

Westchester Charter Revision Commission
Budget and Finance Focus Group
Minutes of November 28, 2011, Meeting

A meeting of the Budget and Finance Focus Group of the Westchester Charter Revision Commission was held on November 28, 2011, at the offices of Jeffrey Binder, 68 East Post Road, White Plains, New York. Present were focus group members Jeffrey Binder (Focus Group Chair), Ann McAndrews, and Paul Windels (physically) and Paul Meissner (Focus Group Vice Chair), Julie Killian, and Matthew Thomas (by telephone). Also attending were Stacey Dolgin-Kmetz, Legislative Counsel to the Board of Legislators, and Paul Noto, a former Majority Leader and Minority Leader of the Board and Mayor of Mamaroneck (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. Mr. Noto then discussed his experience with the budget process from the standpoints of majority and minority leader and of dealing with county executives from both parties. Noting that the Charter gives the Board policymaking authority for the County, he described how the Board first took an independent stance on budget issues under the leadership of Steve Tenore in the early 1990's as well as the general nature of how the budget process has worked within the Board and between the Board and the County Executive during his time of service.

In Mr. Noto's view, the budget process is too short to enable legislators to analyze the budget comprehensively. He pointed out that membership on the Board is a part time position and that the Board has not always hired staff with the experience to analyze a budget in depth – whereas the current Board has hired several staffers who were senior members of the prior County Executive's budget staff. A key criterion in his view is the ability of Board members to

follow up on requests for information from the various executive departments. He would like to see the initial budget released in early October but is also open to the concept of operating on a different fiscal year. Mr. Noto also observed, in connection with the timing issue, that legislators are reluctant to raise taxes shortly before an election.

Mr. Noto does favor having a fixed deadline for adopting the budget with a default mechanism, as it ensures that there will be a budget of some sort no matter what happens in the budget process. He considers the public hearings helpful in that they educate the public about the process and the issues at hand, but that there is too little time to enable the process to accomplish as much as it should. The individuals and organizations that participate tend to be those directly affected by the budget; those same individuals and organizations have the strongest interest in county politics and tend to form the basis of support for most county political activity. By contrast, he experienced far more public interest in day-to-day affairs than when he served in local government in Mamaroneck.

His observations of the process itself include that some legislators operate as workhorses and others as show horses. The same is true for the presentation of parts of the budget – in his view the best budget presentations are concise (less than 30 pages) and focus on the significant issues raised with respect to a particular departmental budget. Ideally, the Budget Chair should ask department heads to focus on what they feel they need in their budgets and why specific items that are proposed to be cut should or should not be cut.

He suggested that an independent Budget Commissioner might improve the overall process and urged that the Focus Group find out if any County has such an officer.

Alternatively, the possibility of an elected comptroller should be considered.

As an overall matter, Mr. Noto believes that the Charter works when elected officials cooperate, but not if they operate in a dysfunctional manner. In his experience, Members of the Board cooperated across party lines and with the County Executive when the Board was closely divided (9-8 or 10-7), as was the case when he served, and it was easier to cooperate in prosperous economic times when the tax base generated sufficient revenues to pay for what was proposed. He never served with a Board aligned like the current Board, with a 12-5 majority in favor of the party in opposition to the County Executive, but noted as an objective matter that such a majority at least opens up the possibility of the majority caucus becoming less inclined to compromise with members of the minority or the County Executive.

It was agreed that the Focus Group should next meet on December 9, 2011, at Mr. Binder's office at 9:30 a.m.

The meeting was then adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Paul Windels III
Acting Secretary