Inclusion Through Diversity

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Committee Listens to Public Comment as Part of Jail Study

The Legislature's special Jail Study Committee tonight led a public discussion on the issue of capacity at the Tompkins County Jail. At the public information meeting, consultants from the Center for Governmental Research (CGR), described the criminal justice and jail population trend analysis they are conducting on behalf of the County, and members of the public were invited to comment and ask questions.

Close to 50 people attended the meeting and nearly half of them spoke. None of the speakers supported building additional jail capacity, maintaining that the County should instead invest in additional programs and services, as alternatives-to-incarceration, and should focus on the root causes of why people are in jail and ways to keep people out of jail, and if they have been incarcerated, how to keep them from returning.

The County Legislature initiated the jail study process last fall, after the New York State Commission of Correction announced its intent to revoke the Jail's long-standing 18-bed variance that has allowed the Jail to operate above its 82-bed capacity. While the variance has been temporarily reinstated, the action has forced the County to consider how to respond, including the possibility of building additional jail capacity. At the beginning of the meeting, Committee Chair Rich John stressed, "The committee has not written its report…At this time, we are trying to listen and learn."

Principals of CGR described their criminal justice system review currently in progress and expected to be completed this spring, noting that Tompkins County is a leader among comparable counties in limiting jail population. CGR's study includes such factors as analyzing the jail population and trends; assessing demographic trends and crime patterns and their future impact; and examining the County's many current ATI programs. CGR's Don Pryor said that while no conclusions have been reached at this early stage, he expects the outcome will involve the need to invest additional resources to address the problem.

One of the first to speak, Ithaca College professor and criminal justice advocate Paula Ionade remarked that the moment of crisis concerning the variance is actually a moment of opportunity for the County to be a "path-breaking leader" regarding ATI programs, rather than incarceration. Speakers, some of them who were once incarcerated themselves, maintained it is programs and services that are needed— such as emergency mental health, alcohol and drug treatment, and job training—and that there must be a focus on larger societal issues (such as schools, the economy, and racism) contributing to incarceration. Several also called for bail reform to help reduce the jail population.

Members of the committee expressed appreciation to those who voiced opinions, among those members Legislator Jim Dennis, who said, "I think we have a lot of things to look at, and we will do that…The County is under constant pressure by the Commission of Correction on our overcrowding, and we have to deal with that…I hope we come back with a result that is satisfactory to some."

To remain informed and involved, residents are encouraged to visit the project website at www.cgr.org/TompkinsCrimJust, which may also be accessed through the County website (www.TompkinsCountyNY.gov – see "Popular Links: Tompkins County Jail Population Study"). At the site, visitors can sign up to receive email alerts as new information is added and can email the study team with comments and questions.

A video file of the public information meeting may be viewed through the Tompkins County Meeting Portal on the County website—direct link: http://tompkinscountyny.iqm2.com/Citizens/Default.aspx (Click on "January 19, 2016 Jail Study Committee meeting: Media.")

Contact: Richard John, Chair, Jail Study Committee, 256-9794

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