

OPERATING BUDGET MEETING

of the

PUBLIC WORKS and TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

The Public Works and Transportation Operating Budget Meeting was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, Smithtown, New York, on Thursday, October 21, 2010 at 9:30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator Jay Schneiderman - Chairman
Legislator Wayne Horsley
Legislator Tom Barraga
Legislator Tom Muratore

MEMBERS NOT PRESENT:

Legislator Steve Stern - Vice-Chairman

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Gail Vizzini - Director of Budget Review Office
Legislator John Kennedy - 12th Legislative District
Gilbert Anderson - Commissioner - DPW
Lou Calderone - Chief Deputy Commissioner
Ben Wright - Sanitation Division - DPW
Bill Hillman - Chief Engineer - DPW
Barbara LoMoriello - Deputy Clerk of the Legislature
Ben Zwirn - County Executive's Office
Robert Doering - Budget Review
Kara Hahn - Presiding Officer's Office

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Donna Catalano - Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Denise Weaver - Legislative Aide

(*THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 9:47 A.M.*)

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this public hearing on the proposed budget for the Public Works Committee. If you all will rise and join us for the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Barraga.

SALUTATION

You may be seated. All right. The purpose of today's meeting, as I just stated, is for the public to be heard. I don't have any cards from the public; is that correct, Madam Clerk? So why don't we do this -- and I'm not sure that BRO is prepared to do any presentations, are you, on this? So maybe, Commissioner Anderson, if you'll step forward, you can give us your thoughts on the proposed budget, and then if the committee has any questions, we'll ask you. And it sounds like it may be a brief meeting.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

Good morning and thank you. As far as the proposed budget, you know, make it short and sweet.

We understand, you know, the current stresses that our budget is up against. This department is committed, as you know, to provide the best service that we can. And we will look to continue that effort this year and the coming years. Beyond that, I would just request any questions that you might have on it.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

And in terms of the funding for your core functions, be they road repairs or snow removal, those kinds of things, I mean, how are you looking in terms of maintaining the County's infrastructure in terms of the public safety components of your department?

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

As far as the actual infrastructure, you know, I can safely say that the County's infrastructure is in good shape. You know, our programs over the past year have looked to continually upgrade our infrastructure, whether it's roads or sewers. You know, it's a very vibrant program. You know, when there have been emergencies that have arisen, we've addressed them. Beyond that --

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Looking at some of BRO's comments, the staffing level issue, can you comment on that?

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

I'm not going to try and tap dance around that. Basically we've been working with the County Executive's Office to, you know, bring new people in. Since the previous incentive, not this recent one, but the one before that, we brought people in. It's always like -- for lack of a better term, it's like watching the tide come in, you know, you get guys come in, some don't pass the test, they leave, we keep refilling it. It's a constant -- it's a constant struggle that we have -- you know, but we have a commitment that we are getting people back in and we are filling the ranks; albeit slowly.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Your "vehicles" is budgeted at half of what you requested. How will that affect the department?

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

You said -- did you say half of what we requested?

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Fifty-seven percent less than sought by the department.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

Well, I think you said 57% of the --

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

BRO's report, it says, "the County Executive's recommended budget provides \$4 million, which is approximately 5.3 million or 57% less than sought by the department." That's for vehicles; automobiles, public safety vehicles, etcetera.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

I just want to be clear right on the 57%. We -- four million is bare bones, and it's not magic. We've been plugging in on the non-safety, non-public safety side of the house. We've been grabbing every cent we can of grant money for hybrids, and that's how we've been surviving on the non-public safety side of the house.

On the public safety side of the house, to be very upfront with you, the \$4 million is basically for public safety. So that's what we would need to keep the various, you know -- it's not just the Suffolk County Police Department, it's the Sheriff's Department, the DA, Probation, to keep them in cars for 2011.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Okay. You know, the only real specific recommendation listed in the BRO's review is this increasing overtime salaries by 489,000, which frankly, I don't think we can do. But any comment on that issue? Is that --

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

I mean, the -- again, given staffing levels, we will be, you know, taking advantage of overtime to make sure that the work that needs to get done is getting done.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Let me go to my colleagues if there's any questions. We'll start with Legislator Horsley.

LEG. HORSLEY:

Yeah, Gil, I just have a basic question, and I think I know the answer, but I'll ask it anyway, get your opinion on it. We are becoming more and more reliant on consultants and farming out the workload, engineering workload and stuff like that. It's happening at all levels of government, it's not just Suffolk County, you see it everywhere. Have you -- have you given any thought or analysis of whether or not -- at what level can you -- how far can you go down without hiring? And is there a point where it is more cost efficient to hire people than it is to hire a consultant? You know, where is that line drawn? I know it's a big question, and I don't expect, you know, a full fledged answer, but at least, you know, on your opinion, are we there, or is this as far as we can go? Or, you know, is it cost effective?

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

You're always going to need consultants. I mean, at one time, I know Suffolk County primarily any work that was done was done with its own forces back in the '60's and probably earlier. There was minimal consultant levels.

Right now, we take advantage of the professional services. It's, you know -- and as you said, there is some level where, you know, you do need staff to monitor, you know, to maintain the program; consultants certainly can't do that. You need to oversee the consultants and that takes a certain amount of staffing.

I would say in most cases right now, we're at a good level where we are maintaining, you know -- given the ARRA projects especially that we've -- you know, that we've gone through, we're about at that limit. You know, we really can't bring too many more, you know, consultants in. But we will -- as those projects begin to be completed, you know, other ones we'll fill in, and we will take advantage of consultants.

LEG. HORSLEY:

So more or less, at some point, your job will become overseeing consultants.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

No. You're still -- it's --

LEG. HORSLEY:

I'm just throwing that out, yeah.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

No, I understand. I can't give you that it's a 40% type of number. At this point, we still have in-house staff that does design work. We still have -- we have in-house staff that oversees consultants, make sure that they're doing the work the way we want it to be done. You know, it's a fluctuating number and right now we're, you know, I believe we're doing the job and doing it well.

LEG. HORSLEY:

That's fair enough. I know it was an unfair question, but it is really -- it's the essence of the budget itself --

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

Right.

LEG. HORSLEY:

-- and where Public Works is going.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

Right. And it's something we've struggled with in-house as well.

LEG. HORSLEY:

Okay. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Who else? Any other questions? No? Where did Mr. Kennedy go? Did he have any questions? I don't think he did.

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

The only thing I'd like to just make a -- just a last statement on the vehicles, if I might. That 400 that we need for the Public Safety, we need that, that really can't be reduced. I know there was some discussion about dropping that number. And, you know, that, as Lou has said, is the bare bones. You know, they do have a large number of turnaround in those vehicles. And I just want to, you know, state for the record that -- that we need that number.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

That message has gotten to the work group. We've made no decisions yet regarding that.

The question pertains to the buses; The Suffolk Transit in general or the Sunday bus? Okay. Well,

we did -- we held public hearings on Sunday bus service, which I think would be, you know, extremely important to implement to stimulate the economy. The report seems to suggest that the fare increase probably wouldn't cover the entire Sunday service that was recommended in the study, probably about half of it.

The fare increase that I've been kicking around is only on the main fare. A 50 cent increase from \$1.50 to \$2.00 on the main fare and to not touch any of the other fares. SCAT would stay the same, reduced fares would stay the same. That 50 cent increase generates about a million and-a-half dollars, something in that neighborhood. And the full costs of Sunday service on the recommended routes would be about three million, including SCAT.

So the question is, you know, do we want to look toward a pilot program, increasing the fares and using the money to implement Sunday service at least on the ten busiest routes? What are the ten busiest routes? It's assumed that the ten busiest Saturday routes would also be the busiest Sunday routes. I think that's a fair assumption. That's what Cherwony used in his calculus of it.

So that is a thought. And there may be some efforts to raise the bus fares and not provide any additional service. I think that would be a terrible mistake. I think at least we should do a Sunday -- Sunday bus pilot program as part of any increase in bus fares. But, Gil, you want to chime in on that?

COMMISSIONER ANDERSON:

Certainly, I would agree with the findings. I mean, obviously we've prepared the report. And it was provided that using -- bringing the funding up to the -- or the fees up to the same level as the MTA now charges, we would still be a million dollars short to provide all 20 -- I think it's 28 or 24 lines that would be operational on Sunday. You know, given the -- we obviously agree with the need for the Sunday service. The problem is given the constraints of the current Operating Budget, we don't feel that this is, you know, the appropriate time right now. It should be revisited next year or year after, maybe when the budget's in, you know -- the County is in better shape given the, you know, what we would anticipate a drop in ridership by any increase, you know. And we went through the whole exercise and math and, you know, it just didn't work out.

Certainly, if it's Legislator Schneiderman's or anybody else's intention to try and, you know, do a test pilot program, the only thing I'd ask is that, you know, we be requested to provide, you know, analysis of the funding.

LEG. HORSLEY:

Is that something that you're looking at, Mr. Chair?

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Yes.

LEG. HORSLEY:

I figured so. It's just kind of like a lead-in line knowing that's probably what you're thinking.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

I've thought of doing this as a standalone. It can be done as a standalone if I get five sponsors or, you know, it can be discussed with the work group. The problem is I think today may be the deadline for standalones.

LEG. HORSLEY:

Well, is it possible that the pilot can come in mid-year or something like that that, you know --

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

There's no really budgetary impact, because it's fully paid for.

LEG. HORSLEY:

If you talk about raising the fees --

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Right. Yeah, my biggest fear is that we will soon start talking about the fares in general in terms of our budgetary shortfall, and it may be seen as a way to close the hole. I would hate -- we have an opportunity right now, because our fares are so low compared to other regional services, bus services; you know, Nassau County is, I think, \$2.50 going up to 2.75 or 3.00 for the bus. We're at a \$1.50. We've been at that rate for at least 16 years. If you just adjusted it for the value of the dollar, you'd have a rate somewhere in that \$3.00 range.

So I think we have an opportunity here to go up. The riders are telling me that they're willing to pay more on that main fare, overwhelmingly, to have that Sunday service because of the cost they're paying for taxis on Sunday. So I think it's an opportunity. If we raise the fares and don't provide Sunday service and we look at it in another year, I don't know how we're going to fund it. So the opportunity will be lost. So, I know there are differences of opinion on whether we need to do Sunday service. But I believe most people who ride on Sundays will go shopping, and we will see a boost in our sales tax revenues as a result.

LEG. HORSLEY:

My own personal feeling is to push the economy. In economic development, we should look at those routes where we're dealing with workers getting to work, getting to and from work. If we could pare that down maybe and find out where those areas are, you know, the -- maybe that's the angle to get people back to work.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Well again, that's -- on Sunday, it's going to be in retail primarily. It's not going to be your industrial. So it's going to be your Tanger Malls.

LEG. HORSLEY:

As well as the East End. And I concur with you on that. Okay? I agree.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Interestingly enough, though, as much as people sometimes see this as an East End issue, the busiest route on Saturday is the Huntington line; the busiest. The number one route that we believe is the busiest route on Saturday --

LEG. HORSLEY:

Is the 110.

CHAIRMAN SCHNEIDERMAN:

Yeah, is the 110 corridor route. The S-92, which is in my district, is the second busiest route. So this should not just be seen as something the East End needs, it's something the whole County needs.

All right. On that note, we'll let you catch your bus. All right. We are adjourned

(*THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED AT 10:02 A.M.*)

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