



Inclusion Through Diversity

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TWO PAGES

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Highlights of the November 18, 2014 meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Legislature Adopts 2015 Tompkins County Budget

After two months of budget deliberations, the Tompkins County Legislature adopted the County's 2015 budget and its capital program for the next five years. Although there was discussion, the Legislature ended up making no changes to the recommended budget before it was passed.

The \$180.8 million budget, with \$83.5 million in local dollar spending increases the County tax levy by 2.5% and decreases the countywide average tax rate by 0.45%. The recommended tax rate of \$6.86 per thousand represents an increase of \$8.67 for the median-valued \$165,000 home. Since the increase is below the adjusted 3.14% State property tax cap, the amount will be returned to the homeowner under the State's new property tax freeze law. For 2015, the County solid waste fee will also decrease by \$4.00, to \$52.00 per household.

The budget was approved by an 11-2 vote, with Legislators Carol Chock and Dooley Kiefer voting no. Legislator Brian Robison, who is resigning from the Legislature at month's end to become Tompkins County Undersheriff, asked Chair Mike Lane's permission to abstain, to avoid any perception of conflict of interest regarding his vote, in light of his new responsibilities.

Legislator Dooley Kiefer advanced one proposed amendment to the budget, for just over \$2,000 in one-time funding for a one-year trial membership in the National Association of Counties, but that failed to win support by a margin of 6-9—Legislators Chock, Martha Robertson, Will Burbank, Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, and Dan Klein joining her in voting in favor. Legislator Chock expressed some unease about the budget—expressing concern about its conservative financial projections, in areas such as sales tax, and concern that the County is not doing enough and could “stretch some more.”

There was also discussion about language in the adoption resolution that references the levy increase as being below the adjusted tax cap, as defined by New York State—some legislators questioning whether the cap level should be mentioned in a budget that represents local officials' determination of proper levels of spending.

Before budget adoption, Legislators, after discussion, by a vote of 11-3 (Legislators Kiefer, Chock, and dissenting), adopted a new Local Law that repeals the Local Law adopted earlier this year that overrides the State tax cap as part of the 2015 budget. Repeal of the law is required under the State's property tax freeze law for homeowners to qualify for the amount of increase.

After the adoption vote, County Administrator Joe Mareane noted that the adopted budget meets goals set out at the beginning of the budget process—to maintain current levels of service; reinvest in facilities and infrastructure; stabilize the Airport's finances; address emerging goals, such as alternatives-to-incarceration and the living wage; to maintain the County's fiscal health and security; and to try to stay within the tax cap. He expressed deep appreciation to legislators, for their time commitment and “remarkable” approach to the process, to department heads for their hard work and commitment, to Budget Coordinator Kevin McGuire for his meticulous work, and to Budget Chair Jim Dennis for ably navigating the Legislature through the process.

Budget chair Dennis observed that throughout the budget process, “we have been honest in our discussion about what the County faces,” creative in how to get to those solutions, and as an organization that’s in the human services business, “shown compassion and sensitivity to those who are most vulnerable.”

Legislature Chair Mike Lane expressed pride in the County’s budget process, praising the county administrator, chief budget officer, and department heads and staff. He said the budget process “makes Tompkins County the kind of place in which we all want to live.”

Contact: Michael Lane, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434, 844-8313, or 844-8440; James Dennis, Chair, Budget, Capital and Personnel Committee, 387-4058; County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.

Freedom from Domestic Violence Recognized as a Human Right

The Legislature, by unanimous vote approved a resolution declaring freedom from Domestic Violence as a fundamental human right. The measure notes, in part, the pervasive, long-lasting negative effects of domestic violence—transcending individuals of every gender, sexual orientation, race, age, nationality, religion, and economic status, and causing long-lasting effects on its survivors and on children who are exposed to domestic violence—and that Tompkins County law enforcement agencies report an average of 147 victims of domestic violence a year over the past three years. The United Nations has recognized freedom from domestic violence as a human right that affects realization of many other rights and freedoms, and that governments have a responsibility to prevent and respond to such violence.

Through its action, the Legislature joins leaders in the United States and world in recognizing domestic violence as a human right and expresses its intent to raise public awareness of and contribute to better public understanding of the issue in the community; calls upon state and local governments to continue to secure this human right on behalf of their citizens; recognizes that County departments and agencies already have protocols in place that acknowledge and address the multiple problems that arise from domestic violence and strongly supports the continuation of their efforts to eradicate domestic violence in our community; and indicates that the County shall consider participating, together with community partners in study of causes of local domestic violence incidents and of the gaps and barriers in the County’s social service delivery to survivors of domestic violence, with the goals of preventing domestic violence, strengthening the County’s response to domestic violence, and improving the provision of services to survivors.

Legislator Carol Chock said, “Domestic violence is a scourge on society” and the County should do anything it can do to address the problem.

Contact: Brian Robison, Chair, Public Safety Committee, 351-3601

Among other business,

The Legislature heard a presentation from Commissioner of Planning Ed Marx reviewing proposals received for redevelopment of the Old Library site. At its next meeting the Legislature is scheduled to act on whether to release a formal Request for Proposals (RFP) to those prospective developers that had responded to the County’s initial Request for Expressions of Interest. The proposals and the Draft RFP are posted on the County web site at <http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/news/expressions-interest-old-library-site>.

Legislators again thanked departing Legislator Brian Robison at his final meeting before resigning to accept the appointment as Tompkins County Undersheriff. Budget chair Jim Dennis called Robison “a reasonable and common sense voice” and said he will be missed. Legislator Robson expressed appreciation the work the Legislature does and for his fellow legislators—whom he described as a diverse group with different views who thinks about what they are doing, and can disagree on positions without bad feelings. Robison said he has spoken up about what he knows and believes, and what he believes to represent and advocate for those in his district.

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