

Monthly Report
Tompkins County Council of Governments
for February 14, 2024

by Councilperson Robert Lynch
Enfield TCCOG Representative

The Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) held its first meeting of 2024 on January 25th. No resolutions were passed. Committees were organized for the New Year, but with no significant changes.

Flood Mapping: Thomas Song of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), who is scheduled to address this Town Board February 14th, provided TCCOG a status report on flood mapping and opportunities for municipal or individual comment.

“We’re at that last mile, last stretch of updating our flood maps,” Song told TCCOG. Song advised that January 31st would mark the start of a 90-day comment period whereby parties, primarily municipalities, could make corrections or lodge appeals to the revised maps FEMA has submitted. But to succeed on appeal, FEMA “has to be shown we made some sort of error” or employed faulty methodology in a map’s preparation, Song said. An appellant would likely need to enlist an engineer to support an appeal. An individual seeking only his own property’s exemption from an identified flood zone would file only after the maps are adopted, the owner requesting a “Letter of Map Amendment.” To support the amendment, the owner’s submission would need to show that the affected property’s ground level stands above the flood level. Again, an engineer’s submission would need to support the claim.

Flood insurance requirements and availability dominated much of the TCCOG membership’s discussion with the FEMA representative. Thomas Song stated that if any part of a building lies in a flood zone and if a federally-backed mortgage exists or is requested for the structure, federal rules require the owner to procure flood insurance. “If you own the property outright, do you need to get flood insurance?” Song posed the question. “No, but if you are flooded and if there is a FEMA Disaster Declaration—and that’s very rare in rare parts of the state—(the owner) may not be eligible to get the full assistance that is offered for property owners that are outside the flood zone,” he stated.

Song said 40 per cent of FEMA’s flood claims come from outside flood zones. As for insurance, “FEMA does not sell directly,” he stated. “We rely on insurance companies to sell our policies.” Song recommended insurance purchasers shop around among companies for the best coverage and price.

Laserfiche’s Future: A surprise discussion among TCCOG attendees concerned Tompkins County’s potential termination of its contact with Laserfiche as an intermunicipal portal for data storage. Ulysses Supervisor Katelyn Olson said the matter had come up at a meeting of Town Supervisors earlier in January, with the prospect earlier raised at December meetings of Code Enforcement Officers.

“I was appalled that we might be getting rid of Laserfiche,” Cayuga Heights Mayor Linda Woodard told TCCOG. “We use it extensively, and we have been able to succeed in getting all of our code enforcement functions streamlined online using Laserfiche without any of this really expensive software that other people are anticipating.... It’s invaluable and it’s cheap, which has to be helpful to a lot of people.”

Ithaca Town Supervisor Rod Howe responded that earlier discussions of Laserfiche's discontinuation may have been premature. "The County at this point is not ready to let go of Laserfiche," Howe said. "I don't think there's any immediate issue now with its going away, but I think it's a larger discussion."

"I would love to have a conversation with the County more broadly about how we can collaborate more effectively to get some either software or IT or cybersecurity issues umbrellaed in a centralized location," Olson urged.

"It's expensive for all of us to do our own thing," Danby Supervisor Joel Gagnon remarked. "It's just one component of a larger picture of what's not just the cheapest way, but what's the cost-effective way for what we're using all this technology for." Gagnon conceded that "there's a trend toward cloud storage of just about everything." TCCOG agreed to invite Loren Cottrell, Tompkins County's Director of Information Technology Services, to its March meeting for a broad discussion, including of Laserfiche.

Shared Services: In her report, Tompkins County Administrator Lisa Holmes said that NYSAC, the New State Association of Counties, has advised her that Governor Hochul's Budget has proposed the elimination of the State's Shared Services Program in 2025. But Holmes has also learned that Hochul has proposed to add money to the Local Government Efficiency Grant program. Local Efficiency grants, Holmes has been told, could replace Shared Services as the vehicle for local assistance. The State Senate and Assembly still need to weigh-in on Shared Services' elimination.

Assessment: At my suggestion, TCCOG will invite Tompkins County Director of Assessment Jay Franklin to its March meeting. The request comes amidst conflicting messaging from various County legislators regarding the potential for moving to a multi-year reassessment cycle in Tompkins County. In January, some may recall, Legislator Randy Brown told this Town Board he'd prefer a multi-year cycle of as long as four years. A committee of legislators also discussed a potential triennial cycle. But new leadership seems cool to backing away from the annual reassessment regimen employed last year.

As for triennial assessment, "I believe that has died," newly-elected Chair of the Legislature Dan Klein told TCCOG. "Almost everyone seems to agree that annual assessment is the fairest way to go, and we'll do everything we can to maintain that system," Klein stated. "I'm not speaking for every single individual, but I think that's the majority of the Legislature." Maintaining the annual reassessment cycle, however, may require additional staff at the Assessment Office.

TCCOG members discussed how taxpayers have trouble understanding the impact of higher assessments on their property. "We need to clarify it with the public," Caroline Supervisor Mark Witmer stated.

"I think you're overestimating the mathematical ability of the majority of residents," Heights Mayor Woodard said. "Most people who look at their tax bill and compare it to last year; (they) say last year I owed \$1,000 and this year I owe \$1,500. And they, in my opinion, blame the Village, the taxing authority, not Assessment. It's the Village of Cayuga Heights that is raising their taxes some how, some way, even if we keep the rate the same," Woodard said many wrongly believe. *(Of course, the true measure of a municipality's frugality is the tax levy, not the rate.)*

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Lynch
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