



Inclusion Through Diversity

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April 16, 2019  
TWO PAGES

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Highlights of the **April 16, 2019** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

#### **County to Purchase North Tioga Street Property**

The Tompkins County Legislature has approved purchase of property located a block away from the County's Courthouse Complex, as the potential site of a new County office building and associated parking. The Legislature, by a vote of 12-2 (Legislators Leslyn McBean-Clairborne and Henry Granison dissenting), authorized the County to exercise its purchase option and acquire the adjoining parcels for a purchase price of \$1.8 million.

The properties, located at 408 and 412-414 N. Tioga, 111, 113, 117 and 119 Sears Street, over the past few months have been the focus of a feasibility study analysis, assisted by HOLT Architects, to assess whether and how the property might meet the County's office space and parking needs. There is also the potential to subdivide to return residential development to the Sears Street side of the property.

The Legislature approved three related resolutions that

- Declared a negative determination of environmental significance based on findings in the project's full Environmental Assessment;
- Indicated that the action meets "public interest test" criteria specified by the New York State Court of Appeals, exempting it from local land use regulations; and
- Authorized acquisition of the property and amend the 2019-2023 Capital Plan and budget to incorporate the acquisition. That resolution states that the Legislature has determined that the N. Tioga property "is the best option for a new office building site where multiple offices could be consolidated at a single location."

Legislators McBean-Clairborne and Granison cast negative votes on all three resolutions.

Prior to the votes, Legislators heard from a half-dozen residents, most expressing support for inclusion of affordable housing on the site, and urging that the County in construction of any office building project to be sensitive to and mindful of the scaling and scope of the project, as well as the aesthetics of the neighborhood. Several expressed concern about a potential four-story option, noting that most structures in the neighborhood are two stories. City of Ithaca Common Council members Seph Murtagh, Ducson Nguyen, and Laura Lewis also spoke at length with Legislators, Alderperson Murtagh noting that Council passed a resolution asking the Legislature to honor the request for housing on Sears Street. He and the other members of Council expressed appreciation for all the effort the County has devoted to informing and collaborating with the City and neighborhood as this proposed project has come forward. There was also discussion of a critical letter received only today from the City's Historic Preservation Planner, Bryan McCracken, expressing concern about the County's purchase of the properties, and the impact he said that ensuing development could have on designated historic resources within the DeWitt Park Historic District. Mr. Murtagh noted, "Bryan is speaking for himself, and that should be clear."

Legislator Rich John, who represents the neighborhood on the Legislature, also thanked the City lawmakers for all they have done to communicate with people in the neighborhood. "I am hopeful that this process at the end

of the day will serve as an example of how we can work together,” he said. But Mr. John, prior to the final acquisition vote, also stated that the vote was very difficult for him. While he believes this is an important pursuit for the County, and to have offices connected and in a central location, he indicated that he is committed to housing on Sears Street and, with design and site features not the issue at this point, he needs to trust his colleagues, and pledged that he will be adamant in pushing that the project be done “in the right way.” Legislator Anna Kelles, who represents the adjoining Fall Creek neighborhood and also noted that she is also a strong supporter of residential housing on Sears Street, said the eventual challenge will be how to weigh all the factors, and thanked her colleagues for seriously considering the housing option.

Legislature Chair Martha Robertson stressed that the current action is just about purchasing the land. There will be plenty of time to work with staff and the community to do the right thing, she said. Legislator Amanda Champion cautioned that she is not really sure that there is a ‘right thing.’ “I think we should buy this property as well, but I can’t tell what this will look like,” she said. “We do have to think of the people who work here, and need to drive in and park here,” she said. Legislator Granison said supported an extension in the County’s four-month option before purchase was considered.

County Administrator Jason Molino has told the Legislature that the N. Tioga property can easily support a new building of sufficient size to meet the County’s present and future needs, and that the County can financially support the project as part of its capital plan. Chair Robertson said she will appoint a special legislative committee to work with staff on further study toward potential development on the site and what form it could take. Ten alternate scenarios are currently before the Legislature, all of which would serve to consolidate a number of scattered downtown County offices into a single location (either a three- or four-story office building), and increase parking options, with possible development of as many as five units of affordable housing along Sears Street.

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Among other business,

The Legislature authorized submittal of an application for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds for 2019 through the New York State Housing Trust Fund and Office of Community Renewal. The County will apply for up to \$1 million to support rehabilitation of 26 homes owned by low- to moderate-income county residents, in the third iteration of the County’s Healthy Homes Rehabilitation Program.

The Legislature authorized acceptance of a \$60,000 grant from the NYS Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services to the Mental Health Department to fund medication-assisted treatment for substance-use disorders at the Tompkins County Jail. The one-time grant funds will be used for additional Psychiatrist hours, medication, and training in the jail.

As recommended by the Governance Council of the Tompkins Center for History and Culture, the Legislature approved addition of the Latino Civic Association of Tompkins County as a potential Licensee of the Center, to participate in the Center as a non-voting partner (not a tenant), subject to signing of a License Agreement.

The Legislature altered its schedule of meetings for 2019, approving cancellation of the July 2, 2019 County Legislature meeting.

**- END -**