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THREE PAGES

Inclusion Through Diversity

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

### Highlights of the **March 17th, 2020** meeting of the Tompkins County Legislature

#### **Legislature Discusses COVID-19 Crisis; Recognizes Work of County Staff**

Legislature Chair Leslyn McBean-Clairborne (D-Ithaca) opened Tuesday night's meeting by recognizing it was taking place under very different circumstances. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and Governor Cuomo's Executive Order to suspend the Open Meeting laws, there was no in-person attendance allowed to the public. The proceedings were shown live over Government Access TV and live streamed on the Tompkins County website. Members of the public were invited to submit questions and comments beforehand.

Legislators practiced social distancing of their own, with two legislators (Martha Robertson and Amanda Champion) calling in from home and the others present separating themselves by four to six feet.

Both County Administrator Jason Molino and Public Health Director Frank Kruppa provided updates to the Legislature on the COVID-19 crisis and the County's response to it. Molino called the pandemic "unprecedented," and unlike other emergencies, "we can't necessarily see what the future holds, or when it will end. We're in the very early stages of our response, and it will most certainly ramp up as we move forward."

Kruppa explained to legislators the process used to test for a suspected case of COVID-19 and responded to complaints from some in the public that not enough information is being shared about positive cases. "It's a matter of protecting one's privacy," said Kruppa. As of Tuesday night, there had been three positive cases of coronavirus in Tompkins County.

During the more than one hour of discussion on COVID-19, legislators praised Molino and Kruppa for the leadership shown during the health crisis, and recognized the hard work of county staff, some of whom have been reassigned to the Emergency Operations Center.

Legislator Shawna Black asked whether the County was considering a curfew or countywide quarantine. Administrator Molino said that "we're not at that point yet," and stated that for a such an action to be most effective, it should come from the State.

Molino told legislators the County has been tracking its costs related to the COVID-19 response, adding the impact to the budget "remains to be seen."

In line with the Governor's order to reduce municipal workforces by 50% for the next two weeks, Molino said the County has been able to reach 60% in reductions. While details are still being worked out and will be released Wednesday morning, Molino said many departments will have reduced hours to the public, or by appointment only. All employees affected by the workforce reductions will be paid during that time period.

Chair McBean-Clairborne closed the discussion with a plea to the public in the wake of reports that some in the Asian-American community have been harassed or threatened. "Please be sensitive," she said. "Stop that behavior, and if you see it...interrupt it and provide support to those being harassed." The coronavirus outbreak began in Wuhan City in the Hubei province of China.

*Contact: Jason Molino, County Administrator, 607-274-5551; Frank Kruppa, Public Health Director, 607-274-6674; Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, Legislature Chair, 607-277-5104*

### **Legislature Casts Key Vote on Proposed Community Conference Center Project**

The Legislature voted 10-4 (with Legislators Glenn Morey, Shawna Black, Amanda Champion and Henry Granison voting no) in favor of a resolution committing to financial terms between the City of Ithaca and Tompkins County in support of a community conference center. The center would be part of the Green Street Garage redevelopment project in downtown Ithaca.

In supporting the project, the Legislature agreed to commit 4% of the county's hotel room occupancy tax revenues each year until 2050, or until such time the space is no longer used as a conference center. Housing and Economic Development Committee Chair Anna Kelles (D-Ithaca) recognized the current COVID-19 crisis will create a financial strain, but she urged her colleagues to look toward the future. Noting the project won't start for another three years, Kelles said "This is an opportunity to help boost the room tax revenue by drawing more visitors for meetings and conferences." She added the County would not be taking on the risk for the project.

In the discussion prior to the vote, Legislator Henry Granison countered, "It is all about risk," pointing to studies of the Saratoga Springs conference center that showed operating expenses doubled that of revenue generated. He said he didn't see any downside should the project not move forward, as more affordable housing would take the conference center's place on the site.

Legislator Shawna Black said it's "the hardest vote she's had to make" during her two and a half years on the Legislature. Citing the uncertainty around COVID-19, Black said she's voting 'no' because the timing doesn't feel right for her.

Legislator Rich John said "We have to look beyond COVID-19, and look at the long-term economic health of the County."

Legislator Deborah Dawson said that while she is "not a big fan of the conference center...I don't think it's the magic bullet everyone claims it to be," she will support the resolution because of how the business community and the local hospitality and tourism industry believe the project is badly needed.

*Contact: Anna Kelles, Chair, Housing and Economic Development Committee, 607-342-2036; Jason Molino, County Administrator, 607-274-5551*

Among other business:

The Legislature voted 11-3 (Legislators Mike Sigler, Glenn Morey and Dave McKenna voting no) to update the County's Administrative Policy Manual to prohibit the possession of weapons, explosives and firearms on County property. Legislator Sigler (R-Lansing) said he couldn't understand why the policy was even being considered, adding "we should not prevent our own employees from defending themselves should they feel threatened."

Legislature Chair McBean-Clairborne read a proclamation celebrating Women's History Month and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment giving women the right to vote (1920 was the first year a woman could vote in a federal election).

**- END -**