James Dennis, Chair, Budget, Capital and Personnel Committee, 387-4058.

Legislature Urges FCC to Preserve a Neutral Internet

The Legislature, acting on the recommendation of the Government Operations Committee and its Broadband Subcommittee, by unanimous vote (with Brian Robison excused), urged the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to “establish a strong set of rules that provide for a neutral Internet”—coming out against proposed rules that could allow for a tiered Internet and provide telecommunications companies the ability to control the market for Internet bandwidth and maintaining that Internet customers have the right to an Internet that is non-discriminating, or neutral, according to source or destination, and calling a “neutral” Internet vital to those in rural areas such as Tompkins County. More information on the issue can be found at www.tompkinscountyny.gov/news/committee-recommends-county-urge-preservation-neutral-internet, which details discussion before the Government Operations Committee last week.

Contact: Legislator David McKenna, Chair, Broadband Subcommittee, 564-7243.

Among other actions, the Legislature

- Approved more than \$170,000 in certified “rollover” funding, unspent by County departments in the 2012 budget, to support current-year spending.
- Adopted two new policies—regarding acceptable use of County information technology resources and policy regarding the County’s response to any suspected breach of confidential information, in compliance with State and Federal law.
- Authorized acceptance of two Federal grants for Ithaca Tompkins Regional Airport--\$2.5 million for the terminal apron expansion and deicing pad project and nearly \$700,000 for purchase of snow removal equipment.
- Accepted a nearly \$150,000 shared-services grant from the State Archives to the County Clerk’s Office, to support further extension of the County’s digital records management program.

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