

**Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature  
Minutes of the October 14, 2016 Meeting**

**Present:** Richard Koubek, Chair; Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair; Lisa Pinkard for Legislator Monica Martinez; DSS Commissioner John O’Neill; Michael Stoltz; Ayesha Alleyne; Michele O’Connell; Richard Krebs; Barbara Egloff; Ellen Krakow; Luis Valenzuela; Kim Gierasch; Michael Haynes

**Excused:** Nina Leonhard; Don Friedman; Sr. Lisa Bergeron; Charles Fox; Peggy Boyd; Valerie Smith; Steve Chassman

**Guests:** Aaron Watkins Lopez, LI Bus Riders’ Union/LI Jobs with Justice; Christian Limbash, AME

1. **Minutes:** The minutes of the September meeting were approved unanimously on a motion by Commissioner John O’Neill, seconded by Kathy Liguori
2. **Child Care Commission:** Kathy Liguori reported that the new Child Care Commission meets monthly. It is planning an spring 2017 summit to be held at Suffolk County Community College that will assemble parents, providers, government officials and child-care/early-learning experts to examine child care and early learning programs with regard to their: (1) quality; (2) accessibility; (3) affordability.
3. **The 2017 Suffolk Recommended Budget:**
  - a. Chair Richard Koubek stated that the Commission relies on the Budget Review Office (BRO) analysis of the recommended Budget, which will be released shortly. He observed that in 2017 the October Commission meeting should be moved back one week later in October so that the BRO report is available. He stated that when the BRO report is released he will contact the Commission for a conference call and possible electronic vote on a letter to the Legislature.
  - b. DSS Commissioner John O’Neill reported that the 2017 Suffolk County Recommended Budget contains a \$1.5 million reduction in DSS funding that is problematic. He noted that, while staffing has been flat, wages and benefits have increased. He pointed out that under current staffing, DSS will be able to meet State mandates such as processing times for Medicaid and Food Stamp applications. However, the \$1.5 million reduction will hamper Department efforts to introduce new management efficiencies such as CPS reports using iPads. Mr. Koubek stated that this is unfortunate since he recalls County Executive Bellone stating at a meeting just a few months into his first term that systemic management efficiencies were a very high priority for his Administration. Mr. Koubek asked about DSS vacancies which, in previous Commission reports to the Legislature were about 11 percent. Commissioner O’Neill stated that vacancies are now around 17 percent. He also stated that due to the \$1.5 million reduction in funding, there might be cuts in the eligibility level for subsidized child care.
  - c. Richard Krebs stated that the WIOA program has suffered a major reduction in federal funding.
  - d. Kim Gierasch stated that the Recommended Budget eliminates the DOH Public Health Nurses program which provides services to low-income individuals and communities.

- e. Note: The BRO report was released late in the afternoon on Friday, October 14<sup>th</sup>. An Ad Hoc Budget Committee (Richard Koubek, Kathy Liguori, Lisa Pinkard, Kim Gierasch; Luis Valenzuela, Ellen Krakow, Don Friedman) participated in a conference call on October 20<sup>th</sup>. The Ad Hoc Committee approved a draft letter to the Legislature calling attention to these problematic items in the budget:
    - i. the \$1.5 million cut in DSS funding which the BRO reported will require the eligibility for subsidized child care to be reduced from 125 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) to 110 percent of FPL;
    - ii. the elimination of Public Health Nurses;
    - iii. the cut of eight Suffolk bus lines;
    - iv. the imposition of a 1 percent administrative fee on contract agencies.
  - f. The Ad Hoc Committee also approved two revenue options mentioned in the BRO report:
    - i. increasing taxes to the State cap;
    - ii. piercing the State cap by .5 percent.
  - g. The letter (appended below), was adopted on a motion by Richard Koubek, seconded by Kathy Liguori, by electronic vote on Friday, October 21<sup>st</sup>: Yes -13; No -0; Abstentions – 4 (Nina Leonhardt; Ellen Krakow; Kim Gierasch; Richard Krebs)
4. **Supportive Housing Work Group:** Mr. Koubek and Work Group Co-Chair Michael Stoltz announced that the Work Group will meet on October 20<sup>th</sup> to discuss SPOA housing for people with behavioral health challenges. This program was discussed by the Commission which raised the following questions that should be discussed at the meeting:
- a. What organizational changes have been undertaken this year in the SPOA program?
  - b. What are the screening steps in the SPOA process?
  - c. What criteria are used to determine eligibility for SPOA housing?
  - d. Are there sufficient beds for families and singles seeking SOA housing?
  - e. How many people are screened and how many are on SPOA waiting lists?
5. **Suffolk County Bus Line Cuts:** Mr. Koubek introduced Aaron Watkins Lopez who is the lead organizer for the Long Island Bus Riders' Union (LIBRU), an affiliate of LI Jobs with Justice. Mr. Koubek noted that he and Mr. Watkins Lopez are colleagues at LI Jobs with Justice and appeared together earlier this year on the WLIW "Long Island Business Reports" program about public bus transportation. Mr. Koubek stated that Mr. Watkins Lopez completed his third annual "Rate the Ride event, travelling by public bus from Jamaica to Orient Point over two days in September. At the SUNY Stony Brook bus stop, he hosted a press conference opposing the elimination of eight Suffolk bus lines at which Mr. Koubek spoke for the Commission along with Legislators Kate Browning and Sarah Anker, as well as bus riders and other advocates. Mr. Watkins Lopez made these points about the Suffolk bus system:
- a. The State funding formula for transportation is flawed because it reimburses counties based on 69 cents per mile travelled and 41 cents per passenger. Suffolk's bus system covers many more miles due to the size of the County. However, since Nassau has 100,000 riders per week compared with 20,000 per week in Suffolk, Suffolk receives \$66 million in State funding compared with only \$35 million for Suffolk County. Yet, Nassau contributes only \$6 million in local funds for its buses while Suffolk contributes \$30 million in local funds.

- b. County Executive Steve Bellone has been asking for an additional \$10 million in State transportation funding for the past several years, backed by advocates such as the LIBRU, Vision Long Island and the Tri State Transportation Campaign. The Commission has also backed these efforts. In 2015, the County Executive announced that he was cutting \$10 million in Suffolk County funds for the buses and pressured the State to increase the County's transportation funding by \$10 million. The State added only \$1.4 million in State aid, thus forcing the County to eliminate the eight bus lines.
  - c. Mr. Watkin Lopez stated that, as a bus rider himself who does not drive a car, he is constantly frustrated by the lack of interest in the County's public bus system. The public buses in both counties serve vulnerable groups such as senior citizens, disabled people, working-poor people and students who cannot afford automobiles to commute to their schools. He pointed out that buses in both counties lack basic amenities such as audio announcements of bus stops and bus shelters. Suffolk buses often do not have illuminated signs with the bus route.
  - d. Mr. Watkins Lopez stated that he was impressed with the large number of riders (perhaps over 100) who denounced the eight bus line cuts at the September public hearings conducted by the Suffolk County Department of Public Works. He thanked the Commission for its support.
  - e. Going forward, Mr. Watkin Lopez is calling on the County to create a Bus Riders' Oversight Committee similar to one in Nassau County that would have riders, advocates and transportation experts assigned to assess public bus service. He also said that advocacy efforts to secure additional funding for Suffolk buses would be continued into 2017.
6. The next two meeting dates have been changed due to conflicts. The November meeting is moved from the 11<sup>th</sup> to November 18<sup>th</sup>. The December meeting is moved from the 9<sup>th</sup> to December 16<sup>th</sup>.

### **Letter to the Suffolk County Legislature on the 2017 recommended Budget**

October 21, 2016

**TO:** Members of the Suffolk County Legislature

**Re:** 2017 Recommended Budget Program Restorations and Taxes

The Welfare to Work Commission writes to you, with urgency and understanding, regarding the serious challenges you face with the 2017 Recommended Budget. In his widely acclaimed address to the U.S. Congress a year ago, Pope Francis said to the members, and to all elected officials beyond that Chamber, "You are called to defend and preserve the dignity of your fellow citizens in the tireless and demanding pursuit of the common good ... especially those in situations of greater vulnerability and risk." We know you feel the weight of this "demanding pursuit" in the face of a structural deficit between \$135 and \$179 million, while, as the BRO report states, you must "provide services at needed levels."

It is the mission of our Commission to elevate the needs of vulnerable Suffolk residents at risk. We write just one week after a disturbing Long Island Association report revealed that Long Island's middle class is shrinking while poor households – defined as those earning under \$46,164 - are

increasing. This definition of poor households squares with our Commission's 2012 report on poverty in Suffolk County.

We are especially concerned about the following items in the Recommended Budget that we believe will disproportionately affect poor and vulnerable Suffolk residents:

**\$1.5 Million DSS Reduction:** The BRO reports that this DSS cut will require eligibility for the child-care subsidy available to working-poor families to be reduced from 125 to 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Just last year, eligibility was at 165 percent of FPL. Using national standards, our Commission has consistently recommended that eligibility be set at 200 percent of FPL as it is in Nassau (\$48,600 for a family of four.) This is the threshold definition of "poverty" on Long Island. Reducing eligibility from 125 percent of FPL (\$30,370) to 100 percent of FPL (\$24,300) will burden already-struggling working-poor families. *We therefore urge you to restore \$1.5 million to the DSS budget* since the resulting reduction in eligibility for the child-care subsidy will have these very negative impacts on poor parents in need of child care:

- Some working-poor parents will place their children in unregulated, illegal and, sadly, some in dangerous child-care settings.
  - Some working-poor parents will quit their jobs and some may have to enroll in Public Assistance.
  - State Child Care Block Grant (CCBG) funding, already too low to meet Suffolk's child-care needs, will decline because it is based on previous year's claims, which, due to the lowering of eligibility, will fall even further for Suffolk.
2. **Elimination of Public Health Nurses:** *We urge you to restore a \$560 thousand reduction in DOH funding for Public Health Nurses* because this cut will eliminate critical pre-natal, children's health, metabolic screening, chronic disease management, child-abuse and neglect programs for low-income families and communities.
  3. **Contract Agency Administrative Fee:** Our Commission's 2012 poverty report outlined the chronic underfunding of many contract agencies who often subsidize County contracts with their own funds in order to meet contracted program expenses. *We therefore urge you eliminate the proposed 1 percent administrative fee* (which will yield only \$84,197 in additional County revenues) since, as the BRO reports, this fee "could have negative fiscal impact on the ... contract agencies that provide valuable services to County residents."
  4. **Elimination of Eight Suffolk Bus Routes:** The Commission has already questioned the elimination of eight bus routes that cost \$4 million since buses serve a wide array of vulnerable riders – working-poor people, senior citizens, disabled people and students who cannot afford automobiles. *We therefore again urge a moratorium on these bus line eliminations until a County demographic and ridership study is completed.*

Our Commission understands that the "demanding pursuit" of the common good requires fiscal responsibility. The program restorations we recommend above could require \$6 million at a time of serious fiscal crisis. We therefore lift up for your consideration two revenue-raising options included in the BRO report:

1. **Increase Taxes to the NYS Cap:** The BRO notes that the recommended budget calls for tax increases that are \$2,000,220 less than what is allowable under the State tax cap. The recommended budget's tax increases will result in an average \$36 increase per household. *If the tax cap limit were met with an additional \$2,000,220 increase in revenues in the General Fund, we estimate that the total additional average household cost would be only about \$3.42 or \$39.42 annually.* As the BRO reports, the General Fund property tax has not

been increased for seven years. This \$2 million could be used to relieve one or more of the funding problems identified above.

2. **Pierce the Tax Cap:** The BRO states that the Legislature could pierce the tax cap with a supermajority vote. Huntington recently voted to pierce the tax cap. Other towns and villages are considering doing the same. We are estimating that a .5 percent pierce of the tax cap would yield a \$3 million revenue increase (beyond the additional \$2,000,220 million if the County reached the full tax cap limit) thereby creating an additional \$5 million in revenues that could address the budget problems we identified above. *Piercing the tax cap by .5 percent would only cost the average taxpayer about \$45 a year in total County taxes, which translates into 12 cents a day.*

The Commission understands that any call for a tax increase – even one as minor as we propose – could cause each of you some political distress. However, Pope Francis movingly captured the bottom line in your deliberations in his address to Congress: “Legislative activity is always based on care for the people. To this you have been invited, called and convened by those who elected you.” Your budget deliberations this year take place amid a national political climate of unprecedented divisiveness, partisan gridlock, personal recrimination and fear. Your vote for a modest tax increase to fund programs that serve vulnerable, working-poor Suffolk residents is indeed “care for the people” and would be a powerful antidote to the poisonous negativity that now afflicts our politics. In addition, it would be a tribute to your personal integrity and courage.

We hope you will fold our recommendations into your deliberations.

Yours truly for the Commission,

*Richard Koubek*

**Richard Koubek, PhD, Chair**

*Kathy Liguori*

**Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair**