



Onondaga County Legislature

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PLANNING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE – DECEMBER 15, 2021 **KEVIN HOLMQUIST, CHAIRMAN**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Ms. Abbott, Dr. Kelly, Mr. Kinne

MEMBERS ABSENT: Mr. Williams

ALSO PRESENT: Ms. Kuhn; also see attached

Chairman Holmquist called the meeting to order at 9:15 a.m. *A motion was made by Ms. Abbott, seconded by Dr. Kelly to waive the reading and approve the minutes of the previous committee. Passed unanimously; MOTION CARRIED.*

1. PARKS AND RECREATION:

a. Amending the 2022 County Budget to Make Funds Available for Construction of an aquarium (\$30,434,751)

“Aquariums have a strong track record of being catalysts for economic and community development”
ConsultEcon 2021 Onondaga County Feasibility Study

- Generate substantial new economic activity (\$51.9 million annually)
(Economic Impact of Construction Period \$63.2M)
- Expand employment opportunities with hundreds of new jobs (423)
(Direct and Indirect Construction Jobs = 274)
- Grow tourism economy
- Catalyze Inner Harbor revitalization and private real estate investment (project over \$200M of private investment)
- Create new fiscal revenues
- Enhance Onondaga County brand
- Provide new educational opportunities
- Enhance quality of life

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Mr. Bottar:

- Aquarium is a big bold new idea for the community, a credit of the community to consider a project like this
- With County Legislative support, the Regional Planning Board is convinced county is planning to move forward with this project immediately; have the resources and expertise to make it reality over the next year or two
- Based on feasibility study, this project would be a major asset for the community, test comes when bringing in the experts, economic feasibility experts, ConsultEcon, premier marketing firm in country
- They give the numbers their analysis comes up with; firm worked on premium aquariums in the country; want the most positive numbers in terms of attendance projections
- No certainty that they will provide that information; information given was clearly addressed in the feasibility study of running an aquarium; report was very positive; only 60-70 major aquariums in North America
- Have a chance to have one in Onondaga County; looking at visuals, looking online at presentation, or visit an aquarium, no question that a properly designed aquarium can be a premier destination in Syracuse
- What would the aquarium do? First and foremost it would be an attraction and resource for Onondaga County

- Many residents do not have an opportunity to travel to other cities to see this, in Onondaga County they do have an opportunity to come and visit
- The pricing in the consultant study clearly matched an SU basketball game, show at landmark, or SU football game; all in the \$20 plus dollar range today
- Aquarium ticket pricing is in line with other major aquariums in the country
- These are major attractions to residents in the community, it appeals to many visitors, people that come to Syracuse
- For those that cannot afford the ticket price, they will have opportunity to visit our aquarium
- 490,000 people, which is what consultant indicated would be a reasonable attendance level for this aquarium; based on demographics, location in Inner Harbor, consultant projected 490,000 people, half will be tourists
- People that live outside of a 60 minute radius of Syracuse is new money coming into the community
- Consultants talk about economic impact of \$50 million a year, every year for community; half represents tourists to Onondaga County; county makes investment of \$85 million
- Every year that generates \$25 million dollars of economic impact; good return on the County's investment
- SU, State Fair, Destiny, Regional Market, Turning Stone, Baseball Stadium, historical attractions throughout CNY, Bass fishing in Oneida Lake - they have time on their hands to come look at an aquarium
- 60 million people within 5 mile radius to Syracuse
- Aquariums give opportunity for a new product; Mr. Liedka says the aquarium would help him to bring conventions to Syracuse; have to update products periodically
- Lot of development in Syracuse, in recent years things have slowed down; if done right, county will attract developers to the Syracuse, Inner Harbor area;
- Estimate is a million square feet in Inner Harbor, \$200 million dollars' worth of investments, apartment complexes, a hotel, office buildings and retail space, heard that over the past three months
- Risks to this project in terms of attendance and cost, but believe the county is taking a measured approach to this project; consultant is saying that the risks are manageable

Dr. Kelly:

- Talked about potential revenue sharing agreement for capital improvements
- What is potential scale of future capital improvements, and will the county be able to generate the revenue to support this project in the future?

Ms. Primo:

- First 10 years there is not going to be a need for major capital improvements; i.e. in Tennessee they were so successful, in 12 years they did an expansion and doubled the size of their facility
- Hope that in 12 years the county can double this facility; if something does happen in the first 10 years, what would the county use for capital improvement?
- Experts say the county will be in the black for the first two years, but after that it will level off; expect good portion of that put into the county's capital reserve account for the aquarium
- The county will be selling naming rights to the aquarium; looking at 501C3 running it; profit motive is not there, just have to operate it
- County is building this building; discussed with County Executive, naming rights, unless 501C3 brings to county, the fee will go to county in capital reserve account

Mr. Kinne:

- Love idea of the aquarium, but there are many unknowns; have not spelled out why
- i.e. Convention Center has been supported forever, then they go down, which drags on the community

Mr. Bottar replied that some aquariums moved into a steady state with a slow decline, but successful aquariums (Boston, Baltimore, Tennessee, Texas, Tampa Bay) started out slowly, changed exhibits, and are now successful. Mr. Kinne said he will accept that, but Mr. Bottar cannot compare those cities to CNY. Mr. Kinne said he cannot afford to go to the dome and pay \$90 for a basketball game, and he wants to do what is best for taxpayers. Mr. Kinne stated that the county does not own the site, so how much is that going to cost. The estimation for attendance is 490,000, divide that by 365 days is almost 1,300 people a day. In November, December, and January, he does not see how that is realistic. Mr. Bottar replied that it would be a place to go in the winter time other than going to the mall. Mr. Kinne asked if Mr. Bottar has an answer to the environmental questions. If it

is a salt water aquarium, what happens to the salt water? Ms. Primo replied that an environmental study will be done once it is approved. Ms. Primo stated that Mr. Fox informed them that around 350,000-375,000 is the attendance at the zoo with very few visitors in the winter. Mr. Liedka said he will be able to sell the county in the winter with the aquarium.

Ms Kuhn asked why now is the time for this. Mr. Bottar replied:

- Understandable right now with COVID to pull back, if follow the literature and what progressive businesses do, the county is very fortunate; Why not now?
- Businesses in the community are ones that move forward when it is challenging; no other major aquariums being talked about in upstate NY or in the northeast; have the market place
- Concern about the impact of COVID on shopping and sales tax revenue
- Is the county going to sit? Or is the county going to take a chance to give a new reason to come to Syracuse?

Ms. Primo commented:

- Through all 20 years of feasibility studies, all point to Inner Harbor for ideal location for the aquarium
- When consultants came to visit, brought them over to Roth Steel; thought that was ideal location on water, which it was not; ideal location is Inner Harbor; did not think the county had opportunity to have property on that water way
- Price is being negotiated; certain that it is in the county's budget and covered by the \$85 million dollars

Mr. Fox commented:

- "Why now?" - inundated at zoo with students; more families want a place to go that is credible, especially children to help the environment; just did 2 papers for students on dredging Onondaga Lake on "what happened and why"
- Zoo invites people in, tell them stories, that is what they want

Ms. Kuhn asked, given the seemingly positive business model, is there any consideration on making it a public-private partnership. The concern is that the county already owns the Convention Center, Amphitheater, and Baseball Stadium. Ms. Primo replied:

- Yes, that is exactly what they are considering; other county owned facilities collaborate with someone else to operate; all instances have been very successful; will be public-private partnership
- County will be responsible for capital improvements and certain everyday maintenance
- Many aquariums run by 501(c)(3)s; there will be a board, and the legislature and County Executive will have representatives on the board
- County will not be the employer; the 501(c)(3) would take care of animals, etc.
- County responsible for maintenance to ensure building is in top shape; would be responsible for capital improvements
- Big questions: When in the black, how is that split? When in the red, who is responsible?
- Sponsorships sold, major gifts, naming rights - How would those be apportioned between public and private partners?

Ms. Kuhn stated that Ms. Primo mentioned personnel and saw that there were 107 FTE's at \$6.2 million. Will the county be paying for them? Ms. Primo replied no, they would be on the 501(c)(3) payroll. Ms. Kuhn asked what the \$30 million dollars is for. Ms. Primo answered that it would be for engineering design, purchase of the property, and those kinds of things. Ms. Primo clarified for Ms. Kuhn that they asked for \$85 million dollars total and split it up.

Mr. Wixson explained that they are looking at a target construction cost of \$1,100 per square foot based on an 80,000 square foot aquarium. Those costs include soft costs, which will not equal a total of \$30 million dollars. Within soft costs are the contingencies and the beginning costs. Mr. Wixson said they need to get started designing it, buying the land, and preparing for the development of the facility.

Ms. Kuhn asked if they are looking for subsidies for the aquarium, and Ms. Primo replied, no. She stated that Mr. Fox has some ideas about offering lower costs, discounts, and other opportunities for people paying for a ticket. Mr. Bottar stated that Ms. Harris pulled together some local pricing: amphitheater lawn seating is \$19.50, SU football is \$25 - \$130 dollars a seat, SU Basketball is \$22 - \$500+, Syracuse Crunch is \$20 - \$27, and Greek

Peek for a family of four is \$86/day (\$73 junior). There are people in the community that can afford ticket prices proposed for the aquarium. Mr. Fox mentioned that Ms. Primo has come up with other ways to save money including exploring a free pass for four that all the libraries would have. There are partnerships through the library system, there is the Zoo to You program, grants from CNY Works, and countless programs to make it accessible for everyone within the community; not only for the Zoo, but for the aquarium.

Ms. Kuhn:

- It is not just the cost; the county is cash rich with communities suffering post-pandemic
- Restaurants and hotels have concerns related to what is happening now; opportunity to address some of those things with an influx of cash; many needs in the community; i.e. kids in lead filled homes

Ms. Primo:

- Ms. Kuhn mentioned representing hotels and restaurants - real people work in those industries; service industry pays some of the lowest wages; people who are going from paycheck to paycheck, that industry was hurt the most
- Best way to help is to generate more business for them; i.e. an aquarium; generate more tourism
- Almost \$900 million dollar industry in this county; people who work in that industry are the ones who go from paycheck to paycheck; want to consider helping people and that is only one group

Ms. Abbott:

- Would love to see more mental health care; know the community is suffering
- Looked at money and sustainability of cash flow; can spend it and call it a day; risks to any investments
- Are there controls on the risk? She thinks there are controls on the risk
- Hope can get money that can improve other aspects for local citizens; focused on the education component for the kids that will not have the opportunity
- Would like education on the waterways, environment, and stewardship of the planet; would be great for kids who live here to be a big part of this; that is exciting

Dr. Kelly echoed comments by Ms. Primo, Ms. Abbott and Ms. Kuhn. He said at an Environmental Protection Committee meeting, he was told that a capital project was projected to cost \$50 million, but was going to end up costing \$22 million dollars. He said everyone is aware of the cost of goods and services going up, so if they are not able to generate the revenue, then the county will have to make difficult choices. Dr. Kelly would rather be proactive to help those that need the support.

Mr. Bush asked if they know of any other place in the country that is currently looking to build an aquarium. Mr. Fox replied yes, there are several. The one they are following is The Bevard Zoo in Melbourne, Florida; \$100 million dollar aquarium. Mr. Bush asked when the last aquarium was constructed. Mr. Fox said that he knows of three in design right now, and they are all in various stages (and accredited). Mr. Bush said he assumes the metropolitan areas are larger than Onondaga County. He is trying to get a comparison of what others are investing. Mr. Bush will support Legislator Kinne's concept of how this is funded, because he has never seen a capital project this size funded this way. It short changes current expenses the county will have. Ms. Primo asked for clarification on Mr. Bush's last statement. Mr. Bush explained that typically the government funds major capital projects, because they do not feel this generation is going to spend \$85 million. The government bonds, so it extends out and every generation has responsibility to pay for it. Ms. Primo said she does not agree. The government bonds, because they do not have funds to pay for the projects. Bonding for this would add \$20 - \$25 million more to the project. The county has the money because of a unique situation, and Ms. Primo said they will use the money instead of earning 1% or less in the bank. This is an opportunity to make a huge investment.

Mr. Kinne:

- Astounded Ms. Primo said that; been here 30 years, the constant is "don't spend the fund balance"
- This Democratic caucus asked for \$2 million dollars last year to help the Health Department and Social Services Department; that was denied; the caucus was called liberal spenders
- Now told the county will have \$65 - \$85 million dollars extra, because the budget was so off; Ms. Primo is saying the county should spend money on this aquarium

- Some could argue no, give it back to the taxpayers; some could argue that the county could do something to help people in this county; i.e: what about an 87 year old with no family that has to go into a nursing home
- Do not have quality nursing homes in this community; every one of them stinks
- What does the county do about the couple that is 85 with an animal they have to leave?
- What does the county do about the lead problems in the community?
- What does the county do about the ongoing mental health problems?
- County should be doing more; cannot name one project in 30 years that the county has not bonded for
- Might be doing much better; can rebond and sell off
- Like the project, but paying for it the wrong way; this is not the right way to do it; not enough information
- Why does it have to be a non-profit?

Mr. Bottar:

- If the county were to bond and achieve a 1% interest rate financing for 30 years, that would add \$3 mil/year to the operating cost of the aquarium to pay off the bond; aquarium would no longer be operating in the black
- Aquarium generates over \$1 million a year in net revenue, so the ability to service debt is very limited
- Other capital improvements the county makes becomes part of operating cost of county
- Build first class facility for \$85 mil; cannot burden facility with paying back bond; adds \$3 mil/yr to operating costs
- Other demands in community are significant; aquarium has 490,000 visitors - generates \$25 mil of economic activity into community every year; gives county resources
- What else could county invest \$85 mil in that will generate \$25 mil in new economic activity every year?
- This gives community more resources to address the full range of means everyone is concerned about

Chairman Holmquist stated that the committee will be voting on this today. He is excited about this project and the County Executive is asking the Legislature to think big. Chairman Holmquist thinks this is what the county needs.

A motion was made by Ms. Abbott, seconded by Dr. Kelly, to approve this item. Ayes: 3 Noes: 1 (Kinne); MOTION CARRIED

2. INFORMATIONAL: Broadband; Brian Donnelly, Deputy County Executive; Kevin Sexton, CIO

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT (ARPA) - ONONDAGA COUNTY INITIATIVES

INITIATIVE: BROADBAND

BUDGET: \$15 MILLION

WORKPLAN:

Broadband is no longer considered to be luxury but more of necessity and greatly supports individual daily business or education. The pandemic forced many in our community to work remotely or to attend school classes remotely. Many workers and students were mandated to conduct business and education from home and too many found their internet coverage either lacking or nonexistent - specifically in our less densely populated communities in the County. The purpose of this initiative is to ensure that broadband infrastructure is available in every part of Onondaga County

Historically, Onondaga County has been focused on digital divide issues in our unserved / underserved areas for a number of years and, have been searching for solutions to address this challenge. We have met previously with a number of ISPs asking them to bring broadband to unserved areas. Lack of density and small potential customer base were the reasons given as to why the ISPs were not interested in undertaking costly infrastructure expansions.

There have been previous public programs offered to address lack of broadband availability but they have fallen short of the desired goal. The NYS Broadband Program was an attempt to bring broadband to our unserved areas. Unfortunately, three phases of the NYS program addressed very little for our unserved residents and businesses within Onondaga County with true broadband solutions.

We have partnered with the Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board in an initiative to address the digital divide in our region. The CNY_RPDB engaged ECC Technologies, a NYS firm with extensive broadband industry expertise, to provide a variety of services including:

- Conduct a physical inventory of existing broadband infrastructure in Onondaga County and identify areas that are currently unserved / underserved and provide a budget estimate to address that component.
- Create a survey questionnaire to ascertain the needs of residents in Onondaga County regarding broadband and to better understand their satisfaction with current service offerings
- Assist in the creation of an RFP for broadband infrastructure

The physical inventory is complete and has identified approximately 193 miles of roads in Onondaga County which are currently unserved. With a scope identified, the County Executive has proposed to utilize up to \$15 million of American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funding to help underwrite the cost to build out additional broadband infrastructure in the County.

Onondaga County will issue a Request for Proposal (RFP) soliciting responses from qualified companies to develop and implement Broadband infrastructure and bring broadband internet services to the our unserved and underserved residents and businesses within the county. The awarded provider(s) of the proposed network(s) will be responsible for the design, engineering, construction and maintenance and ownership of the network including fiber and associated equipment to support internet services. As specified in the ARPA requirements, the awarded provider(s) will offer/deliver internet service options

Mr. Donnelly:

- There are a number of areas in Onondaga County, primarily in the rural parts of the county, that do not have current access to broadband high speed internet
- High Speed is not a luxury item; it is an essential item; something people need to conduct business in their homes
- Business to business, students in their home - they need access to the internet
- County Executive is passion about this and wants this project to be under way
- Partnering with CNY Regional Planning & Development Board (Mr. Bottar); project ongoing to work with consultant to map areas of county that did not have existing broadband; did survey throughout count; needs and wants of citizens
- Working with Company called ETC; assisting with an RFP
- 193 miles of road underserved; maps put together and distributed to town supervisors and members of legislature to make sure those that do not have service are identified; opportunity to add to areas that may have been missed
- Put together RFP; concept to provide an internet service provider; asked to respond to install fiber optic cable, or other options, to areas that do not have it
- Onondaga County will use the ARPA funding to pay for the project

Ms. Abbott stated that as a representative of rural communities, she is excited about this. Ms. Abbott has many shareholders who are excited and asking when. She said that she cannot download the maps and asked if there is a way to get hard copies. Mr. Donnelly replied yes.

Mr. Kinne:

- Will support this because anything is better than nothing; worried the county is not bringing this community into the 22nd century; want to help the community grow, have to be proactive in what they are doing
- This is not it; glad they are doing this, as it is a step in right direction; just worry it is not good enough

Ms. Abbott:

- As a member of CNY Regional Planning & Development Board, they have put tons of time into this study
- It is legislator's jobs to ask questions if they think it is not done right and show up at the meetings

- There have been extensive surveys; Mr. Bottar has done a superb job; have opportunities; cannot sit and wait for people to be spoon feed; there has been a ton of time and effort put into this

Mr. Knapp:

- They have gotten over 3,000 surveys in; everybody in the county has responded
- If there are problems with service, please let him know; if Legislator Ryan has concerns, let him know
- This is the best that has ever been done, as the federal and state programs have been disastrous
- Money has never gotten to be where it is supposed to be; doing this the right way
- Appreciate sending maps to town supervisors and County Legislators, telling them to look closely
- If there is a way to do it better, please tell him; so far they have been doing everything they can

Mr. Kinne stated that for the record that he filled out a survey.

A motion was made by Dr. Kelly, seconded by Ms. Abbot, to adjourn the meeting. Passed unanimously; MOTION CARRIED.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:30 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



DEBBIE KAMINSKI, Assistant Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: PLANNING & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
DATE: DECEMBER 15, 2021

NAME (Please Print)	DEPARTMENT/AGENCY
Ted Fox	Parks - Zoo
J. Bottar	CMY RPD
M. Knapp	CE
Dean Kurashewski	SocLA
Teneshia Murphy	CE office
Brian Kelly	PA/CJ
Yvette Velasco	Law,
Kevin Sexton	OC IT
Brian Donnelly	
Isabelle Iarnis	CE Office
Archie Nixon	Facilities