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Mr. Daniel L. Palmer, County Manager
Members of the Board of Supervisors
Essex County Government Center
7551 Court Street
P.O. Box 217
Elizabethtown, NY 12932

Report Number: S9-21-9

Dear County Manager Palmer and Members of the Board of Supervisors:

The COVID-19 pandemic (pandemic) has had various levels of impact on the financial operations of local governments across New York State. Some local governments have seen little to no impact on their financial operations, while others have seen more significant impacts due to reductions and/or increases to their revenues and/or expenditures. This has led to some local governments having to reduce or eliminate some services and temporarily or permanently reduce staff positions. In addition, some local officials have decided to delay capital projects, which could result in future delays to other projects to maintain and improve local government infrastructures.

The pandemic has also created a difficult environment for officials to develop annual budgets given the unknowns of future financial impacts. The pandemic increases the need for local officials to more closely monitor their budgeted estimates for revenues and expenditures against actual results and modify their budgetary estimates accordingly, when warranted, during the course of their fiscal year.

To assess whether local officials adequately considered the impact of the pandemic on their financial operations while developing their 2021 fiscal year budgets, our office conducted reviews of 20 adopted budgets of various counties, cities, towns and villages across the State. Essex County (County) is one of the local governments included in our review.

The objective of the review was to provide an independent evaluation of certain aspects of the adopted budget. Our review addressed the following question related to the County's adopted budget for the 2021 fiscal year:

- Did officials adequately assess the impact of the pandemic on financial operations while developing estimates for significant revenues and expenditures in the 2021 adopted budget?

Summary of Findings

Our review found that officials adequately assessed the impact of the pandemic on financial operations while developing estimates for significant revenues and expenditures in the 2021 adopted budget.

However, in consideration of the continually new and evolving impacts caused by the pandemic, County officials should carefully monitor their budgeted to actual revenues and expenditures and make amendments to the budget as needed throughout the year.

Methodology

To accomplish our objective in this review, we requested your adopted budget and other pertinent information. We interviewed officials and reviewed the adopted budget to gain an understanding of the budget development process and to determine whether any estimates in the adopted budget were adjusted by officials due to the potential impact the pandemic could have on financial operations. We identified and examined for reasonableness significant estimated revenues and expenditures¹ and estimated revenues and expenditures below our established threshold that could more likely be impacted by the pandemic. We also identified any significant new revenue or expenditure estimates, made appropriate inquiries and reviewed supporting documentation to assess whether the estimates were realistic and reasonable. In addition, we evaluated the amount of fund balance and/or reserves appropriated in the adopted budget to be used as a financing source and determined whether these amounts were available and sufficient for that purpose.

The scope of our review does not constitute an audit under generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS). We do not offer comments or make specific recommendations on public policy decisions, such as the type and level of services under consideration to be provided.

Background

The County is located in northeastern New York State and encompasses 18 towns and two villages.² The County is governed by the Board of Supervisors (Board), which is composed of 18 members, one of whom serves as the Chair. The Chair is the chief executive officer and the elected County Treasurer is the chief fiscal officer. As the budget officer for the County, the appointed County Manager (Manager) requests estimates from department heads to use in the preparation of the tentative budget. Once the Manager prepares the tentative budget, it is presented to the Board. The Board then makes any necessary revisions to the tentative budget. The County holds a public hearing on the tentative budget and then makes any necessary final revisions prior to adopting the budget.

¹ For this review, we established significant estimated revenues and expenditures to be those consisting of 5 percent or more of a fund's total budget estimates.

² Only a portion of the Village of Saranac Lake is in the County.

The County's operating funds consist of a general, county road, road machinery and solid waste fund. In addition to the four operating funds, the County also maintains separate funds for capital projects, workers' compensation and self-insurance purposes. The County provides various services to its residents, including general government support, economic assistance, public health, public safety, road maintenance and solid waste management. The County's operations are predominately financed by sales tax, real property taxes, and State and federal aid.

Following are the 2021 adopted budget figures, broken down by funds, along with the 2020 adopted budget total for all funds for comparative purposes.

Figure 1: 2021 Adopted Budget				
Fund	Appropriations and Provisions for Other Uses	Financing Sources		
		Estimated Revenues	Appropriated Fund Balance	Real Property Taxes
General	\$97,608,875	\$72,145,392	\$1,463,483	\$24,000,000
County Road	13,665,133	13,165,133	500,000	0
Road Machinery	3,480,782	3,230,782	250,000	0
Solid Waste	1,612,594	1,612,594	0	0
Capital Projects	500,000	500,000	0	0
Workers' Compensation	1,484,968	1,484,968	0	0
Self Insurance	4,268,174	4,268,174	0	0
Total for 2021	\$122,620,526	\$96,407,043	\$2,213,483	\$24,000,000
Total for 2020	\$119,375,934	\$93,767,623	\$2,108,311	\$23,500,000

Our review found that while developing 2021 budgetary estimates for significant revenues and expenditures, County officials adequately considered the pandemic's impact on financial operations. If you have any questions on the scope of our work, please feel free to contact Julie Landcastle, Chief Examiner of the Statewide and Regional Projects Unit, at (607) 721-8306.

Sincerely,

Elliott Auerbach
Deputy Comptroller

cc: Michael G. Diskin, County Treasurer
Judith A. Garrison, Clerk of the Board
Gary G. Gifford, Regional Chief Examiner