

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 8, 2022 at 9:00 a.m.

The meeting was called to order at 9:01 a.m. by Director Sarnoski and upon roll call, the following members were present: Commissioner James Kern (participating remotely), Commissioner Lori Ciesla and Commissioner Jason Sarnoski. Also attending were County Administrator Alex Lazorisak, County CFO Kim Francisco, Public Works Director Emily Hammer and Deputy Commissioner Clerk Holly Luberto.

After leading the flag salute, Director Sarnoski confirmed with the County Administrator that the meeting notice was in accordance with the Open Public Meetings Act, Chapter 231, P.L. 1975.

County CFO Kim Francisco said final rules for the American Rescue Plan had arrived on January 6. He signed up for a webinar, and our audit firm was reviewing the materials to help guide us. He hadn't made any changes to the budget numbers since the previous budget session.

Warren County Technical School was first on the agenda, with the following participating in the meeting remotely: Superintendent Derrick Forsythe, Business Administrator/Board Secretary Amy Barkman and School Board Vice President Tim McDonough. Mr. Forsythe proceeded to go through a PowerPoint presentation highlighting various achievements and data, including awards recipients, staffing and enrollment numbers, the 12 different career choices available, and clubs and sports offered.

Notably, approximately 36 percent of WCTS students receive IEP and/or 504 services and accommodations (specialized instruction and/or accommodations); more than 30 percent of students take dual-enrollment courses; approximately 100 students take Honors courses in 19 different class sections; and nearly 30 percent of the students receive free/reduced meals.

Each incoming freshman class is limited to about 130 students, while applications for the last three years have approached or exceeded 200. Enrollment based on high school district: Phillipsburg, 40 percent; Warren Hills, 25 percent; Belvidere, 16 percent; Hackettstown, 11 percent and North Warren, 8 percent.

Adult Education programs offered: Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN), Construction Technology and Welding/Steel Manufacturing. The LPN program

continued to grow, and students have assisted the Health Department with its testing and vaccine clinics. Adult students pay for their courses directly.

WCTS Administration was proud of a number of positive changes, including an updated website (and recruiting video that can be viewed there); the expansion of adult education; and a curricula conversion to Atlas-Rubicon, which will be completed in the summer of 2022. They planned to continue creating positive change in a number of ways, including possibly adding new shop programs; building on the relationship with Warren Community College; moving to an online/digital application process; offering more Adult Education evening courses; and continuing to invest in facility upgrades, with safety and security taking priority above all.

“That’s basically who Warren Tech is as a school as a district,” said Mr. Forsythe as he concluded his overview, and asked if the Commissioners had any questions before turning to Ms. Barkman for the financial component. Mr. Sarnoski asked about virtual versus in-person learning so far this year. Mr. Forsythe said the school just went virtual the prior week and hoped to be back in person on January 18.

Ms. Barkman took over, beginning with anticipated revenues, a list of eight different line items, with county aid at the top of the list. She said county aid had been flat “for the past many years,” but the school did gain “a little bump” last year. Tuition was to remain the same as the prior year - \$600 per student regardless of special education or regular education - and \$20,000 per year per LPN student. Transportation to sending districts was increasing to \$1,250 per student (a \$250 increase from last year), following through with her plan to gradually shift this financial responsibility to the sending districts. In this proposed budget, WCTS was still going to pay about \$380,000 of the total transportation costs.

Mr. Sarnoski asked about charging more for tuition. Tuition per student was currently \$4,600. Ms. Barkman said WCTS gets a certified tuition rate from the state after it sets its budget. If WCTS overcharges for tuition, it has to refund the difference to the sending districts. This happened last year, resulting in a \$600,000 return to the districts. The rate set by the state lags for two years, so she anticipated the refund to the sending districts to be a significantly high number for the next two years.

Regarding transportation, Mr. Sarnoski asked if any prior appropriations could be recovered, considering virtual learning. Ms. Barkman said they did come to an agreement with the bus company last year for a reduction, resulting in about \$100,000 in savings for 2021. However, with the cost of fuel, she expected those costs to increase.

Moving on to anticipated appropriations, most of the increase was for salaries (instruction costs), going up just under 3.5 percent. Ms. Barkman said negotiations had just begun for a contract expiring in June, and she didn't think the union would accept a 3.21 percent increase. Traditionally a three-year contract term, the union was asking for a four or five year contract.

Recent and pending equipment purchases were reviewed, with primary areas of focus on welding, automotive, and theatre lighting dimmer rack replacement. The lighting replacement was unanticipated; water damage from a leak occurred, and very few companies perform this specialized work. This rolled into a Capital Projects discussion, with WCTS having submitted a two-year plan. This list included installing motorized gates behind the building for security, and risk and liability mitigation; upgrading an antiquated phone system; rooftop camera upgrades/additions for safety and security; a new keying system; sidewalk/driveway repairs/improvements; and exterior door replacements. Going forward, Mr. Sarnoski wanted to see a five-year capital plan. "No problem," said Ms. Barkman.

Ms. Barkman provided further details on budget highlights. In addition to continued facility upgrades, and improvements to software, textbooks, website, technology and to ball fields; several items on this list related to personnel matters. Informal negotiations were off to a good start. Mr. Forsythe was spearheading the effort, saying it was important for him to build trust and foster improved communication, which had been lacking in recent years. Mr. Sarnoski appreciated the initiative, saying all parties had to work together over the next few years to address these needs and rebuild trust.

Seeking to wrap things up with WCTS, Mr. Sarnoski turned the focus toward the school's capital improvement needs. The school was able to carry over nearly \$2 million to deposit in its capital reserve account due to combination of factors, particularly COVID (an infusion of federal funding; lower energy/supply costs resulting from virtual learning). Ms. Barkman said she would not be comfortable with any less than \$1 million for capital. Discussion ensued regarding capital vs. OE items, and Ms. Barkman's scrutinization of past spending practices.

As education liaison, Mr. Sarnoski offered to have a meeting with the WCTS budget team to finish going over items in detail, including confidential matters, since it was time to move on with today's agenda. WCTS School Board member Tim McDonough interjected that while he understood concerns with previous leadership, "I think you can see that that leadership has been changed," he said, "With Dr. Lori Austin and with Derrick and Amy, I think the team has really come together." He thanked the Commissioners for their help, questions and recommendations. Mr.

Sarnoski appreciated and agreed, noting the school had been through a number changes, plus had COVID to reckon with. “I’m fully on board with helping you make these transitions, to make sure that we have the best Tech School possible, but we’re going to do that with the taxpayers in mind as well,” Mr. Sarnoski said.

Ms. Ciesla said she appreciated the superintendent meeting with the teachers, saying she thought that relationship had to be very solid. Mr. Kern echoed Mr. McDonough’s comments, noting transformative change with this group over the past two years. He was pleased with the improved collaboration with the Commissioners and Community College.

Fred Cook of Blairstown asked about turnover at the school. Mr. Forsythe said there had been some in recent years, including career teachers who returned to their respective fields, as well as losing teachers to other districts for monetary reasons.

Carol Cook of Blairstown said it was a shock to hear of past difficulties with the school. She attributed this to a lack of county newspaper, and said a group was launching an online publication called the Ridgeview Echo in northern Warren, and hoped WCTS would share its news there.

Mr. Forsythe thanked the Commissioners for the opportunity to be here and for their support. This portion of the meeting concluded at 10:05 a.m.

Warren County Prosecutor James Pfeiffer was next, joining the meeting virtually along with office manager Wendy Riley. Mr. Francisco reminded the group of the Prosecutor’s proposal to add a new unit within his Cyber Crimes division, as well as a recent PBA union settlement, all of which could not be achieved without exceeding the two percent Constitutional Cap. After reviewing the budget, the CFO and County Administrator were able to get the increase down to three percent, which was allowable by resolution.

Mr. Lazorisak said Mr. Pfeiffer and Ms. Riley had done a great job on this budget. Within a successful negotiation process, the Prosecutor was also able to adjust some professional salaries – including Assistant Prosecutors (APs), which had been underpaid. “You have done a great job rearranging and reapportioning money in your budget,” he said to them. Mr. Francisco agreed, saying they worked to maximize their limited revenue.

Prosecutor Pfeiffer said the past year presented a number of challenges, but good things happened as well. He was extremely thankful to Mr. Lazorisak, Mr. Francisco and Ms. Riley for working to get to this point. A pedophile predator unit was needed

as a duty to protect our children, requiring an AP and Agent (both full-time), as well as an administrative person, dedicated to that unit. “Today, everything is driven by technology,” he said, and hoped to get the unit up and running as soon as possible. He said vigilantes were out there very successfully trapping predators, but they don’t do it legally, and then his office had trouble prosecuting cases. Being able to take care of it start-to-finish will help take these people off the streets and keep our kids safe, he said.

Mr. Sarnoski said he appreciated the Prosecutor’s responsible budgeting. “I fully support where we are right now,” he said, and that the new unit had merit. “Yes, we will see an increase, but it’s for a good purpose.”

Ms. Ciesla thanked the Prosecutor for the sound budget, and for adequately paying professionals to retain them. “And we really, really need this new unit,” she said, noting technology affected everyone.

Mr. Kern said while the Prosecutor’s Office was exceeding its cap, considering the work it has done, and will be able to do, to protect vulnerable children with the new unit, “I think that this is an absolute no-brainer to exceed the cap.”

Mr. Francisco went over the office’s vehicle requests. A new Ford transit van would be an addition to its fleet. Mr. Pfeiffer said this was a very important part of the technology being discussed, as this van was important to retrieve technological equipment and begin securing it, and would aid in investigating other technology crimes. Mr. Lazorisak said we have been budgeting for special vehicles over the last few years, so this will be covered, and we can replace the money next year. This portion of the meeting concluded at 10:18 a.m., followed by a break.

The meeting went back on the record at 10:30 a.m. with Warden Ken McCarthy. Before beginning a revenue discussion with respect to the Correctional Center, Mr. Francisco clarified that his numbers may not match up with the Warden’s numbers, because the Finance Department operates on a cash basis. For example, payment for a bill generated for Hunterdon County inmates housed in the jail for the month of January may not arrive until March, so there may be a one to two month lag before it shows up as revenue on the books. “Cash is King,” he said.

Mr. Sarnoski thanked Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Lazorisak for implementing the agreement with Hunterdon, as it was generating revenue for Warren County (which had decreased due to Bail Reform) while saving Hunterdon County money. Warden McCarthy said the agreement had a positive fiscal impact on an otherwise tough year. He went over some numbers, starting with the jail’s average daily population for 2021 (92 inmates per day). Of those, the number of Hunterdon County inmates ranged from

23-40 (average 30/day). Hunterdon was billed \$914,671 for the year 2021.

Counties are reimbursed per diem for state (DOC) inmates not picked up after 16 days. This daily rate was recently renegotiated, with the rate now \$143.97/day effective January 1, 2022 (up from \$62/day). Since COVID, state inmates have been staying for months, and there was a lag in payments received of six months or more. Between DOC and Hunterdon, Warren County earned close to \$2 million for housing other inmates in 2021. Mr. Lazorisak said we had to keep on top of this. John Donnadio got involved to achieve the rate increase, and it costs money to hold onto these state inmates.

Moving on to budget requests, Mr. McCarthy had two main requests, plus a personnel reclassification. The process of upgrading the jail's video system continued; he had been chipping away at the project since 2019. Last year they upgraded the control room, replacing three DVRs and eight cameras. This year he requested 31 more cameras, with audio recording capability, to be placed in areas where problems tend to occur. Mr. Francisco had earmarked \$60,000 in capital funding to cover this request.

The second request was to cover increased medical provider costs, entering the final year of a three-year contract. Discussion ensued about COVID vaccinations being voluntary for inmates, and that COVID wasn't a factor when entering into this contract. There was concern about rates going forward. Mr. McCarthy said CFG was excellent, but pretty much the only game in town.

Regarding personnel, the Warden went over a three-page memo providing background and justification for reclassifying a current Training Officer from Senior Corrections Police Officer to Corrections Police Sergeant. This should be a supervisory position, as it carries a lot of responsibility and authority. Mr. Lazorisak reminded the Commissioners that negotiations with FOP 171 Superior Officers were coming up at the end of this year. Current vacancies were reviewed and a pending Civil Service bill was mentioned. Mr. Sarnoski asked the County Administrator to study the issues and come back to the board with a recommendation.

Mr. Kern and Ms. Ciesla thanked the Warden for his adept management of the facility, particularly in light of COVID. This portion of the meeting concluded at 10:50 a.m.

With the meeting moving along at an efficient pace, it was decided to skip ahead to Public Works and Bridges. The Bridge Division was keeping OE flat but had a couple of capital requests – a dump truck with accessories requested last year and a landscape rake for a skid-steer. Mr. Lazorisak had no problem with these requests,

noting the Bridge crew reliably functioned as a back-up contractor to get site work done, having to rent equipment at times. “That will pay for itself in no time,” Mr. Francisco said. Mr. Sarnoski concurred that Public Works divisions didn’t ask for equipment they didn’t need, and took proper care of it.

The Roads Division requested an increase to its OE for the rising cost of materials. “Everything is going up,” Mr. Francisco said. Mr. Sarnoski asked if the gas tax was bringing in any more money, but it was the same as last year. Regarding capital, Roads sought a sweeper truck (deferred from last year) and two single axle dump trucks.

A brief discussion on road resurfacing commenced. It was difficult to catch up with the schedule, so the county was improving less than 12 miles of road per year. The permitting process was onerous and time consuming.

Planning had requested \$200,000 for more traffic impact studies. Mr. Sarnoski questioned the wisdom of funding more studies when certain improvements had already been identified by the DOT. He wanted to see some money going toward actual improvements. Mr. Lazorisak said it was a long process, and perhaps some of this money could be used for design. He suggested discussing it in more detail later as part a broader capital conversation.

Buildings & Grounds was increasing its OE slightly to cover rising utility costs, materials and service contracts. Under capital, B&G requested three new pickup trucks. This portion of the meeting concluded at 11:08 a.m.

Next was Public Safety. Mr. Francisco reminded the group that the Phillipsburg Rescue Squad had requested a funding increase. The county had been giving each emergency squad \$1,000 for more than a decade. Exceptions were Belvidere (\$2,000), Knowlton and Lopatcong (\$1,500 each), but Lopatcong no longer had a squad. Mr. Kern thought a one-time extra infusion of \$1,000 would be a good use of American Rescue funds. Mr. Sarnoski noted volunteerism was down, and asked Mr. Kern to work on a reallocation plan and come back with recommendations, possibly asking the municipalities to come up with matching funds.

Public Safety had four different budget areas: Communications Center, Public Safety Administration, Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and Fire Academy. Department Director Frank Wheatley said while COVID had garnered most of the attention, OEM had a number of other achievements, including the following: steering more than \$5 million in Homeland Security funding through the county since 2005; closing out a home acquisition and demolition grant for 9 flood-prone properties from

2015-2021; continuing a generator project in response to Super storm Sandy; submitting a grant for Winter Storm Orlena (submitted \$145,000 and received \$108,000); and they were waiting to hear about a grant for the recent Tropical Storm Ida (submitted for more than \$1.5 million).

The Fire Academy stood out as a bit of an anomaly, but Dennis Riley took on the task of redefining its structure and sorting out its budget when he came on board, resulting in reclassification of a number of items. The group proceeded to go over details. Yearly maintenance costs were mandatory and related to testing, and could fluctuate from year to year depending on requirements. The equipment line was vague, prompting Mr. Lazorisak to request an itemized list. Mr. Riley would later explain that one full set of turnout gear costs \$4,500, insufficient equipment could lead to OSHA issues, and some equipment was out of date (including old radios). He was looking into working with area fire companies to barter equipment. “We are doing things to save you money; however, there are things under NFPA I can’t control,” Mr. Riley said, and was preparing a five-year lookout for future needs.

A personnel discussion ensued. There had been one resignation and one retirement, and all instructors were getting a one dollar per hour raise. There were 16 certified instructors, and two were out on medical. The instructors were only paid for hours worked. The Coordinator is the sole salaried position at the Fire Academy. Mr. Riley said this was a very important program, and they had to cancel classes in the past because they didn’t have enough instructors. They were working on conducting a class to train more people to become instructors.

Mr. Sarnoski thanked Mr. Riley, saying he did a good job for his first budget, but still looked forward to some more details in the future. Mr. Kern said this was a unique service offered by Warren County, and it was crucial so that our fire departments wouldn’t have to leave the county for training. This concluded discussion of the Fire Academy.

While personnel requests were normally addressed separately at the end of the budget process, Mr. Lazorisak asked Mr. Wheatley to expand on the new position he was seeking. He said the full-time technology person was overwhelmed, noting the Communications Center was a 24/7 facility, 365 days a year and demanding. He was seeking another individual to help with the tech side of the house.

A capital discussion commenced, including a review of unspent funds remaining on the books from prior years. It was decided to reduce this line item from \$500,000 to \$425,000 for technology upgrades slated for the coming year.

Mr. Wheatley said 15 years ago, when Dave Gallant was Public Safety Director, the department began looking into a redundant/alternate communications center. He was proud to report that by mid-February of this year, a second communications center would be up and running at the armory in Phillipsburg. He said in the event of a major emergency or outage, we will have another place to go.

Ms. Ciesla asked about the 911 fees that should be going to the counties. Mr. Lazorisak said the only way we would see any of that money was if the federal government forced the state to turn it over, or if the counties all got together and filed suit. The portion of the meeting concluded at 11:50 a.m. followed by a brief break.

The group returned to open session at 12:02 p.m. and began reviewing the Capital Improvement Program. Highlights included the following:

Equipment & Furnishings:

- Board of Elections: budgeting \$200,000 per year for 10 years for future voting machine replacements, and money for election redistricting and mapping
- County Clerk: saving toward vault relocation
- Corrections: funding for the 31 new cameras Mr. McCarthy mentioned earlier
- Information Systems: network switch replacement, phone system upgrade, annual technology upgrades
- Planning: GIS software and equipment
- Public Safety: technology upgrades discussed earlier, with his \$500,000 request reduced to \$425,000

Buildings & Grounds Improvements:

- Public Works: Roof, doors, windows; asbestos abatement and bathroom improvements at the Courthouse; Dumont Building exterior repairs; sewer plant reserves for the 911 Center; sidewalks near Courthouse, which will be paid out of the Open Space grant
- Buildings & Grounds: replace fire hydrant at the Fire Academy
- Information Systems: security surveillance systems at county facilities; continued tech upgrades in the Commissioners meeting room

Public Works Director Emily Hammer provided a detailed presentation on facilities upgrades/additions and long-term plans, including the creation of a Human Services “campus” - design and construction of a new 9,000 square-foot, single-story building to house TASS and Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE). The county owns five pad sites, and this will be on one of them. The building will have one separate, secure entrance for TASS clients, one entrance for TASS employees, and another

entrance for RCE. Mr. Sarnoski asked if there would be enough room for RCE to conduct public programs. Mr. Lazorisak said this would be primarily office space, but they could continue to utilize the meeting room in the lower level of the Administration Building, and RCE had been scaling back in-person programs regardless.

Plans included renovating the existing Human Services facility to accommodate the Division of Aging & Disabilities Services. Space being freed up in the Administration building would be analyzed, but it was expected to bring in Land Preservation to join Planning, Engineering and the Public Works Director on the lower level, allow Public Information to expand on the upper level, and bring Information Systems back together under one roof.

In discussing moving departments around, which probably wouldn't happen for at least two years, Mr. Sarnoski asked about the feasibility of moving Special Services School District to the PCFA facility, which would then allow the Health Department to expand a bit. "It's a good thought," Mr. Lazorisak said.

Along with minor renovations to support reconfigurations, Ms. Hammer provided details regarding additional repairs required to the exterior building envelope of Administration Building, including roof repair/replacement, flashing and drainage repair, steel beams and lintels, repointing, access ramp, bridge and entry cap repairs and lighting improvements. Mr. Sarnoski asked about potentially expanding the Commissioners meeting room to accommodate more of the public when there is a big turnout. Such a project would be significantly larger and more complex to be addressed in this round of improvements. Mr. Sarnoski hoped there could at least be enhancements to the front vestibule area, to accommodate overflow crowds watching and listening to meetings on the screen and through the public address system.

In addition to asbestos abatement, Courthouse improvements included corridor-ceiling replacements, lighting improvements and updated restrooms. Work would occur on weekends and take about 20 weeks; the intention was to go out to bid in March.

While it had been hoped to obtain state library grant funding to put toward renovations to the Catherine Dickson Hofman (CDH) branch, money had been awarded mostly to urban areas. A 5,800 square foot addition envisioned expanded space in most areas, improving the entry, children's area, conference rooms, and staff areas; as well as additional electric service, new air handler, plumbing, and enhanced data/Wi-Fi. The current heating source was electric; Mr. Lazorisak envisioned pursuing solar energy. This year the goal was to nail down detailed design drawings, which would probably exceed 100 drawings. "This is a lot of work," Mr. Lazorisak

said. The Commissioners were going to have to consider whether to open an alternate, satellite site offering library services in the northern area while construction was underway.

Another goal was to initiate an electric vehicle program, starting with assessment of infrastructure and cost estimating to construct Level 2 charging stations, and eventually vehicles, with the overarching goal of electrifying 25 percent of the county fleet by 2025. The availability of electric vehicles through the state contract was unknown. There would be three phases of grant opportunities, and would entail about a year of planning. Ms. Ciesla was supportive, and requested grant information be shared with municipalities.

In Belvidere, additional sidewalks were to be installed around the Courthouse, as well as increased decorative lighting and a gazebo in Garret D. Wall Park.

Mr. Sarnoski said it was hard to believe that Ms. Hammer had only been Public Works Director for a few months. He trusted her and looked forward to seeing these plans come to fruition.

Carol Cook was concerned about where local meetings would be held while the CDH Library was under construction. She was happy to hear about the pursuit of electric vehicles.

Mr. Hammer's presentation concluded at 12:52 p.m. and the group turned its attention to capital projects requested by the County Engineers Office. Regarding annual road resurfacing, Mr. Francisco said while the grant covers more than \$4 million of this cost, the county's share kept increasing due to rising costs and contractor fees. Mr. Sarnoski said the gas tax was problematic, and not going toward what it should. "We're not adding miles to the roads," he said.

Going over the requests line-by-line, a few inspired further explanation, such as CR 659 (Spring Valley Road). This partial component of a larger plan was to elevate the roadway where there was currently one-way and allow for two-way traffic again. Phase 2 would continue to pursue addressing overall drainage issues in that area. The extended part entailed DEP recommendations and approvals. Assistant County Engineer Linda Read arrived at 12:58 in the midst of this conversation, and confirmed that the elevation/two-lane improvement was expected to be completed in the coming year.

Regarding County Planner Dave Dech's \$200,000 request to further study CR 519 traffic impacts, Mr. Sarnoski asked how much of this was for construction. The

answer was none. Mr. Lazorisak said he thought more than \$200,000 would be required to conduct all the studies. Mr. Sarnoski wanted reference to 519/521 removed from the line item, as this entailed a larger area (Route 519 from Rt. 22 to Rt. 80). “There are multiple intersections we’re looking at right now,” he said, and wanted to consider putting more in this line item. It was frustrating that taxpayers had to pay for this as opposed to developers, but unless a proposed development was directly on a County Road, that’s the way it was. Mr. Kern thought studies were good, and could be helpful to municipalities. He wondered if the Highlands Council could help fund some this.

Mr. Francisco asked about the Technical School’s request for a flashing road sign. Being on a state road (Route 57), “You’re getting into more than just a sign, Mr. Sarnoski said. He said he would talk with the school in more detail on that.

Back to Engineering matters, Mr. Sarnoski asked if there was a goal to contract out more of these services. Mr. Lazorisak said there probably wouldn’t be any major changes this year. Ms. Hammer and County Engineer Bill Gleba had to get together on this, and COVID continued to affect how slowly projects move through the DEP and DOT processes. Mr. Francisco said there was money budgeted for consulting work in the Engineer’s OE.

It was decided to keep about half of the \$7 million currently budgeted for CDH Library branch improvements in the bank for now, since there would be no shovels hitting the ground in 2022. The money was there for this purpose, it simply would not all be allocated this year.

Mr. Lazorisak reminded board of its next two upcoming meetings, hoping to wrap up all remaining matters during the following week’s budget session. He thanked the Commissioners for going along with conducting fewer, but longer, budget meetings this year. “We’re moving good,” he said.

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 1:17 p.m.