Draft Minutes

Tompkins County Shared Services Panel

June 21, 2017

5:30-7:00 PM

Tompkins County Legislative Chambers

(Including Public Hearing #1)

Members Present: M. Witmer, R.Dietrich, A. Rider, D.Scheffler, B. Goodman, E.Thomas, J.Hart, L.Woodard, J.Leifer, J.Mareane

Staff Present: Paula Younger (Dep. County Administrator), Marcia Lynch (County Public Information Officer)

Mr. Mareane opened the meeting at 5:35 PM. After introducing the agenda, he noted the requirement for three public hearings established by the Shared Services Law. He said that today’s hearing, which is the first of the three hearings, would be open ended. This will allow the public to offer suggestions without being constrained by recommendations already made by the Panel. Mr. Mareane opened the Public Hearing at 5:38 PM.

At that time, and after extending several invitations for the public to comment, there were no speakers. Mr. Mareane closed the public hearing at 5:43 PM and opened the regular meeting.

Mr. Mareane referred to the Agenda and its inclusion of several potential shared service initiatives that have arisen in the Panel’s discussions. He reiterated that because so many shared services and consolidations have already been implemented in Tompkins County, the candidates being considered by the Panel are relatively small in both scope and impact. He also confirmed that the Panel has indicated acceptance of a strategy that will develop a list of things that can reasonably be done in the short term, and also identify potential shared services that are worthy of further exploration, but that need more time to fully assess.

The first candidate has been discussed for several years at TCCOG, and would provide some level of centralized training, under the heading of the TCCOG Training Academy. The actual training would be provided via TC3.biz. The model would be similar to the Supervising for Success model, in which the County provides sufficient funding to guarantee an instructor and materials, which then allows other to enroll employees at a very affordable price. The range of training could vary. He cited customer service, compliance, harassment, hazardous materials, and other examples of training that all local governments may desire. The training would be structured into a 2-semester schedule and offer courses that local government officials have determined will have value. The schedule would be known well in advance, to allow people to adjust their schedules and enroll in training. This would not require all training to be funneled into the Academy model—each local government will likely have unique training needs that they will still pursue independent of the Academy. He said that the savings may be largely in the form of avoided costs (many local governments can’t afford to send employees to training, so they don’t spend much on training.) However, he also suggested that there should be reduced “unit costs” for training as our training needs are pooled and provided centrally.

Mr. Scheffler said the proposal is a good idea, and agreed that the cost and logistics of sending people out of town for training can be quite high. Ms. Thomas said local governments are so stretched that it is hard to send people to training, so the discussion should focus should be on the types of training that will be offered. Only then will local governments be able to determine if the training is relevant and reflects their priorities. Mr. Mareane noted that he’s pulling together a work group, comprised of Amy Guererri, Schelley Michell-Nunn, Judy Drake, Mike Murphy, Paula Younger, and Bill Goodman, to start the discussion about how to organize the Academy and the types of courses that would be most relevant and useful. Mr. Witmer said he agreed that the trainings would be good and agrees that the savings will likely be in the form of avoided costs. In Caroline, for example, the Town doesn’t partake in training because of cost and logistics. Mr. Leifer said the Town of Dryden does have a training budget, so real dollar savings might be possible. Ms. Thomas noted that the State Comptroller is now doing more training, which tends to be compact and available by webinar. She suggested that kind of concentrated, time-conscious training be considered. She also said that local training for planners and planning boards may cost less than out-of-town training and be attractive to local governments.

Noting that several people had arrived at the meeting after the conclusion of the public hearing, Mr. Mareane re-opened the public hearing.

Irene Weiser of Caroline suggested working together on LED streetlights, and that NYPA assistance may be available to assist. She said she was interested in Code Officer training, particularly if it could be expanded to include energy issues and could be open to planning board members, town/village board members, and code officers. She believes this would expand an understanding of what is possible in `a Circuit Rider from the County Department to assist town and villages that do not have Planners.

City of Ithaca Fire Chief Tom Parsons said others do provide code-related training, but that when the training is provided locally, it’s important that people show up and that towns and villages should consider requiring their codes officials to attend. He also said that it is very difficult for smaller governments to retain code officials, and then replace them. He suggested a conversation about consolidating some town/village code operations or having back-up arrangements in which one municipality covers during absences and vacancies. He said Chenango County has a countywide code enforcement approach, with the opportunity for individual municipalities to opt out. Chief Parsons also cited BOCES central business office that provides administrative services to member districts (including training), and that this is something that may provide a model for the Panel.

There were no other speakers. Mr. Mareane closed the public hearing.

Mr. Mareane discussed the second shared services candidate, as originally suggested by Ms. Woodard, which would use the County Clerk and County ITS to develop LaserFische applications to automate routine functions that not only makes it easier to process these functions, but also retain the information in a data base format. He said that the County Clerk is interested in proceeding with this   
“service modernization plan”, and has been asked to begin estimating potential savings. He asked the Panel members if this would be of interest. Ms. Woodard strongly supported the initiative, noting the benefits of having the information in a format that is rational and easily accessible. She said tasks that may now take days should be able to be done in minutes. Ms. Thomas also suggested we add LaserFische training to the list of Academy trainings. There was agreement that this should be included as a candidate.

Mr. Mareane then informed the Panel about a “mass notification” system that the City and County have been looking at for several months, and that the County is now preparing to acquire a system and make it available at no cost to all municipalities. The system would allow broad-based notification for emergencies, and narrowly-focused notifications for specific matters (provided on a subscription basis). Ms. Thomas noted the efficiencies achieved by such a system, and the difficulty of quantifying savings. Mr. Scheffler compared this to a system Cornell has for the Cornell Community. Mr. Goodman suggested the savings estimate be based on the comparative cost if we all purchased a system independently. There was agreement that this should be included on the list.

Mr. Mareane then presented the concept of purchasing consortia for financial software, with the County facilitating the development and distribution of an RFP, and the negotiation of a vendor contract. A common software platform would leave the door open for future shared service opportunities, and the pooled approach should result in costs lower than if purchased individually. Ms. Thomas suggested that the City and County may have superior systems that might be attractive to the smaller governments, and that we should see if these systems could be expanded to include municipalities before an RFP for new systems was developed. Mr. Dietrich said he’d need to check with his technical staff before moving forward. Mr. Mareane said the approach would be voluntary; that nothing would be imposed on municipalities. Ms. Woodard suggested that the Training Academy could provide training on a specific financial system, which would also ease the way to a common system. Almost everyone uses Williamson, and agrees that it is a good “workhorse” system that integrates well with the NYS AUD and doesn’t cost much. Mr. Leifer said savings would not be significant if there was a change, and that real savings would come through things like the State allocating more of the income generated by the justice courts to the host government, and through the consolidation of local courts. All agreed to keep the purchasing consortium on the list for now.

In a similar vein, Mr. Mareane proposed a purchasing consortia for the acquisition and installation of LED streetlights—an idea that had come from an earlier panel discussion. He said the County could play a facilitation role, but the City may be better positioned to take the lead in this initiative. Mr. Dietrich cautioned that if a transition to LED lights is considered, the review should include the health effects of certain light spectra. Ms. Woodard agreed that there seem to be problems in the blue light spectrum. Ms. Thomas concurred, and noted that a NYPA representative recently spoke to the TCCOG energy committee about the Authority’s willingness to assist on project such as this. She noted that the savings aren’t likely to be large because of the low number of lights. Mr. Mareane asked about who would know how many lights are owned by each municipality. Mr. Goodman said Nick Goldsmith would know the City and Town of Ithaca numbers; Ms. Thomas said NYSEG knows how many are in the towns. Mr. Witmer said Caroline has 55 lights. Ms. Rider said Enfield has 6 lights. Mr. Witmer supports the idea and finds it particularly attractive to smaller municipalities. Mr. Mareane said this concept will be included in the next iteration of the list of candidate projects.

Mr. Mareane turned to the next possible project, which had been suggested by Ms. Woodard at the Panel’s first meeting and that involved several municipalities coming together under the terms of a prior agreement to address wastewater treatment facility capacity issues. Ms. Woodard explained that in a 2003 agreement, six municipalities served by the Cayuga Heights and City of Ithaca wastewater treatment plans agreed to come together to develop solutions to problems when they arise. She said that the City and Village plants now have similar problems dealing with capacity issues, and that Inflow and Infiltration coming from precipitation has created a significant problem at both facilities. If the source can be identified, then it can be addressed. The six municipalities are coming together at the end of June to discuss how to best address their problems in the most coordinated way. Solutions will be complex and will take time to develop.

Mr. Goodman said that this will take more time than is allowed by the State’s plan. Ms. Woodward asked whether study money could be secured if this is listed as a shared service. Mr. Mareane said there may be a grant program that fits better than the Shared Services grant that is tied to savings achieved in 2018. Ms. Woodard said that the Village is not eligible for some grants because of its high per capita income. Mr. Dietrich said there may be additional resources in upcoming grant cycles. Ms. Woodard noted that the problem is not the level of treatment currently provided, but the fact that stormwater discharges can overwhelm the current system.

Mr. Leifer asked whether the systems should be unified. Ms. Woodard noted that several municipalities have treatment facilities, and that systems are operated differently (Cayuga Heights owns the plant and bills-out the cost; the City is owned by the City and Town of Ithaca and the Town of Dryden), so exploring idea of merger could take a long time. Mr. Goodman noted that the Village contracts out the operation of its plan, so one future option could be that the Village could choose to contract with the City’s facility for the operation of its plant.

Ms. Thomas said that in Ulysses, the water running from steep slopes results in high silt flows. She suggested that we pursue grant funding to study diversion strategies. Mr. Goodman suggested possibilities for a shared service approach to stormwater diversion. He said the IO recently completed an update of the Watershed Management Plan and has received a 3-year grant to implement a plan. One area under review is approaches to ditching by highway and DPW’s that reduce runoff into the lake. He said money is available to think of the projects, and more money later to implement them. This may relate to shared services—the IO is a shared service serving three counties around the lake. Perhaps there is a way to work this into a shared service. Mr. Witmer said the mission of the IO is to develop projects that work well for multiple communities.

Mr. Mareane asked whether that should be included as a long-term project for the Panel to keep looking at. Mr. Goodman suggested that it may be beneficial to hold off on the submission of a plan in 2017 in favor of waiting until 2018 to submit a larger, higher-impact plan to the State in 2018. Mr. Mareane agreed that this is an important strategic decision. He wondered whether other State grants (Municipal Restructuring Grant and Local Government Efficiency Grant) might be more potent than the Shared Service Grant. Mr. Mareane suggested keeping the Stormwater Management Plan on the long-term list, but doing more work to better define it and see if alternative grants exist. Mr. Scheffler wondered whether a shared services plan that only affected a few municipalities could be submitted. Mr. Mareane said that projects like that would be acceptable, and could be one element of a multi-faceted overall plan.

Mr. Mareane introduced the next items, which is the intermunicipal health benefits consortium. Don Barber and Cortland City Manager Mack Cook have suggested that every time a new member joins the consortium, there are structural changes in the consortium that occur that result in a virtually new organization and that we should claim a $2 million savings. The State has signaled that they won’t look at this as a new savings. Ms. Rider said we should continue to put this in front of the state as a real savings that has had a major impact on small municipalities. Mr. Mareane said he would write up the proposal and let the Panel review it at the next meeting.

In looking at long-term possibilities, Mr. Mareane included the centralization of some back office services and hopes the Panel will stay together to take an in-depth look at the benefits and costs of the centralization of certain back office services. He also suggested including code enforcement as another area that should be more fully explored. Mr. Witmer noted that Caroline shares a code enforcement officer with Harford and Richford. Ms. Thomas said Ulysses shares a code officer with Trumansburg. Ms. Rider said she believes the same individual serves as a code officer for Enfield and Newfield. Mr. Goodman said the City and Town share a sustainability officer.

Mr. Mareane asked the Panel if we’ve left anything off the list.

Ms. Thomas said that the Ulysses highway department has been approached by the fire department to see if they would consider a contract to repair their fire trucks. She suggested this could be applied on a broader scale by creating a central maintenance facility serving multiple municipal users on a voluntary basis.

Mr. Woodard noted that we’d discussed GIS services at an earlier meeting, and that expanding this service would be attractive to a number of municipalities on a fee-for-service basis.

Mr. Goodman noted that many counties are looking court consolidations. Mr. Leifer, who served on TCCOG’s courts task force, said that constitutional barriers typically stymie such efforts.

Mr. Leifer suggested creating a countywide cable office that could handle the franchise agreement with the cable provider, and work to improve customer service. Currently, if there is a problem between he provider and customer, there is no way to enforce a solution.

Mr. Mareane said he will try to distribute a draft narrative report that can be critiqued by the Panel at its next meeting. After the next meeting, the Panel should be close to finalizing a report that is due to the County Legislature on August 1.

Ms. Weiser said there are a couple of ideas being worked on by TCCOG that might fit the shared services model. She said community choice aggregation is being pursued by several municipalities. She will provide a paragraph describing the initiative, and said savings will be difficult to estimate because the price will depend on the energy mix chosen by the entity. Also, on 6/22, Lee Shurtleff will report to TCCOG on the work being done by the EMS Task Force. She encouraged the CEOs to attend that meeting.

The minutes of the June 5 meeting were unanimously approved.

The meeting was adjourned at 6:55 PM.

The next meeting will be July 5th at 5:00 PM, followed by a meeting on the 19th.