

**Monthly Report**  
**Tompkins County Council of Governments**  
for June 12, 2024

*by Councilperson Robert Lynch*  
*Enfield TCCOG Representative*

The Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) met on May 23<sup>rd</sup>. The major topic of discussion, one consuming more than an hour of its just over 90-minute session, focused on the Tompkins Food Future committee's Food System Plan, a multi-faceted initiative to encourage local food production, farm-to-table marketing, farmland preservation, and food scrap recycling. After the presentations and discussion, TCCOG's membership unanimously adopted a resolution, largely symbolic, supporting the Food System Plan. Program advocates said the endorsement could advance efforts to secure additional grant funding for its advocacy.

Tompkins Food Future: Don Barber, chair of the Tompkins County Food Policy Council, and Graham Savio, local agent with Cornell Cooperative Extension, presented an extensive overview of the Food Policy Council's efforts to involve local governments in attaining the Food System Plan's objectives. Discussion also related to some of the challenges local municipalities face in advancing agricultural interests. The full presentation given at TCCOG can be viewed on Tompkins County Government's YouTube channel. Among the discussion's highlights:

- Cooperative Extension's Graham Savio urged municipalities to establish "Agricultural Committees." Savio assumed most local municipalities have such a committee. (Enfield does not.) "That's an important way by which municipalities can support the agricultural community," Savio said of an agricultural committee.
- Savio mentioned the need for Town-farmer coordination in roadside maintenance for such activities as the mowing of road shoulders and roadside ditching. Such coordination, he said, could cut down on the spread of unwanted weeds into farmers' fields.
- The proliferation of solar farms prompted discussion. "Keep agriculture in mind when you're thinking about solar," Savio advised. "Farmland is needed; it's a limited resource," the agent stressed. Savio recommended municipalities "discourage or penalize" the siting of solar arrays on prime farmland. (It's a principle that Enfield's current solar law embodies, though with limited success in its application.) Savio further suggested that communities consider allocating a portion of PILOT or Community Benefit Agreement revenue to what he termed "agricultural priorities."
- Danby Town Supervisor Joel Gagnon raised the difficulty that small-scale local food producers face in marketing their products locally. Gagnon said he's raised excess produce himself at times, but can only give it away, not sell it. He said you can't go into Wegmans and say you've got "an extra bushel of green beans." Gagnon remarked, "I tried that. It doesn't work." Gagnon asked whether additional steps might be taken to facilitate the development of local markets, aside from setting up community farmers' markets.

Tompkins County Budgeting: Tompkins County Administrator Lisa Holmes reported on the parameters the County Legislature had given her regarding the forthcoming 2025 County Budget and the subsequent steps she has taken toward implementing the Legislature's directives.

At a so-called "Budget Retreat" on April 30, the Legislature targeted a limited two per cent (2%) increase in the tax levy for next year. That came despite Holmes' estimates at the meeting that a "maintenance of effort budget"—that is, spending to keep current programs in place—would require a 5.9 per cent increase in the tax levy. The projected New York State tax cap for Tompkins County this budget cycle is 5.09 per cent, a bit more generous than usual.

Maintaining a two per cent levy increase, Holmes told TCCOG, will hit some local programs harder than it will others. State-mandated efforts—particularly in the departments of Social Services and Whole Health—cannot be cut. Because of that fact, Holmes said she had met earlier in the week with department heads and instructed them to draft alternative budgets projecting a five per cent (5%) cut in their discretionary spending.

The Administrator has requested each department prepare both a "Maintenance of Effort Budget" and one imposing the specified spending reduction "to see what we would be losing with a five per cent cut." She said County Administration would take the "first pass" at departmental reductions, and then present its own department's recommendations for the Legislature to consider. "This is going to entail going into departments' base budgets and potentially looking into targeted cuts to programming," Holmes told TCCOG.

Caroline Supervisor Mark Witmer questioned if the full departmental requests might be "attainable" given that a 5.9 per cent levy increase stands not far above the projected 5.09 per cent tax cap. Holmes responded with a fair reflection of legislative sentiment expressed at the Budget Retreat. "Our county elected officials are hearing a lot from their constituents," Holmes told Witmer, as those they represent voice concerns about inflation, the cost of living, and having "a low tolerance for increasing taxes."

Tompkins County EMS: Caroline's Mark Witmer, chair of TCCOG's Emergency Services Committee, reported that Tompkins County's Rapid Medical Response service responded to 84 calls during April, its first month of operation. The service's average call response time was seven minutes. In only 13 of those instances was the call canceled because an ambulance or rescue squad responded to the scene first. Witmer assessed the new service as "working well" and with "good collaboration."

Dryden Councilperson Dan Lamb, a TCCOG member with an ear to Albany, said that New York State may be taking note. "We're creating a model that the state should follow," Lamb said. He suggested that eventually the Governor could recommend a state-funded service of this type, one that counties would administer.

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TCCOG next meets July 25th. Discussion on that date may include the future status of the Laserfiche cooperative data sharing service between Tompkins County and its component municipalities.

Respectfully submitted,

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