



Tompkins County Legislature

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2025 State of the County Address

I will start by repeating exactly what I said last year at this time: 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.

Last year, the County Legislature passed a resolution to allocate \$50,000 to study the potential for a countywide living wage, including its potential benefits and negative impacts, and the legal issues involved. That study will likely be starting in 2025.

In 2025, we will begin a process to look at re-organization of the Office of Human Rights. This process will include input from legislators, staff, members of the Human Rights Commission, and community members.

The issues surrounding homelessness took up much of our time, attention, and resources in 2024. Unfortunately, this will likely continue into 2025. We will likely be starting the Code Blue cold-weather shelter process from scratch once again in 2025. Hopefully, we will have a not-for-profit agency to run it for us, and that will take a lot of the burden off the County. We should also expect significant progress on the “permanent” shelter development process, ideally in collaboration with a not-for-profit agency also. This work goes hand in hand with our imminent acquisition of a property on Cherry Street in the City of Ithaca. We have just hired a consultant to help guide us through the various steps of design, financing, permitting, and development of this property. The consultant, along with our not-for-profit agencies, community members, and those with lived experience with homelessness, will work to develop this property to help meet the needs of our homeless population.

We should also expect significant progress on the Center of Government Building this year. We won't see any actual building yet, but we should get much further along in our planning and design process, and we may even see some clearing of the site.

We also have an upcoming capital project with our Public Safety Building that we hope to see progress on this year. Again, we won't see any actual building yet, but hopefully we will come out of 2025 with a clearer picture of that project than we have coming in to this year.

The issue of enforcing cannabis sales law will be coming to us soon as New York State is putting the enforcement requirement on counties. What do we want in our law? What resources are necessary for enforcement? What increased costs to the County should we expect? Stay tuned as we figure all this out.

The County applied for a New York State broadband internet grant last year. We were supposed to hear from the State in early summer of 2024. Then again in the early Fall, we were told we would hear something soon. We have not heard yet. Assuming we do get the grant, the rollout of that project to reach every unserved address in Tompkins County will begin in 2025.

Some towns in Tompkins County pay a lot for municipal ambulance service, and those ambulances provide benefit even to the towns that don't pay for it. The way to fix this inequity might be a countywide ambulance tax. The Tompkins County Council of Governments wants the County to begin exploring this idea.

There are proposals afloat to expand the number of members of the Industrial Development Agency, and also to designate a seat for a school board member. We may see some action on that in 2025.

Some of the more inward-facing initiatives that the County is likely to tackle in 2025 are less flashy but are central to how our County government operates. Some of these inward-facing initiatives include exploration of changes in our procurement process, a further examination of the future of the Airport, an exploration of how to initiate more reuse of materials within County government operations, Department Head retreats with Legislators, initiating measurement of equity indicators in each County department, evaluating our advisory board appointment process, considering alternate budget development processes, and further vigorous debate about understanding our fund balance, how it is calculated, and its role in our budget process.

Before I go on to talk about our committees, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that we work in partnership with other entities in Tompkins County as we do our work. We are blessed to have numerous not-for-profit organizations doing great work in our County. We magnify each other's work. We are all in this together.

We also have a strong partner in the City of Ithaca. We are a separate government from the City of Ithaca, but Tompkins County government literally lives within the City. I believe that our relationship with the City is the best it's been in years. I can also say the same about the County's relationship with our partners on East and South Hills – Cornell University and Ithaca College.

The Facilities and Infrastructure Committee focuses on roads, bridges, buildings, Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit, and more. Chairing this committee this year will be Lee Shurtleff.

When Shawna Black chaired the County Legislature, she set up a temporary Downtown Facilities Special Committee to focus mostly on the future Center of Government Building. We will continue this committee, with Randy Brown chairing. This committee will meet only as needed.

Government Operations is the committee that focuses on internal matters to the County. Amanda Champion will chair this committee.

The Budget, Capital, and Personnel Committee keeps track of two of our most important resources: our staff and our money. Mike Lane will chair this committee in 2025.

Workforce Diversity and Inclusion is the other committee that focuses on our staff. The Workforce Diversity and Inclusion Committee, chaired by Veronica Pillar, is the guardian of our Tompkins County Diversity Statement, which reads, "Tompkins County Government centers diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are committed to the empowerment of employees and residents to dismantle systemic barriers that inhibit inclusive governance, and the provision of government services to all."

The Public Safety Committee of the County include the Sheriff's Department, the Department of Emergency Response, the District Attorney's office, alternatives to incarceration, and the Assigned Counsel program – known in other places as the Public Defender. The Public Safety Committee will be chaired by Rich John.

Tompkins County is blessed with a beautiful and healthy environment. Making sure the County does its part to keep it that way is the Planning, Energy, and Environmental Quality Committee, chaired by Anne Koreman.

The Housing and Economic Development Committee deals with economic issues, and also with issues of homelessness and housing, and will be chaired by Greg Mezey.

The departments who report to the Health and Human Services Committee contain the largest number of County employees. This is representative of both the needs that exists in our community, and also the value we place on taking care of our residents. Chairing this committee will be Travis Brooks.

The Community Recovery Fund was a program the Tompkins County Legislature invented to distribute some of the federal money we received during the Covid pandemic. There are still a few projects that will continue this year and next, so the Community Recovery Fund Advisory Committee will still need to exist. We will meet only as needed.

We are bringing back a committee from the past: the Tompkins Intergovernmental Relations Committee – TIGR. The job of this committee will be to stay in touch with other branches of government, and to formalize our lobbying efforts. Chairing this committee will be Shawna Black.

Here in local government, we focus a lot on process, procedures, and policies. This is necessary for the good functioning of government. However, we must never lose sight of the reason for all this: we are here to help provide a good quality of life for both our residents and for our staff. So, here's another reminder that we are all in this together, that with effort we can lift each other up, and that government has a strong role to play in this.

Thank you.

Dan Klein, Chair
Tompkins County Legislature