



Inclusion Through Diversity

Marcia E. Lynch, Public Information Officer  
607-274-5555, Office  
607-227-2152, Cell  
January 17, 2017  
THREE PAGES

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Highlights of the **January 17, 2017** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

#### **Legislature Chair Lane Delivers 2017 Annual Message, Announces 2017 Organizational Structure**

In his annual message before the Tompkins County Legislature, Legislature Chair Michael Lane called 2017, the County's Bicentennial Year, "a year of reflection, a year of hope, and a year of action" –a year to look back at our heritage and historic diversity, and to look ahead during the last year of the Legislature's four-year term, with an election coming in November. "In a year of transition and facing unknown challenges, we have hope and we are strong," he said. "We are a diverse county, full of forward-looking, intelligent and passionate people," Mr. Lane observed. Acknowledging the disappointment and apprehension many in Tompkins County feel after the national election, Mr. Lane stated, "We do know, however, that the bitterly divisive rhetoric at the national level does not reflect who we are in Tompkins County and does not reflect the values that we work hard to promote." In referencing the many elements of the county's diversity, Mr. Lane said, "We are new people from everywhere in the world. And when new arrivals come to Tompkins County and contribute to our society, we welcome them. We don't build walls to keep people out; we open our hearts to let them in... We are part of that hope that has always been our America."

Mr. Lane said there will be challenges, and that there is work to be done—in part, how to respond to Federal Government changes to the health care system. "The likelihood that people in Tompkins County will be harmed by unknown partisan changes is very real," he said. "We do not know how those changes will affect the Medicaid costs that our County must pay. With sales tax collections plateauing, there is little doubt we will be forced to raise more money than we want to from the real property tax." At the State level, he said, the financial pressure imposed by state mandates, such as the huge cost of Medicaid and increasing costs for indigent defense, remains a significant challenge. "New York State hypocritically blames local municipalities for the high cost of real property taxes, and imposes tax caps that are unrealistic," he said. "But this is Tompkins County—the very best county—and we will face the unknown with resolve. We will not be quiet and the Legislature, as it has done in the past, will not be shy about letting its advice and opinions be known to federal and state officials. Where reasonable and rational action is warranted we will take it."

Chair Lane announced *2017 organizational structure and leadership appointments*. Much will remain the same, with six standing committees—Budget, Capital, and Personnel; Facilities and Infrastructure; Government Operations; Health and Human Services; Planning, Development, and Environmental Quality; and Public Safety. There are only a couple of leadership changes—Anna Kelles will become chair of Health and Human Services and Rich John chair of Public Safety, with last year's committee chairs (Leslyn McBean-Clairborne and Peter Stein respectively) moving to committee vice chair positions. Jim Dennis will continue as chair of the budget committee; Dave McKenna as chair of Facilities and Infrastructure; Dan Klein leading Government Operations (with Mr. McKenna chairing its Broadband Subcommittee); and Martha Robertson continuing to chair Planning, Development, and Environmental Quality. Three Special Committees will continue with the same leadership—Chair Lane chairing the Transportation and Old Library Committees, and Mr. John leading the Jail Study Committee. Legislator McBean-Clairborne will remain chair of the Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Committee, with Legislator Kelles serving as vice chair. Jim Dennis will continue to chair the Tompkins County Industrial Development Agency, with Legislators Will Burbank, Robertson, and John continuing and reappointment of Grace Chiang also recommended on the IDA.

Mr. Lane also paid tribute to County employees, saying, “Whatever work we Tompkins County Legislators do pales by comparison to the exemplary job that our wonderful employees do for the people of our county. We owe a constant debt of gratitude for the hard work they perform every day, and every night.”

Mr. Lane concluded: “As Tompkins County proceeds into its third century we must all work together. This year, as every year, we will work hard, we will debate, and we will do business. We are the peoples’ team. And if on occasion we should get something wrong, I promise that it will never be because we did not do our very best to get it right.”

Mr. Lane’s full message is posted on the Legislature website at [www.tompkinscountyny.gov/files/legislature/2017%20Organization%20Remarks.pdf](http://www.tompkinscountyny.gov/files/legislature/2017%20Organization%20Remarks.pdf)  
*Contact: Michael Lane, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434 or 844-8440.*

### **Legislature Approves County Charter Amendments**

The Legislature, by a vote of 9-5, adopted a new Local Law amending the County Charter, the action concluding more than two years of painstaking review by the Legislature’s special Charter Review Committee. (Legislators Mike Sigler, Peter Stein, Carol Chock, Dave McKenna, and Glenn Morey voted no.) Before the vote, there was some discussion of a change that had been initially proposed, but ultimately was not approved, related to the powers of the Mental Health Services Board when it comes to selecting a commissioner.

Among significant recommended changes to the Charter: changing the County’s four public works divisions—Highway, Facilities, Airport, and Solid Waste—to County departments; modifying the designation of the Planning Department and its Commissioner to the Department/Commissioner of Planning and Sustainability; changing the name of the Personnel Department to the Department of Human Resources and Solid Waste to the Department of Recycling and Materials Management; addressing the timing of special elections for vacancies; and codifying as part of the Charter an Independent Redistricting Committee, as was employed in redistricting following the 2010 Census.

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

### **County Administrator Expresses Concern About Governor’s Property Tax Proposal**

County Administrator Joe Mareane briefed Legislators on Governor Cuomo’s latest proposal to cut local property taxes, announced last week, one that would call for counties to submit a plan to the voters next fall that would save real, recurring cost savings through inter-municipal consolidations, shared services, and efficiencies. The administrator cautioned that the County in the coming weeks will need to determine how to respond.

In his opinion, Mareane said the proposal appears rushed and heavy-handed, and once again mistakenly blames local government waste, inefficiency, and duplication of services for high property taxes—that the real reason for high property taxes is, in fact, the State and its many unfunded mandates, the largest of them Medicaid. He said many questions about the Governor’s proposal remain to be answered, and cautioned the issue will dominate much of the time over the next several months.

*Contact: County Administrator Joe Mareane, 274-5551.*

### **Zee Zahava Named Tompkins County Poet Laureate for 2017**

Legislature Chair Michael Lane announced the appointment of Zee Zahava as Tompkins County Poet Laureate for 2017. The position of Tompkins County Poet Laureate was established by the Legislature to honor local outstanding poets, integrate poetry into the community, enrich the education of our young people, and enhance the County’s position as a cultural center. The selection and announcement of the Poet Laureate is administered by the Community Arts Partnership (CAP).

Zee has been actively involved in the literary life of Ithaca for the past 35 years — advocating for writers of all ages by organizing public readings, leading writing workshops, and producing print and on-line publications, helping to create programs promoting awareness of the written and spoken word. Zahava was owner of Smedley’s Bookshop; then outreach librarian for the Durland Alternatives Library (and director of its downtown

branch); and now as the director of her own writing studio on West State Street. Over the years, she has led many different kinds of writing workshops, organized dozens of group and solo readings throughout the county, hosted writing circles for teens and adults, and served as editor of numerous literary publications. Her own stories and poems have appeared in many online journals and publications. Find her work on her blog: <http://zeezahava.blogspot.com/>

“2017 is going to be a challenging year for us,” the new Poet Laureate notes. “Staying connected with one another, building bonds of community, recognizing and celebrating all expressions of artistic spirit — these things will inspire us, strengthen us, and enliven us. I plan to dedicate my efforts to bringing people together to share their stories, to listen deeply to one another, and to be enriched by one another. It will be an honor to be allowed to pursue these intentions as the Tompkins County Poet Laureate.”

*Contact: Michael Lane, Chair of the Legislature, 274-5434 or 844-8440; John Spence, Executive Director, Community Arts Partnership, 273-5072, ext. 19, or [director@artspartner.org](mailto:director@artspartner.org).*

Among other business,

County Finance Director Rick Snyder reported that 2016 County sales tax receipts were down by 0.56% (\$186,862) compared to 2015. Receipts were more than \$860,000 below what had been projected in the 2016 budget. Tompkins was one of 18 counties in the state that showed losses. Examining what could be one potential factor, he County expects to ask the State Comptroller’s Office for a state audit of Internet sales in the county. Administrator Joe Mareane said he questions how Tompkins County can have what is probably the most robust economy in Upstate New York and experience these sales tax numbers.

The Legislature, in this year’s version of an action taken every two years since 1992, requested that the County’s State legislative delegation sponsor and support legislation extending the authority of the County Legislature to extend the additional one percent local sales tax beyond its expiration at the end of November 2017, to provide local property tax relief. It is noted that expiration of the one-percent tax would cost the County approximately \$11 million in revenue.

The Legislature discussed, but failed to approve an amendment to the Rules of the Legislature that would have encouraged Legislators to limit remarks during Legislators’ Privilege of the Floor to three minutes, to match the time accorded to members of the public. The measure failed by a 7-7 tie vote, Legislators Mike Sigler, Jim Dennis, Dooley Kiefer, Dan Klein, Dave McKenna, Glenn Morey, and Chair Mike Lane voting no.

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