

**These minutes were approved by the Warren County Board of Commissioners on January 27, 2021.*

The Board of County Commissioners of the County of Warren met in Budget Session in its offices in the Wayne Dumont, Jr. Administration Building, Belvidere, New Jersey on January 9, 2021 at 9:00 a.m.

Due to social distancing directives, this meeting was conducted without any members of the public in attendance. The public had the opportunity to listen to the meeting, and participate if they chose, via telephone.

The meeting was called to order by Director Kern and upon roll call, the following participants were present: Commissioner Lori Ciesla, Commissioner Deputy Director Jason Sarnoski, Commissioner Director James Kern III, County Administrator Alex Lazorisak, County CFO Kim Francisco and Deputy Freeholder Clerk Holly Luberto.

After Director Kern led the flag salute, he confirmed with the County Administrator that the meeting notice was in compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act, Chapter 231, P.L. 1975.

Mr. Francisco said no changes had been made to the budget overview since the group last met on January 6. He was scheduled to meet with County Engineer Bill Gleba in the coming week to go over capital requests. He updated the COVID budget numbers per Mr. Sarnoski's request, and intended to distribute those on January 16. Regarding the second round of \$900,000 COVID funding from the state intended for testing, Mr. Lazorisak said the state denied our request to put it toward vaccination.

The Commissioners invited Land Preservation Director Corey Tierney to come forward and review his budget, which he had submitted previously for review. He said this year's proposal was essentially flat, but a balance was accruing. About 550 acres of farmland had been preserved in the past year, at a cost of roughly \$1 million to the county. "So we're not really drawing down that accrued balance in the Farmland Preservation account," he said, noting it was possible to reallocate the Open Space tax without impairing the Municipal & Charitable Trust Fund Committee (MCCTF) or Board of Recreation Commissioners. (BORC) programs. He did not foresee any problem with reducing the Farmland Preservation portion. About 30 farms were pending. He had hoped to preserve more farms in the past year (about 1,000 acres), but both his office and the SADC (State Agriculture Development Board) had been constrained due to COVID.

Mr. Tierney said state funding appeared to be stable and there was no indication that would change because they were dedicated funds. “The state funding has always been there when we’ve needed it from the SADC, and we have alternative funding from the Highlands Council,” he said. The county ends up paying between 40-50 percent of the total cost for Farmland Preservation. He predicted preserving about 1,000 acres in 2021-22 at a cost of about \$1-2 million, which could be paid out of the accrued balance. Depending on what level the commissioners decided to adjust the Open Space tax, Mr. Tierney recommended splitting that funding between the BORC and MMCCTF, and put nothing toward Farmland this year.

Mr. Sarnoski noted that the allocations could be readjusted each year. Given the length of time for a farm to go through the preservation application process, it is easier to see what’s on the horizon, while the other programs progress more quickly. Mr. Sarnoski said he was comfortable with this recommendation, especially since we have 10.75 years’ worth of funding saved up, versus 5.5 years back in 2014. “That’s a lot,” he said. The proposal was to cut .05 cents (from 2.5 cents down to 2 cents).

Mr. Lazorisak said bringing a Principal Planner over to Land Preservation had been a good idea. Administrative costs, which had to stay below 20 percent, were running about 16 percent, and projected maintenance costs for 2021 were about 15 percent. Mr. Tierney added that there was some deferred maintenance, and up to 10 percent could be allocated to maintenance each year out of the Open Space trust (which was not always the case). Accrued funding can be utilized for maintenance.

For general edification, Mr. Kern asked Mr. Tierney to explain the role of municipalities with respect to Farmland Preservation, and how the counties become involved. Mr. Tierney said his office has a comprehensive Farmland Preservation plan. They look at all the parcels in the county and develop a target list based on certain criteria. The state requires 25 tillable acres (or 50 percent, whichever is less); the county’s criteria is set by the CADB: the farm must be 48 acres of contiguous land under common ownership. His office sends letters to owners of farms meeting the criteria.

In addition, many municipalities have their own preservation programs. They may target the same farms, and their lists may be broader because they can accept smaller farms. Some do outreach, some do not, and each municipality is different. They can generate applications on the local level, with funding contributed as follows: 20 percent municipal, 20 percent state and 60 percent county. Mr. Tierney said he was seeing less and less of this, with towns redirecting Open Space funds to active recreation, for example. Increasingly, the county has been the one preserving farms.

When the county does it without municipalities, the county pays 40 percent and the state pays 60 percent. Additionally, in some instances the county partners with nonprofits such as the Land Conservancy, which is typically and 50-50 cost share.

The program is purely voluntary for landowners, with no cost or obligation to apply. Mr. Tierney said we appraise the property and make an offer, and the parties enter into an agreement only if the landowner voluntarily accepts the offer. There is no cost or obligation if the owner rejects the offer. The only caveat is that the landowner has to wait two years to reapply. “We are an option for them,” Mr. Tierney said. We try to be as competitive as possible, but there are constraints regarding how we spend public (especially state) money.

Mr. Sarnoski pointed out the debt falling off this year, as well as an anticipated increase in ratables. “There’s a lot of things that will offset that half a cent decrease and not make it as impactful as it could have been,” said Mr. Sarnoski, and he complimented Mr. Tierney and the rest of his department for doing a fantastic job. He appreciated the outreach and follow through – especially with the state – which was a big reason for the healthy surplus. Mr. Tierney did not foresee any impairment to the program, as long as he could access that accrued balance.

Further discussion followed regarding the impact of COVID-19 on preserving land. Mr. Tierney said it was a cumbersome process that could take two years under normal circumstances, requiring lots of reviews and approvals. COVID caused additional delays. On the other hand, the pandemic brought a renewed interest in rural real estate. We have not yet seen an impact on appraisals or “raw land” as we have in residential properties, but if the trend continued, Mr. Tierney expected raw land to increase in value. He thought in the future it would become more viable to develop some farmland parcels for residential development that were zoned as such.

For the record, Mr. Kern said towns need to take heed and start having discussions now so they’re not “Throwing their hands up in the air, they don’t know what to do because they have 500-1,000 home developments coming in,” he said.

Mr. Kern asked if the Highlands Council could help fund any particular expenditures in the Land Preservation Department. Mr. Tierney said the Highlands Council did not have a dedicated source of funding from the state. He provided a bit of history of where its funding had come from over the years, but it was inconsistent. He had run a few applications through when the opportunity was there for federal funding passed through the Highlands Council (Fish & Wildlife funding). “It doesn’t appear to be as stable or as guaranteed as the state funding, but it is another pot of

money that we've tapped into," Mr. Tierney said.

Mr. Kern opened up for public comment on the topic of Land Preservation at 9:22 a.m. Blaiirstown Township Open Space Committee Chairman, Joel McGreen, had submitted a written statement for discussion, concerning the preservation of 35 acres next to the Catherine Dickson Hofman Library and across from North Warren Regional. According to Mr. McGreen's statement, the property consisted of open fields, woods, Paulinskill River frontage, a pond, cross county perimeter paths, and a lacrosse/soccer field. There was a signed contract between the Board of Education and Blaiirstown Township. Green Acres provided 50% funding, and local funding was \$20,000. Blaiirstown applied to Warren County's Municipal and Charitable Conservancy Trust Fund Committee for the remaining \$147,500 needed. Funding was denied. The project was the only open space project on their docket. Most other applicants received full or partial funding. Blaiirstown would benefit from some level of funding the Commissioners could provide for this project. The property will be used by a large number and wide cross-section of county residents from student athletes to senior citizens looking for an easy place to walk outdoors.

Mr. Tierney referred to it as the Paulinskill River Park project, and confirmed the MCCTF denied the \$147,000 requested for the 2020 round, but invited them to reapply in 2021. Mr. McGreen had stated concerns that there was risk of losing the property if not closed within a certain timeframe, and that the project would be put out to bid and subject to development pressures. The total cost of the property was \$330,000 (\$310,000 for the property itself, plus \$20,000 in soft costs). Mr. Tierney didn't have specifics in front of him, but his recollection was that the MCCTFC voted nearly unanimously to decline the project in favor of other priorities.

Mr. Sarnoski said it was his understanding that Blaiirstown Township had received \$100,000 last year for a different project. Mr. Tierney confirmed this; it was for about 100-120 acres of Yards Creek property. Joanne Van Valkenburg, Blaiirstown Township Committeewoman, was on the line to participate in the discussion. She said the school board party was Blaiirstown Elementary, not North Warren Regional. Blaiirstown Elementary school district also serves Hardwick Township. Mr. Sarnoski said this was essentially about transferring ownership from one governmental entity to another governmental entity in that area. Mr. Sarnoski said in his opinion, the taxpayers had already paid for this property once, and were being asked to pay for it again. "That's something I have a little bit of a concern with," he said, adding that it was possible to transfer ownership for a dollar, as has been done in the past. "There's certainly the ability to do that if it's going to be maintained for rec and for the purposes it's used for now, and maintained by the

Ridge and Valley Conservancy,” Mr. Sarnoski said. He echoed concerns of MCCTFC members and the reason for the denial. “It’s like a double hit on the taxpayers, to ask them to pay for property they essentially already own,” he said.

Mr. Sarnoski continued, saying he understood all schools were hurting and seeking ways to bridge budget gaps. The school board should understand if they were following the will of the area residents to keep the land for recreation, they should keep it that way for themselves, or if that’s untenable due to maintenance burdens, they could transfer it to the township, and Ridge and Valley Conservancy, for a dollar. According to the MCCTFC application, the usage and maintenance was to remain essentially the same, per Mr. Sarnoski’s recollection.

Mr. Kern sought more details for the reasons the MCCTFC denied the application. Mr. Tierney said the committee felt that were more pressing projects ahead of it, and the property was already owned by a government entity accountable to the people, and not under threat of imminent development. They thought it could wait another year.

Mr. Sarnoski asked Ms. Van Valkenburg if there had been any discussion of transferring the property for a dollar. She said she agreed with what had been said about the taxpayers paying twice for the property. She thanked Mr. Kern for the opportunity to comment, and praised Mr. Tierney and Mr. McGreen for being “amazing” in helping preserve a tremendous amount of property. A real estate professional, Ms. Van Valkenburg said this property was in the heart of north Warren, and surrounding populations visit there. “Everybody comes to Blirstown,” she said. She said this was a key area, fronting the Paulinskill and adjoining the library. It was not just for fields; the RVC wanted to put in walking paths to river.

Mr. Sarnoski said he was not arguing the beneficial nature of the property, but was asking since it was so important, why not transfer for a dollar, “Or just for the money you have available right now, \$160,000, why can’t the school transfer it for that much?” he asked.

Ms. Van Valkenburg stated she was trying to “back off” the school a bit because her daughter was a teacher there and her son was on the school board. “But they do need a new roof,” she said, “There are several things that the school does need... I’m sure that this money is something that will help them as far as their asset is concerned in improving the condition of the school itself.” Like every other school in the county and state, they are hurting for money.

Mr. Sarnoski said that was pretty much what he thought. He repeated he was not arguing against the benefit of the open space, but it was frustrating for a school district to essentially ask for a capital influx, considering how high school taxes already were. He wondered about the developable potential if the property were to be sold privately, thinking it would only be a couple of houses. Mr. Van Valkenburg countered that the nearby area was “more or less” commercial, and an application for a Dunkin Donuts was pending right down the street. Mr. Tierney said it was “professional and office zoning” but appraisal reports indicated that the “highest and best” most likely use of the property was for residential on six acres or more.

Ms. Van Valkenburg argued that wasn’t practical and thought retail businesses would go in. Talking about the school district, she said, “Whether they get the money from selling this property, or if they gave it to us for a dollar, they’re going to raise the taxes or whatever else so the people can do the roofing or to do the capital projects that they do need.” She thought this would be a beautiful way for the county to step in, and the RVC would like to do things there. She recalled what Mr. Tierney had said earlier in his report, that municipalities were not taking the lead in preservation any more, and the potential influx of buyers from out of the area. She said there were “buyers galore” and didn’t see properties being preserved. “I’m begging,” said Ms. Van Valkenburg.

“I hear you,” said Mr. Kern, who though there were two separate issues: schools and their budget problems, and the need to preserve some nice property abutting the Paulinskill and our library. He thought there was a way to address both by working with the school to carve out a portion with river access and trails for the county, and school could retain some property for its fields. Maybe not for a dollar, but he wondered if there could be discussion with the school board to protect the recreational areas the school doesn’t want to just donate. The school board was ultimately subject to the voters, if they want to see the land preserved. He thought there was opportunity to find a balance and potentially do both.

Mr. McGreen said he never talked to the school about donating the property. He said the township did offer roughly \$14,000 below certified market value. “But everybody’s got budget problems,” he said. Mr. Kern suggested continuing the conversation offline to facilitate more dialog with the school board. He didn’t think it was fair for the school to almost threaten the county with development if we don’t take their land. “I think ultimately, we want to do what’s best for Blairstown, and I think we can do that, but I think we’ve got to get the school board involved... and try to come to some amicable agreement,” said Mr. Kern.

Mr. McGreen said the school wanted to auction off the property about a year ago, but held off when the township expressed interest.

Mr. Sarnoski did the math and noted the cost was nearly \$10,000 per acre, a very high price for preserved land and more than the county normally pays for a typical Open Space application. "That's another thing that I have a problem with," he said. Mr. Kern reiterated that's where the school board comes in, and he thought there were two separate issues. There's the issue of the county wanting to preserve a nice asset, but the school board's budget problems was a different matter. He said this was a good time to have the conversation, as the budget process was just beginning.

Ms. Ciesla inquired about the township's Open Space rate, and balance, for consideration. Ms. Van Valkenburg said it was two cents, and the township already paid for two appraisals on the property. "I agree with the director, I think we have to get the school board in this conversation," Ms. Ciesla said. Mr. Tierney was willing to participate in the endeavor. Ms. Van Valkenburg said, "We all have the same goal; we just have to find a way to get to it." She said she was very appreciative of the commissioners' time this morning.

With no more public comments on Land Preservation, the group took a break from 9:51 a.m. to 9:59 a.m.

The next budget up for discussion was the library, with director Maureen Baker Wilkinson. She said the budget was flat. There was less staff (and no student assistants), and those leaving were not being replaced. She said more money was being devoted to electronic resources, and less circulation of print materials. There has been a lot of educational outreach to teach people how to utilize alternate resources, including videos, text and chat services, and a print from home service that needs a little tweaking. The many virtual programs offered were very popular, and the library was working with the Division of Aging & Disabilities Services to help with outreach (exercise, Medicaid). "It's been an adventure in terms of how we're doing business," she said.

Mr. Sarnoski said Ms. Wilkinson and her staff were doing a great job managing through the pandemic. Grab and go bags, increased communication, and librarians provided pandemic-related services that were critical for getting us through. "Thank you so much for that," he said. "I'm very proud of my staff," replied Ms. Wilkinson.

Mr. Kern added that the pandemic forced technology to the forefront. People learned to see the many different programs the library offered, and he admired the creativity. Mr. Lazorisak noted the wide reach of the virtual programs, saying people not only in other counties throughout our state, but as far away as Canada have been accessing the programs.

Discussion turned to capital needs for the CDH branch. The county had applied for a matching grant to put toward renovations there, but it was not approved for the first round of funding. Estimated renovation costs (including expansion, ADA upgrades, mechanical, electrical, etc.) were about \$5-5.5 million. “That branch is in very, very bad shape,” Mr. Lazorisak said. We can reapply for a second round of the grant, but it was unlikely there would be any money for another year or so. The Southwest branch would be paid off in 2022, and Mr. Lazorisak thought we should finish paying that off before addressing CDH. The Northeast branch was now 10 years old, so Mr. Lazorisak recommended budgeting capital in a separate account for maintenance/repair of library buildings. Reviewing the age of each facility, Mr. Sarnoski agreed it made sense to put us on a 16-20 year cycle. He thought much of CDH would rely on obtaining state aid. “I think that’s bigger than we can tackle,” Mr. Sarnoski said.

“Warren County is always penalized for being responsible people,” Mr. Sarnoski said regarding losing out on the grant. The state denies us because we’re not in dire need. There was no information on the second round yet, and there was going to be a lot of personnel turnover within the state library system. After this year, there would be \$1.2 million available for capital needs for all Warren County library facilities. Mr. Lazorisak suggested putting money aside this year to move forward with contract drawings for CDH. If we have to fund the project fully without assistance, he thought there would have to be two phases of construction. “Repairs have to be done,” Ms. Wilkinson said, “There’s a lot of big problems in that building.” No one disagreed. Mr. Kern thought there might have been increased competition for the grant due to COVID, since closures presented a good opportunity to make improvements.

Mr. Lazorisak asked about patronage at Southwest. Ms. Wilkinson said membership continued to increase, with many people registering and re-registering. Special software enabled them to differentiate addresses by municipality, since a couple of member townships may have Phillipsburg mailing addresses. Not many Phillipsburg residents were currently paying for memberships, but that was not surprising since the building was not open.

Mr. Sarnoski asked about usage of the Washington ShopRite drop box. Ms. Wilkinson said it gets used, but not as heavily as anticipated.

Ms. Ciesla said she appreciated all Ms. Wilkinson and her staff had been doing.

There were no public comments with regard to the library. The group took a break from 10:26 a.m. to 10:31 a.m.

Upon return, the commissioners welcomed Dr. Will Austin and Dr. Phil Linfante of Warren Community College. They began their presentation by focusing on the favorable cost to attend WCC compared to other community colleges, and then reviewed the history of county funding to the college dating back to 2004. Dr. Austin thought this illustrated they were fiscally conservative while improving the college over 18+ years.

Dr. Linfante went over strategic planning, and showed different paths available leading to job placement. Along with young high school graduates seeking degrees, some incoming students may already have advanced degrees, but were seeking to obtain licenses for certain fields, as the college offered built-in licenses and certifications. One example was an engineer sitting in the same drone class with a 19-year-old; another was an alcohol and drug counselor who didn't need the credits, but needed the certification.

They took pride in WCC's burgeoning drone program (Unmanned Aircraft System, or UAS). Students participating in the program ranged from high school all the way up to those with Masters Degrees, a certified pilot, and a teacher. Both credit and non-credit tracks were offered. WCC was one of only six AUVSI training providers in the world.

Turning to budget numbers, support requested from the county remained flat, at \$2,280,963. Revenue assumptions were reviewed, with Dr. Austin noting it was a major assumption that state support would return to pre-COVID levels. He expected a slow resumption of non-credit and customized training activities, as reflection of business activity being wiped out. "This will be our worst semester," said Dr. Austin.

Regarding capital support, there was a bit of a windfall because the final cost of an HVAC project undertaken a couple of years ago came in under budget.

WCC was proud of the following awards in 2020: The Chronical of Higher Education ranked WCC #1 of all New Jersey Community Colleges, and #11 in the

USA for student success; Nursing Schools Almanac ranked WCC #1 Community College Nursing Program; and it was ranked the 20th Safest Community College in the USA. There were 1,200 community colleges nationwide. Dr. Linfante received the Trustee Leadership Award for the northeast region. He said this award was really shared by the trustee board and college president, and he was very proud.

Looking forward to 2021, WCC intended to mitigate the impact of COVID on students, the college and the community by working with the county on vaccine deployment. He wanted to be sure faculty and students were indemnified. “We’re here, we’re ready,” Dr. Austin said. Mr. Lazorisak asked about lower-level nursing students becoming certified to administer vaccines. Dr. Austin expected the State of New Jersey to change the rules. He said students already were certified, but not for this purpose in New Jersey. It was a bureaucratic issue. Mr. Kern said we had to prepare for a tidal wave of vaccine once President-elect Biden takes office in a couple of weeks. Mr. Lazorisak expected Medical Reserve Corps members to be approved for vaccine administration. EMTs were mentioned as a good resource as well.

Getting back to the presentation about future goals, a \$50 million grant had been approved by the voters about five years ago (Securing our Children’s Future Bond Act) but guidelines had only recently come out. Dr. Austin intended to write a grant with a 25 percent match to pursue renovating the Phillipsburg branch and investing in unmanned systems and driverless technology.

A walking/running trail was going to be constructed around the campus, thanks to the single largest gift in the college’s history (\$475,000). Every Warren County municipality will be represented with benches along the path, and sidewalks between the Tech School and college would be tied in. Recreational fields may go in later. The donor was anonymous for now.

Mr. Sarnoski said this was a great college model. “Here, you can see the path to jobs, employment and a career,” he said, “And you’ve made it affordable.” Mr. Sarnoski said the county and college have enjoyed a good partnership for a long time, WCC continues to exceed expectations and he was grateful. He asked how WCC was preparing for free tuition. Dr. Linfante said it was going to happen at the state level; CCOG was expected to be written into legislation this month. Now it was for a gross family income of \$65,000, but they thought that was going to go up. Dr. Austin said there were 40 people right now that qualify. There were more than that, but they qualify for federal aid. Mr. Sarnoski asked about the tuition structure. “We’re already providing a great education for a great price; when they provide free

education is that going to lessen the burden on our county... how does that work?"

Dr. Austin noted that Sussex had the highest tuition and Camden had the lowest; Warren County was in the middle of the pack. He anticipated the disparity among tuition rates of community colleges in the state would be fixed, resulting in a change to WCC's tuition, and trustee scholarships would become available for students that didn't qualify. There was agreement that "We're getting punished for doing the right thing for the right reasons." Mr. Kern said Warren was in the middle of the pack at an appropriate price, and the state would realize that. He thought the free tuition would affect private institutions more than public ones.

Wrapping up, Mr. Kern said he thought the world of WCC. He was a former WCC student who went on to Rutgers. "You have some of the finest faculty, the finest leaders, and as long as I'm here, you will always have my support," he said.

Ms. Ciesla was also appreciative. "College is very, very expensive," she said, and people will be coming here from all over to obtain the certifications outlined in today's presentation. Dr. Austin said the success was thanks to not only the commissioners' financial support, but also for providing high quality trustees over the years.

There were no further public comments.

On motion by Ms. Ciesla, seconded by Mr. Sarnoski, and there being no further business before the board at this time, the meeting was adjourned at 11:44 a.m.