



# Onondaga County Legislature

**HASSINA K. ADAMS**  
Clerk

**NICOLE WATTS**  
Chairwoman

**SPENCER BERG**  
Deputy Clerk

## COUNTY FACILITIES COMMITTEE MINUTES – MARCH 17, 2026 CHAD RYAN, CHAIR

**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Mr. Ryan, Mr. Bush, Mr. McCarron, Mr. Thompson

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** Leader Hernandez

**ALSO PRESENT:** Mr. Brown, Mr. Eriksen, Mr. Garland, Leader May; also see attached list

Chair Ryan called the meeting to order at 2:49 p.m. The previous meeting's minutes were approved.

### 1. ONONDAGA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (DOT): Martin E. Voss, Commissioner

- a. INFORMATIONAL – Overview of the Onondaga County Department of Transportation  
*County highway jurisdiction maps on file with the Clerk*
  - DOT operates four section shops:
    - North Area – 6230 East Molloy Road (near airport); services Cicero, eastern Clay, northern Manlius, DeWitt, and Salina
    - Section 2 (Warner's) – Pottery Road; rebuilt 2018; services western Clay, Van Buren, Elbridge, northern Camillus, and Geddes
    - Marcellus – shared facility with Town of Marcellus Highway Department (including salt barn); services southern Elbridge, Camillus, Town of Onondaga, Marcellus, Skaneateles, and Spafford
    - Jamesville – largest facility; houses heavy equipment and welding shop; services DeWitt, southern Manlius, Fabius, Lafayette, and parts of Pompey
  - Services from each shop: snow and ice removal, vehicle maintenance, fueling stations, and salt barns
  - In 2023, administrative and engineering offices relocated from the Civic Center to 10,000 sq. ft. of renovated space at Malloy Road
  - Relocation keeps the department closer to winter operations and EOC coordination; also easier for contractors and constituents to get permits
  - Leadership: no current vacancies
  - Two Deputy Commissioners: James Benskin, P.E. (engineering division) and Adam George, P.E. (operations, maintenance, fleet, and CIP for department facilities)
  - Three highway section supervisors rotate 12-hour shifts (October–April) for 24/7 road coverage in winter
  - Engineering division of 18 engineers based at Malloy Road

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- 2026 budget: approximately \$59 million operating; approximately \$32 million capital
- Federal aid projects follow a five-year timeline from identification to construction start
- Funding formula: 85% federal, 10% state, 5% county local match; legislature must adopt resolutions to accept federal and state funds
- For every dollar spent, 85 cents comes from the federal government and 10 cents from the state – the county's contribution is 5 cents; that 5% in local funds leverages 95 cents in federal and state aid
- 2026 work plan will be presented to committees in April; authorized positions: 167; filled: 163
- Recent and upcoming major projects:
  - Old Liverpool Road rehabilitation (city line to Electronics Parkway) – completed
  - Bear Road and portion of Route 57 – underway
  - Bridge projects: Lakeshore Road Bridge over Maple Creek; Limestone Plaza Bridge (Fayetteville); Tuttle Road Bridge (Cicero); several additional smaller bridge projects
- Two annual bonds requested: a highway bond (paving and 5% federal aid match) and a bridge bond

### Questions/Comments:

- Mr. Ryan: Is there a deadline for any of the bond resolutions?
- Mr. Voss: No hard deadline; the process operates on a five-year rolling cycle. The last few years have been very volatile in terms of pricing – the gap between engineers' estimates and actual construction costs is wide.
  - We're very conservative with how we budget to make sure we don't have to keep coming back asking for money. In the ten years I've been at DOT, we have not exceeded our budget and we don't plan on starting anytime soon
  - We manage our overtime well
- Mr. McCarron: Are you having trouble with CDL driver retention because of pay differences between the county and the private sector?
- Mr. Voss: It wasn't so much the private sector – towns and villages were starting people at six or seven dollars more an hour than we were. We addressed this in two ways:
  - First, we created a winter premium incentive that we're still paying from November to April
  - Second, two years ago, we reclassified driver titles from MEO to match state HMW-1 and HMW titles, which gave them a two pay-grade bump and also raised their overtime rate
  - Retention has stabilized. Our challenge now is the engineering staff – they're in their 50s and won't be here forever
  - We also run a Grade 4 MEO training program at each shop; it takes four to twelve months but we can train and promote internally
  - The bigger challenge is finding people who can pass the pre-employment drug screen and are willing to get a CDL. We're not having the exodus we had to Clay and Cicero a few years ago, but we will always lose skilled operators to National Grid – that's not going to change

### *Presentation Continued:*

- Facility maintenance highlights:
  - Camillus: fully rebuilt approximately four years ago – all new plumbing, septic, and structure
  - North Area: renovation chosen over teardown, saving an estimated \$7–\$10 million; work included new roof, asbestos removal, and modernized mechanic bays with mobile lifts
  - Marcellus: 42 large bay doors currently being replaced; Facilities Management dedicated an electrician to lead conduit work; approximately four doors completed per day
  - North Area: air handling unit replacement pending as an ongoing CIP item
- The 2025 plan is on our website

- Supply chain challenges: microchip shortages currently causing approximately two-year delays on snowplow and heavy equipment deliveries
- To mitigate delays, letters of intent are submitted at budget adoption to secure front-of-line ordering
- Large equipment such as the paint striper and grader was purchased through ARPA funds to reduce reliance on operating appropriations
- Snowplows are not eligible for ARPA or similar one-time funding sources

#### Questions/Comments:

- Mr. McCarron: I've been in contact with the highway superintendent association – the Senate is looking at a \$250 million CHIPS increase. Does that make a substantive difference?
- Mr. Voss: CHIPS tends to be cyclical; in even election years, the amount goes up, and in odd years it returns to baseline. We plan around a baseline of approximately \$6–\$7 million that we're reasonably confident in
  - If the state budget is adopted before our April 21st work plan presentation, we can bake the updated numbers in
  - If the budget hasn't passed by April 15–16, we'll use the baseline and come back with updated figures in the summer when we know the real numbers
- Mr. Ryan: Do we have a comprehensive road condition grading list that is publicly accessible?
- Mr. Voss: We have an internal list. Two engineers – Tim Coley and Mark Shaw – drive every one of our 802 road miles every single year
  - We also use a consultant who does ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to assess areas of concern
  - And then of course there's community feedback. If somebody tells us there's a pothole, we have someone look at it within hours, and if there is one, it's repaired within 24 hours in most cases. Same with mailboxes – we've learned over the years that responding promptly saves everyone a lot of headache
  - Overall, our road ratings really never get below a six or seven – we're pretty aggressive about staying on top of that. The red-highlighted roads on the map I gave you are the county highways we have jurisdiction over
- Mr. Bush: Do you have a list of county roads and county bridges that legislators could share with constituents?
- Mr. Voss: Yes, the map
- Mr. Ryan: The Erie Canal Museum is looking for help moving boxes out of their attic. If anyone wants to help let me know

## 2. **FRIENDS OF THE AQUARIUM:** William Gilberti, Chairman

### a. INFORMATIONAL – Aquarium Quarterly Report

#### Questions/Comments:

- Mr. Ryan: Who else is on the board?
- Mr. Gilberti: Pastor DeCarto, Andrea Autry, David Bottar, Isabelle Harris, Brian Kelly, Julie Abbot, I (William Gilberti), and Archie Wixson
- Mr. Ryan: What is it that you guys are doing?
- Mr. Gilberti: We were incorporated in March of 2024. I did not become chair until September of 2024 after Chairman Fox retired, so my tenure has really been since then
  - Our purposes are for the growth and development of the aquarium, for moving forward the educational and environmental stewardship programs, and for fundraising for the benefit of the community

- Mr. Ryan: So we received a report (*Attachment No.1: Friends of Onondaga County Aquarium Report*) we have total pledged \$7.6 million, total received \$7.4 million, approximately \$255,000 outstanding. How does the transfer to the county work, you get the money, transfer it to Onondaga County, and they are doing what with it?
- Mr. Gilberti: That's not really in the purview of the Friends of the Aquarium, but we are donating the money to the county for purposes of, at this point, development of the aquarium and all the other purposes we stand for. We're in the early to mid-stages of construction.
- Mr. Ryan: Are any of these earmarked for specific projects within the aquarium?
- Mr. Gilberti: Of the \$7.5 plus or minus, most is through donations and some through grants. Approximately \$1.25 million was through grants from the Onondaga County Development Corporation, which is a matter of public record. Approximately \$5.9 million of that has been donated to the county for the development of the aquarium since we're not yet in the growth stage.
- Mr. Ryan: Do you have a breakdown of grants versus donations?
- Mr. Gilberti: We are aware of the amounts per donor or grantor. The grants are public record. The individual donors I cannot share unless I have their permission.
- Mr. Eriksen: What are the approximate number of donors that have contributed to the friends group?
- Mr. Gilberti: It was on the report delivered to the legislature.
- Mr. McCaron: Who got it?
- Mr. Ryan: Legislator Brown asked for it, and I happened to be cc'd on it but it wasn't shared with all the legislators.
- Mr. Eriksen: So about \$7.6 million was taken in through donations is that correct? Do we have a breakdown on donations versus grants?
- Mr. Gilberti: Donations and grants; I don't have the precise dollar breakdown but it's approximately \$1,250,000 in grants and the rest in donations.
- Mr. Brown: What do you see as the role of the Friends of the Aquarium going forward as the project begins to open, as far as fundraising? Where do you plan on raising and spending money?
- Mr. Gilberti: We went live with our website a few weeks ago; I hope everybody has seen it, I encourage you to take a look. Excitement is building, there's no question. We've been approached by a list of individuals and organizations that want to contribute
  - We have made our first investment into what we call our aquatic population. You just don't get to open the doors of the aquarium and expect the fish to arrive.
  - We are working with ZoOceanarium, the management group retained to operate the aquarium; they are a global organization that manages aquariums around the world.
  - Through their resources we've been able to start our aquatic population. We're thinking of fundraising activities associated with the arrival of some great species that would be fun and exciting for people to see.
  - From the board's perspective, the money raised will support the growth and development of the aquarium, especially highlighting education. The county executive has challenged the children of Onondaga County to name the aquarium, and all the children in the county are right now gathering their selected names, it's created quite a buzz.
- Mr. Brown: You mentioned the website and the acquisition of species. Do you foresee more of those purchases, and how much are we expecting to pay going forward?
- Mr. Gilberti: We rely entirely on our outside professionals, ZoOceanarium, with respect to creating our aquatic population, both saltwater and freshwater fish. At least 70% of the saltwater fish will be wild-captured
  - The highest standards of humanitarian and ethical capture are required. They are quarantined where they're captured, biologists and aquarists begin to coordinate with ours here, and when they're transported they go into quarantine tanks first before being introduced to the main population.

- The first order required 50% down, and that was approximately \$250,000 plus or minus \$10,000. We'll see when we get the data on how successful that first purchase was and then understand from ZoOceanarium whether further investment is needed
  - We rely solely on them because they know what they're doing
- Mr. Eriksen: Is there a confirmed opening date?
- Mr. Gilberti: As Friends of the Aquarium, we don't have one, we're not involved in construction
- Mr. Eriksen: Is it anticipated that the Friends group will have a role with the aquarium over the longer term, such that fundraising may be used for year-over-year operating costs?
- Mr. Gilberti: As I understand it right now, that is what exactly, the similarity would be to the zoo. I'm not familiar with the specific numbers but that would be our continuing role
- Mr. Kelly (Commissioner of Parks and Recreation): It costs about \$23 million to operate the zoo. We get \$7 million from county government. Actual costs run \$11–\$12 million
  - The Friends group subsidizes the gap, they're forever supporting events, programs, and maintenance. Operationally it's a great resource for taking care of the house as well
- Mr. Eriksen: How many people have access to the donor list?
- Mr. Gilberti: The executive committee board, and then the entire board once the board decides to go forward with accepting a donation. We know the identity of every donor
  - We're guided by the requirement that the donor wants. I'm involved with dozens of 501(c)(3) and they have reasons to be anonymous.
- Mr. Thompson: Of those approximately 42 donors, has anyone opted to not be anonymous?
- Mr. Gilberti: I believe once the aquarium opens you will know the names of several of the donors, probably by virtue of the manner in which they have asked to deal with the aquarium in terms of their donation
  - They may be sponsoring one of the aquatic exhibits in the name of someone who has passed, for example. You'll probably know the names of most of them when the aquarium opens and we can then fulfill our side of the agreement
- Mr. Brown: How are you going about seeking donors, a particular group of philanthropists, businesses, or a broader approach?
- Mr. Gilberti: Since September of last year, every donor I'm aware of has approached us; they've either approached a legislator and I've gotten a call, or they approached a board member and I got a call
- Every donor I can say I'm aware of approached us, wanting to be involved. That's why I feel comfortable saying there's a lot of excitement in the community
- Mr. Thompson: Animals that will populate the aquarium are being caught largely in the wild. Is there a plan with ZoOceanarium to build a sustainable breeding program so the aquarium can sustain its own population going forward?
- Mr. Kelly: We're going to seek AZA accreditation, just like our zoo. Once accredited, we're involved in a Species Survival Program (SSP). Animals come on loan at no cost, we breed them, do something for the population, keep them for a period of time, and then they go to another aquarium or zoo
  - ZoOceanarium is already AZA-accredited in St. Louis and Dallas, and it's part of their contract with the county
- Mr. Brown: Are any of the donations recurring, have any donors pledged annual giving going forward? In reference to other friend groups, my fear is that this project will be a sustaining cost year in and out if revenue doesn't hold up. Will the friends group be able to plug the budget gap annually or will we need to seek more donations?
- Ms. Smiley: Based on all the projections we have, the aquarium will be sustainable based on revenue projections and tenant agreements. The intent is not to have long-term county resources dedicated to it
  - The Friends will probably still have a role in education and other programs, but actual operations and maintenance is planned to be self-sustaining
- Mr. Brown: Are there any recurring donations going forward?

- Mr. Gilberti: The donations we've received so far are varied. Several of the more significant donors have mentioned they would be highly interested in continuing each year. I can't say for how long, but I am sure if we all work together and make the aquarium a success, the more likely they are to continue their support
- Mr. Brown: Knowing there are at least some recurring donors gives me optimism. This Legislature has agreed not to put in additional money. I have a real fear that two or three years from now we're going to be asked to do that, and I don't want to do that. Hearing this gives me some optimism
- Mr. Eriksen: To the extent you're at liberty, is it possible to give us an idea of the breakdown of donors by type: individuals, businesses, foundations?
- Mr. Gilberti: Yes, to all three.
- Mr. Ryan: Is the \$7.6 million a quarterly report or a total in totality? We're supposed to get quarterly reports
- Ms. Smiley: In totality since inception, audited
- Mr. Gilberti: I believe this report we just gave you, we have independent auditors, represents the precise total for the period its reporting for which I guess would be the quarter
- Mr. Ryan: Were any of the donations made in exchange for naming rights or signage, and is there marketing material or a public process for sponsoring a tank or exhibit?
  - Mr. Gilberti: The board has not made any decision yet on how to value naming rights for the aquarium. First we'd like to find out the name the children select, and then somewhat similar to the dome situation, the JMA scenario. We haven't identified the exact value yet
  - It continues to increase in our minds because the excitement continues to grow. There's already an expression of interest from at least a dozen parties
  - We want to get the maximum value for the naming rights for as long a period as we can, and we'll let that be known to as many potential interested parties as possible. But it is a board decision and we're still in the midst of construction
- Mr. Ryan: Do you have a target fundraising number before the aquarium opens?
- Mr. Gilberti: I do not. It's hard to ever anticipate the heart of a charitable donor. I can tell you there's a lot of excitement
- Mr. Ryan: Is it unusual in your experience with 501(c)(3)s that all donations are anonymous and none of that information is shared publicly?
- Mr. Gilberti: I'm not sure it's fair to say all donations are anonymous as a conclusion. All donations are at a stage where our relationship with the donor is such that they wouldn't allow release of their information yet because we're only in the midst of construction
  - At the point when the aquarium opens, I'm sure you will know the name of most of the donors by the manner in which they've provided for their donations. Some are going to make their donation stay anonymous as is their right. But at this juncture no donor has said you can use my name
- Mr. Ryan: So you are saying its federal law that allows them to stay anonymous. I'm trying to understand the role of the legislature here.
- Mr. Durr (County Attorney): There is a specific U.S. Supreme Court case that backs the anonymity of donors, and it's also in the IRS code, anonymous donations are protected as part of First Amendment free speech
- Mr. Brown: Can you provide the Supreme Court case and the IRS code to the committee?
- Mr. Durr: I will send it to you
- Mr. Bush: I understand that ruling, but government needs to be transparent and people need to know the flow of funds in and out of government. We wouldn't have needed to pass that resolution last year if this was already covered
- Mr. Durr: The ruling pertains to everything, Syracuse University, the Everson Museum, all of them. Go to any of those institutions and you'll see the plaques on the wall. The Legislature did not include

anything regarding disclosure of donors in the local law because they were aware of the federal court case and the IRS code at that time, it would have been contrary to federal law

- Mr. Ryan: So we're talking about when this finishes a lot of information coming out, why was that arbitrary date decided? Was that stuff written in the contract, saying we won't release your information without your permission or until the day of the opening?
- Mr. Gilberte: Where there is a contract it would say that, where there's not a contract
  - It's our understanding and commitment to the donors
  - I understand all the questions, but you should check with all the 501(c)(3)'s in the county because if they were told that all their anonymous donors have to be known there would be significant issues
- Mr. May: Just to clarify, there was no action by the Legislature making donations anonymous. The Legislature was silent on the issue based on existing case law. That's important
  - Number two, and this is somewhat rhetorical, what is the interest in who the donors are? These are private individuals or businesses that have elected to give their money in a manner which is probably still under significant negotiation
- Mr. McCarron: That's correct, the Legislature took no action to create anonymity
- Mr. Ryan: I personally wonder who the donors are. Are these county contractors who donate a million dollars and have it put on the back end of a road work contract next year? Do I think this administration would do that? I really don't. But we are stewards of public dollars. If a large portion of donors are people who do business with the county, how do we know they're not getting it back through county contracts the following year?
- Mr. May: With all due respect, if that's the implication, why aren't we just asking that question directly?
- Mr. Ryan: I think if we just shared the list of who the donors were it would answer that question
- Mr. Brown: Constituents are asking me about this. Fundamentally, if people I represent are asking me about government spending, I want to be able to give them an answer and I can't
- Mr. Durr: These donors are not anonymous to the board. The board knows the identity of every donor and has an ethical obligation to screen them
  - The board is subject to the county's ethics law, which provides the Legislature with appropriate oversight assurance. The anonymity is the law of the land, you have to rely on the process, and the process is the board knows. They are not going to take money from bad actors and they are bound by the ethical constraints of our ethics law
- Mr. McCarron: Why is there not this level of concern about Friends of Rosamond Gifford Zoo or the Everson Museum? This appears to be politicizing the aquarium. I'm raising money, giving it to the county to build, maintain, and promote the aquarium, that is the mission. The donors should be protected. It's their legal right. The transparency comes in how the county spends the money, which we will be able to see
- Mr. Ryan: Legislator Brown did ask about the other groups and received nothing. The local law requires quarterly reports from all Friends groups. We requested them across the board. The only one we received was from Friends of the Aquarium
- Mr. Donnelly: Nobody ignored your request. Per the email we sent, donations between \$1,500 and \$10,000 must be disclosed in a quarterly report. The other Friends groups had no donations in that range, so no quarterly report was required. Donations over \$10,000 are brought to the Legislature for acceptance. We did not ignore it, there simply have not been donations at that level for those other groups
- Mr. Brown: I did not say you ignored me, you gave me a literal answer and I appreciate that. I'm responding to the statement from the floor that we didn't ask about the other groups, because we did
- Mr. Eriksen: The reason this is not the zoo is that the zoo is popular, people like the zoo. This aquarium was passed along very narrow, very controversial political lines. A lot of career legacies are on the line

with this aquarium, and it is a reasonable conclusion that a donation to the aquarium may also boost the legacies of those who spent political capital on it

- The challenge is that with approximately 42 donors and \$7.6 million raised, the average donation is roughly \$150,000. Normal people do not have a spare \$150,000
- This Legislature is tasked with spending public money on contracts, and if we do not know who donated, we cannot check whether the recipients of those contracts also donated to the aquarium
- We are fully unable to ask the question: is it a possibility that some who donated did so with something else in mind beyond excitement about an aquarium? I'm not saying that is what's going on. But when I knock on doors, that is a concern people have, and we should have the tools to follow up on it
- Mr. May: I'm glad I don't live in your district because people aren't asking me those questions. I'm not saying they aren't asking the questions, I respect your questions but the answers I'm hearing are political
  - This Legislature authorized \$85 million, drew the line there, and handed it back to the administration
  - The procurement laws and the concern over certain relationships are covered quite well in how this money gets spent. We are getting a report today on how it's happening. I'd like to keep the politics out of the equation and get to the bottom line of what the foundation is actually doing
- Mr. Thompson: We are in politics. This is the spending of money on something intended for the public good. We're doing the work of the people
- Mr. May: The \$85 million this body authorized is being spent. The rest is being sought and obtained by the administration and the foundation to make up the shortfall. The procurement guidelines and oversight mechanisms cover those concerns quite well. What I'm hearing is a report on what the foundation is supposed to be doing, how much money is raised, how much there is to go
  - The elephant in the room is there's a lot more money to go and we're not talking about that or about how we get there
- Mr. Ryan: I appreciate it. I don't want it to come across as politics. In my district, this is an issue that receives bipartisan criticism on both sides of the aisle
- Mr. Brown: I want to reiterate something Leader May just said, the legislature has agreed not to put any new money into it. That is why I asked about recurring donations
- Mr. Garland: I encourage committee members and the public to review the March 4, 2025 session recording, in which the formation of the Friends group, contracts, and donor anonymity were discussed at length. That might answer some of the questions raised today
- Mr. Ryan: Regarding board makeup, are there staggered terms, and who has appointing authority?
- Mr. Gilberti: Per the bylaws, there are three-year, two-year, and one-year terms, staggered. All appointments are made by the County Executive
- Mr. Gilberti: I've lived in this county my entire life, more than six decades, and I am volunteering my time, which means I am volunteering my integrity and my character, as is every other board member
  - When we sit around that table in our board meetings, there is no designation of party above anyone's name, there is only the interest of this county. This is probably one of the greatest cultural investments the county has made in my lifetime. We have adopted our own ethics and conflict-of-interest policies
  - We take our jobs very seriously and I will continue to volunteer and try to do the best job I can for this county as a whole

### 3. **AQUARIUM:** Archie Wixson, Jr., Commissioner of Facilities Management

#### a. INFORMATIONAL – Aquarium Project Status Update



- Construction Status: Approximately 65% complete overall; different phases are at varying levels of completion.
- Opening Timeline: No confirmed opening date; striving to complete construction by end of summer (before Labor Day); pinning down a specific date risks making the date the measure of success rather than the quality of the completed facility
- Phase 1 (shoreline stabilization and surcharging): Substantially complete; sheet pile cutting to final grade remains
- Phase 2 (site work and deep pile foundations): Approximately 95–99% complete
- Phase 3 (primary phase, current):
  - Structural concrete: complete (excluding sidewalks)
  - Roof: complete except for the temporary section to be removed for installation of the two largest acrylic panels
  - Utilities: corridors installed; National Grid required reversal of utility entry direction, necessitating relocation work
  - Concrete tanks: in place; awaiting acrylic panels
  - Fiberglass tanks: manufactured at Indiana facility and receiving rock work; will arrive with most rock work pre-installed as part of the acceleration strategy
  - Rock work on signature exhibit tanks: ongoing through end of project, up to coral placement before fish introduction
  - Crane activity: Six cranes on site previously reduced to one as heavy crane work is largely done; cranes will return to place large acrylic panels in the coming weeks
  - First two large acrylic panels, manufactured overseas, are currently at the New York port awaiting customs clearance
- Delays have occurred in contracting, deliveries, field changes, and winter testing; considered the most logistically complex project of its type in the region
  - Each delay has been addressed through extended hours, alternative strategies, or additional resources
- Total Project Cost: \$103,780,137.67; all contracts are fully encumbered; represents the complete appropriation for construction as currently contracted

### Question/Comments

- Mr. Ryan: What was authorized by the county legislature?
- Mr. Wixson: Legislature authorized \$85 million, other funding sources closed that gap, the Friends of group have a role in the mix of a variety of funding needs
  - Friends group retains additional funds for non-construction purposes including aquatic population acquisition, operational startup, and potential future endowments
- Ms. Smiley: \$5.9 million transferred from Friends of the Aquarium for construction cost. The full \$103 million, including the Friends money is accounted for in the county's budget
- Mr. Ryan: Has anything changed with the Change Orders?
- Mr. Wixson: Total approximately \$300,000, included in the \$103 million total; two primary items:
  - Emergency generator transfer switch: approximately \$249,000 – contractor obtained better pricing and faster delivery than the county could directly; was an add-alternative bid item, not a base bid item
  - Natural gas trench: approximately \$37,000 – National Grid declined to provide the utility corridor; county required the plumbing contractor to install it; no impact on future operating costs
- Mr. Ryan: Will that change operating costs going forward.
- Mr. Wixson: No.

*Presentation Continued:*

- Tank Testing and Preparation: Life support system (LSS) testing already underway in many tanks (pressure, volume, flow)
  - Leak testing completed in accessible areas of larger tanks; all identified leaks repaired
  - Remaining leak testing will follow acrylic panel installation (21-day silicone curing period)
  - Tank cycling – introduction of beneficial bacteria to establish pH balance – takes approximately 30 days but can be accelerated with additives; Zoo Oceanarium handles this process

*Mr. Thompson exited the meeting at 4:32 p.m.*

**Question/Comments**

- Mr. Ryan: When are your first animals coming in?
- Mr. Wixson: First delivery of species anticipated in late July
- Mr. Ryan: And ZoOceanarium does that?
- Mr. Wixson: Yes, Zoo Oceanarium coordinates all acquisition, quarantine, and transfer;
  - Some smaller freshwater species will be quarantined in advance at partner aquarium facilities within a half-day's drive
  - Carpenters Brook Fish Hatchery is assisting with salmon and trout, using available tanks after spring stocking
- Mr. Ryan: How about staffing? Is it just Brian Kelly, does it fall under parks?
- Mr. Wixson: To a degree, Parks will have the oversight of the operations. ZoOceanarium is the one responsible for the operations
- Mr. Ryan: So are the staff, which are the tradesmen, are they out of your office and they go and spot check for issues?
- Mr. Wixson: Facilities Management will provide skilled trades support on an as-needed basis (mirroring its role at the convention center, amphitheater, and NBC Stadium)
- Mr. Ryan: Do you anticipate an increase in staffing? How about Parks?
- Mr. Wixson: My department won't need an increase in staffing to operate this aquarium
- Mr. Kelly: No
- Ms. Smiley: ZoOceanarium will be the operator of the entire facility
- Mr. Wixson: ZoOceanarium staffs and fully operates the facility under contract; currently five ZoOceanarium staff engaged; executive director has been selected and communicates with Commissioner Wixson and Commissioner Kelly nearly daily
- Mr. Ryan: Once we're up in running, oversight will fall on Commissioner Kelly?
- Mr. Wixson: That's what's intended now
- Mr. Ryan: What's our gameplay for parking and crowd management?
- Mr. Wixson: ZoOceanarium will handle the parking situation
- Mr. Ryan: How much parking is there?
- Mr. Wixson: On property, approximately 50 visitor spaces and 30 employee spaces; approximately 48 street spaces on Solar Street
- Mr. Ryan: Do we anticipate the other parking lots to be ready by the summer
- Mr. Wixson: We certainly do

- Mr. Donnelly: Working with adjacent property owners on short-term parking solutions; some existing lots are usable as-is with minor improvements; longer-term discussions involving parking garages and larger lots are ongoing
- Mr. Ryan: Financial feasibility, any changes?
- Mr. Wixson: Revenue projections unchanged from original feasibility study; aquarium expected to be operationally self-sustaining, exclusive of Friends group contributions
- Mr. Ryan: An update on Community Partnerships?
- Mr. Wixson: County Executive expected to make public announcements regarding community and educational partnerships the following Thursday (March 26, 2026)
- Mr. Brown: If I can go back to parking quickly, I'm a bit worried. On the slated projection, it was about 1,500 people per day, but the parking is far less. Can you help me out?
- Mr. Wixson: Feasibility study projects a need for approximately 300 spaces at any given time, based on an average two-hour visit and projected daily attendance of approximately 1,500 visitors
- Mr. Ryan: Are the other lots going to be owned by us? Is it free or paid parking?
- Mr. Donnelly: Not entirely sure, likely a mixture
- Mr. Ryan: For the other contracts, will we be notified?
- Mr. Donnelly: We will follow the model from the amphitheater. ZoOceanarium will be the one to do the contracting
  - New surrounding development not yet formalized when the feasibility study was conducted, may further improve attendance projections

*Presentation Continued:*

- There will be partnerships with local educational institutions
- Marketing: Zoo Oceanarium is currently working with a marketing group, developing promotional materials and preparing upcoming advertisements
- Risks: At this stage all primary risks are speculative unforeseen conditions; all construction is under contract; no significant open financial exposures remain outside existing contracts

#### **4. DISCUSSION OF CORRESPONDING OUTSIDE BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS**

- a. Review and Discussion of Vacancies and Prospective Candidates for Outside Boards and Commissions

***A motion was made by Mr. McCarron, seconded by Mr. Bush, to table this item to the next committee meeting; Ayes: 2 (Mr. Bush, Mr. McCarron) Noes: 1 (Mr. Ryan) Absent: 2 (Ms. Hernandez, Mr. Thompson); MOTION CARRIED.***

- Mr. Bush requested that the Department of Transportation provide legislators with a list of county roads and county bridges; Chair directed staff to follow up accordingly

#### **C. Adjournment**

***A motion was made by Mr. Ryan, seconded by Mr. McCarron, to adjourn; Ayes: 3 (Mr. Bush, Mr. McCarron, Mr. Ryan) Noes: 0 Absent: 2 (Ms. Hernandez, Mr. Thompson); MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.***

The meeting was adjourned at 4:50p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



SPENCER BERG, Deputy Clerk  
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: COUNTY FACILITIES  
DATE: MARCH 17, 2026

| NAME (Please Print)    | DEPARTMENT/AGENCY |
|------------------------|-------------------|
| Marty Voss             | DOT               |
| Angie Donohue          | DOT / Fin ops     |
| Bob Kern               | Law               |
| William Gilbert        | Agencies          |
| Arthur Wixson          | OCEM              |
| Kristi Smiley          | Finance           |
| Benjamin               | CE OR             |
| Carl Hammel            | Personnel         |
| Coline Laphin          | Comptroller       |
| Jordan Antonacci-Brown | Comptroller's     |
| Tyler Woods            | Comptroller       |
| Joe Frakes             | Agencies          |
| Jason Dean             | Finance           |
| Kyle MADDEN            | COUNTY LEG.       |

**ATTACHMENT NO. 1:**  
**FRIENDS OF ONONDAGA COUNTY AQUARIUM REPORT**

| <u>Amount Pledged</u> | <u>Amount Received</u> | <u>Amount Due</u> | <u>Amount Transferred to Onondaga County</u> | <u>Number of Donors</u> |
|-----------------------|------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| TOTAL                 |                        |                   |                                              |                         |
| \$7,669,769.94        | \$7,444,769.94         | \$225,000.00      | \$5,910,000.00                               | 42                      |