



Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

COUNTY FACILITIES COMMITTEE MINUTES – APRIL 21, 2026 CHAD RYAN, CHAIR

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Ryan, Mr. Bush, Mr. McCarron, Mr. Thompson, Leader Hernandez
ALSO PRESENT: Chairwoman Watts, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Eriksen, Ms. Block, Ms. Denton; see attached list

Chair Ryan called the meeting to order at 2:51 p.m. The previous meeting's minutes were approved.

1. ONONDAGA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION: Martin E. Voss, Commissioner;
Chris Roberts, Civil Engineer Three; Penny Donahue, Senior Management Analyst/ CFO

2026 Highway Plan on file with the Clerk

- a. **BOND** – A Resolution Authorizing Various Bridge Improvement Projects in and for the County of Onondaga, New York, at a Maximum Estimated Cost of \$1,490,000, and Authorizing the Issuance of \$1,490,000 Bonds of Said County to Pay Costs Thereof (\$1,490,000)
- Commissioner Voss presented the 2026 highway work plan, the index of all work planned for the year, covering paving, bridges, culverts, and related infrastructure
 - The budget page shows the breakdown of funding sources: 2026 operating budget, CHIPS, bond issue, federal aid, state aid, and other, with the total on the far right. Projects are listed on the left side by category
 - Federal aid projects for 2026 include: Buckley Road, additional design work on the Loop the Lake Trail, Jamesville Toll Road Bridge, John Glenn eastbound paving, Liverpool Road, and the Onondaga Boulevard project
 - Operating budget cash for 2026 is \$2.5 million; the 2025 figure was \$6 million
 - CHIPS funding: the 2025 final figure, after Albany finalized the budget, was \$11,162,786. Because the state budget has not yet passed, the work plan uses the baseline figure of \$6.787 million, which has been consistent for approximately 20 years
 - These are formula-driven appropriations allocated by road mileage to every county, city, town, and village in the state
 - The actual CHIPS appropriation numbers will not be known until the state passes its budget. Commissioner Voss anticipated returning in May or June with updated figures. Resolutions are required both to spend money and to formally accept state and federal funds
 - The bond column reflects the two bonds being requested for approval today: one for bridge improvements and one for highway improvements
 - Of the bond funds, \$3,560,000 is designated as the local match (generally 5%) for federal aid projects, leveraging federal and state dollars that fund the bulk of the work
 - Total work planned for this year is just over \$36 million
 - Hot mix paving contract is currently with Seneca Stone

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- Midland Asphalt holds the Nova Chip and cold mix contract
 - Surface treatment is out to bid and has not yet been awarded
- All projects are baked into the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and are part of the budget presentation in the summer and fall. Cost estimates and regulatory hurdles, such as those affecting the Loop the Lake Trail, can delay or slow projects, but the process must continue to move forward
- Federal aid projects operate on approximately a five-year timeline from conception to construction start
- Key project highlights from the work plan:
 - Jamesville Toll Road Bridge (DeWitt): Construction anticipated in 2030; process is ongoing to keep it moving
 - Old Liverpool Road 2 Paving: From Electronics Parkway to the village, including sidewalks. A special state grant was secured; survey work has been completed. Construction is anticipated next year
 - Federal aid paving: Additional paving on higher-volume federally aid-eligible roads (4,000+ vehicles per day), including drainage and other structures. The county's share of Onondaga Boulevard runs from Fay Road to Velasco Road
- The City of Syracuse is coordinating a complementary project from Velasco east on Onondaga; efforts are being coordinated to avoid overlap
 - Traffic signals: Five signals requiring upgrades, Cassen Road at the mall, East Molloy and Kenny, West Tennessee and Whedon, Fay and Grand, and Kasson at Hollow Hill
 - Cold mix: Applied to lower-volume rural roads in areas such as Lafayette, Spafford, Tully, and Tully. Hot mix is used in more congested urban and suburban areas
 - Bridges: Broadfield Road (nine-foot airport bridge) and Valley Drive among others; stream cleaning, maintenance, and scour inspections also included
 - Guide rail: Replaced at locations where the risk to a driver going past the edge of pavement is significant; guide rail is used to protect drivers, not property
 - Bituminous surface treatment: Pavement preservation program applying a thinner asphalt treatment to maintain decent roads and extend their life, avoiding full repaving
 - Storm sewers, catch basins, and culverts, routine but necessary maintenance items
 - Facilities repair: Deputy Commissioner Adam George is overseeing capital projects including sewer work at Marcellus, door replacements at Marcellus, drainage work at Jamesville, and an air handling unit replacement at North Area to address dust and air quality in the garage
- The paving lists (hot and cold mix, with accompanying maps showing roads, locations, and treatment types) will be released to contractors once the bonds have cleared committee, after which a schedule will be coordinated. Competition for materials and hauling with the state and the Clay project may require scheduling flexibility
- Jamesville Road will be paved the first week of May, as a carryover from 2025 when asphalt plants closed before the work could be completed. The state routinely allows carryover for this reason
- Bituminous treatment is applied on top of cold mix roads throughout the county as a final surface treatment
- Two bond resolutions on today's agenda
 - First bond is the bridge bond, supports the bridge program; the \$1.49M leverages millions more for bridge work
 - Bond resolutions handled by Management, Budget, and Bond Counsel

A motion was made by Ms. Hernandez, seconded by Mr. Thompson, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- b. **BOND** – A Resolution Authorizing the Reconstruction and Construction of Improvements to Various Highways in and for the County of Onondaga, New York, at a Maximum Estimated Cost of \$7,110,000, and Authorizing the Issuance of \$7,110,000 Bonds of Said County to Pay Costs Thereof (\$7,110,000)
- Item 1b is the \$7,110,000 bond for the highway program

A motion was made by Mr. Thompson, seconded by Ms. Hernandez, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- c. Amending the 2026 County Budget to Fund in the First Instance 100 Percent of the Federal Aid Eligible Costs at a Maximum Amount of \$184,000 for the Right-of-Way Acquisition Phase of the Seventh North Street (CR 45) Paving Project, PIN 3756.76, Authorizing the Acquisition of Real Property in the Town of Salina for Highway Purposes, and Authorizing the Execution of Agreements (\$184,000)
- Seventh North Street project, right-of-way acquisition, from Electronics Parkway to the city line (just past the intersection near the pilot/city line)
 - Public hearings, done extensively, both online and in-person, show there is real interest in sidewalks and bike lanes in that corridor; the project will try to adapt to that
 - To narrow the roadway and accommodate bike lanes and sidewalks, small slivers of right-of-way must be acquired from adjacent properties
 - Right-of-way means expanding the highway boundary, property owners retain ownership of their land and will be compensated through negotiation
 - The county does not have eminent domain authority and negotiates all right-of-way acquisitions
 - Legislative approval is required to use the budget for those negotiations
 - Mr. Ryan: How did you arrive at this number?
 - Mr. Voss: The numbers were developed by the engineering consultant responsible for the overall project, using standard valuation for these small slivers of right-of-way
 - Mr. Thompson: In that negotiation, the homeowners are compensated in some way?
 - Mr. Voss: Yes, these are mostly businesses, with one homeowner
 - Properties identified include mostly businesses, with one residential owner
 - BOCES is among them, their driveway has effectively become a public road, and discussions are ongoing about whether it should be designated a Town of Salina or county road, given the growth of businesses in that area
 - Mr. McCarron: Would the expansion be on both sides of the roadway, given that the south side is residential?
 - Mr. Roberts: The takings are on both sides of the road, just slivers, not the whole way
 - We have to put a traffic signal pole in at one of the corners, just a triangular piece for that
 - Other small slivers for sections of sidewalk where they don't currently exist
 - Mr. McCarron commented that his office is on that road and the sidewalks are needed, there are always people walking the shoulder and he can't believe nobody gets clipped
 - The hard part with sidewalks is the county doesn't own them, but under federal law is required to build them; once built, the municipality is required to maintain them
 - Town of Salina historically has not wanted to do that in the winter; Electronics Park is a good example, sometimes they're plowed, sometimes they're not

- Town of Camillus does a pretty good job down in Fairmont clearing sidewalks in front of the commercial corridor because people who live in those neighborhoods want to be able to walk to the grocery store on a nice day
- Camillus and North Syracuse were noted as municipalities that do a great job; they have the equipment and go out and clear them
- This resolution allows the county to advance the project, do the right-of-way, and get the process moving forward; construction is targeted for 2031
- All maps are included; once property owners hear the project will improve the road, drainage, sidewalks, and bike lanes, they are usually happy with it

A motion was made by Ms. Hernandez, seconded by Mr. McCarron, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- d. Amending the 2026 County Budget to Pay in the First Instance 100 Percent of the Federal and State Aid Eligible Costs at a Maximum Amount of \$6,236,750 for the Buckley Road Paving Project, PIN 3756.70, Authorizing Execution of Agreements, and Rescinding Resolution No. 50-2025 (\$6,236,750)
 - Paying the first instance resolution, legislative authorization to front money for a federal aid project, to be reimbursed by the federal government through New York State
 - Buckley Road from Hopkins to Taft in Clay
 - Replace drainage, widen the roadway, add turn lanes
 - Remove concrete medians
 - Improve traffic signals, new signage
 - Sidewalks between Bailey Road and Taft Road, near the medical center and Brooklyn Pickle area
 - Very busy, growing part of the Town of Clay

Mr. McCarron left the meeting at approximately 3:14 p.m.

Questions/Comments

- Ms. Hernandez: This one supports the Hopkins Park upgrades too, right?
- Mr. Voss: Yes, it's in that area, Hopkins Park is going to draw a lot of visitors

A motion was made by Ms. Hernandez, seconded by Mr. Thompson, to approve this item. Ayes: 4 (Ryan, Thompson, Hernandez, Bush) Absent: McCarron. MOTION CARRIED.

- e. Amending the 2026 County Budget to Pay in the First Instance 100 Percent of the Federal and State Aid Eligible Costs at a Maximum Amount of \$8,075,000 for the Construction Phase of Onondaga Boulevard (CR 240) Paving Project, PIN 3756.75, and Authorizing Execution of Agreements (\$8,075,000)
 - Resolution allows the county to advance \$875,000 for construction, anticipated to start in 2027
 - Two-course pavement treatment from Fay Road to Velasco Road, from the beginning of Onondaga Lake to the city line:
 - Safety improvements around West Hill and the Western Lights commercial area
 - Sidewalk on both sides in the commercial area
 - Multi-use paved trail from Wegman's to Fay Road
 - Drainage, roadside obstacle, guide rail, signage and striping improvements
 - New traffic signals in front of Wegman's and Velasko Road

- Mr. Ryan: How far up are the sidewalks going?
- Mr. Roberts: Sidewalks will go to Wegman's, then the multi-use trail picks up on the north side and goes westerly past West Hill High School, almost all the way to Fay Road, stopped slightly short due to right-of-way issues

A motion was made by Ms. Hernandez, seconded by Mr. Bush, to approve this item. Ayes: 4 (Ryan, Thompson, Hernandez, Bush) Absent: McCarron. MOTION CARRIED.

- f. Amending the 2026 County Budget to Fund in the First Instance 100 Percent of the Federal Aid Eligible Costs at a Maximum Amount of \$220,000 for the Right-of-Way Acquisition Phase of the Canalways Trail Salina Extension (Phase 2) Project, PIN 3757.02, Authorizing the Acquisition of Real Property in the Town of Salina for Highway Purposes, and Authorizing the Execution of Agreements (\$220,000)

- Right-of-way acquisition resolution to begin the process with CSX
- Historically, state DOT handled railroad right-of-way acquisition, but after a significant valuation dispute in Rockland County about 10 years ago, where the state valued land at \$100,000 and the court came back at \$10 million, they are no longer willing to do so
- The county will undertake the right-of-way process through a consultant; will not be fast but the resolution is needed to start the ball rolling
- Will be more difficult without the leverage of the state of New York, but the county is committed to pursuing it
- Final segment will run from Murphy's Island over the marsh and Lake Creek, along Onondaga Lake Parkway under the railroad bridge, all the way to the butterfly garden where it will terminate
- Noted as a universally accepted and appreciated project that cuts across all socioeconomic lines; people use the trails for the amphitheater, to walk around Liverpool; long-term vision includes road races and bike races

Mr. McCarron returned at approximately 3:19 p.m.

A motion was made by Ms. Hernandez, seconded by Mr. Thompson, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- g. Amending the 2026 County Budget to Fund in the First Instance 100 Percent of the Federal Aid Eligible Costs at a Maximum Amount of \$960,000 for the Design (Scoping I-VI) and Right-of-Way Incidentals Phase of the Old Liverpool Road Improvements Project, PIN 3757.05, and Authorizing the Execution of Agreements (\$960,000)

- Paying the first instance for design, next phase of Old Liverpool Road from Electronics Park almost to the village, following the completed phase from the city up to Electronics Park
- Former supervisor was adamant about sidewalks; they are still included in the project
- Resolution keeps the design process moving; construction would be a couple of years out, needs to be in the queue with design funded so the county can look for construction money later

A motion was made by Mr. Thompson, seconded by Ms. Hernandez, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- h. Amending the 2026 County Budget to Fund in the First Instance 100 Percent of the Federal Aid Eligible Costs at a Maximum Amount of \$720,000 for the Design (Scoping I-VI) and Right-of-Way Incidentals Phase of the Jamesville Toll Road Bridge (C-902) over the Susquehanna Railroad Project, PIN 3757.15, and Authorizing the Execution of Agreements (\$720,000)

- Bridge project targeted for 2030; resolution covers design and any right-of-way incidentals
 - Concrete deck, approaches, abutments and pedestals to be removed and replaced
 - Steel girder ends to be repaired and painted
- Substructure and wing wall concrete repairs

A motion was made by Mr. McCarron, seconded by Mr. Hernandez, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- i. Authorizing the County Executive to Amend a Five Year Agreement with the State of New York for Snow and Ice Control on State Highways for the 2024-2029 Seasons to Increase the 2025-2026 Season Estimate and Amending the 2026 County Budget Accordingly
 - The county has an agreement with New York State where the state pieces off several hundred miles of roads to the county to plow and pays for it; the county does the same with towns and villages
 - Most efficient way to keep blades on the road, the network is set up for travel, not plowing
 - County plows state routes such as Route 20, Route 31, and Route 11; towns and villages pick up smaller arterial roads
 - Helps maintain a homogeneous fleet county has larger dump trucks for wider roads; towns and villages have smaller equipment better suited for neighborhood streets
 - Last year's salary scale adjustments required updating the cost basis; Penny tracks actual costs and the state reimburses on that basis
 - Resolution certifies the county is eligible to accept those reimbursements from the state comptroller
 - Item J also covers the same agreement with towns and villages

A motion was made by Mr. Bush, seconded by Mr. Thompson, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- j. Regarding Snow Plow Services Provided by the County and Local Governments within the County: Amending the 2026 County Budget to Accept Additional Revenue from New York State, Making Funds Available for Use, and Authorizing the Execution of Agreements
 - Severity index payment for the 2024-25 winter season
 - The state issues a severity index, a standard winter is 1.0; when snowfall pushes it above 1.5, the state issues a severity payment
 - This past winter had 146 inches of snow
 - The county runs 24/7 all winter to stay in compliance with the state contract
 - Resolution covers additional reimbursement for overtime and extra expenses from that winter

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Voss: Nicole, do I have to do the whole presentation again at Ways and Means?
- Ms. Watts: I will check with the Chair, but I do not believe so. Please plan to be available for any additional questions
- Ms. Hernandez: There was interest raised in Facility Road and Thompson Road being included in the same type of project as the Teall Avenue
- Mr. Voss: We do these public hearings and get a lot of great ideas. The challenge is that the grant we received is for a set amount, and we want to maximize what we can do within those dollars. We would love to underground utilities and do everything at once, but that costs millions. We are trying to do the most we can with the dollars available, and the Teall Avenue corridor is long overdue. Also worth

noting, the City of Syracuse is doing a complementary project from just south of the Shop City McDonald's intersection heading south past the Henninger area and toward the highway, which, coordinated with the county's work, creates a new connected corridor for pedestrians through that area.

- Ms. Hernandez: You mentioned Thompson Road, isn't that a state road?
- Mr. Roberts: Yes, Thompson Road is mostly owned by the state, outside our jurisdiction. The state just repaved it. We did complete the bridge on Exit Street a few years ago, though; that one was ours

A motion was made by Mr. Bush, seconded by Mr. Thompson, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

2. DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION: Brian Kelly, Commissioner

- a. Amending the 2026 Onondaga County Budget to Accept a Grant from the New York Statewide Investments in More Swimming Initiative Overseen by the New York State Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (\$50,000)
- Request to amend the 2026 county budget to accept a \$50,000 grant from New York State SWIMS to reimburse municipalities through certain counties and large cities to incentivize lifeguard recruitment, retention, and training and improve swimming opportunities throughout the state
 - Onondaga County Parks established IMAs with seven municipalities:
 - Towns of Skaneateles, Town of Camillus, Town of Manlius, Town of Solvay and Geddes, the Village of Jordan, the Town of Saline, and the Town of Van Buren
 - Each municipality reimbursed \$4,000 for documented raises, retention bonuses, training, and/or training materials and equipment purchased May 2024 through September 2025
 - Remaining \$22,000 reimburses Onondaga County for training, training equipment, and lifeguard raises

A motion was made by Mr. McCarron, seconded by Mr. Bush, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

- b. Naming the Pavilion at the Empower Federal Credit Union Amphitheater at Lakeview in Honor of Joanne "Joanie" Mahoney – Brian Donnelly
 - Resolution to name the pavilion at the Empower Federal Credit Union Amphitheater in honor of Joanne Mahoney, former County Executive
 - She was the driving force behind the amphitheater being built; the county is now in its 10th full season
 - There was trepidation when it was being built, but it has proven to be a tremendous success over the last 10 years
 - We would like to place her name on the pavilion

Questions/Comments

- Mr. McCarron noted it was a very controversial project at the time; the county went ahead and invested in it and it has proven to be a great asset to the community and a profitable venture; hoped all county projects end up like this
- Mr. Ryan noted that he echoed those sentiments, noting Joanie did a lot of great things for this county
- Mr. Bush: When does the agreement run out with the Oneidas for that? Are they paying us so much a year?

- Mr. Donnelly: There is an exclusivity agreement put in place by New York State that precludes certain counties from having casinos but diverts proceeds from other casinos to those counties; no known expiration date, believed to be in perpetuity, but I will confirm that for you

A motion was made by Mr. Thompson, seconded by Ms. Hernandez, to approve this item; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

3. FRIENDS OF THE ROSAMOND GIFFORD ZOO: Megan Thomas, Vice Chair; Andrew Brazil, Interim Executive Director

- a. INFORMATIONAL: Discussion of Operations
(Attachment No. 1: Andrew Brazil's Statement)
Supporting Documentation, including 2024 Donor List, 2024 Board of Directors, and 2024 Annual Report on File with the Clerk

Presentation by Andrew Brazil:

- Since 1970, our 501c3 nonprofit organization has served as a dedicated partner to Onondaga County, not merely a vendor or fundraising arm, but an operational partner that allows the facility to function at a level of excellence that would otherwise be impossible through municipal resources alone
- The county owns the facility and employs the top tier animal staff; the Friends manage the public-facing operations 363 days a year, closing only for Christmas and New Year's Day
- Work is integrated into every corner of the zoo through a complex ecosystem of services:
 - Retail and guest services: the Curious Cub gift shop exceeded \$1 million in gross revenue in 2025; proceeds go back into the zoo to fund internal signage, marketing, and general zoo support
 - Food and beverage: the Friends' award-winning food and beverage team manages all on-site concessions and catering, ensuring every dollar spent on a meal or event hosted at the zoo is reinvested into the facility rather than diverted to an outside for-profit corporation
 - Education: the Friends' award-winning education team manages educational programming serving thousands of local students annually, made possible by a \$2 million restricted endowment from the Rosamond Gifford Foundation awarded in 1999; required for AZA accreditation standards
 - Marketing: the Friends' award-winning marketing department manages all marketing, PR, and social media for the zoo, a service valued conservatively at over \$300,000 annually, provided at zero cost to county taxpayers
 - Philanthropy and events: serve as the primary engine for private and corporate philanthropy, securing funding through individual donors and hosting signature events such as Brew at the Zoo, Zoo Boo, and the Fall Conservation Bash
 - Membership and volunteers: serve and engage a loyal base of nearly 10,000 member households; volunteers provide thousands of hours of service annually, assisting with guest education and special events, a massive in-kind labor force the county does not have to fund
- Public trust is the most valuable asset; when a citizen buys a membership, sponsors an event, or makes a donation, they are entrusting the organization with the intent that their money goes directly to animal welfare and zoo programs; it is paramount that we protect that intent, ensuring resources are not diverted to outside projects
- To maintain AZA accreditation, held continuously since 1987, there must be a healthy, stable, and unified relationship between the facility and the support organization; any disruption or ambiguity in roles creates a direct risk to that accreditation, which places the zoo among the best in the world

- We are seeking a stable long-term memorandum of understanding and a retail agreement that allows us to be the best possible partners to Onondaga County and the animal care team; the goal is to keep resources and energy focused entirely on the growth of the zoo and the care of its animals

*Presentation Continued by Megan Thomas:
(Attachment No. 2: Statement)*

- We are here today to talk about challenges we have been facing in running an effective partnership between the zoo and the Friends; our goal is a partnership where the Friends can support the zoo to run and to thrive; we have not had such a partnership for some time
- The county is seeking money from the Friends to support its sorely underfunded aquarium in a way that is lacking in integrity and threatening the very existence of the Friends
- On or about April 28, 2025, the Friends were approached with a request: would the Friends donate \$1 million to the aquarium project; the funds from donors and the Gifford Foundation endowment were not allocated for the aquarium but for the zoo; many donations were tied to specific projects; nonetheless, the Friends staff brought this request to the board
- The board had grave concerns; the request was not in line with the mission and \$1 million is a large percentage of funds; last year net assets were about \$7.5 million, so \$1 million would constitute about 13% of net assets
- The board decided to ask the Gifford Foundation whether they could give these funds away; the Gifford Foundation did not support giving these funds to the aquarium
- When the Friends did not respond, the county started to put immense pressure on the Friends; what followed was a campaign of retaliation and bullying:
 - Meetings became more hostile; the county became increasingly aggressive, getting angry at the Friends for minor issues
 - The Friends had applied for a grant for a community reinvestment program providing employment opportunities for youth living below the poverty line; when it was awarded, the media picked up the story; the county became angry, saying this was embarrassing to them

Ms. Thomas read the full email from Brian Kelly, dated July 7, 2025 into the record;

- In a Syracuse.com article published today, Ryan McMahon is quoted stating these numbers needed to be increased and that it was unrelated to the aquarium ask
- The county sat on the MOU and refused to sign it; then in October 2025, the county sought aggressive changes that had never been asked for before:
 - Membership dues increased to 40%, doubling what was previously paid to the county
 - Attempting to change how the Gifford endowment operated; previously the interest funded education; now interest would be used for programs and activities approved by the director of the zoo under the supervision of the commissioner of parks, effectively taking away the Friends' control of these funds
 - The MOU term was changed from every five years to annually, threatening financial stability
- The county then started talking about going out to RFP for the gift shop, something that had never been discussed before:
 - It is nearly universal practice for public zoos with nonprofit partners to manage gift shops without going to RFP
- The Friends give a percentage of the gift shop back to the county and reinvest the remaining portion back into the zoo; no private entity could do such a thing

- General Municipal Law Section 103 generally requires competitive bidding, but there are exceptions; this does not apply to concession agreements
- Taking away the gift shop would be incredibly detrimental; it has consistently represented between 38 and 46% of net revenue; it would be a significant if not unsustainable impact
- The board's suspicion of a link between the failure to give the \$1 million and the new hostility was confirmed at an October 28, 2025 board meeting; county representative Brian Kelly was asked directly: if the Friends were to give the \$1 million to the aquarium, would the RFP and the MOU still be an issue; he stated they would become negotiable; many people in the room heard this statement

Ms. Thomas asked board members present who heard this statement at the October 28, 2025 meeting to raise their hand; multiple individuals confirmed the statement by a show of hands

- After Carrie Large moved on, the zoo took over her office and locked the Friends out; the Friends cannot hire a new executive director given the state of the RFP and the MOU, and there is no office space at the zoo
- The Friends are asking for the legislature's help on three things:
 - The RFP for the gift shop to be awarded to the Friends with an agreement it will not be sent back out to RFP
- The MOU that Carrie Large signed in August 2025 needs to be countersigned by the county
- An end to the campaign of bullying, retaliation, and unprofessionalism; looking for increased accountability from the legislature and a restored partnership built on mutual respect

Questions/Comments

- Mr. McCarron: So, you talked about the memorandum of understanding that's renegotiated annually. When was the last time the MOU was renegotiated?
- Ms. Thomas: It was renegotiated in 2025, fully executed
- Mr. McCarron: When's the last time we had a fully executed revision?
- Ms. Thomas: I don't have it in front of me. A couple of years ago
- Mr. Brazil: 2022
- Mr. McCarron: Do we know what the changes were between the previous one and the 2022, versus what the changes are?
- Ms. Thomas: Nothing substantial like this; minor edits, minor revisions; it was always a collaborative process and never something that would impact us in such a way as this one did
- Mr. McCarron: Relative to the relationship between the zoo and the aquarium, I might be misremembering this. If I am, please forgive me. Didn't the zoo put in a request to run the aquarium? Wasn't the aquarium idea partly because of the zoo's pushing back in the day?
- Ms. Thomas: I'd really like to clear up this statement about the Friends being the precipice for the aquarium; on the record, this makes no sense and is not the case; the Friends never asked for this, it was not the Friends' idea to have the aquarium; however, once it was happening, we want to be a partner
- Mr. Brazil: I wasn't a part of all these conversations, but conversations took place where the Friends offered, are you going to need a Friends organization at the aquarium? Can we carry our services that we're providing at the zoo over to the aquarium? We've had some great success here, how can we help you there? It was never really like we were driving the bus, we were offering support
- Mr. McCarron: Did the Friends of the Zoo officially put in to compete to run the aquarium against zoOceanarium?
- Mr. Brazil: I believe there was a proposal on the table at some point

- Mr. McCarron: I'm just trying to remember to get the history of the relationship because you're alleging bad blood in the county, it looks like the zoo had a vested interest in the aquarium; not saying you pushed it, but had a vested interest in being partners with it early on based on the relationship of asking to run it
- Ms. Thomas: That is indicative of how things went before, if there was an opportunity for partnership, totally open to it; the ask from the county wasn't the problem; the problem is what happened after; similarly to how we entered into the RFP for the aquarium, once that was done, we moved on, there was no problem
- Mr. McCarron: This might be a question for the county. When the amphitheater was done and the concessions were done, did that go out to open bid to run concessions at the amphitheater? Do we currently have an open RFP for concessions at the zoo right now? Is that like an open bid? Is it legal to even discuss it?
- Mr. Durr: You cannot discuss the details but you can discuss the process
- Ms. Thomas: Just to be clear about why the bid for the amphitheater would have gone out for RFP, it's because they don't have a 501c3 partner; it is a categorically different issue; under General Municipal Law 103, that makes sense; in our situation, it is the exception
- Mr. McCarron noted he thinks open competition to negotiate the best deal for the county is in the best interest of the county; he has not seen the Friends' budget and would love to see a report on educational programs, costs, monies being brought in, staffing, and where all monies generated by the 501c3 are going. What is your annual budget?
- Ms. Thomas: Andrew, I'm hearing this statement of, well, we just want to make sure we're doing what's best for the county and the zoo, in short, there can be no better situation for them unless there's another partnership with another nonprofit that similarly situates US; it's just this nonprofit as opposed to a private entity

Justin Sayles, Executive Communication Officer:

- Mr. Sales: I just want to clarify a couple of things. That's actually not true; where the idea of the aquarium came from, it was a direct conversation with the former board president Janet Augustini and the county executive; it's public record on his calendar; I don't know why that is a source of debate, but that's just factually inaccurate
- Mr. Thompson: What thing is factually inaccurate specifically?
- Mr. Sayles: That the idea did not come from the Friends of the Zoo, the aquarium
- Mr. Thompson: I remember about 15 years ago, there was talk about having an aquarium next to or an extension or expansion of the zoo. Are these the same idea?
- Mr. Sayles: This was a long-standing idea of the Friends of the Zoo; when Ryan McMahon took over as county executive, one of the first meetings he had was with then board president Janet Augustini and other representatives of the zoo coming to pitch the idea of an aquarium
- Mr. Thompson: At the inner harbor?
- Mr. Sayles: That was determined after the feasibility study was done. The idea was an aquarium would be an asset to the community; feasibility study was done that ultimately resulted in the Inner Harbor. I don't know why this is a source of debate but the idea did come from the Friends
 - With respect to partnership, couldn't agree more; as someone who was part of those conversations, would just push back on the assertion that there was hostility regarding the awards the Friends got; it was in the interest of partnership, we just asked that when the Friends happened to be successful with an award, they maybe shoot us an email saying hey, FYI, we happen to win this; reading about it in the newspaper was maybe not the best way to pursue a partnership; I don't think that's a lot to ask; I think the legislature would like to know just as much as anybody else when we when friends groups win awards; I don't know how that gets interpreted as hostile

- Submit for the record the previous MOU and the pending MOU, as well as communication showing that current board president Terry Hopkins specifically asked the county to wait to sign the MOU until the RFP for the gift shop was done; will also provide the 2022 MOU for comparison

(Attachment No. 3: Email Communications)

- Ms. Thomas: As to the historical issue of whose idea it was to have an aquarium, we could probably debate this all day; let's be clear about who went to the legislature and asked for the money and who treated the Friends with retaliation when they said no; we're here to be a partner but the way this is going on lacks integrity, period; if the RFP is sent out to someone else, that is a problem; we want to move forward with a final MOU on the terms from the 2025 agreement
- Mr. Brazil: There have been so many versions of the MOU; some include operation of the gift shop and marketing services which are directly funded by the profit from the gift shop; it is a chicken and egg situation, if we don't know we are going to be operating the gift shop, we can't commit to some of the things in previous versions
- Ms. Thomas: The positive changes that were made to the most recent version were made by our team; we still don't have a signed agreement; we are not here today because the agreement is not signed; we are here because the MOU changed in an aggressive manner that departs from the historical nature of this agreement and our historical operations
- Ms. Thomas: As to the issue of whether the grant situation was hostile, there was a lot of hostility and a marked difference from how the Friends were being treated before; the grant went out, we were told it was embarrassing and we were stopped on the wrist for this; that was just one of many examples; I was told things are tense, things are toxic, things are hostile; we never want that, we want a good working partner
- Mr. McCarron: We never want that, we want a good working partner. I know there's been a lot of change of leadership there, were you two the ones specifically negotiating the MOU for the Friends of the Zoo?
- Ms. Thomas: I was very much involved but kind of behind the scenes; it was more so Carrie who was probably negotiating that, and Terry
- Mr. Bush: I just would like to express a little disappointment; the Friends are a very valuable contributing group in our community; words carry a lot of meaning and I would hope that words could be spoken that will bring people together and not use hostile aggressive language that won't help us solve the problem; that is how it sounds coming from the Friends group; I'm sorry that you feel that way, but we need to move forward and figure out how we can get this solved in the best fashion for everyone
- Mr. McCarron: And if I could just add, I think other Friends groups are being renegotiated with; like Beaver Lake Nature Center, Brian May unfortunately had to go there; was that MOU recently redone?
- Mr. May: It was being renegotiated
- Mr. McCarron: It's not just this group; that makes you wonder, was it retaliatory? Is it coincidental? I hate to throw this out there, but is this bad blood being politicized? I hope not.
- Ms. Thomas: Certainly not on our end; with respect to the words, I agree that words matter and that is a really important point; what is happening right now is that the Friends are under economic threat; our choice was to speak up or to go under; we are doing so in a way that shows integrity and is supported by the documentation; we want to make it clear on the record that we are not going to continue to be treated this way; this is not the way that an effective partnership runs; we are here to assert our boundaries and what we need to move forward
- Mr. Brazil: This was not our first course of action; I do agree words are important and choice in words is important; there was a lot of debate at board meetings and executive sessions about next steps; it got kicked back a lot because we weren't sure we had the points we wanted to make; it got to the point with

the relationship with the county and at the zoo itself that we felt it necessary to engage the legislature and use the words we chose; we feel it is required to use this language at this point

- Mr. McCarron: When this came to be, did you guys reach out to the legislature or did the legislature reach out to you?
- Mr. Brazil: Chad had joined the board and at his first meeting was brought up to speed on the current situation
- Ms. Thomas: The Friends also offered to meet with whoever wanted to meet before this meeting and no one took them up on it; the opportunity never got passed along
- Mr. McCarron noted this was the first time hearing of it and that whoever it was sent to, it never made it to a lot of them
- Mr. Sales: In the interest of Legislator Bush, I appreciate your comments; let me reiterate something the county executive said and maybe this will allow everybody to turn a page; this project has been fully funded for months; we've stopped pursuing or seeking a donation from the Friends for longer than that; we have certainly moved on months ago; I hope the Friends can do so too
- Mr. Thompson: Does that mean the MOU has been agreed upon and signed by the county?
- Mr. Sales: The Friends specifically asked to hold off on signing the MOU; I'm referring to this constant question about the \$1 million, the project is now fully funded and we've moved on; we no longer pursued any additional donation from them with respect to the aquarium; the only obstacle to signing the 2025 MOU is that the current board president asked us to wait until the RFP for the gift shop is done
- Mr. Thompson: So, you're saying that there is no obstacle to both sides signing the 2025 MOU?
- Mr. Sales: The only obstacle to signing the 2025 MOU is that the current board president asked us to wait until the RFP for the gift shop is done as you will see in the communication I provided you
- Ms. Thomas: And Justin, what about the RFP, is that also going to be given to the Friends?
- Mr. Sales: No comment on an open RFP process
- Mr. McCarron: You said you offered to meet with the legislators, at what point in time were the emails released to the media to leverage them before we even knew about this?
- Mr. Ryan: When the agenda was posted
- Mr. McCarron: So it was originally the plan to leverage the media for this meeting?
- Mr. Ryan: I think the media asked for the agenda
- Mr. McCarron: So it is being politicized; I think this is extremely inappropriate; I'm offended by how this went down
- Ms. Thomas: I'm offended by what you just said because it's not being politicized; we literally don't have an executive director right now, we can't even fund an executive director, our money is tied up, we don't have an office; what are we to do, just sit back and watch this happen? We went to the county and they had not wanted to have a conversation with us; that is why we are here; we didn't reach out to the media, the media reached out to us
- Mr. McCarron: I think that if you and Chairman Ryan, who I'm a little disappointed in, especially based on the comments earlier, wait till this afternoon; this was a planned ambush today; this is how I'm interpreting it, the emails were sent to the press at some point in time before any legislator on one side of the aisle knew any of this was an issue at all; and then the agenda was put out with the intention of coming in with this knowing that the article was going to be written, still before a portion of the legislature knew anything about it
- Mr. Ryan: Nothing was sent to the media; they requested the documents from the clerk's office after they were posted publicly
- Ms. Hernandez: Commissioner Johnson, do you have something you would like to say?
- Ms. Johnson: Very disappointed; I would say for the people that we've worked with and I'm fairly new, are not the people sitting here. Terry Hopkins has been a very good and effective president of this board; there is no doubt there have been issues and conversation, but nothing that hasn't been good business practices between both groups; active conversation is part of a good relationship; there

has been respect on both sides; it disturbs me that the RFP is being spoken about at this level, it is inappropriate to the process and not fair to the entire county RFP process

- Terry Hopkins has been an effective president and has negotiated with us in good faith as we have negotiated with her
- In the fall, Commissioner of Parks Brian Kelly and Deputy County Executive Johnson met with Terry Hopkins and John Harris to discuss whether there was an opportunity to combine and share an executive director at the departure of Carrie Large; it was a cordial conversation; I don't think adversaries would have had that type of conversation
- Ms. Thomas: We are concerned about the idea of combining executive directors; we feel the county is trying to remove the gatekeepers to our endowment and funds to get to it for the aquarium
- Ms. Hernandez: Thank you to the Friends of the Zoo for making sure you keep the sustainability of the zoo by giving back; I want to say thank you for speaking up for your donors too, when donors gave to the Friends of the Zoo, that is what they gave for or they would donate to the Friends of the Aquarium

Statement from Kathy O'Connell, Board Member

- I may not have fully heard Justin refer to a conversation between the county executive and our former director Janet; I don't believe that happened because I was on the board from May of 2019 and Janet left the zoo in January 2020; I never heard anything about an aquarium in that time
- My other point, and this is with all due respect, is that I am concerned and very disheartened by the reaction of some people here given what came out a couple weeks ago about what the county did with the money from the movie project; I hope they would show integrity
- Mr. Bush: How much money does the endowment generate?
- Mr. Brazil: The initial endowment was \$2 million given over a period of time; the interest has exceeded the initial endowment; it is now over \$4 million
- Mr. Bush: There's is an annual distribution from that fund to the Friends group
- Mr. Brazil: The endowment agreement says that money can only be used to fund educational services at the zoo
- Mr. Bush: It goes to the Friends group?
- Mr. Brazil: Yes
- Ms. Thomas: It gets reinvested into the zoo
- Mr. Bush: When that gift was made, it was given to the Friends group
- Mr. Brazil: Correct
- Mr. McCarron: Is there any way to see the operating budget for the last five years, just to compare what we're taking in, where the monies are going, and how that reinvestment in the zoo is being utilized; where is that money being reinvested into the zoo?
- Ms. Thomas: Will take that under consideration and get right back to you; can be sent to the clerk for distribution to the committee
- Ms. Johnson: The question Legislator Bush about the \$2 million endowment, it was done over 10 years; the resolution passed by this body to accept and use it clearly states it has to be expended for programs and activities approved by the director of the zoo under the supervision of the commissioner of parks and recreation
- Mr. Bush: So, where does the Friends group come into that?
- Ms. Johnson: That's not here

4. DISCUSSION OF CORRESPONDING OUTSIDE BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS:

a. Review of Submitted Resumes and Candidates for Board and Commission Vacancies

- The Vehicle Use Review Board is being considered for reinstatement; it has not been active for a little while; original initiating legislation had a combination of appointments from the county legislature and county executive
 - The comptroller recently did an audit related to county vehicles
 - No determination needs to be made today; members are encouraged to review the audit and provide feedback on whether the board should be reinstated as part of oversight of county vehicles
- Mr. Ryan: I encourage every member of this body to read the audit and if you think it deemed necessary to form the board, or unnecessary, please let me know

A motion was made by Mr. Thompson, seconded by Ms. Hernandez, to adjourn; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:16 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Hassina K. Adams, Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: COUNTY FACILITIES

DATE: APRIL 21, 2026

NAME (Please Print)	DEPARTMENT/AGENCY
Megan Johns	Friends of the Zoo
Andrew Brazill	Friends of the Reservoir behind Zoo
Denise Donahue	4m ops / DOT
Mr. Kelly	PAUCS
Robert DeRover	CE etc
Norman Donnelly	
KYLE MADSEN	LEGISLATURE
Nathaniel Overdyk	DALICS
Isabelle Harris	CE
Chas Reich	CE
M. Voss	POT