

Highlights of the October 12 & 13, 2021 meeting of the Expanded Budget Committee of the Tompkins County Legislature

Tompkins County Legislature Begins Voting on Recommended 2022 Budget, Approves All Member-Filed Amendments

During two meetings of the expanded budget committee of the whole Legislature, Legislators considered and voted on several member filed amendments to the Interim County Administrator's recommended 2022 County budget. Legislator Deborah Dawson (D-Lansing) gave opening comments remarking on the deliberations to come and encouraging all Legislators to listen to one another and disagree without being disagreeable.

Interim Tompkins County Administrator Lisa Holmes gave an overview of available unassigned fund balance to inform the process of assessing the over-target requests. Holmes outlined that at the close of 2020 the fund balance was \$47.9 million, this year the known withdrawals from the fund balance bring that figure down to \$41.6 million, and with what's targeted for use in the 2022 recommended budget the figure decreases to \$36.8 million. In 2021 fund balance has been used to balance the 2020 budget, for pandemic-induced impacts and is budgeted for use in 2022 for Capital Program recommendations, upcoming one-time and contingency requests, and the purchase of the Tioga Street properties and improvements to the public safety building. The fund balance estimates are expected to change based on revenues being greater than anticipated in 2021.

Member-Filed Amendments

Member-filed amendments are budget items considered one-by-one outside of funding in the recommended budget. The impacts of these member-filed amendments will result in changes to the tax levy and/or fund balance. Prior to the consideration of the member-filed amendments the recommended tax levy increase was 2.7%, representing a \$42 increase in taxes for a median priced home in Tompkins County (\$205,000). Following the amendments the tax levy was adjusted to 1.6%, or a \$22.46 increase of the median priced home's tax bill over the previous year. This totals \$1,265 in taxes on a median priced home.

Amendments considered and approved by the Legislature included the following:

An amendment was proposed by Legislators Dan Klein (D-Danby), Shawna Black (D-Ithaca), Deborah Dawson (D-Lansing), Leslyn McBean-Clairborne (D-Ithaca), Anne Koreman (D-Ulysses), Mike Sigler (R-Lansing), and Glenn Morey (R-Groton) that would draw from the County's fund balance to cover all proposed levy increases. It was approved 11-2, with Legislators Mike Lane (D-Dryden) and Martha Robertson (D-Dryden) in opposition and McBean-Clairborne excused, following an amendment to the proposal brought forth by Legislator Koreman to set the amount to be withdrawn at \$1 million. Legislator Klein stated that the original amendment would bring the tax levy to 0%, reducing the 2.7% levy increase in the recommended budget, and any further expenses added to the budget by member filed amendment. Legislator Black added that the "idea of recovery funds was to invest in our community, the way I see we can help the most amount of people is by approving this amendment. For homeowners whose assessment stays the same their tax bill would stay the same." The original amendment equaled around \$1.56 million. Interim Administrator Holmes stated that this would delay the increase in the tax levy to a future year, and could have a compounding effect. In opposition to the

amendment, Legislator Mike Lane (D-Dryden) stated that “it’s the job of elected bodies to keep tax increases reasonably low,” adding that this doesn’t give a break to everyone, as many residents of Tompkins County are renters who wouldn’t get a property tax break from this proposal. The amended proposal recommending a limit of \$1 million was estimated to result in a 1% increase to the levy before the consideration of further member-filed amendments.

An amendment for a local match for capital improvements and deferred maintenance at Tompkins Cortland Community College totaling \$310,000 was brought forth by Legislators Dawson, Schill, and Lane and approved by a vote of 12-1, with Legislator Granison opposed and Legislator McBean-Clairborne excused. Legislators remarked that this is an investment in the college which is a property shared by Tompkins and Cortland Counties. An amendment brought forth by Legislator Dawson to fund the second and third years of TC3’s workforce and career development pilot program totaling \$220,500 was approved unanimously.

An amendment calling for \$199,656 in funding to cover the first of three years of development of “Sunflower Houses” through Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services, Ultimate Reentry Opportunity, and Opportunities Alternatives and Resources was offered by Legislators Robertson, Granison, Black, Schill, John, and Koreman. The funding will support capital improvements to affordable housing and programming expenses and operations to support those who are returning from incarceration. The amendment passed unanimously, 14-0. Several Legislators discussed the impending “Recovery Fund,” with some stating that requests like this would be better served through that fund once details are codified. According to Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services Executive Director Johanna Anderson, the plan is for these housing units to be occupied starting December first of this year. Legislator John, who chairs the Public Safety Committee stated that New York State has a 65% failure rate for individuals on parole, indicating that this proposal would deliver value for those in need and reentering from incarceration. An amendment from Legislator Black to fund this now and leverage funds from the to-be-determined local “Recovery Fund” that would be decreased by this proposal’s amount passed unanimously, with years two and three set to come from fund balance following an amendment moved by Legislator Granison and approved 13-1 (Legislator McBean-Clairborne dissenting).

An amendment for \$100,000 to run a County organization-wide compensation study was member-filed by Legislators Dawson, McBean-Clairborne, and Black. The amendment passed unanimously, 14-0. Legislators spoke to the fact that this has been planned for a few years but was delayed due to the pandemic.

Legislator Rich John brought forth an amendment in support of a Career Pathways collaborative effort to address employment for those most marginalized in Tompkins County. Several agencies work together in conjunction with Cornell Cooperative Extension to administer this program and support individuals. The amendment totals \$85,000 and was passed 13-1 with Legislator Granison opposed.

An amendment in support of a resource navigator program addressing health equity in conjunction with Cornell Cooperative Extension and other community partners was passed 10-2, with Legislators Granison and Dawson opposed (Legislators McBean-Clairborne and McKenna were excused).

An amendment was proposed by Legislators Robertson, Granison, and Koreman to initiate a study of county-wide code enforcement. The amendment passed 13-1, with Legislator Glenn Morey voting in opposition.

Additional amendments were passed to increase in the stipend for the County Historian, funding for advisory board priorities, support for local emergency responder subscription to a service called “ES Chat” that would allow first responders’ cell phones to act as radio communications,

and support for the County’s Poet Laureate.

A \$70,000 amendment filed by Legislator Robertson restoring COVID-related funding to the Tompkins County Human Services Coalition was proposed and approved 13-0 with Legislator McBean-Clairborne excused. Executive Director of the Coalition, Kathy Schlather joined to share the state of the organization and the increased demands on programs offered resulting in this ask for restored funding. Legislators Robertson and Dawson spoke highly of the work the Coalition does to serve Tompkins County residents.

An amendment passed 11-2 (Legislators Granison and Sigler opposed and Legislator McBean-Clairborne excused) to continue support of Building Access to Childcare Coordinator position at the Child Development Council for \$50,000. It was moved by Legislator Shawna Black. Black added context about the goals of this position and how it has shifted throughout the pandemic. The amendment would move the support to future target funding. Executive Director of the Council, Melissa Perry spoke about the current state of access to childcare in Tompkins County, and that this position focuses on building individual relationships with providers to help them grow, accept funding from the state and federal government, and navigate regulations. Perry added that there are currently 1,396 slots in Tompkins County in licensed and regulated childcare settings, indicating that it is severely below the community’s need – there are 3.5 children in the County for every available slot.

Legislators Robertson and Granison offered an amendment in support of LawNY’s program to address housing concerns of their clients facing eviction or the threat of eviction and/or homelessness. LawNY’s program helps connect individuals with resources and options to keep them housed before an eviction issue arises. Following an amendment from Legislator Granison which was approved 12-1 (Legislator Lane opposed, Legislator McBean-Clairborne excused), the support was set as ongoing target funding. LawNY Executive Director Keith McCafferty joined the meeting to discuss the program and to detail the situations many community members and landlords find themselves in and the increasing need for these services. The amendment was approved 12-1 (Legislator Lane opposed, Legislator McBean-Clairborne excused).

An amendment filed by Legislators Robertson, Koreman, McKenna, Morey, and Sigler for \$15,000 in support of rural libraries was passed 13-0 (Legislator McBean-Clairborne was excused). The support brings the libraries up to the funding level expected sans-pandemic.

An amendment proposed by Legislators Koreman, Schill, John, McKenna, and Robertson to fund \$130,000 for the Finger Lakes ReUse Center each year for three years was passed 11-2 (Legislators Granison and Dawson opposed). The funding would support the Center in lieu of previous support contributed via a contract by the County’s Recycling and Materials Management department which has been cut due to changes in the recycling commodities market. Legislator John remarked that this funding is important because the County has been a long-standing partner of Re-Use and has leveraged the partnership to meet expectations for waste reduction. Legislator Robertson spoke to the materials on offer by ReUse and how they impact the community. An amendment offered by Legislator Klein was approved that will fund the first year of this from the to-be-developed “Recovery Fund.” Executive Director of the ReUse Center Diane Cohen joined the meeting to discuss the challenges faced by the

Center, including that donations have skyrocketed and there are tons of materials on hand, while revenues haven't grown at the same level, and that the organization is assessing how best to move forward while continuing to provide important and growing job training and employment programs.