Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES – SEPTEMBER 28, 2026
MAURICE BROWN, CHAIR

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Brown, Leader Hernandez, Leader May, Mr. Burtis, Mr. Romeo, Ms. Denton, Mr. Bush
ALSO PRESENT: Chairwoman Watts, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Knapp, Mr. Ryan, Mr. Meaker, Mr. Eriksen, Ms. Block, Mr. McCarron

Chair Brown called the meeting to order at 9:35 a.m.

Chair Brown noted that the committee would be discussing the specific changes to the Ways and Means report, starting first with Health.

1. **HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE:** Dan Romeo, Committee Chair
   a. Department of Health
   (*Attachment No. 1: Health & Human Services Committee Budget Proposal)*

- Add three positions to the substance use initiatives; two peer specialists and one case manager
- Created in collaboration with the administration
- Program where substance use has people that respond to overdoses, then works with the people impacted to get them services and connect them with ways to address the situation
- One of the goals, both a way to address the current problems, but also preventing problems in the future, i.e., the DCFS claim; multiple approaches to address the concerns within the community
- Three positions told are appropriate to expand that program
- Program currently restricted both in time of day and space, a small geographic area; will help expand both time of day coverage and geographic coverage

Questions/Comments:

- Were Deputy County Executive Rooney or anybody on the executive's team consulted before these positions were created?
  - Conversations with the administration to make sure the positions were the appropriate positions for the outcomes looking for
- Did the Deputy County Executive or anyone in the chain say these positions were needed?
  - All based on conversations with a collection of people in the administration

    - Asked, would these positions expand this program in terms of time of day and geographic area; they said yes
- The how to solve, not necessarily a request from the department?
    - Don't want that to imply the need isn't there
    - Based on conversations, the need is there from the people that work in the administration; did not come and say, "We need this"
- These weren't requested, but inferred; determined as committee chair that these are needs the county has?
    - Yes; no objections when brought up
- Successful programs working, but potentially increasing capacity?
    - Correct

Chair Brown clarified that these are recommendations, with no vote on any of these right now, and that they will be included in the Ways and Means report and voted on.

- See the appropriation or the increase; don't see the funding source; going to have that tomorrow?
    - Identified cuts in ways to reappropriate funds to pay for this
    - Currently working with the administration so as not to interrupt any initiatives; discussions currently happening; not finalized
    - Found the opportunity to fund all of these just by reappropriation
- Everything resolved by tomorrow morning?
    - Yes
- Some of these cuts and reappropriations across departmental boundaries?
    - Yes
- Health department piece still being discussed, but not finalized
    - Heard from Community Development that the funds for Windows, Doors and More are no longer available
    - Flexible lead funding for those above income thresholds set by the HUD funding grants and other grants through New York State
    - An investment in Windows, Doors and More of interest; an amount not nailed down; why not on here
    - If able to finalize other numbers and funding is available, will be pursuing; a recommendation in terms of amending the budget if possible
- Remaining flexible lead funding from the 2026 budget that would carry over into the next year?
    - Funding used for initiatives such as training the contractors, other advertising, other operational procedures so the lead division functions well over a period of years
    - A chunk of money just for Windows, Doors and More would go towards the remediation
    - Didn't want to disrupt that funding, which has a plan for it right now
- Restore what had previously been HUD funding?
    - No; HUD funding still available for another couple of years
    - Make $90,000 and a child tested positive for lead, or lead in the house, may need $50,000; average around $40,000 per unit
    - Likely not eligible for grants like the HUD funding; would allow people on that edge, with children, to get the remediation done
- Still need the reserves of where all these community development programs are; what funding available, where allocated
- Going inside of the plan and making some adjustments to Windows, Doors and More?

- Windows and Doors program, and the Windows, Doors and More program the county has been running
- Windows, Doors and More flexible funding the health department can use discretion on

b. Department of Social Services – Economic Security

- Create a program coordinator; didn't know the appropriate title; what was landed on
- With all the food security money and initiatives, and the need continuing to come because of the federal government, someone to coordinate all the different initiatives; a point person to help make the system more efficient
  - $500,000 the County Executive put in for capital funding for food banks
  - Increased funding for the food pantries
  - Other initiatives through the Department of Social Services and within the community
- With housing, the county became the point, coordinating the system; based off the current homeless housing program the county runs
- Food security initiative focused; looking at the system as a whole; county dollars coordinated, spent and distributed in the best way possible
- Covering gaps and redirecting funds that may be out there already; need going to change in the coming year

Questions/Comments:

- Any fear of this becoming a duplication of work; someone doing this work to the extent it should be done?
  - Someone that this is a part of their job, a small part
  - Position would allow somebody to be dedicated to that and take a proactive approach, looking at the system as a whole
- How was this number arrived at?
  - Looking at what this person would be doing; a higher level, coordinating with different people within county government
  - Not a supervisory position, but a higher level position, with the authority to talk to the different people working on the different programs
- Confer with Personnel on alignment of salary?
  - Not Personnel; some people within human services
- Employee benefits; does the number align with actual costs; from Finance?
  - Numbers estimated; part of the discussion with Finance over the next 24 hours
  - Make sure what is being reallocated is exactly what is needed, not too much or too little
- Average percentage of salary dollars going to benefits right now?
  - 55.5% for the fringe rate; an aggregate across the whole county
- Job title hasn't been worked out yet with Personnel?
  - Correct; part of the detailed discussion; best guess in terms of where this new position would be
- VSA the same type of position and grade; full description not worked out; a guesstimate?
  - Correct; Health Department positions finalized
  - DSS position and veteran services position new positions; best guess; continuing conversations to finalize
  - Overseeing something new; a coordinator position a good place to start; subject to change

- Would need to be worked out today, tonight, tomorrow
- Just over a quarter of what is appropriated to the food bank every year; utility of this position rather than directing that money directly to the food bank?
    - Gaps in service in the different areas of need
    - Some food pantries great at advocating for themselves, others don't have infrastructure; those able to advocate draw in more money, may not be based on the need in the area
    - This person would see that gap and may be able to take something on or encourage some other way to fill the gaps
    - Things outside food pantries' realm, i.e., the transportation of food from the food pantry back to the house
    - Solution may not be more money; moving some service over or expanding a current service
- Would this individual seek to dictate to different groups and pantries how to provide services?
    - Significant number of county dollars; this person would make sure those county dollars drive that
    - Even without county dollars, make people aware of gaps; find some other service to fill that hole
- These conversations not taking place, or not to a level sufficient to meet the need?
    - Currently no one whose job is dedicated to that; with the increased need coming, need somebody dedicated
    - Extreme need in concentrated areas that have gaps right now
    - Not going to be able to fill the gap the federal government left; fill the gap as efficiently as possible
- Grade 35 goes up to $107,000; a case supervisor goes up to $78,000 in DCFS, a very important position; any guidelines, any criteria of background, education, experience to qualify?
    - Job descriptions or job requirements not created yet
    - Caseworker number not a number came up with either
    - People within DSS working on this as a small portion of their job; ability and background to fill this role
    - Leave it up to the administration to find the qualified person

c. Department of Children and Family Services
- Increase by 12 caseworkers and three case supervisors
- Number told would be able to be trained and onboarded within the year
- For every four caseworkers, a supervisor; why broken up 12 to three
- Three ways to look at the current situation with caseworkers; too many, just enough, or not enough
    - If currently enough, these 12 workers would allow the current staff to be more proactive about engaging with families who may need support; intervene early on, i.e., the PAR program
    - If not enough, struggles with recruiting; would relieve caseloads, relieving stress, hopefully helping retain workers
- A couple of years ago, added 15 people, the max at the time; within eight now
- 15 a number able to onboard over the next year; reduce caseloads; proactive approach
- A preventative approach; peer support addressing the current needs; tackling the issues from both ends

Questions/Comments:

- A very significant change to the budget being proposed; never say no to human service needs in Onondaga County when they can be justified; a few years ago added 15, still eight vacant, now 15 on top; two years before even filling the eight; a committee recommendation, a chair recommendation; what department personnel are driving this need?
  - Definitely not just the chair; a couple of years ago, wanted to increase more; told not able to hire more than that
  - Eight currently short within an acceptable margin; constantly losing people and hiring people; 100% only at a moment in time
  - People who work for the county said this number could be hired
  - Heard from the people working on the ground that the caseloads are somewhat overwhelming
  - A solution brought about through several conversations; the employees working on the ground, the department throughout the year, the committee
  - A committee recommendation
- Never at 100% because of attrition, people not making it through the training; waiver at 75, 80; by increasing the number, 80% of 112 is closer to 100, closer to operational capacity?
  - Significant turnover in caseworkers; a very difficult job
  - Being at 100% for an extended period of time difficult; building this in would hopefully improve that attrition rate
- Never at 100%, therefore always savings in the 101; rationale behind increasing salaries and benefits by over $1.2M?
  - Creating a position and funding it, should have the funding for it
  - Ideal situation all of those positions filled and funded
- Look at other existing unfunded titles throughout the county and seek to make those whole as well?
  - Through Health and Human Services, yes; a large number because of the concentrated number of caseworkers
- Amendment lists local share as $1.175M; a $170,000 difference?
  - A typo; local share should be $1.345M
  - Benefits number going to be a little bit higher; close estimates without finalizing the discussions with Finance

Chair Brown noted that the numbers themselves may change, and that members will have the number before it is time to vote.

- Numbers important; also job titles, job descriptions
  - Information will be provided before being asked to vote
- Not ready; the details matter; today, tonight, tomorrow; the numbers are important; budget season
- Do we need to tax for this solution; tax for maybe some part of it to see if a theory or strategy works?
  - Based on the ability to move funding around without increasing the current proposed tax rate, yes; should prioritize this given the impact on children and the future of the county
- With every page, what do we want to tax for, what are we willing to tax for, what do we need to tax for, and the basis for that
- Funded positions not filled, and wanting to increase the number of funded positions?
  - Eight positions a moment in time; if able to take on 10 people, would like that number of funded positions available

    - Told 15 a number believed to be able to be taken on throughout the year
- Move them to grade 35 might help
- If 10 people show up, wouldn't take an act of Congress to get two more positions; this group would come together; not frozen
- Contingency funding?
    - Haven't finished yet
    - Significant contracts; around $70M to $90M between the grant funding and the department
    - Asked throughout the year for a list of those contracts and amounts; still waiting
    - Outside counsel since lawyers moved to DCFS; the $500,000 contract with Hillside for home finders
    - Contingency account would help drive those conversations in the coming year
    - Thought about putting contracts outside governments into contingency; detrimental to the service; pulled back
    - Professional services line; questions raised about outside contracts; contingency to get clarity and have conversations throughout the year

d. Veterans Service Agency
- This position would be difficult to hire right at this moment, given the hiring of three positions in the department
- May be hired later in the year, depending on the capacity of the department to onboard those three new positions
- No funding required from local dollars
- County VSA does a great job of servicing veterans; current work restricted to just the veterans
- This position would seek to serve families of veterans, i.e., a mother or father deployed for a number of years
- Grants available mostly to school districts that could service families of veterans; understanding of veterans' unique needs really isn't there; don't take advantage of those grants
- Person would help drive grants available from the federal government to municipalities or school districts
- Reimbursed through an administrative portion of that grant
- Program coordinator position a best guess; still having conversations with HR, Finance

Questions/Comments:
- Sounds like a good idea; first aware of a change to VSA as a pair of family coordinators; looking to create a different position, one position?
    - Yes
- Different than the current family coordinators the Veteran Service Agency uses?
    - Yes
- Can the positions be distinguished easily?
    - Not easily; more to expand that reach; going to other places available for grants
    - May work directly if the municipality or school district needed; more to give that professional knowledge of how to apply
- The assistant director currently a grade 35; this position would be reporting to the assistant director; a problem with the two at the same pay grade

- Without new position duty statements, no idea where these should fall, whether a program coordinator is an appropriate title; quite a bit of research
- Assurances that a position like this would unlock the revenue on this page, or hoping for the best?
  - Based on the number of grants made available to other entities not taking advantage, a significant likelihood; nothing guaranteed
- Greater than 50%; revenue other municipalities have generated, for comparison?
  - Large discrepancy between the number of available grants and the number applied for; a significant opportunity
- Looks so easy on paper; why not 10 of these people?
  - Semi-exploratory; adding people adjusted based on the outcomes
  - Not leaving money on the table when it comes to federal grants
- Legislature overwhelmingly supportive of the Veterans Service Agency; where is it coming from; where's the need; who's advocating?
  - When first on the legislature, learning about VSA; service veterans really well; questions around the families
  - Response was, "We do our best to support families, but we don't have a strong infrastructure in place"
  - Through conversations with the people at VSA
- Should benefit costs also be included under Veteran Service Agency for the corresponding salary?
  - Yes
- Can't think of a time this body has created positions; a little out of the lane
- Funding source means some buy-in; curious what kind of buy-in achieved; the sooner known, the better
- Some horse trading to be done in the next 24 hours
  - Would have preferred everything ironed out; the pace at which this moves; presenting while still building them out

Chair Brown noted that these are draft proposals, still being considered, and that the committee will not be voting today.

2. **<u>COUNTY FACILITIES COMMITTEE</u>:** Chad Ryan, Committee Chair
(*Attachment No. 2: County Facilities Committee Budget Proposal)*

- No increases and no decreases; shifting funds into contingency
- Professional services line, $100,000; last year used for the STEAM school; project done
  - Historical numbers around $25,000; leave $25,000; other $75,000 in contingency
- Provision for capital projects, $400,000; contingency half of it
- Parks and Recreation provision for capital, the Honeywell consent decree funds; contingency the whole amount

Questions/Comments:

- Reason for contingency for the provision for capital projects?
  - Supportive of the facilities and the parks; some concern on where these dollars would go; make sure going to the correct place
- Any specific earmarks for those funds?
  - Concerned about the aquarium; this body said no more county dollars to the aquarium

- County adjacent entities steered millions towards it; the 312 from the parks went there
- These other two can be spent on buildings owned by the county, again the aquarium
- Don't want to take the money; facilities has important things to do; make sure where it's going

- Were those dollars described, or always open ended?
  - Not sure; can talk to the CFO
  - Asked in the meetings; no definitive plan for any of it
  - $400,000 a catchall to see what comes up; parks, no answer either
- Promised transparency; a way to help with transparency of how these dollars are spent
- County Executive has authorization of some accounts under his purview; as a legislature, made that statement; a challenge

3. **ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION COMMITTEE:** Gregg Eriksen, Committee Chair
(*Attachment No. 3: Environmental Protection Committee Budget Proposal)*

- One item proposed for contingency; WEP's budget, professional services line; $420,000
- Contract with Miller Strategies, a federal lobbying group
- A relationship that bears monitoring and potentially revisiting
- Makes sense to work with folks who can help tap into opportunities the federal government has
- Not clear what has been gotten from this relationship; monthly updates asked for; reports not seen yet
- Purpose to help build the semiconductor cluster; not clear how much success is directly attributable, as opposed to efforts the county and other government officials have made
- A Republican aligned lobbying group; one or both houses of Congress may change in November; monitor whether equipped to navigate a divided government
- Contract up in May; ability to monitor, revisit, think about if the right fit

Questions/Comments:

- Characterize what is known about this firm; the goal of this relationship?
  - Purpose like any other lobbying group; help find opportunities within federal resources to build up the cluster
  - A WEP line item; initial focus in the wastewater treatment area
  - Scope of services subject to change; possible to expand as work continues
- Contingency isn't a terrible idea; not being cut; contracts a little out of scope; getting a handle on the scope of service and goals a good idea
  - Under contract, probably can't cut; contingency route for additional oversight

4. **PLANNING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE:** Elaine Denton, Committee Chair
   a. Office of Economic Development
(*Attachment No. 4: Planning & Economic Development Committee Budget Proposal)*

- Overall support for the local farm and food security pilot program; more information on how the program would work, who can apply, what grants, how much, how many farms
- Put the $250,000 in contingency to get these details before releasing those funds

Questions/Comments:

- Agree with this approach; spoke with the leadership of the Matthew 25 Farm in the Tully area; raise food to give away to local food pantries and food banks; excited; offered to help navigate

Chair Brown echoed his support, noting that he would like some kind of metrics and assurances that this will go towards the intended outcome.

- Increase transfer to grant expenditures by $250,000 for the Agriculture Council for Syracuse Onondaga Food Systems Alliance; experience deploying resources and grants where most needed across the food systems; an addition
- Another decrease there, or an increase to contingency?
  - An addition
  - Where the $250,000 will come from part of the discussions on funding all of the increases, in coordination with the administration
  - Found, but working with the administration so as not to disrupt current initiatives
- Can expect the corresponding decrease elsewhere in the budget?
  - Yes; mapped out tomorrow

b. Division of Community Development

- Home Headquarters Gen Z down payment assistance program; supportive, but details matter
- $2M placed in contingency, allocated once the details are fully developed
- Important to see the fund balances from community development and planning; funding for crucial programs, i.e., removing lead, Shape Up, windows and doors
- Money allocated being used versus sitting in a bank account

Questions/Comments:

- Holding in lieu of sales tax money for villages hostage until a better feel for project accounts in other areas?
  - Under county general; same approach; what is the $5.75M being used for; where is that going
  - Who's applying, who makes decisions, where the funding is going; a transparency question
- Brought up in committee at any point?
  - Asked the CFO to provide a list of what the funding has been used for in the past
  - Community development Main Street grants and village infrastructure grants; how these programs complement each other or differ

5. <u>PUBLIC SAFETY COMMITTEE</u>: Ellen Block, Legislator
(*Attachment No. 5: Public Safety Committee Budget Proposal)*

- Bring the allotted funds for the sheriff's office cars up to $750,000; a $500,000 increase

Chair Brown noted that this was discussed at the Public Safety Committee meeting, and that where the money will come from will be finalized over the next 24 hours.

6. <u>WAYS & MEANS COMMITTEE</u>: Maurice Brown, Committee Chair
a. Board of Elections
(*Attachment No. 6: Ways & Means Committee Budget Proposal)*

- $15,000 increase plus cost of living adjustment for the two commissioners; $30,000

Questions/Comments:

- Recommend not discussing these salaries in committee any further; conversations outside regarding specific individual salaries; three individual salaries
- Individuals' livelihood, profession, performance; best to have those conversations offline; no objections to what has been put on here
- Numbers are there; transparent; wise to have a full discussion in private

b. County Legislature

- Increase of professional services; restoring what has been done in the past; cut in this year's budget

Questions/Comments:

- Puts it back at the 2026 appropriation?
  - Yes
  - Slightly increased; professional services line also pays for evening meeting security

A motion was made by Mr. May, seconded by Ms. Hernandez, to enter into executive session; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

The committee returned from executive session at 11:40 a.m.

A motion was made by Mr. May, seconded by Ms. Hernandez, to exit executive session and return to open session; MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.

Adjournment

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

The meeting was adjourned at 11:41 a.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

SPENCER BERG, Deputy Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature