



Lackawanna County

Commissioners

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The County of Lackawanna's 2021 Budget Message

2020 Lackawanna County Budget-Funded Accomplishments

As the calendar changed to January 2020, a new era in County government began as three individuals took the reins, focused on charting a brighter future for residents and municipalities alike.

Their unified mission was simple – improve the economic landscape through new and innovative programs that would spur growth and keep the best and brightest here.

Along with the new Board, something else came to town that had a significant impact on the community - COVID-19. The pandemic brought everyday life, as we knew it, to a grinding halt.

Lackawanna County met the virus head-on. A plan was put into action to safeguard the general public and employees. Operations at the Government Center never stopped; however, they were handled in a different manner.

The County was ahead of the curve in keeping its doors open. In early March, a significant number of laptops were ordered to enable staff to work at home. Pallets of sanitizer, masks and other PPE supplies were purchased to make sure all buildings were spotless, protecting the essential workers who were on-site. Supplies were also distributed to first responders and law enforcement personnel.

Various Declarations of Emergency for the County and Courthouse were issued. Drop-boxes for Row Offices and various departments were stationed in the facility's vestibule for people to continue to do filings, pay taxes and secure legal documents. Plexiglas was installed in several locations and offices systemwide to serve the public. The Courts wired several courtrooms with video equipment in an effort to hold trials in a safe environment. Evidence-sharing software was also purchased to further cut-down on bringing large groups of people to public settings. Off-site jury selection was also done.

Recognizing the financial strain that the pandemic put on the residents, the Commissioners waived the penalty fees for the County property and Library taxes, if they are paid in full by the close of business on December 31, 2020.

While health and safety were major concerns, the County did conduct “normal” business of major significance. The 2020 General Obligation Bond Series A, covering 2016 and 2018 borrowings, were refinanced without lengthening the term, saving the County \$5.8 million. In addition, 2020 General Obligation Series B Bonds refunded 2010 Bonds, saving an additional \$1.2 million. The savings generated were done without lengthening any terms. The County again used the same “formula” with the refinancing of the General Obligation Note Series C of 2020, saving another \$177,000.

Another tough decision was made early-on to raise taxes 6.5 mils to put the house back on solid financial ground. The revenue generated was used to bolster a weakened Pension Fund and to cover the deficit without depleting the fund balance.

Economic Development has always been a County hallmark. Now, it matters more than ever with the uncertainty caused by COVID-19. A \$2,500 Business Relief Grant Program was established to provide seed money to firms that were either shut down or had to scale back operations.

Another County staple – The Community Re-Invest Program – provided organizations and municipalities with much needed “last mile” funding. Twenty-one grants, totaling \$104,186, were awarded to fund worthwhile community ventures. Other business development initiatives, CDBG funds, and CARES Act resources were utilized to breathe life into our local economy.

Human Services remained the focal point of our mission to assist the elderly, families and youth. Homelessness has continued to be a major issue both during the pandemic and in general. The department provided shelter and food assistance through grant resources.

With individuals losing their jobs, paying rent and/or a mortgage was difficult. A rent/mortgage relief program was established to help the elderly, individuals and families to either pay their landlords or pay their home mortgage. An advertising campaign was developed and various agencies were enlisted to provide help with completing the application.

The Area Agency on Aging developed a new tiered Senior Center arrangement to provide a greater variety of activities.

Safety for the residents in our communities is vitally important. To that end, our 911 Emergency Services Center continued to upgrade communications systems and lines. The District Attorney’s Office entered into an agreement with the University of Pittsburgh for training and stocking EMTs and other personnel with Narcan to fight overdoses. Protecting individuals on the front lines was accomplished through grants for new bulletproof vests and body cameras.

The Prison has also undergone a number of operational, security and prisoner ancillary services changes to improve the overall management “chain of command.” The prison was restructured to address two key issues – security and treatment for inmates suffering with substance abuse and/or mental health issues. The significant changes at the prison were all budget neutral.

Direct physical mail for the inmates has been reduced to scanning to eliminate contraband entering the facility and getting to the prisoners. Contact visits have also been limited for the same reason. Sheriffs will be incorporated into the front area as an extra layer of coverage, surveillance and control to protect our employees and to provide an overall safer environment.

In addition, inmates now have access to tablets to use for researching legal information, studying for a GED, reviewing tutorials and reading mail. Not only do the tablets allow the prison to run more efficiently and, as previously stated, reduce the risk of contraband entering the facility, they also generate additional revenue for the prison.

An RFP for medical treatment was advertised for the purpose of providing inmates as comprehensive a care program as possible.

The commitment to upgrade County's roads continued with various paving projects, as well as several bridges being constructed, upgraded, sent for design, or replaced. Other improvement projects focused on new sidewalks, lighting and retaining walls in various communities.

The County also entered into an agreement with the City of Scranton to collect its property/real estate taxes through the Tax Claim Bureau, receiving five percent on each lien collected.

A virtual marketing campaign was launched to encourage people to shop local to help out small businesses in these unsettling times.

Debt Position

The County has been able to mitigate its annual expenditures for debt service by taking advantage of favorable interest rates. The savings from the refinancings of 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020 allowed the County, without extending the maturity of any of the refinanced bonds, to maintain its annual debt service in a manageable range.

The County will continue to be diligent when seeking further opportunities to restructure its long term debt.

Financial Policies of Lackawanna County for 2021

In 2021, the Administration will again be conservative and demonstrate fiscal responsibility, restraint and management when addressing the County's financial challenges.

The Administration will continue its commitment to addressing the constant challenges facing County government on numerous fronts, especially in the area of its workforce. Personnel-related expenses (salaries, wages and health care) comprise 62.31 percent of the County's general fund budget, net of tax transfers out.

Important Features of the Budget

The 2021 general fund budget includes no property tax increase.

Many man-hours went into the preparation of the County's 2021 fiscal blueprint. Its goal is service to approximately 210,000 residents. The budget also reflects no cuts in programs that our communities and people rely on.

The budget also contains provisions for our parks, Human Services programs, Aging initiatives, environment, and spraying for gypsy moths and black flies while also monitoring for various other

viruses. We continue to meet the challenges of an ever-changing society by doing more with less in a fiscally responsible manner.

Public input is vital to the budget process and the final approved fiscal blueprint. The budget hearings are the perfect venue for the public to provide the Commissioners with ideas that they can review and implement, where possible, to help cut expenses further, generate additional revenue, and move resources to other areas. Residents can attend the Budget Hearings, but space is limited. Please submit questions/suggestions to openmeetings@lackawannacounty.org.

The cost to run County government and its various programs is substantial. A prime example is the Prison. A great deal of revenue is expended for staff, programs, medical treatment, supplies and other ancillary services. This is part of our mission, and we will continue to do so as efficiently as possible.

Reasons for Major Financial Policy, Expenditure & Revenue Changes from 2020 Budget

Due to continued pressure from shrinking Federal and State funding, collectively bargained wage and benefit increases, and rising law enforcement costs, the County's 2021 budget will exceed the 2020 budget.

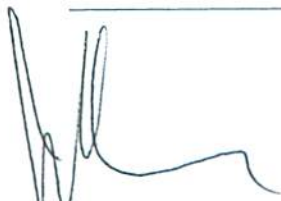
During 2020, the County was able to capitalize on a significant surplus in its debt service fund. Since the County depleted the debt service fund surplus, the County will need to transfer additional funds from the general fund to the debt service fund for 2021.

As previously noted, the Human Services area continues to be the main priority of the programs offered by the County government. In addition to that sector, emergency response, the court system and other vital functions will comprise the majority of the County's 2021 expenditures.

Budget Overviews

The 2021 general fund budget totals \$138,188,930. The 2021 capital budget totals \$2,525,000. The 2021 debt service budget totals \$20,503,513. The 2021 special purpose funds budgets total \$59,235,224.

This Budget Message is respectfully submitted this 15th day of October 2020 pursuant to Section 1.12-1203 of the Lackawanna County Home Rule Charter.



Jerry Notarianni, Chairman
Board of Commissioners



Debi Domenick, Esq., Vice Chair
Board of Commissioners



Chris Chermak
Board of Commissioners