



Inclusion Through Diversity

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THREE PAGES

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Highlights of the **August 2, 2016** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

#### **Much Deliberation, But No Agreement to Schedule Hearing on Proposed Sheriff Local Law**

Considering the issue during two hours of deliberation, the Tompkins County Legislature failed to yet move forward with scheduling formal public comment on a proposed Local Law that would modify the position of County Sheriff. The Legislature's special Charter Review Committee had recommended adoption of the law that, subject to voter approval, would remove law enforcement responsibilities from the elected position of Sheriff and transfer them to an appointed Commissioner's position under a new county Department of Police, with the Sheriff retaining responsibility for the position's civil functions, including operation of the jail. Any change in the position would not take effect until after the end of the current elective term of Sheriff, as of January 1, 2019. Saying that it's time to bring the issue to a head, Legislature Chair Mike Lane stressed that the action would not do away with an elected sheriff, but would retain some of its functions and establish a county police department led by a Commissioner that would be selected based on professional qualifications.

In a wide-ranging discussion, however, some Legislators questioned that proposed split approach, saying serious consideration should also be given to the other potential alternative that County Attorney Jonathan Wood had advanced at the committee's request, that of changing the Office of Sheriff in total from an elected to an appointed position. The schedule had been to conduct the public hearing August 16<sup>th</sup>, to enable action by the Legislature during the first meeting in September, which would permit the issue to appear on the ballot for the November 6<sup>th</sup> general election. Legislator Martha Robertson expressed frustration that legislators were being asked to make such a major policy decision with more discussion needed and many questions yet to be answered. Legislator Peter Stein also acknowledged the major nature of the decision, saying he is a strong supporter of change, but was not willing to act at this point. Legislator Will Burbank agreed that more discussion is needed, that there should be discussion at the program committee level, and that there is always the option of putting the matter to special election if the general election timetable could not be met. Legislator Mike Sigler maintained he remains opposed to any change from an elected sheriff, saying an elected position is the one of the most important and accountable to the public. Legislator Jim Dennis was one who maintained any appointed position should report to the County Administrator, as do other department heads, and not to the Legislature, as was proposed.

A motion to table, advanced by Legislator Stein, failed by a vote of 6-7 (Legislator Leslyn Mc-Bean-Clairborne excused.) Legislators then considered an amended resolution, which would have supported the approach of scheduling two public hearings on August 16<sup>th</sup>, one on each alternate version of the Local Law. That measure also failed by a 7-6 vote (Legislators Dennis, Rich John, Anna Kelles, Dave McKenna, Glenn Morey, and Sigler voting no), falling short of the required 8-vote majority. The original recommendation, which would have scheduled the hearing on the split-position approach, was then put to a vote, failing to win support by a 3-10 margin, only Legislators Dan Klein, Lane, and Charter Committee Chair Kiefer voting in favor.

Mr. Klein said discussion of the issue will be added to his Government Operations Committee agenda for its August 3<sup>rd</sup> meeting, and Public Safety Chair Stein said his committee will also take up the matter of the Sheriff's position prior to the next Legislature meeting. Legislator Anna Kelles advanced an eleventh-hour motion to reconsider the two-public-hearing option, which again failed 7-6, Legislator Stein changing his earlier vote and

declining to vote in favor. Chair Lane advised that another motion to reconsider may be advanced by another legislator at a future meeting.

*Contact: Dooley Kiefer, Chair, Charter Review Committee, 257-7453; Michael Lane, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434 or 844-8440.*

### **Legislature Chair to Establish Special Jail Study Committee**

Legislature Chair Michael Lane announced that he will form a special Jail Study Committee, which will be charged with examining capacity issues at the Tompkins county Jail, the possibilities to affect capacity through the County's alternatives-to-incarceration programs, how reductions from those programs can be quantified, and how the County might best persuade the State Commission of Corrections to extend the current 18-bed variance. In a letter to Sheriff Ken Lansing, the Commission last month announced its intent to revoke the variance, which would eliminate all double-bunking in cells by September 1, 2016, a development that county officials have cautioned would have a staggering effect on costs.

County Administrator Joe Mareane told Legislators he has prepared a draft resolution for consideration at the Legislature's next meeting, which will call for appropriation of funds to support two studies—a study of population trends for the jail and a study of the architecture that would be needed to accommodate that population. The administrator has asked for Public Safety Chair Peter Stein to convene a special meeting to consider the matter. The goal, Mareane said, is to have the variances continue.

*Contact: Michael Lane, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434, 844-8313, or 844-8440; County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.*

### **Legislature Accepts 2015 County Financial Report**

The Legislature, without dissent, accepted the audited Tompkins County Financial Report for the year 2015, conducted by Insero & Co. CPAs. (Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne was excused.) County Finance Director Rick Snyder provided Legislators a detailed briefing on the Financial Report.

Among the highlights, the report identified no material instances of noncompliance and no material internal control weaknesses at the financial statement level; the County's Unassigned Fund Balance increased by nearly \$5.5 million in 2015, placing it at 18.6% of General Fund Revenues. The County's Transportation (Airport) Fund recorded a net operating gain (revenues over expenses) of more than \$145,000, compared to a net operating loss of nearly \$209,000 for 2014. As of year's end, the County's total outstanding bonded indebtedness stood at \$52.2 million, 11.31% of the County's statutory debt limit.

Legislature Chair Mike Lane praised the report as "a spectacular report, which budget and finance Chair Jim Dennis said represents "an incredible amount of work" by the Finance Director and his staff.

*Contact: Finance Director Rick Snyder, 274-5444; James Dennis, Chair, Budget, Capital and Personnel Committee, 592-3206.*

### **Contingent Funds Allocated to Support Housing Summit**

The Legislature, without dissent allocated \$2,500 from the Contingent Fund to help support the 2016 Tompkins County Housing Summit, a collaborative effort involving a number of individuals and organizations throughout the community, to share information from recent housing studies, such as the County Housing Needs Assessment, and engage a broad cross-section of the public, as well as housing experts, to discussion challenges to meeting local housing needs and developing strategies for meeting those needs. The contingent fund allocation will support a share of the expense of a conference organizer for the event. The Legislature's action also authorizes the County to accept an additional \$7,500 from other organizations and municipalities to fund the remainder of that expense.

*Contact: Martha Robertson, Chair, Planning, Development, and Environmental Quality Committee, 272-0584.*

Among other business:

Public Health Director Frank Kruppa briefed the Legislature on the county's drought condition and the collaborative effort that's being undertaken to address it. He cautioned that the area remains in the middle of a

drought regardless of the recent rain we have received, stressing that we need to receive  $\frac{3}{4}$  to an inch of rain each week, or 6 to 9 inches of rain in total to get out of the drought condition. It remains very important, he stressed, for all to conserve water.

The Legislature authorized acceptance of a \$17,500 grant from an anonymous local foundation to support the Drug Courts of Tompkins County. Probation Director Pat Buechel indicates that the grant money will be used to finance alcohol monitoring services for drug court clients, services for treatment liaisons, and participant rewards and incentives.

The Legislature approved renewal of the five-year lease by the Alcohol and Drug Council of Tompkins County of space on the fifth floor of the County Mental Health Building.

The Legislature authorized the County to execute a supplementary funding agreement with the New York State Department of Transportation covering Coddington Road safety improvements at the Burns Road and East King Road intersections in the Town of Ithaca. The agreement, cover right-of-way expenses, permits reimbursement for expenses up to \$70,600; the County's 2.5% share is expected to be \$1,765.

**- END -**