

Minutes of the WPCNA Meeting: 10/9/18

Education House, 5 Homeside Lane

Guest Speaker – George Latimer,
Westchester County Executive

WPCNA Board Members attending:

Bill Brady	Co-President
Andrew Custodio	Co-President
Ruthmarie Hicks	Recording Secretary
Tom Osbeck	Treasurer

WPCNA Board Members not in attendance:

Ron Palmer	Co-Vice President
Chris Price	Co-Vice President

The meeting was called to order by Bill Brady.

Reminder – The next meeting will be on 11/13/18.

Bill Brady introduced George Latimer: He is a native of Westchester County having grown up in Mount Vernon and currently lives in Rye. He has been a council member in Rye, a county legislator a member of the New York State Assembly and later the New York State Senate. He was elected as Westchester County Executive in 2017 and took office this year.

George Latimer:

One of the difficulties of being involved in county government is that residents don't fully understand the role of the county in their day-to-day lives. The services provided are often somewhat invisible.

The county has 4200 employees. It includes social services, a park system, public transportation, sewage. Westchester runs the second biggest bus system in the state of New York (with NYC obviously being first).

When most of us go into New York City, we can see the need for public transportation and notice if it isn't working properly. In Westchester, this is a bit harder because most people drive and our system is geared to automobiles. Most people don't realize how important the busing system is.

Sewage is another boring topic. We spend money on it, but it is something no one notices until something goes wrong.

Since county taxes are small percentage of total property taxes, you can cut taxes 10% and it will save an average family about \$400.00.

Further, the county pays 25% of Medicaid for its residents. That's about \$570 million/year. New York is the only state that makes such big requirements on the county budget.

We are aspiring to stay within the tax cap of 2.2%. There was a \$32 million deficit for last year which was closed out by reserve funds. \$18 million in deficits is projected for this year, but this depends on tax receipts. Back-to-school sales were up over the previous year, so the deficit might be lower than \$18 million.

The county is resurrecting projects that have lain fallow. For example, the WestHELP site near WCC was a project for the homeless was built 20 years ago. This was closed 6 years ago. It will now become 74 units of senior housing.

The sewage system needs upgrades. We have to make ourselves more resilient to events like Hurricane Sandy without doing massive overhauls of infrastructure.

The airport remains a hot topic. The discussion of whether it should be privatized is a bit of misnomer. The people who work at the airport currently are not employed by the county. What was discussed under Astorino was a change in the governance.

The airport is right next to our water supply. There are also noise and air quality issues. We need to resume water testing and perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) removal from water. We need new noise monitors and air quality control. Then we have to go to the FAA for the changes that we need.

We need a new master plan for the airport. People tend to look at the airport as to how it impacts them directly. We can't control aviation but we can control some of the commercial activity.

If we lost all management of the airport we would have less control over what happens at the airport. If it becomes subjugated to the Port Authority, then its expansion would not be under our control. As it is, it is the 3rd busiest airport in New York State.

QUESTIONS:

Q. Are there further cuts in personnel that can be made.

A. We have already reduced personnel from 5000-4200. There isn't much more that can be cut. We have to find ways to close gaps and raise revenues.

For example, we are negotiating with Airbnb so that they pay taxes like any hotel. We are also looking for ways to save money on energy during peak usage times. The gaps have to be closed piece by piece.

There are also economies of scale where the county can share services with a town. For example, Mount Kisco just turned over policing to the county. As part of the merger, Mount Kisco police officers were sworn in as county police.

<https://www.lohud.com/story/news/local/westchester/mount-kisco/2015/05/12/mount-kisco-police-merger-approved/27202081/>

This works for some things, such as police and DPW and works better for small towns (The White Plains Police are not likely to merge with the county).

There is no magic bullet. It's the cumulative impact of many actions.

Q. What about the repair of Mamaroneck Ave?

A. R&M (repair and maintenance) projects is including road repavement. We delayed a long time on this and now there is pent-up demand due to neglect. Playland also needs about \$80-\$100 million in capital. We have to get all these things done with fewer personnel than we had in the past.

Q. If you look at all departments, where do we need the most help/revenue/expertise?

A. The biggest concern is with sewage treatment from health and pollution standpoint and the health of the Long Island Sound. There is the possibility of creating a regionalized sewage system that runs county-wide might be more efficient than town by town.

Another issue is the Health Department. We need more clinics than just in Mount Vernon and Peekskill. Many people who use clinics to vaccinate their children need to use the bus for access. We need more clinics to make this effective.

We don't have money earmarked for the opioid crisis. The situation is totally out of control.

The biggest problem is that there is only so much we can pay in real estate taxes. The cost of providing basic services is going to be more than residents can pay. We need the state to restructure everything. You don't need big government but you do need government.

Q. During the campaign, Indian point was discussed by Astorino as to whether or not the money being spent by Entergy was adequate for the expense of dealing with spent fuel rods. Are we going to be on the hook for that?

A. Maybe. The decommissioning company is taking over Indian Point. They will take care of it over the next 20 years. But, if the company doesn't have enough money, or it shuts down, then we could be on the hook (probably through the state) to fix the remaining issues.

Q. What is going to happen to Buchanan?

A. They don't want to dissolve themselves into the town of Cortlandt. They are going to get hit very hard. State transitional funds will help for four years. They have to decide how they want to take care of the situation, they have home rule. The county will work with the village but the state will have to come in.

Q. What can we do about the opioid crisis? Now it's a white problem as well as black. Why are drugs are so hard to solve?

There is physical and emotional attachment to the drug. If you approach it as a police problem won't get solved. You need medical, social and police for this sort of problem. Bad people figure out how to feed people's habits. A big jail sentence is not a deterrent to addiction.

The meeting was adjourned by Bill Brady.