

Westchester Charter Revision Commission
Budget and Finance Focus Group
Minutes of January 13, 2012, Meeting

A meeting of the Budget and Finance Focus Group of the Westchester Charter Revision Commission was held on January 13, 2012, at the offices of Jeffrey Binder, 68 East Post Road, White Plains, New York. Present were focus group members Jeffrey Binder (Focus Group Chair), Julie Killian, Ann McAndrews, John Mattis, and Paul Windels (physically) and Derrickson Lawrence, (by telephone). Also attending were Stacey Dolgin-Kmetz, Legislative Counsel to the Board of Legislators, and Mark S. Tulis, Chair of the Westchester County Healthcare Corp. and a former member of the Board of Legislators (as well as former Town Supervisor and Councilmember for the Town of Newcastle (in person) and Commission Chair Richard Wishnie (by telephone).

After the meeting was called to order, Paul Windels volunteered to serve as secretary for this meeting. The Minutes of the December 9, 2011, meeting were approved subject to changes given to Mr. Windels. Mr. Tulis then addressed the meeting. His overall observation was that the budget process worked properly with respect to the 2012 budget. He noted that the various players in the budget process achieved their major goals – for example the approval of the sewer project for New Castle, which had previously been held up by certain individual Board members. In his view, the ability of one or two powerful legislators to hold up a vote impairs the ability of the Board to function. He therefore recommends that any individual member of the Board of Legislators should be able to have the Board vote on any matter simply by requesting a vote. He also pointed out that he had served on a commission that had recommended abolition of “in lieu of” payments but that the Board had returned to the custom of making such payments to members about a year after that recommendation had been made.

Mr. Tulis believes that the budget process is too compressed time-wise and that ideally it should be completed before Election Day – or at least the County Executive’s proposed budget submitted before that date. He would favor the creation of an independent budget officer, but not an elected official. On the other hand, he believes that the Board could function with less budget staff – when he served the Board’s budget staff comprised approximately 14 employees.

He sees the tax collection system as a major problem, especially in difficult financial times – including times when some people or entities simply fail to pay taxes. Noting that Westchester’s system of towns guaranteeing tax collections upstream is a very rare practice, and that at present there are approximately 45 different assessing units in the County, he recommended that the County should centralize both the assessment and the collection of taxes. The political difficulties of implementing a county-wide assessment process were discussed, especially the concern of seniors living on fixed incomes that a drastic reassessment would disrupt the entire structure of their retirement. A related problem arises out of the ability of condominiums and cooperatives to opt to be revalued based on the rental market. It was also noted that the assessment process cannot be changed by Charter amendment, but requires legislation from New York State, and the history of the failure of such legislation to become law during the 1990’s was explained.

Mr. Tulis explained that the Medical Center’s debt is not guaranteed by the County at present and that the County provides it with no funds. The County is landlord for the Medical Center and provides services, such as snow removal and steam heat, for which the medical Center pays between \$9 and \$12 million per year. The Medical Center also provides services to the County Jail, and is reimbursed at the Medicaid rate. The Medical Center has had good relations with both the Board of Legislators and the County Executive. Its board is appointed

through a complicated process – Mr. Tulis believes that the Medical Center’s board should be self-run, but notes that that is an issue that needs to be resolved by state legislation (he does believe that such legislation would be forthcoming if the Board of Legislators and the County Executive requested it via Home Rule Message).

Mr. Tulis has tried to consolidate laboratory services between the Medical Center and other public entities.

It was agreed that the Focus Group should next meet at a date to be determined in order to focus and synthesize the information made available to it to date and to map out what additional information might be needed in order for it to make recommendations to the full Commission.

The meeting was then adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Paul Windels III
Acting Secretary