

## **Legislature Adopts Financial Goal for 2013. Will Consider Recommended Budget With 3.5% Levy Increase**

As a starting point toward preparing a 2013 County budget, the Legislature has authorized the County Administrator to present a 2013 budget that would allow the maintenance of current levels of operation and provide some latitude to address high priority deficiencies that have arisen after three years of budget cuts. The Administrator's recommended budget will carry a property tax levy increase of no more than 3.5%.

Under the plan authorized by the Legislature, County departments will be given a budget target that will allow them to maintain current levels of operation. Current projections indicate this level of spending can be supported with a 2.2% increase in the County tax levy. However, the Legislature authorized County Administrator Joe Mareane to consider an include in his Recommended Budget over-target requests submitted by departments and agencies, provided that the Recommended Budget does not require a tax levy increase of more than 3.5%. That would provide the Administrator latitude to address some high-priority deficiencies in light of past cuts.

The County's actual property tax cap will not be known until mid-summer. However, citing last year's adjusted tax cap of 2.9%, Mareane said the 3.5% increase in the levy could be within the adjusted tax cap for 2013.

The vote was 13-2, with Legislators Dooley Kiefer and Leslyn McBean-Clairborne voting no.

Administrator Mareane estimates that a 2.2% levy increase would support a maintenance-of-effort budget, following three years of very deep cuts—a plan that would support current operations, incorporating adjustments for such factors as new wage/fringe rates, uncontrollable mandates, and other fixed costs. With a 3.5% levy increase, the County will continue to have a much smaller workforce than just three years ago can continue to adapt to a workforce 9% smaller than three years ago and a smaller offering of programs, but also address clear and critical needs that have been

The Legislature's action notes that budget reductions imposed since 2009 have been deep, and in some instances “beyond the level the Legislature finds necessary over the long term to maintain the health, safety, and quality of life of the citizens of Tompkins County.”

While cautioning that projections this early in the year related to mandated costs and other factors could change, Mareane noted that the relative stability in 2013 budget projections is the product of difficult decisions and actions that the Legislature, department heads, and the County's bargaining units have taken during the most difficult years of the economic crisis. Unlike many other local governments, he said, these actions adapted to a hostile, volatile economy, without resorting to gimmicks and fiscal sleight-of-hand.

Legislators McBean-Clairborne and Dooley Kiefer, both who voted no, expressed concern about the numbers. McBean-Clairborne said she supports the 2.2% guideline, but not the 3.5%, since

she is uncomfortable about the potential effect on taxpayer. Kiefer said she believes the proper maintenance-of-effort number is 2.3% and that additional latitude for potential restoration should be set closer to 4.4%

In a separate action, the Legislature, by a vote of 13-2, authorized scheduling a public hearing on to take comment on a proposed local law that would leave open the option of the County's overriding the State's property tax cap for 2013, if that is deemed necessary. (Legislators Luz Herrera and McBean-Clairborne voted no.) The hearing will be held June 5, 2012 at 5:30 p.m. at Legislative Chambers of the Tompkins County Courthouse, 320 N. Tioga Street, Ithaca.

Stressing that scheduling the hearing or that adopting such a local law does not mean that the County will exceed the tax cap, budget committee chair Jim Dennis characterized scheduling the hearing now as prudent, as a potential tool for the County's "tool box" as the budget process moves forward. Legislator Luz Herrera said she may support such a move at a later time, but not now, advocating restraint to wait until later in the process.