

FINANCE/TAX REDUCTION/MANDATE RELIEF - COMMITTEE

Monday, May 15, 2023 - 10:30 AM

Thomas Scozzafava, Chairperson
Noel Merrihew, Vice-Chairperson

Chairman Scozzafava called this Finance Meeting to order at 10:30 am with the following Supervisors in attendance: Clayton Barber, Stephanie DeZalia, Shaun Gilliland, Charlie Harrington, Roy Holzer, Steve McNally, Noel Merrihew, James Monty, Tom Scozzafava, Matt Stanley, Ike Tyler, Davina Winemiller, Margaret Wood and Mark Wright. Robin DeLoria, Derek Doty, Ken Hughes and Joe Pete Wilson were excused.

Department Heads present: Judy Garrison, Michael Mascarenas, Jack Moulton and David Wainwright. Laura Carson and Michael Diskin were excused.

Deputies present: Chelsea Merrihew.

Also present: Joe Keegan - NCCC

News media: Alana Penny – Sun News.

SCOZZAFAVA: Good morning. We'll call the Finance Committee meeting to order. We'll start with Chelsea.

C. MERRIHEW: Good morning. So you have my report. We've collected \$493,000 in April, transferred \$328,000 to the Treasurer for local retention. I have two updates relevant to the New York State budget being passed. The proposed DMV revenue share increase was approved so January 2024 we will start receiving across the board 10.75% for all revenue collected in the office and then online from Essex County residents again, when I plug that model into last year it's an increase of about \$50,000, so 20%.

MASCARENAS: That's great. Something positive.

C. MERRIHEW: Then the other you've probably already heard but there were modifications to the penal law 265.01E criminal possession of a fire arm rifle or shotgun in a sensitive location so they did modify that to exempt firearm private property in public parks in the forest preserve and added language accepting the re-enactors so that was also good. That's all I have for today. Any questions?

TYLER: You said they modified that. What was going on with that?

C. MERRIHEW: So when they made the changes last year to what the sensitive locations would be for firearms there was concerns because it said public areas but did not exempt the Adirondack Park or the Catskills so the added language in there exempting the forest preserve from being a sensitive location.

TYLER: The State did?

C. MERRIHEW: Being a sensitive location, yes.

TYLER: Okay I thought you said out of your office you guys did it.

C. MERRIHEW: What's that?

TYLER: I thought maybe you said you changed that out of your office but it was the State legislature.

C. MERRIHEW: No, it was through State legislature.

TYLER: Alright, thank you.

C. MERRIHEW: You're welcome.

SCOZZAFAVA: Any other questions? If not, thank you. Okay Laura has been excused. Dave Wainwright.

WAINWRIGHT: Other than my budget, I just want to mention again Grievance Day is coming up it's May 23 for most towns unless your Assessor has more than one town.

We had BAR training, it was April 26th held right here. We had 18 people in attendance, two more completed virtual training and one went to Franklin County so right now all the towns are in good shape as far as BAR members but if you find that you do need one extra somebody bails out and all of sudden you are able to get somebody we can get them trained right up until Grievance Day with either they can come in and get a book or they can do this virtual training it's a YouTube video so everybody should be good this year.

Three towns were scheduled for full reassessment projects this year. Willsboro was the only one that completed theirs. Six towns did their maintenance in their cyclical plan you have either a full reassessment year or you have a maintenance year, six towns did their maintenance and eleven towns just took care of their new construction Moriah is still working on their project for next year. I have a couple reminders, if your town has a website you're required by law to have a link for the public to go out and look at their assessment rolls and their tax rolls. I looked at all the websites and I do see that there are a couple towns that are either missing a link or they've got a link and it's to the 2022 tax roll, it's just old and outdated but the easiest way to do that is link it right to the Real Property site that way you never have to change it we are always up to date and your websites will always be up to date.

And the last thing I have is I know a lot of towns are changing exemptions with the senior citizen's limits and adding the new fire fighters exemption please send our office a copy of your local law or resolution so we can get this information input into the computer that's the only way it calculates the proper exempt amount for us to get it in there so that's all I have.

MONTY: I have a few questions for you Dave. First off I think we're scheduled next year for a full assessment, this will be the fourth time in four years so if we chose not to do it again because of the trends we can conceivably go below 100.

WAINWRIGHT: Sure.

MONTY: Okay the first year that happens how does that affect my town?

WAINWRIGHT: Well when your eq rate falls your tax rate is going to go up so your first bill that

you're going to see is your school bill coming out in September and for Boquet Valley School all the towns maybe paying, I don't know what the rate is in Boquet Valley say it's 10%.

TYLER: Sixteen.

WAINWRIGHT: Oh sixteen you guys maybe seventeen or eighteen.

MONTY: We are at 100% this year I'm not worried about that I'm looking down the road.

WAINWRIGHT: That's what will happen if you let your eq rate go that first year.

MONTY: So basically we have eleven towns in Essex County who are going to see that correct? Because you said we have eleven that are not at 100%?

WAINWRIGHT: That is correct.

MONTY: We have seven that are.

WAINWRIGHT: Pending, yes.

MONTY: What other effects can that have? It's my understanding the STAR exemption goes away.

SCOZZAFAVA: It is reduced.

WAINWRIGHT: Yes it will go down, it will be okay this year next year it will go down. For towns that have a lot of state owned land the state will not pay on their higher value so this year we had a 10% trend on state land for some towns that's millions of dollars' worth of state land you don't get the benefit of that. Your bond rating they say can suffer. Exemptions not in the first year but next year because we don't put the equalization rate in for '23 until January of next year so what happens is the state will refuse the roll, they come out with an equalization rate sometime around the end of July or August they have a tentative roll, at that point we can't change the equalization rate for this year so it has to be changed for next year and that's when you'll see your exemptions start to change, your STAR will go down a little bit, your Veteran's exemptions will change a little bit, your AG exemptions if you've got AG exemptions in your town they'll change, ceiling railroads will change any town that has a railroad going through it the Assessor doesn't actually value that railroad the State does but they give it a ceiling amount they say you can assess it up to these amount and no higher, those ceiling amounts will come down. There are quite a few repercussions to it. The other situation is you're not at 100% so what you'll see on the roll is an assessed value and then a market value and the market value is obviously going to be higher because say your town is only assessing at 90% for market value or 80% but because your tax rate is going to increase you're going to be paying the same amount, you're still paying for that higher amount with the increased tax rate because that equalization rate has fallen off so it's not doing the tax payers a favor by not maintaining 100% in essence it's hurting them exemption wise and the fact that they don't get the benefit of the state owned land, the railroads don't pay as much as they could.

MONTY: So in a situation where you have a merged school district, one community is at 100%, two aren't at 100% will that effect the 100% community or their tax rate will be higher than the other two communities?

WAINWRIGHT: The tax rate will be higher for the two that do not maintain 100%.

SCOZZAFAVA: We're at 75% and my phone has been ringing off the walls because as you just pointed out, it's going to show your taxable value on the tentative roll and then it's going to show you your market value.

WAINWRIGHT: Yes assessed value and market value.

SCOZZAFAVA: So people are seeing that number, geez, what the heck is going on here and I'm telling them you've got to look at what your assessed value is because this is the reason it is showing that much higher market value because we are 25% according to the State below where we can be. Moriah has a school district that includes part of Westport and part of Crown Point so it's definitely going to have an impact. Your Enhanced STAR or your STAR exemptions are going to decrease as you point out, your Veterans so you know the Assessors are working right now to get this reevaluation done which needs to be done. They didn't do anything for years I'm talking about a number of years now down there and now unfortunately everybody pays the price because everybody is afraid of the word, re val well, you know the problem with that is that a reevaluation by not doing one your taxpayers are going to get hurt more by if you were doing it because and that's a fact.

MONTY: I get that and that's a lot of the phone calls I've been getting Tom and all of sudden people see a 20% increase in assessed value well, how come my taxes are going up 20%? I said, they're not. I mean, last year our assessed value in town was up about 15% yet I was able to lower the taxable per 1000 by almost forty cents so it went up but not as much as it could and I get it. My last question is why do we not hire Assessors if the State is dictating this? Why don't we save \$20,000 and just let the State do this.

SCOZZAFAVA: Listen, we've had that argument for twenty-five years with New York State.

MONTY: We are darned if we do, darned if we don't.

HOLZER: We could always invite Jon Stec back here but we all know how enlightening that was last time he was here. He talked about everything but the actual issue. So just to follow up for communities that have a lot of State assessed land and you said they don't pay or they do decrease and is that a penalty when they don't pay?

WAINWRIGHT: No, they pay it's just that they will pay on last years assessed value. You won't get the benefit of whatever the state land went up and this year was a 10% trend for state land.

HOLZER: But that's not the normal trend right?

WAINWRIGHT: It depends year to year but no, generally it's not ten but they are seeing a lot of forest lands go up now at first it was just single family homes now you're seeing it go to vacant land and forest lands people are still paying way more than assessed value.

SCOZZAFAVA: One perplexing question that I've always had is so you see this happening when your equalization drops down below 96% and then you start feeling the impact what about when your equalization shoots up to 115%? What's the impact then?

WAINWRIGHT: It's kind of the same. You're assessing too high so you're going to see assessed

value on the roll and market value will be lower. Your equalization rate, I'm sorry your tax rate will change it will come down so it's the opposite. When you assess more than a 100% you open yourself up to grievance day and small claims assessment review and Article 7's people are going to say –

SCOZZAFAVA: On our website is there anything on there that explains reevaluation and impacts and how I mean, generalizes it so people could have a better understanding of?

WAINWRIGHT: We have some links to State publications.

SCOZZAFAVA: Like a question and answer scenario is what I'm thinking.

WAINWRIGHT: There are some things like that but if you like, I can put something together. I did do something for the Town of Willsboro.

SCOZZAFAVA: Yeah, I think it would be extremely helpful if we had something like that.

GILLILLAND: Actually Dave did that for me last week just kind of a general synopsis which I can send out to people who send email and stuff which has been really great, I appreciate it.

SCOZZAFAVA: Yes, I think it would be extremely helpful.

WINEMILLER: Right along with that I'd like to ask if the explanation that you gave if you could include all the negative things that happen when we fall below so that would be great.

WAINWRIGHT: Basically everything is negative. There are no positives to assessing it less than 100%.

WINEMILLER: Right but the way you explained it to us just now I think –

SCOZZAFAVA: Like on your STAR exemption that type of thing.

WAINWRIGHT: Yup.

TYLER: This seems to be the State's scheme to get people who are not at 100% basically the State it will probably work out better that way and get more money because they don't have to pay different exemptions and stuff. I was just going to ask the same question, if you could maybe put together when people come in my office and call me, what happens if we are not at 100% if you could do that if it's possible that would be great.

WAINWRIGHT: Sure.

TYLER: The info that we have on our webpage that we are supposed to have, was Westport, are we okay do you know?

WAINWRIGHT: I don't remember but I can go back and check.

TYLER: That would be great, thank you. Let me know.

MONTY: What my Assessor did for us because we were receiving so many calls he actually came

to a board meeting but he also put together a spreadsheet of sales in the last few years with the towns contiguous to Lewis and it was scare you to know what these properties are selling for.

SCOZZAFAVA: Oh, I see it.

MONTY: It would scare you to know that and some of these people were coming in and complaining one in particular showed an assessed value of \$180,000, they paid \$450,000 and I said, so it was worth \$450,000 for you to buy it.

SCOZZAFAVA: Everybody is over assessed until it comes time to sell it.

MONTY: But my point is that sheet really help prove as much as I hate to say it, proved what they were saying. There were very few that went down.

SCOZZAFAVA: I get the sales from your office and I see the sales and for Moriah I mean, they are through the roof. I mean, they are in many cases twice or more than what the assessed value was on the property.

WAINWRIGHT: And the longer you go without doing a full reval the more inequity gets into your roll so pretty soon you've got people who are paying too much and other paying who are paying way too little and it's just unfair, it's unequitable and it's unfair so reval is the only way to get these things straightened out.

SCOZZAFAVA: Okay anything further for Dave? Thank you. Okay Mike Diskin has been excused. Mike Mascarenas.

MASCARENAS: Hello everybody. I'm going to just give you an update on where we are with some of the ARPA work. The board approved the ARPA report back in February and we have been moving forward on some of these projects.

Project number one is the Ag Building we approved the architect last month that's moving forward. The IT upgrade, I don't know if you know there's a couple different Hughs in the county and they are both very bright individuals. Hugh Heron is leading that project from an IT standpoint and he's working now on making sure we are meeting procurements and things and getting through all those quotes that we need to get that accomplished. That will be an upgrade to servers, cyber security, telephone and just an overall upgrade to our system that should put us in a good position over the next seven or eight years so that's moving forward well.

The one area I wanted to speak to you about Mr. Scozzafava asked me about in particular and I just wanted to make sure there was no confusion was the jail project. The jail project, the removal of the old jail just to be clear is well underway and in terms of what we need to do to get that taken care of in the time frame. I've been working with the County Clerk's office, Board of Elections I've checked out every piece of real estate personally that is and around Essex County in terms of trying to find space suitable for what we need. Just so you are all aware you know it seems like it would be an easy thing just to bring in a piece of equipment and have that jail on the ground I want to let you know it's much more complicated than that. That jail house has set a lot of utilities, there's a lot of fiber running through that jail, and it services the Treasurer's department in terms of electricity and those types of things. We need to get that stuff relocated. The pod needs to be removed so we can even get at the jail. That pod holds all of our election machines so I need to find a new home for those and Board of Elections is working with me in trying to help me do just that. There's a lot of records in the old jail that I'm working with the County Clerk in trying to find space to relocate those records and get those out so just so everybody is aware we're not

scheduling to have that jail come down this year. We would like to get the pod out of the way and all those utilities relocated. We're probably looking at a removal more to the end of 2024 which would meet our ARPA guidelines in terms of spending those funds. I just want to let you know we are working on moving all that forward. There's a lot of people in trying to assist us in that. We just really have a space issue in terms of where we can put those things. My goal would be we just ordered those new election machines we're hoping they will be here for the November election. My goal would be when those machines return that they would go to whatever new home we find for them and that would allow us to get that pod to the ground and start working on the things we need to do for the jail.

SCOZZAFAVA: Good report. Any questions?

MERRIHEW: Michael on the de construction of the old jail in the past we were sort of assured of the state picking up a high percentage of that cost because of the change in legislation this year in DSS reimbursement will that effect our game plan there?

MASCARENAS: Not necessarily right now so what they have there if we were to decide to build a structure there in the future this project really just removes the old jail, gives us the opportunity with the ARPA funds what we were looking at before was a depreciation model that the State had in place for DSS. So DSS is truly an agent of the State. We operate under their networks, it goes into state infrastructure serve systems and they will pay a percentage every year in terms of a reimbursement on the states they occupy. Currently the space DSS occupies is been already depreciated so the county is not able to take advantage of reimbursement in that space currently a new structure would allow them to do so. So that's why it almost made sense if you were going to put up a new building you would relocate DSS there so that you would get that State support. That model for Venesky for us is still in place currently the reimbursement that came back from state was really primarily around Medicaid and reimbursement around Medicaid and what our weekly shares are so it shouldn't impact that depreciation model as we know but currently our goal is to get that building to the ground while we don't have to push that back to our constituency. In the past we didn't really have this opportunity where we could take funding from elsewhere and get that building to the ground and we were able to keep it off our tax rolls so I think it's imperative that we keep moving forward and figure that out. If any of you know space that maybe I haven't looked at let me know I'm happy to look at it. It is important that it is in and around Lewis being that we have election machines and records that need to be accessible. I know people have offered space in their other towns but when we get a record request it's hard to drive 45 minutes to have to go get that record and then bring it back to Elizabethtown.

SCOZZAFAVA: Good report. I think we should take the whole operation and move it right to Lowes all the county offices.

DEZALIA: So you were talking about space for records and that type of thing but what about our employees that are in the Probation Department temporarily while de construction is happening also after what are the plans for that department?

MASCARENAS: Absolutely. I visited with the Probation Director last week on this very issue. As we get closer her and I are going to work on a plan I think for them in particular we could do a plan that was much like we did during the pandemic while that building comes to the ground. She seemed like that probably would be suitable in order to allow them to be dispatched from various area. They spend a lot of time as you guys are aware in your neighboring towns and meeting with the clientele so it really would be just providing them with what they need, the tools they need

to get their work done from a remote location while we get that to the ground but you're right there is a lot of details to this whole thing and it involves many departments.

DEZALIA: And our plan is to relocate them back there? That's going to be their home?

MASCARENAS: Yes right now well, I don't want to give you anything definite because there's, Heather has been very good about being a team player and she basically said if we have to go somewhere we have to go somewhere so we have some options I think of how we can shift people around to make the most sense it's just wherever that space that we find might be most conducive to the people that are going to occupy it going forward.

DEZALIA: Thank you.

SCOZZAFAVA: So the pod would be just, we wouldn't use it, we're not going to try and move that to another location?

MASCARENAS: No Tom we had our engineers look at the pod, we looked at the pod, we talked to Jack's staff about it, that pod is such a width that it came in three parts when it came down the road so right now there's been interior walls that have been modified, the roof now is one roof, the joints are gone so even putting that on the road it would almost be like a cardboard box that is open on both ends there would be no way to necessarily hold that together, with that being said I do have Jim Dougan pricing us out another pod like structure to see what the cost of something like that maybe and then the trick would be finding, I went through the tax sale auction stuff that we get put out there and there's really nothing in this tax auction that would be conducive to space to utilize to the county so just to assure I'm not leaving any stone unturned. I am looking at every avenue.

SCOZZAFAVA: Okay. Any questions for Mike? Anything else Mike?

MASCARENAS: No, that's it. Thank you.

SCOZZAFAVA: Joe, North Country.

KEEGAN: Good morning everyone. Nice to see you. It is for students and for faculty it's the best time of the year, graduation is right around the corner. I want to thank you for your ongoing support of the college and our students for another successful year. Graduation is Saturday. We have Billy Jones who is our commencement speaker. We're looking forward to Billy addressing. We also have nursing pinning's taking place on the Ti and Malone campus Wednesday night, Saranac Lake on Thursday if you're around and would like to join in any of those celebrations we would love to have you.

We had our first advisory board in four years down in Ticonderoga thanks to Mark Wright who attended and I think it was a really wide ranging discussion. Mark I don't know what your thoughts were?

WRIGHT: I'm getting a lot of participation there. I thought it was great.

KEEGAN: Yes and we had Senator Stec join us for the entire two hours which is also wonderful. It's great when our State officials are able to be part of the college and we've had great support from all them.

State budget I'm sure you're all parsing it we are all too, we were fortunate to be able to get the

floor funding for the up and coming year for the college that keeps \$300,000 in our budget that we may have otherwise lost so that's a good thing for us all and we didn't get the 4% operating increase which we were hoping for. The floor was the bigger nugget so we're grateful for that and then a couple last things, big capital projects. I think you all know the Saranac Lake campus is under construction, right after commencement we are going to see nursing and science labs upgraded there, same thing down in Ticonderoga with the nursing lab and on the Malone campus. We opted to not go with the ground breaking ceremony because we're not really breaking ground but we will have a ribbon cutting ceremony when we do that we will invite you all to come in and help us celebrate it. It's the first significant investment in the campus that we've had maybe, since 1977. I think we had the nursing building up in 2000, but it's been a long time so people are excited. It's hard to believe how much stuff we've kept and collected over those 50 years in the science labs and then finally we just wrapped up our AEMT the first round of the AEMT, 27 of the 28 that started made it through the program that's I think good for us all. We've got a second round of basic EMT going right now, we'll have another one in the fall we'll have another advanced in the spring and we're looking to set up another basic waste water operator course in the fall so keep it on your radar and as we know more about the details we'll get that out to you. And that's everything Tom.

SCOZZAFAVA: Any questions?

MONTY: Joe that's wonderful about the EMT's and the AEMT's. It sounds like it's being well received.

KEEGAN: It has been Jim, yes.

MONTY: Do we have more people looking to get into those type of programs?

KEEGAN: So the enrollments have been strong. I haven't seen the enrollments for the fall yet but the summer enrollments are looking strong as well, so yeah.

MONTY: Nice, thank you Joe. That's huge for Essex County.

KEEGAN: Yes we are delighted both with the ability to do it and with the turnout.

MONTY: Thank you.

KEEGAN: And we were able to through some funding, we were able to bring all of those programs up to the twenty first century with their materials new manikins so we got state funding from that which was really helpful.

MONTY: Nice, thank you.

SCOZZAFAVA: Anything else for Joe? If not, thank you. Anything further to come before this committee?

GILLILLAND: I actually got a call by Seth, so to give you a little update everybody is probably hearing about migrants. So, this whole migrant thing is being driven by the City of New York, I guess the State is hearing about it because they weren't told a lot of these things, the City is actually going up and hiring hotels and busing them to these hotels without checking with the counties. There are no plans, etc. at this time there is nothing saying any migrants is coming to

the North Country but this is an ongoing thing. The state is probably going to think they go to the operation of what they are going to do from the City because the City can't keep it under control. There may be more to come but at this point there is nothing showing any migrants are coming up here or no plans to. If there were the state would be funneling all that through DSHS and Emergency Services that's all I know.

SCOZZAFAVA: Any questions on that?

MERRIHEW: I've noticed to what Shaun is eluding to, I saw that in the budget that was passed, \$1 Billion dollars migrant administration whatever it was and we are all fighting over about \$200 million dollars for our infrastructure that was just such a shock to see that much money allocated and we're left out there fighting for such a small piece of the pie.

SCOZZAFAVA: This County in my opinion, Shaun you and I have had this discussion or Moriah, the county, we do not have anywhere near the infrastructure that would be needed to support them coming to the Essex County. We don't have the health care needs. I mean our own constituency can't even get into it, we don't have the housing, we don't have the transportation that would be needed to be available and so on so we probably should have some kind of an assessment done on what we actually have here because eventually they could be coming saying, you know well we are going to use Moriah Shock or we're going to use one of these facilities that support hotels.

MONTY: I think they are coming already we just don't know the large masses.

GILLILLAND: What they did too is basically the City right now is looking for cheap hotels.

SCOZZAFAVA: There's one in Keeseville. Alright, with that any questions? If not, we stand adjourned.

As there was no further discussion to come before this Finance committee it was adjourned at 11:05 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Judith Garrison, Clerk
Board of Supervisors