

Organizational Remarks by Chair, Michael Lane
January 17, 2017

2017-a year of reflection, a year of hope, and a year of action. It is the Bicentennial of the creation of Tompkins County. It will be a year to look back at our heritage and our historic diversity. It commenced with the indigenous peoples who lived here, and was augmented by wave after wave of those who were brought here, or who immigrated here from continents, countries and regions around the world. They built our towns, villages, city, and all of their infrastructure. They devised the educational, aesthetic and social services that make us all very proud. They farmed, labored, and manufactured. They taught, researched, wrote, enterprised and invented in ways that grew and continue to grow our economy.

In a year of transition and facing unknown challenges, we have hope and we are strong. It is the last year of this Legislature's four-year term and there will be an election in November. Next year there will be a new beginning, as happens each four years. This Legislature will pass on to the next one a county that is a little better than it was when we received it. That is our responsibility and our progress.

We are a diverse county, full of forward-looking, intelligent and passionate people. We have recently been through a national election. Many of us in Tompkins County are disappointed, and understandably apprehensive about what it means for our nation and our County. We do know, however, that the bitterly divisive rhetoric at the national level does not reflect who we are in Tompkins County and does not reflect the values that we work hard to promote. Take a look at the places in Tompkins County; take a look at the collage of faces of our people. We are rural and urban. We are every race. We are every religion and no religion. We are young and old. We are straight, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, queer and questioning. We are fully functioning individuals challenged by and overcoming physical and mental disabilities, and addictions. We are new people from everywhere in the world. And when new arrivals come to Tompkins County and contribute to our society, we welcome them. We don't build walls to keep people out; we open our hearts and let them in. We are a safe place and we are a part of that hope that has always been our America. We know that everyone deserves a chance.

We know there is work to be done. The Federal Government will again change the health care system. The likelihood that people in Tompkins County will be harmed by unknown partisan changes is very real. We do not know how those changes will affect the Medicaid costs that our County must pay. With sales tax collections plateauing, there is little doubt we will be forced to raise more money than we want to from the real property tax.

At the State level, the first real chance for New York to transfer the cost of mandates from the real property tax to the income tax was unceremoniously vetoed by Governor Cuomo in December. That blocked the State's assumption of the cost of indigent defense over a seven year period. With new laws increasing the number of people who will qualify for indigent representation, the expense to Tompkins County can only go up. The cost to counties for Medicaid is already huge, and, unbelievably, last year there was an effort at the State level to remove the existing Medicaid cost cap and increase charges to counties even more. New York State hypocritically blames local municipalities for the high cost of real property taxes, and imposes tax caps that are unrealistic. Sales tax receipts are anemic and may be a symptom of a change in the way consumers spend. But, this is Tompkins County-the very best county-and we will face the unknown with resolve. We will not be quiet and the Legislature, as it has done in the past will not be shy about letting its advice and opinions be known to federal and state officials. Where reasonable and rational action is warranted we will take it.

With all of that, the County's Budget, Capital and Personnel Committee must do important work. We have a budget process that is second to none. We start early in the year and all Legislators are deeply involved in it from start to finish. Recent reports from Albany alert us that there will be even more critical budget issues mandated on us and to which we must respond. I have asked Legislator James Dennis to continue as Chair of this important committee. He will be joined by Legislators Michael Sigler as Vice Chair, and members, Leslyn McBean-Clairborne, Glenn Morey and Dan Klein.

I have asked Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne to Chair the Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Committee this year and Anna Kelles to be the Vice Chair. That Committee also includes serving members of community and staff. 2016 was a busy year for that Committee and 2017 will be as well. We need to continue the follow-up on the climate survey of our employees. We need to encourage even more diversity among applicants for Civil Service and other jobs. We need to provide training to continue to make our workplaces open and welcoming. The Committee will review and bring to the Legislature reports from Departments on how they are doing implementing County policies to improve diversity.

The Planning, Development, and Environmental Quality Committee will change. Last year the Committee had seven members. This year it will return to a five-member format. Because it is a workhorse committee with a heavy workload, the members will be discussing whether it needs to be meeting more often than monthly, which it has done in the past. Legislators Martha Robertson as Chair and Dooley Kiefer as Vice Chair will again lead the Committee. They will be joined by Legislators Carol Chock, Michael Sigler, and David McKenna as the other members. Important issues are on the Committee's plate. An important Housing Summit was sponsored by the County and held last November. How we increase affordable housing for people who choose to live in Tompkins County will need to be further examined. The report of the Energy and Economic Development task force needs to be implemented. The new three-year Energy Task Force will give us advice on renewable energy strategies to move the County to lower carbon emissions. This will help us comply with our Comprehensive Plan and Energy Roadmap to fight climate change. The Committee will need to look at all of that while continuing oversight of the normal work of the County Planning Department and related entities such as Tompkins County Area Development, Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit, and the Soil and Water Conservation District.

Our Facilities and Infrastructure Committee oversees a variety of important departments that deliver necessary services to the people of our community. Highway and bridge projects, building maintenance and renovations, and the need to purchase and maintain costly equipment are all part of its work. Our enterprise programs in Solid Waste and at the Airport report to it, and looming important projects there require ongoing attention. This year I have asked Legislator David McKenna to continue as Chair of the Committee. Additionally, Legislator Glenn Morey will serve as Vice Chair, and Legislators Michael Sigler, Peter Stein, and Dan Klein will complete the group.

Coming off a very busy and sometimes controversial 2016, our Government Operations Committee will continue under the leadership of Dan Klein as Chair. Carol Chock will be the Committee's Vice Chair, with Legislators Dooley Kiefer, Richard John and Will Burbank as the remaining members. That Committee oversees several core county departments, including County Administration, Assessment, Board of Elections and Public Information to name a few. Its Broadband Subcommittee will continue under Chair David McKenna. We are still looking to assist residents in obtaining needed broadband service in unserved parts of our County such as Caroline, Danby and Newfield.

Legislator Anna Kelles 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. Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne will be Vice Chair, with Legislators Peter Stein, Carol Chock, and Will Burbank also serving.

The Public Safety Committee will have important work this year. The Sheriff's Department reports to it, as does the Probation Department, the District Attorney, the Assigned Counsel program, the Department of Emergency Response, and the Criminal Justice/Alternatives to Incarceration Board. Among other things, the committee will oversee county efforts to provide services for released jail prisoners re-entering our community, with the goal of helping to reduce recidivism. A study of police service consolidation will also be pursued. Legislator Richard John will chair the committee this year. Legislator Peter Stein will be the Vice Chair, and the other members will be Legislators Anna Kelles, James Dennis and Martha Robertson.

In 2016, a special Jail Study Committee was created in response to the threatened revocation by the New York State Commission of Correction of space variances for housing prisoners at the jail. A jail population study is underway. That Committee will also be advising us on programing and building design needs. Legislator Richard John chairs that Committee, with Legislator Anna Kelles as Vice Chair. Legislators James Dennis, David McKenna, and Martha Robertson are the other members on the Committee.

Because of extended delays in the City of Ithaca's review processes requiring multiple submissions by the County's preferred developer for the Old Library site, the special Old Library Committee's work is not complete and will continue this year. As last year, it will continue to meet on an as-needed basis towards the finalization of the sale of the property. I will continue to Chair that committee with Legislator Leslyn McBean-Clairborne as Vice Chair, and Legislators Dooley Kiefer, Michael Sigler, and Martha Robertson also serving.

Last year, the special Transportation Committee began a serious review of transportation problems in our County. State highways, our Airport, mass transit, and the development of the recreational trail system were examined, to name a few of the issues that were discussed. Much continues to be happening at the Federal and State level with respect to transportation and future project funding. The Committee will continue and I will be chairing it with Legislator David McKenna as Vice Chair, and Legislators James Dennis, Glenn Morey, and Peter Stein as members.

The Tompkins County Industrial Development Agency provides tax incentives 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 remain as Chair, with Legislators Will Burbank, Martha Robertson and Richard John continuing. I am recommending that Architect Grace Chiang be reappointed to the Board. I understand too that Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce President & CEO Jennifer Tavares will be re-appointed to her seat on the Board by the Agency.

Whatever work we Tompkins County Legislators do, pales by comparison to the exemplary job that our wonderful employees do for the people of our County. We owe a constant debt of gratitude for the hard work they perform every day, and every night. From Social Services to Solid waste; from Mental Health to Public Health and Youth Services; from emergency services to highways, Airport and bridges; from building maintenance to our Library and Community College; from Weights and Measures to County Administration, and all the others. They have our thanks. Without them, our County would be only a name on a wall.

As Tompkins County proceeds into its third century we must all work together. This year, as every year, we will work hard, we will debate, and we will do business. We are the peoples' team. And if on occasion we should get something wrong, I promise that it will never be because we did not do our very best to get it right.