

Tompkins County Legislature

Organizational Remarks by Chair, Michael Lane

January 19, 2016

Now in its 199th year, Tompkins County sets a high bar as a leader among its county peers for policies and programs that are intelligent, innovative, compassionate and essential for its residents and for the people who find employment here. As we have rocketed into the 21st century, we are working purposefully to improve our local economy, and in partnership with our city, towns and villages, striving to help make people's lives a little better. The work is incomplete. Too many people still struggle with the high cost of living. Housing of all kinds is in short supply and even so-called affordable housing may be too expensive for many. As we have spent considerable effort over the last fifteen years to help revitalize Ithaca, our county seat, we have not been so vigilant about assisting our rural towns and villages to achieve their significant potential for economic development. While we should in no way diminish our support for our city, it is time that we begin to pay more attention to the outlying areas.

2016 will be a challenging year. While the Governor and the State Legislature propose spending millions of dollars of money for their own new pet projects, the tax cap imposed by them on local governments, coupled with the ever present high cost of state mandated programs, continues a multi-year thrust against genuine home rule for local governments, while feeding a top-down, personality-driven, autocracy at the state level. Already some of our own local state legislators are trumpeting an effort to extend the tax cap. Little wonder about that when it is no burden on them, but is a shift of costs instead to counties, and other municipalities. The truth is that if New York State wants to reduce real property taxes, then it needs to take over all of the cost of its own mandated programs, like Medicaid.

--Amid all of that, the County's Budget, Capital and Personnel Committee will have its work cut out for it. I have asked Legislator James Dennis to continue his role as Chair. Returning to that committee will be Michael Sigler as Vice Chair, and experienced members Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, Glenn Morey and Peter Stein. Personnel work to be done will have increased focus including performance reviews for the employees who report directly to the Legislature. In addition the committee will be taking on oversight of the tourism program.

--The population demographics of Tompkins County are changing. Our community is diverse and welcoming and we must continue to reflect that within our own county workforce. The workforce climate survey conducted and presented last year provides a starting point for review of policies and commencement of strategies to improve the feeling of inclusiveness for all of our employees. To lead our effort, the Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Committee will continue this year. Leslyn McBean-Clairborne will again chair that committee, which also includes serving members of community and staff.

--A few years ago because of workload and the need to provide essential focus, we created a separate Economic Development Committee and a separate Planning, Energy and Environmental Quality Committee, both of which have done good and important work. For 2016, those two committees will be joined again as one. In a first in recent memory, the membership of this new Planning, Economic Development, Energy and Environmental Quality Committee will include seven members, with that being reflective not only of the important work of the committee but the level of interest of Legislators in the work it will do. With an eye towards climate instability, Tompkins County is a statewide leader in encouraging change in the way we produce and deliver energy. We are also a bright spot upstate for economic development, and we need to encourage such growth in manufacturing, agriculture and other sectors that will provide good paying jobs for residents. Coupled with that, we have to be able to provide housing—from apartments to individual family homes—and child care to make finding employment and family living here a desirable choice. This new committee will be chaired by Legislator Martha Robertson, with Dooley Kiefer as Vice Chair, and Legislators, Carol Chock, Anna Kelles, James Dennis, David McKenna, and Michael Sigler.

--The Facilities and Infrastructure Committee does vital work. It oversees highway and bridge projects, and the equipment that is needed to maintain them. The multiple county buildings and other facilities, along with our enterprise programs in Solid Waste and Airport, require ongoing attention. In 2016, the committee will oversee the completion of the capital project for renovations to the Mental Health Services Building and for the program renovations for the Tompkins County Public Library. This year I have asked David McKenna to return to that committee as its Chair. Additionally, Dan Klein will serve as Vice Chair, and Legislators Anna Kelles, Glenn Morey and Michael Sigler and will round out that group.

--The Government Operations Committee will continue under the leadership of Dan Klein as Chair. Will Burbank will be the Vice Chair of the Committee, with Legislators Carol Chock, Richard John and Dooley Kiefer as the remaining members. That Committee administers departments, including County Administration, Assessment, Board of Elections and Public Information to name a few. We are still looking to assist in providing needed broadband service for parts of our county, the subcommittee on Broadband will continue with as David McKenna as Chair. Additionally, I will be asking the Government Operations committee to consider creating a subcommittee that would include community members to review the Human Rights program. Events in 2015 pointed to a need to look at the relationship between the Human Rights Commission and the Human Rights office and to re-explore the delivery of the vital services that are provided to the people of our county through this historic program.

--Leslyn McBean-Clairborne will chair the Health and Human Services Committee this year. That committee has charge of those departments which matter so much to the most vulnerable of our population, employ the majority of our employees, and administer the greatest part of the county budget. Carol Chock will serve as Vice Chair, with Legislators Will Burbank, Anna Kelles, and Martha Robertson. Among other things, that committee will pay attention to the recently approved combination of administration of the County Mental Health Department and the County Health Department.

--The Public Safety Committee will have important work this year. The Sheriff's Office reports to it, as does the Probation Department, the District Attorney, and the Assigned Counsel program. Among other things, the committee will look at new county efforts to provide re-entry services for jail prisoners back into our community with a goal of helping to reduce recidivism. After the 2015 incident at Hornbrook Road, Tompkins County and our Sheriff's Office continues its interest in further exploring how such incidents can best handled. With federal assistance, a review of that incident will commence this year. A proposed study of police service consolidation will also be pursued. Legislator Peter Stein will chair the committee this year. Martha Robertson will be the Vice Chair, and the other members will be Legislators Will Burbank, James Dennis and Richard John.

--The Charter Review Committee will be looking to complete its work this year and bring forth proposed amendments to the full legislature. The Committee will have the same membership as last year, but I have asked Legislator Dooley Kiefer to chair the Committee with Peter Stein as Vice Chair. Returning members are Legislators Dan Klein and me.

--While most of the work of the special Old Library Committee is complete, the Committee will continue and meet on an as-needed basis for the finalization of the sale of the property. I will continue to Chair that committee and the other same members will continue with Leslyn McBean-Clairborne as Vice Chair and Legislators Dooley Kiefer and Michael Sigler also serving.

--Much is happening at the Federal and State level with respect to transportation. A multi-billion dollar federal highway bill and proposals by Governor Cuomo for increased funding for infrastructure means we at the local level must be thinking about our own needs and poised to advocate for and secure funding for our airport, our mass transit system and our highway system. This year I have proposed a special Transportation Committee to look at these issues. The purpose of the special committee is not to supplant the work of the program committees overseeing these systems but rather to take another look at what changes might be made and new directions taken in light of Federal and State actions. I will be

chairing this special committee with Glenn Morey as Vice Chair, and Legislators James Dennis, David McKenna, and Peter Stein as members.

--The Tompkins County Industrial Development Agency helps to spur economic activity in the County. It is administered by the Tompkins County Area Development agency and governed by its own Board. Four Legislators sit on that Board. Legislator James Dennis will continue as Chair, with Legislators Will Burbank and Martha Robertson continuing. Legislator Richard John, who is a lawyer with experience in business and as a municipal attorney, will fill the vacant seat. I am also recommending that Mayor Svante Myrick, whose term expired at the end of 2015 be reappointed to one of the at-large seats.

--The people expect we part-time Tompkins County Legislators to work hard, and we do that. I fully expect that we commit more time and energy to the performance of our elected duties than do any county legislators in the region. It makes us a better, more cohesive body. We work as a team to get things done.

We study issues seriously, strongly debate them, and then take action. We do know and recognize, however, that what is accomplished for the people of Tompkins County would not for a minute be possible but for the support, hard work and advice of our county employees. From County Administration to the 700 plus employees who work every day in so many capacities, each is a real hero for what is done for our people every day single day. To them we say thanks and with their help we will do our very best for everyone.