Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE, MEETING A- BUDGET REVIEW DAY 7
MEETING MINUTES – SEPTEMBER 23, 2026
MAURICE BROWN, CHAIR

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Brown, Leader Hernandez, Leader May, Mr. Burtis, Mr. Romeo, Ms. Denton, Mr. Bush
ALSO ATTENDING: Chairwoman Watts, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Knapp, Mr. Ryan, Mr. Meaker; also see attached list

Chair Brown called the meeting to order at 9:38 a.m.

1. <u>DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING</u>: Troy W. Waffner, Director

(Attachment No. 1: Onondaga County Department of Planning, 2027 Executive Budget Written Statement)

2026 Initiatives

- Busy in 2026; advanced several initiatives
  - Housing
  - Transportation safety
  - Greenways and blueways
  - Agriculture
  - Inner Harbor
  - Convention district
  - Municipal planning

2027 Budget

- 2027 focus will continue to be on completing these plans and studies, then implementing their recommendations
- Will finish 2026 within budget
- Pleased with the 2027 budget; will allow the work to continue unimpeded

ON Farm Fest

- Held this past weekend
- Once a year Planning, along with Dave Knapp, the Ag Council and the 12 host farms, invites people out to the farms to learn about agriculture
- Only 2% of the population grows and produces the food for the other 98%

Questions/Comments:

- What is the $2.5M in non-government for in the operating budget, and why is it not in professional services if consultants are hired to do the work?
  - Contractual services line; the Regional Planning and Development Board contract
  - Contracts and professional services can be in either category
  - Provide a base level of funding for the board, as do the other member counties
  - Assists with their planning needs and other needs as they seek other grant money for implementation and planning of projects

- $200,000 was in transfer to grant expenditure last year but is not there this year; what was that for, and are there still funds left over?
  - Agritourism grants
  - Received a large number of potential projects
  - Funded approximately $100,000 to $125,000 so far
  - Continue to receive applications
  - Will be expending the rest of that fund this year
  - Funds left over intentionally so applications could continue to be looked at as they came in

- Which department will be administering the Gen Z housing program?
  - Community Development

- What is the $2.1M for contractual expenses in the grant projects fund?
  - SMTC
  - Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council; the county is a member
  - Mainly Onondaga County, but includes parts of Oswego and Madison counties
  - Does the main transportation planning in this area
  - Receives the federal funds which go out for all the projects big and small
  - Roughly $2M

- Operating professional services line; 2025 actuals were just under $40,000 and $86,000 was adopted; where is it this year and what is it used for?
  - Much closer in line with budget
  - Savings was in the mapping as the mapping software was being built out
  - This year going to spend the full amount

- Is a similar line anticipated for next year; is it the same project?
  - No; now it is the annual cost for all the mapping

- Model zoning overlays for adoption by local municipalities were discussed in the Housing and Transportation Citizen Advisory Board; is leftover 2026 funding the reason they are not included in the 2027 budget?
  - Correct
  - Money was established a few years ago for town planning grants that municipalities can apply to
  - Still funding remaining

- In reference to this legislature's previous support for local planning budgets, especially for the northern towns; what have the costs been, are they recurring, and what has the reception been?
    - Planning grants that municipalities apply for to assist with completing their updated comprehensive planning and zoning
    - A lull for a period, but a renewed resurgence
        - Town of DeWitt, Town of Lysander and Town of Fabius have all applied to update their comprehensive plans
    - About 20 to 21 towns and villages have applied and are in various stages of completing comprehensive plan and zoning updates
    - Three or four more are interested
    - When Micron put the shovel in the ground, it spurred the next round of towns to apply

- Is there still funding remaining for new towns to come on board?
    - Yes

- Update on the data center study?
    - Still in the procurement process
    - Three proposals received and being reviewed
    - Expect to make a decision around the end of the month, around September 30th

- Request for a list of the reserves available for planning, such as updating comprehensive plans for the villages, and what is left over. Are Greenways and Blueways funded from the same bucket or a different one?
    - Working through Naturally Connected, the Greenways and Blueways Master Plan
    - Ellison McMahon will be presenting to the committee tomorrow on it
    - Goal is to identify the next round of investment
        - Best drivers for connectivity
        - Best land to try to preserve
    - Half mile trails are nice in every town, but connectivity is what drives it, as a community mobility initiative

- County Executive mentioned Plan Onondaga 2 in his presentation; what will be the difference and what is the vision?
    - Talked about implementation funding
    - More to come

- Grant project funding; are other supports offered outside of cash, and are there guidelines or guardrails on how the funds are used?
    - Depends on the grant program, but none are loose and all have guardrails
    - Guided grant programs; Greenways and Blueways funds can be used for
        - Hard construction costs
        - Soft engineering costs, to get to the point of applying for hard construction costs through various programs

        - A match

- With the concerns for housing throughout the county and funds provided to look at zoning and planning, are municipalities being encouraged in the direction the county would like them to go?
    - Attend their comprehensive planning committee meetings
    - Share with them what Plan Onondaga has in it
    - Transparency and local input drive the comprehensive planning process
    - Ultimately it is what a town wants to be in the next 10 years
    - Provide input, but don't hammer people over the head with a certain set of values
    - Try to get them to understand all the issues involved so they will come along

- Update on the Lysander Baldwinsville Waterfront Revitalization Project?
    - In process; the parties are together and collaborating
    - Working through the process to identify projects, themes and aspirational goals
    - Not to the point of an end plan; probably the middle point
    - Took some time to get the contract through the state, but working well now and on a quicker basis

- Keeping the lakes clean is a priority, particularly Otisco and Skaneateles due to the drinking water; what in this budget or in grant funds can support county directed activities and the volunteer groups that are crucial in that process?
    - What has been supported in the past is probably a guide to the future
        - Shotwell Brook in Skaneateles; purchase of land by the Finger Lakes Land Trust at the headwaters of Skaneateles Lake; provided somewhere around $180,000 or $200,000
        - Otisco Lake; money through Greenways Blueways programs in the Office of the Environment to fund the seaweed machine and other initiatives around the lake
    - Recognize the importance of all lakes, but certainly of those two as they provide drinking water
    - Can have a broader discussion about what else Greenways Blueways or other programs can do to assist in those efforts

- What is missing from the budget?
    - Have the tools needed right now and are equipped to do the work program
    - Whether that is true in the future depends on what is in the implementation plans
    - County Executive and County Legislature have been very generous in making sure the work can get done

2. <u>DIVISION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT</u>: Martin C. Skahen, Director
(Attachment No. 2: Onondaga County Community Development, 2027 Executive Budget Written Statement)

2026 Initiatives & Accomplishments

- Meeting all the initiatives and accomplishments set out for the 2026 budget
- Going to come in on budget

2027 Budget

- Almost all of the department is grant funded
- Grants are in place, and admin dollars to pay staff come from them

- Have the right size staff

Gen Z Down Payment Assistance Program

- Only major addition to the budget from last year; $2M in the transfer to grant expenditure line
- Will work in partnership with Home Headquarters to implement
- Modeled after a successful down payment assistance program Home Headquarters has run for a while
- Grant to Gen Z professionals who are looking to buy a home but can't afford the down payment
- Helps young professionals put down roots
- Many are paying in rent what they would pay for a mortgage

Questions/Comments:

- Has the Gen Z program been built out; qualifications, income?
  - Will work with Home Headquarters on that as the program is developed
  - For single or two person applicants in the Gen Z age, which is up to 30 by next year

- Are the grants capped?
  - There will be a capped amount
  - Will work with Home Headquarters to determine the sweet spot for the amount per grant
  - Want to help as many people as possible with an amount that gets them over the hump into home ownership

- Is there a timeline?
  - When the budget cycle is over, will get to work with Home Headquarters so it is up and running January 1st

- Fund looks like it is going into rehab grants as opposed to home ownership subsidies; will there be a rehab piece?
  - Not going to see it in the grants at this moment
  - The $2M that gets transferred in will show in the modified budget afterwards
  - What is shown is the normal CDBG and other grants in the grant project line

- Contractual expenses non-government were about $6M in 2025; what was going on?
  - Funding that has been going through for lead and some of the other projects
  - Actuals are much higher because it is previous dollars spent
  - Additional projects that have been in the budget over the last couple years
  - Can get more detail on the exact line

- Lead funding; what funds are available for Windows, Doors and More or other lead programs, and what is going in this year?
  - No additional lead dollars added by the county this year
  - Working with the money on hand, which is sufficient to keep going for another year
  - Not aware of another round of Windows, Doors and More
  - Current round is still being expended

- Is the O-CHIP program in this year's budget, and what will the parameters be for accessing those funds next budget year?
    - No additional funding added this year
    - Still have funds available for people who need and apply for it
    - In a good position to get through the next year

- How is O-CHIP going and what is the plan to deplete the money; housing is such an issue in the community that those funds should get out the door?
    - Committee meets every quarter, usually with three or four applications
    - Some of the projects have been getting bigger since Micron broke ground
    - Pretty steady flow
    - Every builder helped talks about how important the funding is to close the gaps to move forward
    - Very challenging environment to build any type of housing right now

- When are those dollars expected to be depleted?
    - Will get through 2027, which is why the County Executive didn't put money in this year's budget
    - Getting more and more interest as Micron moves forward

- O-CHIP is a great program with a great reception by the community; a lot of projects in the pipeline, and the larger they are the longer it takes to get them in the ground

- O-CHIP funds on completion, so a significant amount of money is still sitting there, but it has been approved and is waiting for projects to complete

- Legal decisions several years ago impacted the first time home buyer program; has it become untenable, and is there an effort to come up with a new model?
    - More challenging to run the housing development fund company first time low-income home buyer program
    - Used to get all homes off the delinquent tax auction list; no longer able to with the changes
    - Used to take eight to 10 homes every year off the delinquent tax rolls, rehab them and sell them to low income first time home buyers
    - Currently working down inventory
    - Recently finished the first Land Bank home; South Collingwood, sold and closing within the next couple weeks
    - Moving toward a model partnering with the Land Bank
        - Homes two or three at a time
        - Not carrying as heavy an inventory
        - Can walk through a Land Bank house first; could never get inside the foreclosure homes

- With that model, can homes be found that are more clustered, to generate spinoff investment in the area?
    - Haven't gotten that far into it, but a great idea

- Unreserved fund balance is over $86M in general grants and $25M in the community development fund; is money transferred into Community Development going to the community development fund specifically?

- Yes

- If that is unreserved, is there a plan for that money?
  - All of it gets allocated to specific projects
  - Some relates to the O-CHIP money that hasn't gone out the door yet
  - Have obligations out there or applications coming in
  - There are plans for all of those dollars

- Is the Village Infrastructure Grant Program the same as Main Street?
  - Two different things; the Main Street program runs out of Community Development
  - Village infrastructure funds are in county general, done through applications, and go through the Finance office

- Request for the fund balance of the village infrastructure grants
  - Requirement that it gets spent fully every year

- When does the $7.75M federal lead grant end?
  - 48 month grant, in its second year; ends in 2029
  - Ahead of schedule on the work, on assessments and on draw down of money
  - Going to finish earlier than the time the federal government allows
  - Will probably apply for a new grant earlier than the normal timeframe

- Is the training program to get more contractors qualified for lead work still going?
  - Lead program is doing as well as it is because the County Executive invested county dollars so a training program could be set up
  - Had a huge bottleneck; takes so much to become a contractor doing lead work for the county following the HUD guidelines
  - After COVID only three or four contractors were left; now over 20
  - Still up and running
  - Funding behind it to get through the next year

- Land Bank owns a developable building lot; where does Community Development fit in with that?
  - Does not
  - Land Bank owns two lots; talked to Home Headquarters and the Land Bank about getting involved to have development done there
    - Home Headquarters would build from the ground up
    - Land Bank would do a modular
    - Both cost about the same and would need subsidies of $225,000 per home
  - Not feasible to pay $450,000
  - Land Bank still has the properties and has to work on a Plan B

- Understanding was that the Land Bank had money to build the houses, but the state disqualified them and sent the money to Syracuse for one of its projects
  - Land Bank applied for a cluster home grant and included those two properties

- State said the funding could be had for the cluster, but those two could not get done

- A small developer has built out a housing project of maybe 15 homes and has adjacent unimproved land; can Community Development help put in sewer and water lines and roads to build homes on it?
  - No; can help with building the homes with O-CHIP money, but not infrastructure
  - Infrastructure is what a developer pays up front
  - O-CHIP is the last money in because it is county dollars
  - Money is not given to a developer until a certificate of occupancy is received for the units being claimed
  - Agreed that infrastructure costs are prohibitive for a lot of small developers

- Often the same people apply for Main Street grants, and members of the community don't know about these grants; what does outreach look like?
  - County Main Street; work with the municipalities
    - Municipalities go out to property owners to sign up and submit applications
    - Municipality reviews the applications and sends in a package of its strongest
    - Reviewed and awarded based on the funding available
  - Lead grant
    - Contract with the Health Department to market it, paid out of the grant
    - Biggest seller is word of mouth
  - O-CHIP; anyone doing construction in Onondaga County knows about it, so it doesn't require marketing

- No overtime wages, but a minor decrease in salary?
  - Cycle and timeline of the grants and turnover in the department
  - No reduced funded headcount

- Main Street, O-CHIP, the two Shape Ups, the hotel initiative and the lead initiative; many new in recent years; are being done with the same staff and pretty much the same budget; appreciate the efficiency and effectiveness

- Glad these programs are in place at the front end; seeing the Micron site cleared for construction motivates people to realize the opportunity is real

- Shape Up for Veterans; what is the status, and is there funding here or is it working off old funding?
  - Great program, very well received
  - All the funds have been expended
  - Handful of projects still in the pipeline to be done
  - Nothing in this budget for Shape Up for Veterans

- What was it originally funded with?
  - $500,000, then a couple years ago $77,000 was put in as a budget amendment to keep it going through another year

- What performance metrics will be used to evaluate the Gen Z housing program; what will have happened in a year to show it is going well?
    - Will have spent all the money, and a bunch of people will be living in houses they wouldn't have been able to afford without it
    - How many is determined by the amount given per grant

- Is the expectation that the entire $2M is spent down in 2027?
    - Expect a pretty strong reaction to the program; hope would be yes
    - May not have done all the closings, but the goal is to have allocated the funding to everyone

- Big criticism is getting the money out the door; programs sound good, but if the money isn't spent it sits there while the community is in need
    - When a builder shows up, approval comes pretty quickly
    - It is having them come in and apply

- Why was the Gen Z population targeted versus Gen X or millennials?
    - Saying Gen Z to put in mind how it would work; in 2027 Gen Z will be 15 to 30 years old
    - People who have been out of college three or four years and have established themselves somewhat professionally
    - Looking to build equity instead of paying a landlord every month, put down roots, maybe start a family

- Is there an age cutoff; would a 32 year old or a 40 year old qualify?
    - No hard cutoff yet; Gen Z describes the demographic being targeted
    - 32 might be able to squeeze in
    - Definitely for a first time home buyer

- Are there other hard qualifiers; Onondaga County residency, income requirements?
    - Onondaga County; yes
    - There will be income requirements, not yet determined

- These are grants forgiven over time; were options explored such as 0% financing paid back over time, as a more sustainable approach?
    - Trying to help them overcome the biggest hurdle to being a homeowner
    - Did not explore a low interest loan
    - Starting with a forgivable grant
    - Probably modeled like other grants; a lien on the house for a period of time the person has to live there, then the lien is released and the grant doesn't need to be paid back

- Will Home Headquarters assist these buyers with the process; applying for a mortgage, understanding their credit and the requirements to buy a home?
    - Yes; Home Headquarters runs a home buyer program
    - Would be prudent to talk to them about having grant recipients go through that program prior to being eligible

3. **<u>BOARD OF ELECTIONS</u>:** Kevin P. Ryan, Republican Commissioner; Dustin M. Czarny, Democratic Commissioner

2027 Budget

- By and large acceptable; wholeheartedly approve its passage with one exception, the requested pay increase for the commissioners

Commissioner Salaries

- Board of Elections does more with less
  - Salaries far below those of many other counties, some of which are smaller
  - Fewer employees than many counties with fewer registered voters
  - Cost per voter to the taxpayer is far less than similarly situated counties
- Commissioners are the two county employees who do not get a cost of living increase
- In 2020 the Legislature made a policy decision that the commissioners would be paid $99,973; not increased since
- In 2026 dollars that salary has the purchasing power of $78,067.76, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics
- Request that the salary increase be approved as requested, to keep up with the 2020 policy decision

Staffing

- Four additional workers given in 2025 have lessened the need for overtime; no longer facing 70 hour work weeks
- Will have some overtime in a federal year, but nowhere near where it was
- Chief registration clerks given last year; now process all registrations and absentees within a 24 to 48 hour window, even in high volume times

Four Year Terms

- Request to consider moving the commissioners to four year terms
- Have been two year terms along with the Legislature, which moved itself to four year terms with approval of the voters
- 61% of all counties in New York have four year terms for their elections commissioners
- 64% of all full-time elections commissioners have four year terms
- Running for reelection while running an election in October is different in a midterm year than in a presidential year, which is the next time if not moved
- Embodies the four year life cycle of elections and gives a clear way to evaluate a commissioner's workload
- Both requests are about benefiting the position long term, so reasonable people will be willing to put their names forward

Questions/Comments:

- Is there still time this year to move to four year terms, so reelections occur in gubernatorial years and not presidential years?
  - Yes
  - All of the bodies that have done this did it with the reappointment of their commissioners, set for some time in October or November

- Terms could be set in the reappointment paperwork

- Does it have to be done with the appointment schedule, or can it be any time?
  - Not sure; imagine it would have to be at the start of a new term
  - Will look into it
  - Would need to be the start of a new term
  - Both commissioners have organizational meetings coming up to be nominated for another term
  - Commissioners start a new term on January 1st; change it before the new term commences, not once it has begun
  - Time to set it would be concurrent with the placement of the commissioners who take office January 1, 2027
  - Probably the November meeting, considering the 30-day window that usually follows the recommendations from the county parties

- How many salary increases have been received during the Democratic Commissioner's tenure?
  - 2013 to 2020; an annual increase that went along with the CPI and the CSEA contract
  - Stopped at 2020; no salary increase since

- What is the $400,000 in all other expenses in the grants fund?
  - Combination of several grants, all from New York State through the state budget
  - Postage grant is the biggest; pays for anything to do with vote by mail, equipment or postage
  - Unexpected emergency fund based on population; a flexible grant
    - Used to pay off overtime
    - Used to increase capital at the board
    - Hoping to use it in coming years to upgrade the van
  - First question on every purchase is whether it can be paid for by grant funding, before funds appropriated by the Legislature
  - Van is used to bring ballots to the post office, so it is eligible under the postage grant
  - Regular dialogue with the State Board of Elections on ways to use grant funding

- What impact might the changes proposed at the federal level have on the budget this year or next?
  - No impact on this year; UOCAVA ballots have already been mailed to overseas and military voters
  - Governed by the New York State Election Law
  - Federal government has very little role in the way elections are conducted, other than federal elections
  - An executive order doesn't change the way the Board of Elections operates
  - Injunction is in place against the executive order
  - Have talked to vendors, including new vendor Fort Orange, about what would have to change, such as barcodes on the outside of ballots
  - May not affect the local board budgetarily; would affect service to the voters, as it slows down mail even further
  - No budgetary effect in the short term; long term unknown

- Is voter registration up to date for the coming election?

- Current
- Countywide internet outage yesterday threw a curve
- In a 24 to 48 hour window, and have kept that pace for the last two years
- Already started voluntary overtime to deal with the added volume after Labor Day

- What procedures are in place for election day, following the incident with the enforcement agency during the primaries?
  - Bipartisan poll watchers at every polling place; their first call would be to the commissioners
  - In June the Democratic Commissioner immediately went to the site and the Republican Commissioner called the Department of Homeland Security
  - Incident had nothing to do with an attempt to suppress voters or impede voting operations
  - One agent wanted to have a conversation with a poll worker who was working that day; bad timing and extremely poor judgment
  - Federal and state statutes are in place to protect the voting franchise
  - Absent an emergency or bona fide law enforcement operation, they have no reason to be at a polling place
  - Voters have nothing to fear by coming out to vote
  - Stressed in poll site manager classes to contact the board if anybody is there that is not authorized

- Is there any plan in the budget to update the Board of Elections cameras to record for longer than a 30 day period?
  - Came up last week; an investigation with allegations of voter fraud, and the security cameras only save the data for 30 days
  - Reached out to IT and Purchase to interface with the security vendor on increasing the length of time footage is kept
  - May be a cost associated; not known at this time
  - Will come back to the Legislature once the cost is figured out
  - Grant funding is available for a lot of these things
  - Both in favor of increasing the number of days and the camera footage
  - Cameras were bought in 2023 with federal cybersecurity grant funding
  - No federal cybersecurity funding since, so it would be paid from state grants
  - Provided Facilities will work with the board, will bring the request to the Legislature as a later request or in the next budget request

- Health of the building was discussed last year; is it still leaking?
  - Roof that was bonded by the Legislature has still not been fixed
  - Request to fix it came in June in the middle of the primary; asked for later in the summer, and no date has been received as of today
  - Until the roof is fixed, carpeting and other things inside the building cannot be fixed
  - No major leaks over the summer, even with the torrential downpour in August
  - Reached out as recently as this morning to find out when it will be scheduled
  - Volume of people in and out of the building only increases closer to the election; prepping machines, training classes
  - Nightmare is work starting during early voting and still going on election day

- Were the issues last year with the air conditioning or the heating?
  - Both
  - Better, but an old building; pockets have less heat and air conditioning than others, including both commissioners' offices
  - Secondary to the roof
  - Voting machines are water resistant, not waterproof
  - After one storm, water had ponded in one of the receptacles of a machine

- Are employees still able to park across the street?
  - For now, yes; the owner continues to market that lot for sale
  - Erie Boulevard West is supposed to be redesigned as part of the I-81 project, so better sidewalks may be coming
  - Employees still have to walk across a very dangerous street without traffic signals or sidewalks
  - Reached out to the city about a crosswalk; denied because of the curve and the speed of that road
  - Pothole was fixed

- What is missing from the budget?
  - Comfortable with the budget, with the exception of the commissioner salary
  - Comfortable with this budget
  - Election inspector pay should be on the Legislature's radar before the next presidential election
    - Paid at minimum wage
    - Retention is becoming a real problem
  - Two ways to handle it
    - Better pay for the election inspectors
    - City of Syracuse and the county treating election inspector work like jury work, so employees report as inspectors instead of to their jobs
  - Used to have a surplus of inspectors from those two bodies; lost a great deal when the day off moved from Election Day to Black Friday
  - Something the Legislature and the two administrations can work on before the 2028 presidential election

4. <u>COUNTY COMPTROLLER</u>: Martin D. Masterpole, Comptroller
(Attachment No. 3: Comptroller's Office 2027 Budget Request)

Office Overview

- Divided into two sides; the audit division and the accounting division
- Audit division; departmental audits, including room occupancy tax
- Accounting division
  - Annual financial statements
  - Payroll division; pre-audit of payroll and claims
  - Every claim that is paid is pre-audited

2027 Budget

- Total salaries down $4,000 from the 2026 adopted budget; what the administration put in as salary savings; don't completely agree with it
- Part-time salaries flat year over year
- Supplies flat
- Maintenance, utilities and rents flat
- Professional services up $1,000 due to a contract escalation
- All other expenses up $16,000 over adopted, due to outside audit contract increases; contract with Bonadio
- Travel and training flat

Audits

- 11 audits completed so far in 2026; all listed on the website
- 19 in 2024 and 15 in 2025; 2026 will be right in line with those years
- An audit can be underway and not released until January or February, crossing over two years

Room Occupancy Tax

- Audit what the hotels self-report
- 2025; 35 hotels reviewed, total collected $246,903
- 2024; 22 hotels reviewed, $433,000 recovered; some of the bigger hotels were completed in 2024
- 2026; on pace to do 40
- Each audit finds an average of about $10,000
    - A bed and breakfast in a small village could be in the hundreds
    - A large hotel that is a constant violator could be hundreds of thousands

Questions/Comments:

- Staffing is down two positions between 2025 and 2026; was that a change in the scope of work?
    - No
    - A couple budget cycles ago, account clerk 3s on the payroll side were elevated to auditor 1s; they were working outside of title, doing more audit work
    - Payroll is now processed out of the Personnel department's payroll division and audited by the Comptroller's office
    - Those positions were abolishments of vacant account clerk 3 titles
    - What exists on the books is not funded, not filled and won't be

- Is the cannabis tax money being distributed to the towns and municipalities?
    - Yes; goes through the Finance office
    - Reports from New York State set how the distributions are to be done, based on the municipalities

- What is missing from the budget?
    - Put in a request for a new position; regulatory compliance coordinator, grade 32
    - Want to restructure on the payroll side
        - State Comptroller's office enhanced reporting relative to retirements; a lot of work in the short run

        - Everybody is buying back time, which takes a lot of legwork between the local government and the State Comptroller's office
    - Would put enhanced reporting, garnishments, deferred compensation and other higher level responsibilities now with the payroll auditors under one individual, at a higher pay grade and skill level
    - Would replace an auditor 1, of which there is a vacancy
    - Existing auditors would still do the payroll auditing
    - Salary difference from an auditor 1 is just under $6,000
    - Room occupancy tax currently funds one auditor position; approximately $50,000
    - Request is for about another half a position; approximately $75,000 funded out of ROT
        - Would more than satisfy the salary difference for the new position, plus the $4,000 cut as salary savings
    - Worked with Personnel to make sure it was in scope and in title

- There are 10 auditor 1s; is the ask to change to nine, with the one changed becoming a grade 32?
    - Yes; grade 32

5. <u>COUNTY CLERK</u>: Emily E. Bersani, County Clerk
(Attachment No. 4: Onondaga County Clerk's Office, 2027 Executive Budget Written Statement)

Office Overview

- Recording office for the county
    - All county land records
    - On the court side, New York State Supreme Court records, county criminal records and judgments
- Priorities since taking office in 2024; accessibility, customer service and the integrity of the records
- In 2024
    - Increased the training budget to allow more professional development
    - Increased deputy salaries so they were appropriately compensated
    - Adjusted the roster to eliminate some underpaid positions

Revenue

- Remain a consistent revenue stream for the county
    - Filing and recording fees
    - Copy and subscription fees
    - Miscellaneous fees
    - Mortgage tax
- Increased rental income from abstract companies that rent space, effective for 2026
- Lost some abstractors due to COVID

2026 Highlights

- Extended office hours every other Wednesday until 6:00 p.m.; passport applications and notarizations after traditional business hours
- Mobile notary services; once a month in Liverpool, where demand has been big
- Effort to go to every library in 2026; made it to 23
- Deed theft prevention presentations at different events

- Mobile passport events, including a few in collaboration with the federal government at libraries
- Digitizing records at a rapid pace; thousands put online this year
- Added career ladder opportunities; incredibly difficult to hire deputies off of the street
- Capital improvement project started Monday
    - Using open grant funding, including the wireless access grant, to replace old technology and equipment in conjunction with capital improvement funding

2027 Budget

- Operating budget remains pretty consistent with 2026; about $3.58M
- Only changes are the year over year salary adjustments
- Two of the highest paid employees are retiring, giving salary savings
    - Top paid principal deputy at the end of this year
    - Another deputy in the beginning of 2027
- Only ask won't impact the bottom line; unfund the photocopy machine operator position, grade 4, and replace it with a clerk 3, grade 7
    - Incredibly underpaid and outdated position that isn't what the employee is doing in daily operations
    - Additional clerk 3 gives a path to promote from recording clerk to clerk 3 to deputy

Questions/Comments:

- Is the $55,000 in grant a continuation of the digitization process?
    - Collect $20 per recorded document; keep $1, and $19 gets sent back to New York State
    - Amount kept goes into the records management improvement fund
    - Sitting at around $200,000; none spent since taking office, but gearing up to spend it
    - Vendor quotes for digitization are $200,000 for a microfilm project of a few boxes
    - $55,000 is the projection of what will be brought in each year

- Where is the mobile notary service in the Liverpool area?
    - Liverpool Library
    - Librarians have been told to call if a need comes up

- Is there data on how many people use the every other Wednesday hours?
    - Collected in a spreadsheet; will provide it

- Photocopy machine operator becoming a clerk; two authorized photocopy machine operators are showing?
    - One is unfunded
    - Change is already included in the executive budget; the creation of a clerk is on the personnel page

- Does a lot of the overtime deal with being in the community after hours?
    - Sometimes
    - A lot of the library sessions were done during the workday with the first deputy, without pulling other staff
    - Older age group is interested in the deed theft presentation, and the ideal time to see them is during the day
    - Happy to do after hours community events as well

- What is missing from the budget?
  - In an ideal world, would keep a lot more of the money sent back to New York State
    - Joined the legislative committee of the New York State Association of County Clerks, advocating to retain more money for the county
    - Clean Slate Act is coming and will require a lot of administrative power from the office
  - Wish all staff could be higher in terms of grade
  - More money to digitize
    - Costs so much in human power, or vendor quotes if contracted
    - Vendors are not fully indexing, so there is still work after they scan

- Is digitization something that could be built internally, given the $200,000 cost estimated?
  - Have been tapping into the seasonal aide line to add capacity internally
  - Not software; it is human power physically scanning the records, indexing and doing quality control
  - More a matter of capacity
  - One idea for the $200,000 is hiring seasonal aides at the max rate for one or two years
  - Weighing giving that money to a vendor against paying somebody locally, even if it is without benefits
  - Temporary employees are eligible for benefits if they work at least half time for the position
    - 35 hour position; 17.5 hours
    - 40 hour position; 20 hours
  - Have to do that consistently over a three month period and then maintain that average

6. <u>DISTRICT ATTORNEY</u>: William J. Fitzpatrick, District Attorney
(Attachment No. 5: Onondaga County District Attorney's Office Presentation; Attachment No. 6: District Attorney Letter to the Legislature)

Office Overview

- Have kept the office running under budget or at budget for the last 35 years
- A very proactive office; in addition to prosecuting cases
  - Work with Albany on criminal justice legislation
  - Issue grand jury reports regarding misfeasance or malfeasance by public officials
  - Prosecute labor law violations; anticipate increased efforts with Micron and the I-81 project; one major investigation already going on
  - Prosecute public corruption
- Conviction integrity unit
- Have talked with legislators about a DV registration, and about balancing privacy needs with public safety regarding Flock cameras

Gun Violence and Homicide

- 58% drop in violent gun crime in the City of Syracuse over a three year period
- Result of an extraordinary relationship between the office and SPD
- Gun violence statistics for the county are very low
- Lowest homicide rate in Onondaga County in history

- Based on evidence-based prosecution, targeting offenders and an aggressive approach to gang prosecutions
    - Prosecuted a RICO case last year and convicted multiple members of a violent gang
- Most of the guns coming into the community come from states with non-existent or very lax gun control laws; Georgia, Florida, I-95
- Homicide solve rate in Onondaga County is 85% on an annual basis, not including cases solved in later years

Caseload

- Approximately 4,000 to 4,500 felony cases a year
- About another 6,000 to 8,000 misdemeanor cases
- Handle every traffic ticket in Onondaga County
- 88% trial conviction record
    - Trial preparation bureau meets weekly, with each assistant DA presenting the facts of the case

ADA Salaries

- In a good place now in terms of competitiveness of ADA salaries
- Defense lawyers in Onondaga County and the rest of the state get $158 an hour, and account for their own hours
    - Working 40 hours a week, can earn $300,000 a year
    - Lowest paid assigned counsel attorney makes close to $100,000 a year
    - One individual now being prosecuted had billing over $750,000
- Assistant DAs also have to attend centralized arraignment part
    - Were promised money for the ADAs in negotiations; delivery of zero
    - At CAP arraignments and justice court at night, the ADAs are the only ones in court not being paid
- On-call ADAs respond 24/7 to inquiries from every law enforcement agency in the county
- Community forums and schools; all uncompensated

Forensic Science Center

- Tremendous partnership between the office and the Wallie Howard Jr. Center for Forensic Sciences
- Expect tremendous advances in forensic identification; DNA, fingerprints, other biological material; as a result of artificial intelligence

Diversionary Courts

- A leader in the state in terms of diversionary courts
- Every one was created by the office, or approved and worked on with the Office of Court Administration
- Every one has to be populated by staff from the office
- Each diverts dozens, if not hundreds, of individuals every year who might otherwise be heading to Jamesville or state prison

Investigator Salaries

- Professionalized the investigators; average investigator has 10 to 15 years of violent felony and homicide experience
- They are police officers and respond to calls
- Comparison shown between what the investigators make, what others make doing a far less dangerous job, and what other DA's offices pay their investigators with far less workload

- Ask the committee to consider the investigator salary bump; everything else is in good shape

Robert Brooks Prosecution

- Appointed by Attorney General Letitia James to prosecute the homicide of Robert Brooks, an incarcerated individual
- Without the body-worn camera footage that was inadvertently saved, don't know what could have been proven at trial
- Case was settled by the State of New York for $24M
- Also prosecuted those who killed Messiah Nantwi at another facility less than a week after their colleagues were arraigned

Questions/Comments:

- Commend the District Attorney and his office for the work on the Robert Brooks case

- Why does the narrative on the gun violence statistics not make it outside of rooms like this; there is a notion that crime is at all time highs?
  - Because fear works
  - Good luck attracting Micron and other industries with that narrative
  - There are problems; poverty begets crime; but the narrative should be out there
  - Those stats are extraordinary and should be trumpeted

- There is a real fear in the community that Micron is going to be able to break the law; good to know the office is aware

- Why has the county not been able to keep pace with comparable counties such as Oswego and Broome on investigator salaries?
  - Notion that because they are collecting their pensions, the salary should be lower; not fair
  - They collect their pensions whether they are security guards at Micron or working for the office
  - Actually saves money in the long run in terms of healthcare costs and other benefits
  - Traditionally a myopic view of the salary structure

- Comparison included benefits such as school breaks off and free tuition for children; is the county able to offer benefits like that, and has it been considered in discussing investigator pay?
  - Has not been, but willing to consider and discuss it
  - The increases the District Attorney recommended are in the executive budget

- Investigator grades are different; is that how the increase was accomplished?
  - Yes
  - DA Investigator 1 goes from grade 29 to 31
  - DA Investigator 2 goes from grade 31 to 32
  - DA Investigator 3 goes from grade 32 to 33
  - Would follow the step progression along those grades

- The pendulum has swung in how defense lawyers are compensated versus the ADAs, and justice is being administered differently; night court, CAP court, travel; looking into the future, what does the Legislature need to expect financially to stay competitive?
    - Understood there was a County Executive initiative to do a review of all upper level salaries
    - Don't like the idea of coming before the Legislature every three years, as opposed to it being done automatically for cost of living and inflation
    - Want salaries that are competitive
    - Number one reason people leave the office is money
        - $100,000 is not very competitive when whittled down by children, education and school loans
        - Private firms offer three or four times that to start as an associate

- Success of the diversionary courts is a good thing, but with no cash bail is there really a choice?
    - Yes; those courts all exist with the District Attorney's blessing
    - No cash bail is a different issue, and a state issue
        - Could be fixed with reasonable people sitting in a room
        - Object is not to have an indigent nonviolent offender sitting in a local lockup because he can't make $100 bail
        - Someone on a 28th petit larceny still at liberty doesn't help him or the shopkeepers, particularly in disadvantaged neighborhoods

- Syracuse Police Department reports the office has been bundling appearance tickets for repeat offenders; is that a shift of manpower, or does it have budgetary implications?
    - No budgetary implications
    - With SPD, focusing on gang members and repeat core offenders, starting with the RICO case last year at Parkside Commons
        - Federal criteria from the Department of Justice have to be met before someone is put on the gang list
    - Not asking for more money to do that; can do it internally

- Salaries are going up but benefits are going down?
    - A lot of grant dollars, and some of the grants can cover benefits too
    - Split between operating and grants

- Professional services is down $72,000; what is in there?
    - Actual expenditures for expert witnesses have been historically lower than this line
    - Varies year by year; still enough cushion
    - Difficult budgetary item to predict; came to the Legislature regarding the Neulander case, knowing normal expenditures for expert witnesses would be exceeded

- What is the boost in all other expenses under grants?
    - Variety of grants supporting a variety of different things
    - Have been very successful with GIVE and other grants
    - Right sizing those lines to the actual expenditures and what things are being used for

- Animal Cruelty Court; constituents report no place to put the animals and a lot of animals loose on the streets; how are the animal cases going?
  - Serious problem in Onondaga County with the past mismanagement of the ASPCA
  - In full disclosure, the District Attorney's wife has volunteered to be on the board
  - Suggestion; a state-of-the-art veterinary center at Jamesville to house abandoned animals, also used as an educational opportunity for kids
  - Critical need; hate to see a dog picked up and euthanized because there is no room

- What is missing from the budget?
  - Vehicles
    - The DA's office has a police department
    - No money allocated this year, and not asking to increase the budget; will make do in the next calendar year
    - Something to discuss next year
  - Need to revitalize the office; not looking to move, but the carpeting hasn't been changed in 30 years; probably an issue between the District Attorney and the County Executive
  - District courts; the courts need to be centralized
    - Would save a tremendous amount of money
    - Would not have to have people going out at nighttime
    - More consistent justice
    - Probably more revenue generated from fines

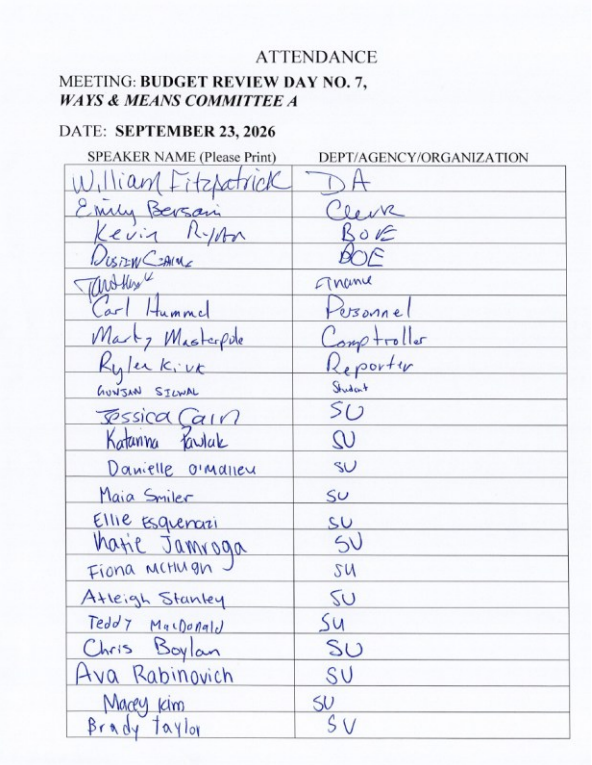
Without objection, the County Executive and County Legislature presentations were postponed to Ways & Means Committee, Meeting B.

Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 12:11 p.m. The committee will reconvene at 1:00 p.m. for Ways & Means Committee, Meeting B.

Respectfully Submitted,

SPENCER BERG, Deputy Clerk



ATTENDANCE

MEETING: **BUDGET REVIEW DAY NO. 7,**
WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE A

DATE: **SEPTEMBER 23, 2026**

SPEAKER NAME (Please Print)	DEPT/AGENCY/ORGANIZATION
William Fitzpatrick	DA
Emily Bersani	Clerk
Kevin Ryan	BOE
Dustin Caine	BOE
[illegible]	Finance
Carl Hummel	Personnel
Marty Masterpole	Comptroller
Ryler Kirk	Reporter
Gunjan Sidwal	Student
Jessica Cain	SU
Katarina Pawlak	SU
Danielle O'Malleu	SU
Maia Smiler	SU
Ellie Esquenazi	SU
Katie Jamroga	SU
Fiona McHugh	SU
Atleigh Stanley	SU
Teddy MacDonald	SU
Chris Boylan	SU
Ava Rabinovich	SU
Macey Kim	SU
Brady Taylor	SU