



Onondaga County Legislature

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CONSENSUS REVIEW ADVISORY COMMITTEE

March 23, 2017

Kevin A. Holmquist, Chairman

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Ulatowski, Ms. Boyle, Mr. Sgromo, Mr. Whorrall, Mr. Kinne, Ms. Hudson

ADVISORY MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Knapp, Mr. Jordan, Mr. Carni

ALSO PRESENT: Chairman McMahon, Mrs. Ervin, Mr. Walsh, Mrs. Stanczyk, Mr. Paro, Mr. Frateschi, Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Berger, Mr. Germain

Chairman Holmquist called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

Chairman McMahon:

- Thanked members for agreeing to serve on the committee
- Legislature and Common Council gave a Home Rule message to NYS Senate to secure funding for a study of what government could look like in the future -- look for efficiencies and recommendations
- Consensus took the money and did a study. Consensus group consisted of reps from: 1 common counsel; 1 town supervisors, 1 village mayors; 1 county legislature, also private citizens and representative from co. executive office
- Consensus came up with a blueprint that they thought should be considered - initially included 51 recommendations – final report had 50, as one recommendation was completed by the County – merger of MWB and OCWA
- There has been collaboration efforts between city/county, between towns, between village/towns, between villages, etc., and it doesn't get enough fanfare. This process will help showcase those collaborations and highlight other things that can be done.
- Item No. 50 – County Legislature, policy makers that could advance a referendum on behalf of the community, but thought it was fatally flawed. Questioned how the community could be asked to vote on an item when the only thing known is that there will be 33 politicians that serve on the body; those politicians would be the legislature
- One of the strongest powers of a legislature in any form of government is to be able to draw the lines -- the only thing known about the new government is that the legislature wouldn't be able to draw their new lines. Some of the community felt it was a good plan; the county legislature didn't.
- Questioned how the voters can be asked to vote on something where there is no charter, no delegation of powers; unknown what the executive branch would look like
- Washington is going through a mess of a process right now over health care, wherein Obama Care was rushed through without knowing what it looked like; now Republicans are putting forward a replacement, and they don't know what it is going to look like; we should learn from history and not repeat that process
- The other 49 recommendations have merit; many have talked about doing some of the things for years
- Challenge the Committee:
 - The way to move forward as a community is through local engagement from local policy makers. Look at the 49 recommendations; study them; see what can happen. Will have resources at legislature, i.e. legal, budget
 - If some recommendations don't make sense; that is fine. The committee has to do the work at the end of the day – it is not a think tank or paid consultants.
 - Get out of comfort zones; challenge yourselves on some recommendations which have to do with giving up some control, because it's the right thing to do and can really show true efficiencies. If it can save money, make us more competitive with reasons for people to live here, then it worth policy makers' time.
 - The folks pushing the agenda of no. 50 are going to be skeptical if this committee can come up with results.

Chairman Holmquist:

- Thanked everyone; there is a lot of talent at the table; opportunity to continue the efforts done in local government
- Has served in Village of Manlius for 10 yrs., town board for 4 yrs.; legislature for over 11 yrs., and lived in the City.
- Committee does not have to reinvent the wheel; the group is really experienced
- Knows the first 49 recommendations are nothing more than a continuation of the collaboration, cooperation, consolidation efforts that we have been doing for decades

- Volunteer group at Consensus put a lot of work into this; it is very much appreciated
- No. 50 is dead on arrival; has no community support, no support from elected officials, no support from rural, urban, or suburban citizens – that was the case born out at all of community information formats that we all attended. There is a lot of good stuff in the first 49 recommendations.
- Understand that the final decisions are with elected officials/boards throughout the community, who have been working on these issues for many years
- This is a product of a lot of work that a lot of people put into it.

Chairman Holmquist said that one of the issues he had was with the process of the Consensus Committee – they are volunteers and appreciates all the work they put in. He used the fire departments as an example. The Consensus Committee went out and interviewed a lot of people in the fire service and all of the other services in the report. He said that he hasn't heard of a single chief that was interviewed, which is unfortunate. After the interviews, they went back downtown to the ivory tower and cooked up some ideas, which is why there are omissions and errors in the report. The fire service, and all services in the report, deserves a seat at the table, to have a dialogue, a discussion. Not that the final decisions are up to the people in the fire service or other services, but to have buy-in it has to be from the bottom up. He said that Consensus has said that it is bottom up, but it is simply not true. It is top down edict, and his hope is that the message will finally be received to cease and desist on number 50, which quite literally has no support in the community by all measures.

Chairman Holmquist said "let's focus on being productive." Everyone was asked to at least begin thinking about the 3 groups of recommendation. 1. Perceived as *low hanging fruit, easy to do*; 2. *medium lift* – get out of comfort zone a little more; have been done before and can do it again – get some items that maybe can be compromised on; 3. *Things that are never going to happen*; things that aren't supported and off the table. The expectation is that this group will work efficiently, very quickly. Recommendations can be made as it moves along. A meeting schedule needs to be accomplished; he suggested meeting twice a month to get this done; it needs to get done this year. He said that the committee is not going to solve each issue; it is simply going to make the recommendations to the village board, city council, town boards, county, affected agencies, etc.

Chairman Holmquist asked members to provide expectations of the committee, ideas for process and content.

Greg Sgromo, Dunn and Sgromo Engineers:

- To try to do it in a year, we need an organized method of picking where to start
- Set goals as to how many to do at each meeting. Maybe look at one at a time; pick a list of things we need to do for the next meeting; get a list distributed – maybe it's one or two tasks/meeting, and try to keep them closed up.

In answer to Chairman Holmquist, Mr. Sgromo said that some of this is very straight forward and won't take as much time as others. There are others that will be long, drawn out, and possibly may never get a consensus on, or at least not without a lot of additional data, talking and meeting. It would be great to start with the low-hanging fruit, pick some of those first – get a feel for how people are thinking on some of these things; get a dynamic going and carry it on to more difficult ones.

Paul Whorrall, Mayor, Village of Manlius:

- Agrees with Mr. Sgromo
- Has been more/less asked to serve to dissect the the fire and EMS services
- Background: continues to be a 45-year member of the fire department, which started out as volunteers and is now a combination, chief for 25 years; served as President of County Fire Chiefs Association; just finished term as President of the International Association of Fire Chiefs
- Has a background of what is going on locally as well as a across the country
- Attended most of the meetings and group gatherings held to explain Consensus
- A question on the part that he is looking at -- has yet to find anybody that they have spoken to
- They should have spoken to fire chiefs, administrators, or governing bodies for fire districts for villages and towns, to get the information on where the service is and where they feel it is going or not going.
- There are issues in the fire services, but does not think the magnitude of what they want to do will solve those issues; it might make it worse.
- Some of the stuff is a little too drastic to lay on people that volunteer

In answer to Chairman Holmquist regarding anything that he thinks the committee should do or is easy to do, Mr. Whorrall said that he is excited about looking into the whole thing and getting other people's opinion. He can say what he feels will benefit the municipality, but would like to hear what everybody has to say.

Bill Kinne, Legislative Aide:

- Grateful to be appointed. As a taxpayer and Christian, he is disappointed that some elected officials on both sides of the aisle have said things that have given grave injustice to the volunteers.
- We are in the greater Syracuse Community, “it shouldn’t be us vs. s them.” referenced S.U sports – people say they are from Syracuse.
- Disappointed that the committee is not going to look at some of the governance things. They gave 23 examples of establishing a single personnel department for the whole county, as well as a single treasury office, audit division, property assessment, and law department.
- Can’t see why that doesn’t benefit everybody in the county, no matter where you live. Lawyers are expensive; it seems there should be one professional law department.
- Looking for:
 - A metropolitan police department – laws no matter where you live are the same; don’t need a police chief, five police chiefs, or ten police chiefs to tell you that
 - One department for drinkable water; the same for wastewater
 - One codes department – codes affect all of us no matter where we live

Chairman Holmquist said that we are looking at the first 49 recommendations, but anything else, including some of the things that Mr. Kinne mentioned, can be discussed. If anyone knows of any other ideas from people and wants to bring those ideas to the committee, that is fine. There is nothing off the table, except for the one item that no one supports.

Joe Carni, Common Councilor:

- Appreciates the volunteers for Consensus that got together and spurred this conversation
- Low hanging fruit:
 - In talking with people in neighborhoods or with other electeds in city, county, villages, and towns – it has always seemed odd that there are two IDA’s – OCIDA and SIDA; both are able to give tax breaks and essentially compete against each other.
 - Before the power was taken away from the Council to approve PILOTS and different tax incentives, there was concern that “we should just really pass this and approve it, because if we don’t give it to them, maybe the benefit will go to the county.” It is one thing that seems easy to address and fix.
- There are a whole host of things that are a little bit more of an ask and a little bit more difficult, i.e. fire departments, police departments.
- Public safety is the biggest thing that has been talked about at the neighborhood meetings that he has attended.
- Schools are probably the biggest reach; it would be interesting to at least have that discussion amongst this group. It was put on the back burner with Consensus – doesn’t see why that discussion couldn’t occur here – what are some of the concerns, what are some of the issues.

Susan Boyle, Common Councilor:

- Thankful for the opportunity to serve on this committee; considers it a tremendous honor.
- Respects the work that has been done by the volunteers; they have laid out an outline for this committee to consider
- The first few items should be items that clearly benefit the entire county and city together
- Important to keep in mind “modernization.” If not willing to have the conversation about modernization, then we will never get there and are never going to grow.
- Change is hard and growth is hard; these conversations are vital to the success of our future metropolitan city, if that’s what we end up having.
- Low hanging fruit:
 - IT - where there would be benefit across the board and easy enough to do
 - We are buying all kinds of technology, and with modernization at the core of our goal, IT is the first step.
 - If we integrate our technology and pool our resources at the technological level, the other items could probably come along a little smoother.
- Medium area:
 - Parks - where the city and county can benefit
 - It is a little complicated, political, but looking at the historic preservation side of things, historical parks and stonework, everyone benefits from everyone investing in the parks system.
 - Onondaga Park is the most photographed park in the County.
 - City needs to maintain some control of programming, serving the population that uses the park system during the summertime for the youth.
- More difficult area:
 - Economic development strategies – where it would benefit everyone
 - Really appreciates what was written in the report about it, but struggles a little with some of the formulas that they came up with

- Thinks this committee can do a better job with an equitable plan; work together and can get to a place where everyone sees some success
- If we can conquer the things where we all succeed first, then we can work on harder things down the road.

Casey Jordan, County Legislator:

- Has been a practicing attorney for the past 30 years; before becoming an attorney he studied economics.
- A lot of the recommendations in the Consensus report make sense from an economic standpoint.
- As much as running government like a business is talked about, the reality is that government isn't a business. All too often, there are political influences that affect decisions.
- There are areas of low hanging fruit that can be pursued
- There is theory and there is reality. Many of the ideas have been implemented before - what are the outcomes – did they actually accomplish the goals intended -- some of these things did not
- Is very focused on what his constituents want – what is in their best interest
- In last 11 yrs. the number one thing that constituents have said is “lower my taxes.”; great to talk about too many levels of government, but his constituents’ bottom line is that they want a lower cost of government. They aren't really focused on how many levels of government there are, only to the extent that they perceive them as an increase in the cost of government; they want us to lower taxes, save money, and reduce the cost of government.
- Suggestion/hope for this committee is to focus on what will actually save taxpayers money and lower the cost of government.
- Increase efficiency is a methodology as a way in which we can lower the cost of government, but there are also some recommendations that haven't saved money.
- Doesn't know if it is fruitful to spend a lot of time pursuing things that have been tried and not resulted in cost savings.

Damian Ulatowski, Supervisor, Town of Clay:

- Thankful and honored to be asked to serve on the committee
- Supervisor for the largest population area outside of the City of Syracuse in Onondaga County; represents a tremendous amount of people
- Primarily concerned with his constituents
- His being here may be a little parochial, but intends to grow through the process and embrace all of the ideas—will see what mayors bring, what county brings, and what the city brings; it will be a learning process; the committee can build something that can reshape our community and be leaders

Mr. Ulatowski said that last Tuesday he read in the Syracuse newspaper something that said that merging would mean a 70% property tax cut. He asked if this is a new item put into the report. He said that this revolves around Medicaid being on the table; and questioned if that was something in Consensus that he didn't know about, because he certainly didn't read it. That headline is very misleading. Chairman McMahon explained what that addresses; the property tax levy for the county is \$140 million. The Medicaid bill, an unfunded mandate, is \$98 million. Assemblyman Stirpe proposed that if the city and the county merged, he would put forward legislation that says the state will cover the Medicaid costs for Onondaga County. The likelihood of that passing is absolutely zero. If that could pass through the NYS Assembly and Senate, and get it through NYC, then it would put all of us in an interesting position. The more likely issue that came about recently is related that the Collins-Falso amendment – potential healthcare replacement legislation. This would be a mandate on NYS, which says they can no longer pass those mandates to counties. NYS would be in a position to figure out, across the state, how to fund the unfunded mandates that they have been pushing out to everybody. Chairman McMahon said that is just the county property tax bill, not property taxes overall. The county tax bill is probably one of the smallest. The town tax is very small, the county tax is very small, but then there is a very large school district tax. In the City of Syracuse, there is dependent school district, and it is all incorporated – they don't have the ability to tax themselves. The Stirpe legislation hasn't gotten to a committee. Mr. Knapp said that there is no co-sponsor.

Mr. Ulatowski said that the committee and everyone in the room is probably well aware of what the Chairman said, but the public reads things like this and it is extremely misleading. He said that we need to be very cautious in what we say in building this to make sure we get out a message that is true, that we can support, and if any of us are singled out in the process that we are on the same page, saying exactly what our intentions are.

Mr. Ulatowski continued:

- Broke the report down into three categories: things he thinks we can do; other items he is leaning toward – needs more information/can't make a decision based on what he sees; things that are more organizational in nature – have a greater impact on the public
- The more impact they have on the public, the harder they are to bring to a conclusion. It is almost a “no” in that regard, because it would involve bringing in other services that are directly impacted by some of the recommendations we are trying to make.
- Looking forward to the process; thinks we can build something

Helen Hudson, Common Councilor:

- Thankful for being asked to the table; thanked the original Consensus Committee for their hard work – spent hours in the communities talking about the 51 different items.
- City government has combined purchasing with the county – would like to know how that is working out; maybe there is a way to spread it out to the towns and villages and see how purchasing power can be made bigger.
- Skilled trades – plumbers and electricians are all one in the same -- in one organization; doesn't think it would be hard for a plumber to be sent to, i.e. Minoa today and one to go over to Manlius or Syracuse -- look at spreading and sharing those services
- The medium lift – have to look at some of those.
- The hard stuff is going to be the school districts; voted no on the first Consensus study because of the school district; have to really take a look at it
- Is a Syracuse resident first, but a county resident over the whole; hates that we are talking about each other as “us and them.” We are not, and have to get this right down the road -- our great grandchildren are the ones that are going to be responsible for picking all of this up and figuring it out.
- Doesn't want to see us become another I-81 fifty years down the road; imperative that we sit together as a region and talk about some things that we could honestly do together, and have an open door for an opportunity to look at some of the harder things with a smoother transition.

David Knapp, County Legislator:

- An advisory member – here to help and support the process
- Many years ago he and Robert DeMore spearheaded the Southern Onondaga Trash System (SOTS) - multi-town trash system, a unique entity between Lafayette, Tully, Fabius, and Pompey. It has been going for 12 years and people are still paying less than they did 12 years ago. It might be some of the low hanging fruit that could be expanded. The Consensus report talks about that entity, and one of their recommendations is that it could be expanded and easily done.

Chairman Holmquist thanked Mr. Knapp for bringing up that topic and noted that the Town of Manlius modeled its trash district after the SOTS program, which they learned about at a NYS Association of Towns meeting. He said that they met with Mr. Knapp, Mr. DeMore, and others that had been working on it. Mr. Knapp said that it was a big lift; every time there was a referendum most folks said that there was no way it was going to pass, and then in was well over 60% in each town. It has worked out well. Chairman Holmquist said that it was done a little differently in his town, but learned from the process. The process matters – it's not just conclusions or recommendations – it is how we do this. The trash district was a great example. In Manlius it was the third rail -- “don't touch my trash.” At the time there were seven days of trash trucks that individual homeowners contracted directly with. Every day in the neighborhoods there were trash trucks running around, and everyone paid \$300 - \$400. Some people were even higher; in the more rural areas some were paying \$450 - \$480 per year for trash service.

Chairman Holmquist said that a task force was set up with the consultation of SOTS and community forums, much like Consensus did, around the town of Manlius. They met in Kirkville, Freemont, Minoa, Fayetteville and Manlius. He said that postcards were sent, and a trash survey was done. There was great communication with everybody and they let people know that they could come to a publically known forum, speak, and fill out the trash survey. The response rate was 52%; 91% supported a trash district. The first year the cost was about \$118/household. He said that also, in the spirit of Home Rule, they did not mandate or dictate to the town or the city. Any individual citizen was allowed to opt out. Mr. Knapp said that the opt out clause was a key part of SOTS also. Chairman Holmquist said that raises administration costs, the overall cost raises about \$3.00/household; the cost could have been \$115. He said that they also allowed whole villages to opt out. All 3 villages in the town technically are in the trash district, and currently have opted out, but can opt in at any time. Homeowners associations were allowed to opt out. The people in the various HOA districts were upset until they found out that they could opt out or in at any time. People realized they were saving 75% on costs; it is good for the environment – not having trash trucks 7 days a week in neighborhood; now it is once a week.

Chairman Holmquist said that he told that story because the process mattered and people really appreciated the fact that we were listening – not just giving speeches and dictating “we think you should have this service”. That is not how it should work; the citizens should drive it.

Chairman Holmquist recognized the following individuals and asked if they wanted to say a few words:

Linda Ervin, County Legislator:

It is exciting that sitting around the table might be the people who form a new government. Approaching it with open ears, eyes, and hearts – coming together positively would be good. She would like to see the results be something that would benefit everyone in the county.

Marty Masterpole, City Auditor:

Regarding government modernization, what is proposed is a change, but is not sure how modern it is. We have heard about cost savings, and from his analogy in reading the report multiple times, he is not sure that the cost savings as proposed or wished for are there. The largest cost drivers of every municipality in Onondaga County are schools, public safety – police and fire, and those were skipped or pushed aside. He struggles with the cost savings under the current form.

He hears from city residents regarding the Consensus report that they want to be treated fairly. Much of what was discussed with the trash district with the opt in or opt out, makes people feel like they are being treated fairly – like they are being treated like others regardless of where they live or what their social/economic class is. He asked that the people in the city of Syracuse feel like they are being treated equally to the people in the Town of Manlius or Town of Onondaga, or wherever the case may be. It is a huge factor going into the success of government modernization and cost savings.

Bill Fisher, Deputy County Executive:

Echoed the County Executive’s statement from her state of the county address – *have the courage to put things in front of the voters and have them decide*. Many things in the Consensus report would require a ballot referendum, often a double referendum where the voters of the city and towns would have to vote. He noted that while we represent them, they can also speak directly at the ballot, and he encouraged the committee to consider that option.

Chairman Holmquist said that the goal today was to get some discussion going. He asked members to come up with their lists of low hanging fruit. It is a great place to start, and will move through the list rather quickly. He asked that members to provide their list of recommendations to suestanczyk@ongov.net within the next week. There was an agreement to hold the meetings on Thursday mornings, twice per month. Meetings will be kept to one hour. Chairman Holmquist said that it will be an aggressive timetable to get through the list and make recommendations to the elected board.

Mr. Kinne said that there is \$25 million sitting out there that has been offered to be used for this Consensus study -- if we need some of that money, it shouldn’t be overlooked.

Chairman Holmquist said that an agenda will be generated from the list of recommendations. Members will be emailed a schedule of meetings in the next week.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:58 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



DEBORAH L. MATURO, Clerk
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