



September 7, 2009

Advisory panel: Tompkins spending level unsustainable

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It's time for Tompkins County legislators to make some unpopular decisions, including slashing staff and programming, according to an advisory panel of community leaders.

A group of eight former officials and citizens representing various business sectors spent the summer studying the county's fiscal situation and concluded that taxpayers can not support spending at its current level.

The ever-increasing cost of living has had a "depressing effect" on age and economic diversity in the county, said John Neuman, president of 1492 Consulting Group and member of the Budget Community Advisory Panel.

"Perpetuating programs that no longer have what may have been a high benefit relative to cost cannot continue," he added. "The county cannot afford anymore each and every single one of its programs and, as you know, there are many, some of which provide services similar or identical to those of other organizations in the county."

When first convened in 2004, CAP produced several recommendations, many of which have been implemented, such as setting tax and spending caps at the beginning of the budget process and inter-municipal agreements like the new health insurance consortium.

In its latest report, presented to legislators last week, it recommended further action, including shifting more services to not-for-profit agencies and responding to state aid cuts by reducing the service associated with that aid, rather than replacing it with local dollars. State-mandated programs, often considered off-limits, should also be examined for efficiencies, the group said.

Neuman said personnel also has to be tackled, noting it is the county's largest cost and could grow nearly \$13 million over six years even if wages are frozen, due to benefits like health care and pensions.

A salary survey should compare the wages, benefits and workload of county staff with those of peers in the private, institutional and not-for-profit sectors, and county employees should contribute more to their health insurance plans, the report states.

Some suggestions are reflected in the tentative 2010 budget.

A recommended reduction in staff by 27 full-time equivalents mirrors County Administrator Joe Mareane's proposal to reduce the roster by 26. He has also earmarked \$50,000 to implement a "lean office" initiative to streamline services, which the CAP group suggested based on its success at Tompkins Cortland Community College.

Neuman commended the county for strides in cost control over five years, saying spending increased 30 percent faster than the cost of living in that time, compared to a 460 percent increase 1999-2004. But he added that more needs to be done.

"We would like to see this county become broadly known for smart, instigative, yet sensitive management of the tough trade-offs between the desire for services that are really important and crucial, and what is truly affordable given the economic environment," he said.

The full report can be found at www.tompkins-co.org/pubinfo/budget/.
