

The Board of Chosen Freeholders of the County of Warren met in Budget Session in its offices in the Wayne Dumont, Jr. Administration Building, Belvidere, New Jersey on January 15, 2020 at 7:00 p.m.

The meeting was called to order by Director Richard Gardner and upon roll call, the following members were present: Freeholder Jason Sarnoski, Freeholder James Kern, III, and Freeholder Richard Gardner. Also attending were County Administrator Alex Lazorisak and County CFO Kim Francisco.

The Pledge of Allegiance was led by Director Gardner, who then read the following statement: "ADEQUATE NOTICE OF THIS MEETING *OF JANUARY 15, 2020* WAS GIVEN IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT BY FORWARDING A SCHEDULE OF REGULAR MEETINGS OF THE BOARD OF CHOSEN FREEHOLDERS TO THE WARREN COUNTY CLERK, THE STAR-LEDGER, AND DAILY RECORD AND BY POSTING A COPY THEREOF ON THE BULLETIN BOARD IN THE OFFICE OF THE BOARD OF CHOSEN FREEHOLDERS. FORMAL ACTION MAY BE TAKEN BY THE BOARD OF CHOSEN FREEHOLDERS AT THIS MEETING. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IS ENCOURAGED. IN ORDER TO ASSURE FULL PUBLIC PARTICIPATION, THOSE INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES WHO WISH TO ATTEND THE MEETING SHOULD SUBMIT ANY REQUESTS FOR SPECIAL ACCOMMODATION ONE WEEK IN ADVANCE."

Providing the latest updates to the budget overview, CFO Kim Francisco reported the preliminary net valuation of taxable ratables for 2020 that just arrived from the Tax Administrator showed an increase of \$174,227,262. This represents a 1.5 percent increase over last year. A resolution will appear on January 22 meeting agenda to cancel a few old balances formerly designated for bridge and road/drainage improvements, resulting in \$1.3 million being returned to the Capital Improvements fund.

Land Preservation Director Corey Tierney came before the Board and said he once again proposed keeping the rate flat as per his budget submission. He thought the Freeholders should consider potentially reallocating the three primary Land Preservation programs, currently distributed as follows: Farmland Preservation – 55 percent, Open Space – 20 percent, and Municipal & Charitable – 25 percent. The program has been spending about \$1 million per year in county funds as budgeted for Farmland Preservation, and not really drawing down the substantial surplus earmarked for Farmland Preservation. In order to draw down the surplus, we would either have to preserve more farmland, lower the rate, or reduce the allocation away from farmland

and shift it over to the other two programs. Mr. Tierney thought the first option was not optimal, as even though his office is doing outreach, the applications coming in have remained static for the past 10 years. Lowering the rate would impede the other two programs, so he thought it was time to reallocate the distribution. There are different ways to work with the numbers. Mr. Sarnoski asked about the requirements regarding administrative costs, seeking reassurance there was enough money banked for that purpose. There was no danger in this regard due to the large surplus.

Mr. Tierney provided both five-year and 10-year averages of annual spending for the programs, again suggesting it was time to shift funds away from farmland to the other two programs. Regarding MCCTFC (Municipal & Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund Committee), Mr. Tierney expected an uptick in requests if more funds were to become available. Increasing its funding by \$250,000 per year would bring it up to \$750,000, in between the five-year and 10-year averages. Mr. Gardner wanted to ponder the percentages a bit more, “But I think we can do something,” he said, adding it was a “moving target” depending on our goals. With one third of our farmland already preserved, Mr. Gardner thought it was possible that another third would eventually make its way into the program.

Diverting \$250,000 to Open Space and \$250,000 to MCCTF would leave \$500,000 in Farmland Preservation (FP). Mr. Tierney said if we continue to spend \$1 million per year on FP, we can draw down the surplus by half a million dollars per year, and still have a margin there.

Mr. Sarnoski inquired about tightening the rules on MCCTF to make sure projects are going to be utilized and maintained, and have a committee behind them. He cited the VanNest-Hoff-Vannatta Farmstead and Rutherford Hall as examples of good investments, as opposed to putting money into properties that rot. Mr. Gardner thought this has been progressively improving, but it can be hard to predict the future activity of board and committee members. Ramsaysburg, for example, wasn’t doing very well in the beginning, but really came around. Mr. Lazorisak reminded the Freeholders that they were the final decision-makers and have the authority to deny applications. It was agreed that the benefit to the public had to be evaluated. Mr. Tierney added that even properties/organizations that are doing well and attract numerous visitors still have long-term plans that will keep them coming back for more funding. Hoff-Vannatta, for example, hasn’t touched the barn in the back, and the interior of the main building has yet to be restored. Some other projects throughout the county are fledgling, and it is hard to predict their staying power. Mr. Tierney said it helps when the municipalities back up the local group. Some of it is emergency stabilization to buy time for groups to “get their act together,” said Mr. Tierney.

Mr. Gardner emphasized the importance of organizations' plans to attract the public, noting the ongoing debate regarding the Asbury Mill. Applications were no longer being accepted from religious organizations, since the State Supreme Court decided the matter. There is some gray area in the decision, but Mr. Tierney made a policy decision to err on the side of caution.

Mr. Kern pointed out that it would be nice to showcase these properties with the county's bicentennial coming up in five years. Whether it was possible to devote some of these funds to the bicentennial effort, Mr. Tierney thought an argument could be made for it, as historic preservation and artifacts are defined rather broadly, but was waiting for a response from counsel to be on the safe side.

Aside from the dollar amount, Mr. Francisco asked Mr. Tierney for the percentage allocation he had in mind. He suggested cutting Farmland in half, to 27.5 percent, with the balance split between the other two programs. He had initially proposed zeroing out Farmland, but thought it prudent to keep something in there. "Corey, you're doing a great job," Mr. Sarnoski said.

Finishing up, the Board and County Administrator seemed supportive of transferring an employee from the Planning Department to Land Preservation, to help oversee and improve maintenance of Open Space, which involves time and coordinating contractors. He had also requested a couple of salary adjustments for the Board's consideration.

Terry Urfer, Hope Township Councilman and MCCTFC member, asked to make a public comment. He agreed Mr. Tierney does a great job, and noted that some of the money last year went toward preserving about 100 wooded acres in Blairstown. The Land Conservancy and others put money in, with the County being responsible for only about 15 percent of the total cost in the end. This portion of the meeting concluded at 7:20 p.m.

Next up was Library Director Maureen Baker Wilkinson. She began by talking about the pursuit of State grants to put toward improvements to the Catherine Dickson Hofman Branch. All information had to be submitted by April, and she expected it to be a tough competition for the money.

The exterior landscaping of the Southwest Branch is very costly to maintain. Weeding the beds alone is hard to keep up. Mr. Lazorisak said now that we own the property, local zoning no longer applies, so he suggested converting some of the

landscaped areas back to grass. Further, he said Buildings & Grounds workers spend a lot of time on maintenance between all the branches (417 hours in work orders). He advised adding a lower-level maintenance position in B&G to be devoted to library facilities upkeep and learn the buildings, to be reimbursed through the library tax. “I think that’s a good idea,” Mr. Gardner said, “We want to keep the grounds up and have it look appropriate and respectable.” The Board agreed with the addition.

Ms. Wilkinson said they were trying to reduce personnel costs, primarily by phasing out Student Assistants in favor of self-checkout. The minimum wage increase is having an impact, and they are working on training Library Assistants to take on more duties. While Civil Service wasn’t necessarily an impediment, there is difficulty filling the professional positions due to low pay. Mr. Lazorisak suggested applying for waivers to the NJ residency requirement. He heard they are being granted freely, and then we can open up these positions to Pennsylvania residents.

Regarding what patrons are accessing online and technology safeguards, Ms. Wilkinson explained that the public computers are on a separate network from the library network. “It’s completely separate,” she said, adding they also have software on all machines in public areas that re-sets computers to their original settings every time they are logged off. There is no way to install any software or keep any documents on the public computers. Mr. Lazorisak said the Library Commission has to make it a priority to work with County Counsel on bylaws.

Mr. Kern inquired about patronage at the SW Branch. It continues to be very steady, and Ms. Wilkinson described a “people counter” system that has proven very useful. It detects how many adults and children enter the facility at given times, and even factors in the weather. The portion of the meeting concluded at 7:39 p.m.

Warren County Technical School (WCTS) was the next topic, with Superintendent Ed Zalewski distributing a handout. The budget was currently slated for a two percent increase to OE, which Mr. Zalewski said was okay, but he presented a five-year capital needs plan that sought more than double the budgeted \$250,000 for the first year.

Updates and statistics included the following:

- The school will no longer offer Electronics as a concentration, due to a pending retirement.
- An effort to tie in with business leaders led to the recruitment of a new welding instructor.
- Unnecessary electrical expenses have been reduced by 68 percent over 10 years,

after numerous updates and improvements. These savings have been going back into the classroom.

- The relocation of the LPN program to WCCC's Phillipsburg Educational Center has been a huge success, with 23 students on pace to graduate in June. Without the Freeholders' help last year, this program would no longer have been offered.
- Renovations are nearly complete on a new Child Development space, partly formerly occupied by the County library.
- To date, 204 applications have been received for 115 openings. This represents 16 percent of all eighth graders in the county.

Most discussion focused on the five-year capital needs plan. Mr. Zalewski said some of the school's equipment was older - not the latest generation - and he included photos of some WCTS labs next to other vocational schools' labs. Mr. Sarnoski said he would rather the expenditures go toward the student programs as opposed to more indirect upgrades. He used a gym floor replacement as an example.

When asked about the potential of getting some money from the State to help fund some of the improvements, Mr. Zalewski said it was unclear, and there are many hoops to jump through. This portion of the meeting concluded at 8:03 p.m.

Approaching the Board next were WCCC President, Dr. Will Austin; and Dr. Phil Linfante, Board of Trustees Chair. They were pleased to present a recent news article referencing a report by The Chronicle of Higher Education determining WCCC was one of the nation's most successful two-year public colleges, ranked #11 of 838 institutions. WCCC's graduation rate is the highest of all community colleges in the State of New Jersey.

Dr. Austin and Dr. Linfante took turns highlighting various accomplishments over the years, as well as favorably comparing and contrasting WCCC with other NJ community colleges. The comparison included Raritan Valley Community College, which enjoys far more public funding support. They are redesigning the college's logo, renaming it Warren Community College, and will begin offering bachelor's degrees. Planning for the future, in 10 years there will be 25 percent fewer high school seniors.

Past achievements included the expansion and enhancement of the Dual Enrollment program in 2013, a program that has awarded more than 10,525 college credits over the years, saving families millions of dollars. In 2019, WCCC subscribed to a nationally recognized annual textbook service, which also saves students money.

Regarding funding from the State, Dr. Austin thought we had to be careful of

pressure to merge with other institutions, and to keep an eye on the NJ State Funding Formula.

Operating aid requested of the County represented a two percent increase over the current year's appropriation. Being wary of what may happen on the State level, Dr. Austin requested the Freeholders pass a resolution to split the requested funding allocation to have \$250,000 devoted to preserving the Dual Enrollment program, with the balance going toward OE. Regarding capital, excellent bids came in last year for HVAC upgrades; it appears the replacement will come in at half the projected cost. Dr. Austin hoped to put that savings toward hiring a grant consultant and work with WCTS to obtain grant funds.

Dr. Linfante explained a concept to be implemented in 2020, saying there are various entry points to the college. Not all students are incoming freshmen; some are seasoned professionals that may be seeking a supplemental course or certification to stay current in their field, or personal enrichment. With multiple ways in and out, it was time to break down the walls between credit and non-credit courses, and have students from diverse experiences attend classes together.

The textbook program allowed the college to do away with its bookstore. Abilities of Northwest Jersey is going to open a store in the space, to be staffed by clients to learn job skills. "Oh, that's excellent," said Mr. Sarnoski. This is rent-free, just like the LPN program. "These are things that help our community, and we want to be helping our community," Dr. Austin said.

Regarding a grant writer, Mr. Sarnoski said he was getting to the point of considering one just for Warren County. Between the municipalities, the college, the Tech School, the EDC, etc., the Freeholders thought it was a concept whose time had come.

In closing, Dr. Linfante said he travels around the state, attending many college trustees meetings. "You guys have appointed a tremendous group," he said. All members work together and closely with the President. "It's what's best for the students," he said.

There were no closing public comments, nor questions from the press.

On motion by Mr. Sarnoski, seconded by Mr. Kern, and there being no further business before the Board at this time, the meeting was adjourned at 8:49 p.m.