



ULSTER COUNTY LEGISLATIVE NEWS

ULSTER COUNTY NEWS INFORMATION
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Legislator David B. Donaldson Elected To Serve As Chairman Of The Legislature Gives Chairman's Message And Announces Appointments

During the January 8th Organizational Meeting of the Ulster County Legislature, David B. Donaldson was unanimously elected to serve as Chairman of the Legislature for 2009. Majority Leader Brian B. Cahill and Minority Leader Glenn P. Noonan were re-elected as representatives of the Democratic and Republican caucuses, respectively.

Chairman Donaldson announced changes to the Legislative Office, appointing Mary L. Carey as Clerk of the Legislature and Karen L. Binder as First Deputy Clerk. Carey was Confidential Secretary to the Chairman since 2006 and previously worked for City and State governments. Binder, a Legislative Employee and Deputy Clerk since 2004, was successfully self-employed for thirty years.

Newly appointed to the Legislative office are Meg E. Dellay, Deputy Clerk/Confidential Secretary to the Chairman, Karen R. Spinozzi, Deputy Clerk of Finance and Daniel G. Heppner, Esq., as Legislative Counsel. Prior to arriving at the County, Meg Dellay worked for the State Legislature in a research and writing capacity. Karen Spinozzi brings a wealth of County knowledge to the Legislative office, having worked for County government for many years, most recently in a fiscal role within the former County Administrator's Department. Heppner, an attorney in private practice and until recently, the City of Kingston Corporation Counsel, will benefit the County by his extensive legal expertise.

Chairman Donaldson's Vice Chairman of the Legislature will be Legislator Alan Lomita, District No.7. Legislator Lomita, Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, will have the additional charge in the absence of the Chairman to preside over each duly constituted meeting of the Legislature and other duties as outlined in the Legislature's Rules of Order.

Chairman Donaldson welcomes the above changes and appointments to the Legislative staff; feeling the current staffing will guarantee the Legislature will operate efficiently under the new Charter government.

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Chairman Donaldson presented his Chairman's Message which follows:

Chairman's Message January 8, 2009

Fellow members of the Legislature, I must first thank you for the honor of continuing as your Chairman and servant and further thank the employees, citizens and press that are in attendance this evening.

Three years ago I stood before you as the first Chairman of an Ulster County Legislature with a Democratic majority in nearly thirty years. Pointing out the time as historic, I paraphrased Thomas Jefferson's opening remarks before Congress as he first took office in 1801, "We are all Federalists, we are all Republicans, we are all Americans." The Jefferson "revolution" was the first time in history that one party in power of a nation peacefully handed over the reigns of power to another party. It proved that the American experiment with government worked. Like Jefferson, I understood that we were all in this together and I pledged to work with both sides of the aisle and I continue that pledge.

Today we are embarking on an even more historic time in our history. Our economy is at its worst since the Great Depression and we continue in a war that drains our resources and affects our standing in the world community. But, when clouds are at their darkest, we have a way of finding our brightest. Our first African American President was elected with a strong mandate and I am optimistic that his service will bring our nation back to its moral and just standing in the world community and restructure our economy to better serve the people of our nation.

We Shall Bloom

This spring we will see our County bloom with over 200,000 tulips that were planted by civic organizations, schools, non-profits and individual citizens as part of the Quadricentennial Celebration of Henry Hudson's sailing up the majestic river that now shares his name. We can only imagine his thoughts as he gazed upon the beautiful river, mountains and valley we call our home.

Last Thursday we celebrated a different historic moment, one we helped create, the swearing in of our first County Executive. Three years ago I requested others support and embrace a charter change in my State of the County Address at which I concluded "I may be the last Executive Chairman of this Legislature. I embrace this and encourage others to do the same." I now stand before you as the last Executive Chairman and the first Chairman of a new balanced government in its infant stage and with that I echo my exact words of January 4, 2006, "I embrace this and encourage others to do the same". We molded this historic change through a selfless drive to best serve the public and we should be proud of the results. We now must nurture new relationships so our creation can bloom.

I have invited the County Executive to deliver his first State of the County Address in front of the Legislature at our February meeting and he has agreed to do so. As long as I serve as Chairman this will be an open invitation and I plan on working as close with the Executive as he is comfortable with, but I will also be diligent in protecting the powers of the Legislature to assure the balance that was intended in our Charter.

Legislative Accomplishments

In 2006, I talked about a financial disaster we were facing. Our fund balance was shrinking, our bond rating was at risk and we were facing a 25% property tax increase the following year if we continued to do business as usual. We needed to bring better government at a better price and that would require a three year cycle of well thought out financial choices, many tough decisions and a dash of creativity. Through consolidations, reducing staff, delaying hiring, implementation of a new contract management system, completing federally mandated MS4 requirements at 1/10 the cost, intelligent use of technology, health insurance changes that have been emulated by the surrounding counties and various towns, along with old fashion belt tightening - - we delivered better government at a better price.

We are going into this year with a budget that is well below the inflationary rate, we resisted the politics that would have raided the fund balance so our fund balance remains healthy, and we have a most favorable bond rating. The three year financial plan worked and it is a testament that strong determined people can make a flawed system work. As we hand over the executive powers to our new County Executive we can be extremely proud of our past record as both the executive and legislative branch because it truly speaks for itself.

By contrast, both the Federal and State governments are deeper in red ink than they ever have been in the history of our nation and state. If the past is an indicator, the medicines they use to fix their financial illnesses may very well affect our County's financial health. We will need to be prepared to effectively deal with whatever changes in funding or mandates come our way. I will instruct our Deputy Clerk of Finance and the Finance Committee Chairman to keep close tabs on Federal and State changes and to be as proactive as possible.

I understand that many legislators may feel apprehensive as we begin our new form of government. As a student and teacher of government, I am excited about the new opportunities, powers and duties we will have. We in fact are more empowered to do what legislative bodies are meant to do; control the power of the purse and create clear policy for the County to follow. We will no longer be negotiating how much salt to buy or debating over the color of the doors at the Mental Health Department or attempting to oversee and build projects by committee. Should I remind you how well the latter worked? Instead we will be able to spend more time on what legislative bodies should be doing - - creating policy and holding the purse.

Even though we were often preoccupied with the day to day operation we were still able to work on policy and we accomplished a great deal over the past year. We brought forth legislation and initiatives that:

- Began to hold adults responsible when allowing underage drinking,
- Completed the placement of defibrillators at all County buildings,
- Created a Heart Safe County,
- Implemented a Childhood Overweight and Obesity Prevention program,
- Began GPS tracking of Sex Offenders,
- Created a Re-Entry Task Force,
- Will soon prohibit smoking on County property,
- Created a Department of Environment,
- Secured a Grant to Study Centralization of Property Tax,
- Created a Recycling Oversight Committee,
- Brought about a Shared Municipal Services Feasibility Study,
- Participated in the creation and funding of the Ulster Tomorrow Study,
- Funded and assisted in the Creation of the Solar Consortium,
- Created an Open Space Policy and Open Space Partnership,

Funded and produced the upcoming Quadricentennial Celebration activities
Authorized the funding, distribution and planting of over 200,000 tulips,
Created a long sought after Veterans Cemetery,
Brought for and passed Ethics Legislation,
Expanded the Home Ownership Program,
Supported Belleayre Ski Center,
Created the ultimate transparency by Web Casting our monthly meetings,
Extended Bus Services during the holidays and began a Bus Link to Metro-North,
to name a few.

In our new capacity, we will now also be viewing all contracts over fifty thousand dollars. In the past once we passed a budget, the contracts were awarded and carried out by the Departments and Administrator without Legislators ever seeing them or even knowing who they were awarded to. This new oversight is a powerful check toward transparency, one that is somewhat unique to our Charter, and I believe it will be a great asset in our capacity to control spending. As Chairman, I will continue signing off on various Inter-Municipal and Intra-Municipal Contracts.

We are presently adjusting to renovations to accommodate our new form of government. Last year an Administrative Committee requested complete physical separation between the new County Executive and the Legislature that had an original price tag of 1.2 million dollars that was to be bonded. This was reduced by the Legislature's Building Utilization Committee to approximately half that but the bonding was rejected by the Legislature's Finance Committee. Using emergency powers as Chairman prior to the Charter, I met with our staff, the Administrator's Staff and Buildings & Grounds to work out an emergency plan that would start the process in-house, using as many resources remaining from the 2008 budget as possible. The renovations were started and have since been handed over to the new County Executive. I am happy to say things are moving ahead of the original schedule.

Legislator Mary Sheeley will be appointed to Chair a Sub-Committee on Housing and Transportation to explore ways to address housing issues and better serve the public in regard to public transportation. A Sub-Committee on Safety Chaired by T.J. Briggs will be charged to help better coordinated the various emergency responders and address County Safety Issues. A Sub-Committee of the Laws and Rules Committee, on Efficiency and Reform, will need to address Charter issues as we transition. A committee of Town Supervisors and Legislators to study the Board of Election charge backs, to create a fair policy in regard to cost sharing, will be named within a week's time.

Have a healthy, happy, and prosperous new year.

David B. Donaldson, Chairman
Ulster County Legislature 2009