



# Tompkins County Legislature

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## 2024 State of the County

The state of the County is excellent, and at the same time there are plenty of areas that need a lot of attention and need a lot of help. We are doing a lot, and there is a lot more to do.

As we look ahead to what might happen in 2024, I see the following as some of the big agenda items:

- The County needs more office space as New York State is requiring us to move out of some of our existing space, and as some of the space we currently occupy continues to push past its useful life. Planning for a new super-green Center of Government building will likely involve significant Legislator and community engagement in 2024.
- The County received a grant and has been working with a consultant on developing a Strategic Operations Plan to improve our delivery of services. We will finish the plan and vote on its adoption in 2024.
- The County is currently planning to take action to make a dent in the number of people experiencing homelessness and sleeping outside. There will be a lot more to say about this as 2024 progresses.
- The County has more than 40 advisory boards, populated with over 300 volunteers. In 2024, all of these advisory boards will be required to review and update their bylaws.
- We have been without a permanent County Attorney for about 6 months. We hope to hire one very soon. Thank you to Holly Mosher for bravely filling the gap.
- The County will be implementing a Rapid Medical Response project in 2024, which aims to bolster the existing emergency medical services system and to decrease response times countywide.
- The County has a goal of making broadband internet available to every address in Tompkins County. There are currently more than 1,000 addresses in Tompkins County that are considered unserved. We are waiting for the large amounts of federal and state money that has been set aside for this purpose to be ready to distribute. We won't finish the broadband project in 2024, but hopefully we will get a good start on it.
- Reimagining Public Safety was a 3-year, multi-point plan which ends at the end of 2024. This year, we will begin to evaluate that initiative and to plan for what comes next.

And there is plenty more beyond that.

Our Chief Equity and Diversity Officer, Charlene Holmes, has now been on the job for a few months. Working primarily with the Workforce, Diversity and Inclusion Committee, she is going to help us achieve more, and to work better in these areas. That committee will continue to be chaired by Veronica Pillar.

Public safety is a prominent issue in Tompkins County as it is everywhere. Reimagining Public Safety is an initiative that came out of the trauma of the George Floyd murder, and a follow up Executive Order from the Governor. It was designed as a 3-year project. We are now entering our third year. That means that evaluation and planning must start soon so that we have a good idea of what comes next, in time for our budget season.

One of the most promising developments that happened in the area of public safety in 2023 was the rollout of the CARE Team (Crisis Alternative Response and Engagement). This program pairs a law enforcement officer from the Sheriff's Department with a mental health professional from County Whole Health to go out on certain kinds of calls. There is one version of this for the Sheriff's Department, and one version of this that will roll out soon for the

Ithaca Police Department. We will all be watching these programs in 2024 to see how they develop.

In 2023, we paused our efforts towards planning for what comes next with our County jail. Travis Brooks led a months' long task force to look at all aspects of the jail from the viewpoint of both County government and from the public, including from those who have direct experience with incarceration. That effort seems to have gotten everyone on the same page, and that is a remarkable feat. Planning for what comes next with the jail will continue in 2024. These projects and more will occupy the attention of the Public Safety Committee, which will continue to be chaired by Rich John.

Our budget process is long and extremely deliberative. The budget is a reflection of our values, and to a large extent determines the work plan for the year. Tompkins County is fortunate to be in a good financial position. At the same time, our needs are great, and everything is expensive. I fully expect that we will continue our robust debate about the role of the fund balance. And Chairing the Budget, Capital, and Personnel Committee this year will be Mike Lane.

Our environment, including mitigating and adapting to climate change, is central to so many areas such as health, economics, energy, water, food, recreation, transportation, and much more. We need to act locally to protect Cayuga Lake and to support the diversion of waste as we transition to a more circular economy. Concern for the environment is at the top of the list for many residents of Tompkins County. Anne Koreman will continue to chair the Planning, Energy, and Environmental Quality Committee.

We currently have two committees that deal with County facilities. Just a few months ago, the Downtown Facilities Committee was formed to deal with the multiple pieces of the multiple-year project to solve our space needs. I believe that by the end of the year, we will be far along in moving towards that solution. Continuing to chair that committee will be Randy Brown.

The Facilities and Infrastructure Committee is where we spend time with roads and bridges, our County buildings, TCAT, and more. Roads and bridges are critical for everyone, and even more so in our rural areas. Lee Shurtleff will be chairing this committee in 2024.

Having one committee this is charged with economic development and all that that entails, and also housing, and all that that entails, is a big job. That is the scope of what our Housing and Economic Development Committee does. Homelessness is a prominent issue here in Tompkins County, as it is in many places. In 2024, the County will be re-thinking what we can do with our sheltering services to address this growing problem. There are other aspects of homelessness that we will also be working on, alongside other housing and economic issues. Chairing this committee again will be Greg Mezey.

The Health and Human Services Committee interacts with a very large number of employees, programs, and dollars that the County invests in trying to make sure people have what they need to live a decent life, and to catch people who may be falling through the cracks and to support our young peoples' health. Chairing this committee in 2024 will be Shawna Black.

I have been on the Government Operations Committee since my first day on the legislature and it's a little sad for me to have to give it up. The Government Operations Committee is charged with most of what you might call the internal workings of County Government. But, the internal is directly connected to the external, so this committee's scope is broad. Continuing to chair this committee will be Amanda Champion.

Thanks to all committee chairs and to all members for stepping up to the plate and taking responsibility. Giving every Legislator something they are excited to work on while at the same time making sure all the slots are filled is a challenge. A record number of Legislators said to me this year, "I will do whatever you need me to do." I am truly and deeply thankful for everyone who said that. Everyone seemed to get something they wanted in terms of committee assignments for the year.

The County has many partners in our work. I want to take a minute to talk about one of our partners: the City of Ithaca. The County and the City have multiple projects that we collaborate on, or hope to collaborate on: The CARE

team partnership that I mentioned earlier between the Ithaca Police Department and County Whole Health, a number of Reimagining Public Safety initiatives including the Community Justice Center, utilization of money from the opioid settlements, upcoming negotiations on participating in the Rapid Medical Response project, and TCAT bus service, along with our partner Cornell University.

The Ithaca Common Council now contains many members who are brand new to government. It is not clear which way all these collaborations will go. I am optimistic though that we have a good partner in the City of Ithaca. I have spoken with Mayor Cantelmo several times, and he shares my optimism. We both believe that we will have clear channels of communication between the City and the County, and that communication is the key for a good relationship.

I also want to take a minute to thank our employees. From the moment I started on the County Legislature and began meeting with each department head and their staff, I was struck by how our employees seem mission driven. There is no County government, there is no 2024 work plan, without our employees. I hope our actions will speak louder than our words in expressing our appreciation to the County employees. But for now, you do have these words: thank you, thank you, thank you.

And one more extra thank you for the people who help this Legislature function at a high level on a day-to-day basis. Thank you to our Legislature clerks and to County Administration and County Finance. You are the ones with the really hard jobs.

Dan Klein, Chair  
Tompkins County Legislature