

Year in Review: 2016's Top Montgomery County Headlines

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For the C-S-E

As 2016 comes to an end, so does the first term for Montgomery County's inaugural legislature. The county's form of government changed in 2013 from a board of supervisors to a two-branch form of government, with nine legislators and a county executive elected to represent residents. In November, polls opened for locals to not only choose the next president, but also the legislature for the next three years.

Several new faces will represent the county's interests, many of which are Republican, taking the majority from the Democratic party. District 7 will be represented by Michael Pepe, replacing Barbara Wheeler. Daniel Wilson will replace Terry Bieniek for the District 5 seat.

Republicans Brian Sweet and Robert Headwell will replace District 2 Legislator Thomas Quackenbush and District 4 Legislator Ryan Weitz, respectively. Weitz and Quackenbush both decided not to seek re-election.

Republican incumbent for District 1, Martin Kelly, was re-elected.

Democratic incumbents Roy Dimond, District 3, John Duchessi, District 6, Joseph Isabel, District 8, and Robert Purtell, District 9, were also re-elected.

Additionally, the county will see a new district attorney after James "Jed" Conboy decided to retire after serving 21 years in the position. Current assistant district attorney for both Fulton and Montgomery counties, Kelli McCoski, was elected to the position over Howard Aison, also a Montgomery County assistant district attorney and former district attorney.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

This year, the county also made steps toward revitalizing the former Beech-Nut site in the village of Canajoharie. The county was awarded a temporary issuance of ownership for the more than 26-acre site, allowing officials to legally enter the property to conduct tests determining whether it is feasible for the county to take ownership. The site is owned by TD Development LLC in Cincinnati, Ohio, which has failed to pay taxes since purchasing the property in 2013.

The site was selected by the American Architectural Foundation in March to participate in the 2016 Sustainable Cities Design Academy. In the three-day design charrette in Washington, D.C., funded by the foundation, a group of county officials worked with professionals who have previously tackled large-scale remediation efforts to create a vision for the former Beech-Nut factory.

Ideas for redesign include demolition on the eastern end of the site, a more traditional economic development site, to get it shovel-ready. The western portion of the site needs to be stabilized, county officials have said, and could include more non-traditional development, such as incorporating trends like

distilleries or culinary arts, a connection to institutions like the Arkell Museum, or a regional hub for educational institutions.

The county has not yet foreclosed on the site and is waiting for release from the Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Environmental Conservation for site-related liability.

- In another move forward with economic development, the town of Florida Planning Board approved in October a 750,000 square-foot distribution center for Dollar General in the Florida Business Park Extension at the corner of Fort Hunter Road and Route 5S, which is land owned by the Montgomery County Industrial Development Industry. The facility was first proposed in March, after Dollar General decided not to pursue a distribution center in Saratoga County.

The IDA expects to close on a land deal with the Dollar General Corporation within the next two weeks. The \$91 million proposed facility could create at least 430 new jobs within the first five years. The company expects to invest more than \$85 million in the project. If approved, construction is projected to begin around May 2017.

- The county also opted to join the Greater Mohawk Valley Land Bank in October in an effort to combat blight in the county, about two years after the idea was originally proposed. Montgomery joins the Herkimer, Otsego and Schoharie counties, as well as the cities of Rome and Utica.

LEGISLATURE BUSINESS

- The county legislature started off the year by going back to a five-person committee structure, which the legislature began its first year with before going to a three-person structure. Legislators said the three-person structure caused confusion about who could or could not vote to move a resolution to the full body meetings.

- The legislature adopted an updated non-bargaining personnel policy for elected Montgomery County officials during a Personnel Committee in March. The policy combines what elected officials would have earned through longevity and step increase, or gradual increases in an employee's pay. The policy also increases salaries for the county treasurer, clerk, sheriff, and coroners. The salary increases will take effect after the officials' current terms, a decision that came after the legislature pulled a resolution that would increase salaries during the current terms through a local law following opposition.

- After more than a year of work, the legislature passed a local law in March to strengthen animal welfare and cruelty prevention in the county by enhancing regulations from the Department of Agriculture and Markets. The law sets a minimum standard of care for animals with housing, sanitation and exercise, among other provisions. The law was first proposed in 2015 and was met with concerns that fees would hinder lawful breeders and sellers from continuing their operations.

- The legislature adopted a \$111.2 million budget for 2017 on Oct. 11. The budget includes a nearly \$260,000 property tax levy increase and revenues, excluding the tax cap, budgeted at \$83.4 million. The budget uses \$3.897 from fund balance.

- Town of Florida Supervisor Eric Mead was confirmed as Department of Public Works commissioner during a legislature meeting Oct. 25. He will start in the new year. Mead replaces retiring commissioner Paul Clayburn, who has been with the county for 30 years. Clayburn will stay on as "commissioner of highways" with Mead as DPW commissioner until Clayburn reaches full retirement age in about a year and

a half. County officials have said this ensure Clayburn's years of experience are not lost.

INFRASTRUCTURE

- MJ Engineering and Land Surveying, P.C., of Clifton Park, released a final draft of the Fonda Connector Study in January with updated costs and preliminary designs. It proposed three potential routes for a highway that would connect the Thruway Exit 28 to the Johnstown Industrial Park, diverting truck traffic from downtown Fonda. The routes would take land from local property owners. Montgomery County and the village of Fultonville officially opposed the connector in March. Department of Transportation officials have said it would be difficult for Fulton County to proceed with the plans without Montgomery County's support.
- A collapsed culvert on Miami Avenue closed the busy road from Tessiero Square to Amsterdam High School from March 18 until Oct. 14 while plans were approved by Gov. Andrew Cuomo's Office of Storm Recovery, which provided funding for the \$550,000 replacement. The original 25-year-old metal pipe sustained damaged during recent hurricanes and was replaced with a high-strength plastic.
- After a year of construction, Montgomery County officials marked the grand opening of the new wing at the Public Safety Facility off of Route 5S on Oct. 19. It is named after long-time county employee Lucille Sitterly, probation director, and holds the new Emergency Operations Center, and the probation, mental health and public defender offices.
- The legislature adopted in October a payment in lieu of taxes schedule for utility-scale solar and wind energy systems, similar to that available for other commercial businesses. The local law seeks to capture tax revenue from solar developments, rather than not acting on a state real property tax law that allows alternative energy facilities to be exempt from general municipal and school district taxes for 15 years.

OTHER COUNTY NEWS:

- Montgomery County launched Montgomery County Works in May, a website to help connect job-seekers with available employment opportunities throughout the county. Within two months, the website had received positive reactions across the capital region.
- Montgomery County took a hit in sales tax at the beginning of the year, seeing a more than 6 percent decrease in its sales tax from 2015, largely due to a drop in fuel prices at the end of 2015. This was the largest hit in sales tax statewide, although many other counties saw low sales tax as well. First quarter sales tax, however, was already looking up in April at about 6.2 percent higher than the first quarter in 2015.
- The 175th Fonda Fair kicked off Aug. 30 with a host of events, including a small ceremony attended by local officials who reflected on the history of the fair within the county and its significance in recognizing local agriculture.
- Montgomery County received \$4.56 million through the latest round of Regional Economic Development Council funding, which includes \$1.26 million for the city of Amsterdam. The county IDA received \$1.5 million for the Florida Business Park Extension project for improvements to Route 5S to help with traffic flow to make way for the Dollar General Distribution Center. The county also received \$671,575 to go toward relocating the Public Safety Facility Emergency Services and Sheriff's Garage out of the floodplain and onto land next to the Public Safety Facility off of Route 5S.