

Highlights of the July 6th, 2021 meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

Legislature Gathers In-Person Following 16 Months in Virtual Format

Vice Chairwoman Shawna Black (D-Ithaca) thanked County staff for managing the past year of virtual meetings and for instituting a hybrid (online and in-person) approach quickly following the lifting of the New York State Executive Order allowing remote meetings on Zoom. Black shared that more information is to come on the topic of how meetings may be available via Zoom or YouTube in the future, noting that the discussion will continue at the upcoming Government Operations Committee meeting on August 5th.

Members of the public are now able to join the Legislature in-person for full Legislature or committee meetings. As virtual options for public comment are made available, Tompkins County will communicate that information with the public. For more information on public comment, visit: <https://www2.tompkinscountyny.gov/legislature/publiccomment>

Legislators Hear Presentation on Economic Recovery Strategy

Heather McDaniel, President of Ithaca Area Economic Development joined the meeting to present on the recently developed Economic Recovery Strategy. McDaniel highlighted economic impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic including data clarifying that the number of people gainfully employed or looking for work in the Ithaca area has declined by 2,200 individuals since the beginning of 2020, as one indicator of the challenges the economy will face getting back to the pre-pandemic normal.

The strategy is organized in three phases of recovery: response, stabilization, and redevelopment and revitalization. The response section of the strategy occurred during the beginning of the pandemic and focused on immediate relief, the stabilization phase highlights actions over the past year to save jobs and provide resources to at-risk businesses and increase consumer confidence, and the redevelopment and revitalization phase was referred to as what comes next – actions focused on targeted business sectors, workforce development, and infrastructure. McDaniel detailed the local sectors that need additional revitalization, including small local businesses, the tourism and hospitality industry, in-person office businesses, and manufacturing companies. McDaniel highlighted the to-be-constructed conference center as another key tool for revitalizing the local economy.

Legislator Anne Koreman (D-Ulysses) thanked McDaniel and suggested a further focus on supporting small businesses, noting that they often grow into larger businesses and are frequently employers of a more diverse employee base, “let’s go forward and make sure those who were underrepresented or underemployed are put in the front so we can build back our system better.” Koreman also suggested a further prioritization on rural communities outside of the City of Ithaca. The suggestion to focus more on rural communities was echoed by Legislator Mike Lane (D-Dryden), he stated “the other villages and rural areas are entitled to grow as well.” McDaniel stated that their programs are designed to support

the entire County. Legislator Leslie Schill (D-Ithaca) said “when we bring together new industry, infrastructure, and housing, they start to cluster and attract more businesses, visitors, residents, and jobs.” Schill continued, “We have to think about mitigating impacts, a lot of people have to drive through the City and we’ll need to invest properly in infrastructure to support this.” Legislator Martha Robertson (D-Dryden) added that by strengthening our nodes (areas with higher density or better infrastructure throughout the County), the community makes best use of all infrastructure for sustainable growth.

Among Other Business

\$573,000 was appropriated from the County’s 2021 contingent fund to support tourism promotion. The resolution references the specifically dire impact faced by the tourism industry and that this amount helps to make up for lost revenues for organizations supporting that industry. Legislator Dan Klein (D-Danby) noted that this amount is a significant amount of the budgeted contingent fund before the appropriation was approved unanimously (Legislators McBean-Clairborne, Morey, and John were excused).

Interim County Administrator Lisa Holmes shared that progress continues on the Reimagining Public Safety Plan, with the positions to staff the Community Justice Center to be posted for recruiting applicants in the coming weeks.

Holmes also announced that Daniel Nolan will be joining County Administration this month as Budget Director. Nolan was most recently the Manager of Capital Finance for the New York Public Library. Legislators thanked outgoing budget preparation-lead, Kevin McGuire and wished him well in his next endeavors.

Public Health Director Frank Kruppa and Deputy County Administrator Amie Hendrix gave an update on the local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, outlining that active cases are down to single digits and vaccination rollout continues via pop-up clinics in rural areas and with community partners. Following a presentation of the dramatic increase in website traffic of the Health Department website, Legislator Leslie Schill (D-Ithaca) inquired as to what the Health Department plans to communicate with the larger audience that has been developed. Kruppa responded that substance abuse, mental health, and other health department programming will be key focuses moving forward.

Kruppa detailed the recent successes of a “Public Health Ambassador” program, which brought on individuals with lived experience as staff members to do outreach and support focused on high-risk and marginalized communities, stating “we saw good success, we heard from many people getting vaccinated that having someone talk to folks about vaccines really made an impact.” Kruppa noted that the Health Department is looking to make this a more sustainable program, establishing a team of people in the department who will help reach the community in a more organized and ongoing fashion, focusing on immigrants, communities of color, and other marginalized or underserved groups. Kruppa shared that the current version of the program is supported by grant funding and that he will be bringing forward a request to further the program in the upcoming 2022 budget.

