

GKA remarks at 6/20 press conference

Thank you for coming.

As you know, the Erie County Charter Revision Commission was established last year and instructed to study the operations and responsibilities of county government and recommend any changes to the county charter that are needed in order to improve how county government functions and how it delivers services. I am here today, as chair of the commission, to deliver our final report to the County Legislature.

(Unscripted thanks to the commissioners, the staff, and the volunteers.)

The commission examined the entire charter, article by article. We divided that work among five committees: Administration and Legislature; Fiscal Affairs; Form and Scope of Government; Human Services, Education, Recreation and Culture; and Public Safety. Each committee met weekly, from October 2005 through this May, in addition to the meetings of the full commission. The committees interviewed county officials, outside experts, civic organization and concerned citizens, to learn how county government operates now and to collect suggestions for how to improve it. The full commission also received presentations from elected officials, scholars, and other experts in good-government practices.

Each committee submitted its eventual recommendations to the full commission for further review and possible revision. By the end of May the commission had taken action on all of the committee recommendations. We then held a series of three hearings, in different portions of the county, to hear what the public had to say about our provisional recommendations. After meeting again as a full commission to consider the testimony provided at the hearings, we made our final revisions and produced the report I am now holding.

I'd like to highlight a few of our many recommendations. First, regarding the county's recent fiscal crisis, which so severely disrupted life for both county residents and public servants, angered so many, and prompted, in part, the creation of this very commission: The causes of that crisis are not *entirely* to be found in the county charter. Short-sightedness, irresponsibility and poor judgment can never be completely eradicated; they could arise within any governmental structure and under any set of operating procedures. We can, however, reduce the risk by introducing safeguards into the process of formulating and adopting the county budget.

Several such safeguards are proposed in our report; they establish checks and balances among the County Executive, the Comptroller, and the Legislature, to ensure that each branch's actions can be independently reviewed by the others. First, the annual budget always relies on an estimate of revenue anticipated to arrive during the coming year. If that estimate is unrealistically high, a budget that appears to be balanced will in fact lead to a deficit during the year. To avert that problem in the future, we are proposing that the Comptroller be authorized to review the revenue projections in the annual budget submitted by the County Executive, and to recommend that the

Legislature cut any inflated projections. Moreover, should a deficit still occur during the year for whatever reason, we propose that the Comptroller share the authority, now held exclusively by the County Executive, to declare the deficit and call on the Legislature to take corrective action. Our proposal also establishes a series of steps with specific time limits, involving the Administration, Comptroller and Legislature, to ensure that any such deficit does in fact get addressed promptly.

Although not a matter of charter language and thus not something we're formally proposing, we do believe there's another step the Legislature could take that would strengthen its capacity to independently judge the county's fiscal condition and the documents it receives from the County Executive and Comptroller: we believe the Legislature could better carry out its own fiscal responsibilities and intervene *before* a crisis erupts if it augmented the financial expertise of its own central staff.

Also related to fiscal responsibility is the recommendation to divide the current duties and powers of the County Executive between the County Executive and a proposed position of County Manager. The County Executive would continue to set the overall direction of county policy, while the County Manager would oversee the day-to-day operations of county government, including the hiring of all department heads. The Commission was divided on this proposal, but a majority believe that such a hybrid form of government would best meet the county's needs because it would provide both the strong political leadership of an elected head, responsive to voters countywide, and the professional skills of a qualified manager. The supporters of this proposal believe that placing day-to-day operations in the hands of a nonpolitical manager, hired through a national search, would yield more responsible budgets and less patronage hiring.

Now, apart from addressing the roots of the recent fiscal crisis, the Commission was also concerned with providing the residents of the county a more accessible government and better services. There isn't time to discuss all our recommendations in those areas, but I would like to mention just two examples. First, one way we recommend opening up county government to public participation is by providing opportunities for public comment before the Legislature enacts local laws—we propose requiring a public hearing before the Legislature passes a proposed local law (except in cases of special urgency, when immediate action is required). And as for improving county services, one of our recommendations is to implement the major features of a plan that's been sitting around waiting to be enacted for several years, known as the "Blueprint for Change." It's a complex proposal, but the central idea is to offer a single point of entry to county residents needing assistance of any kind, so that a single case officer can provide an integrated package of services spanning various funding sources. To make that possible, several county departments would be brought together under the current Department of Social Services—to be renamed the Department of Human Services—and operations would be restructured so as to focus entirely on the needs of those receiving services, not those of the Department. Some savings are expected, but the primary goal is streamlining and improving the services that are provided.

The final topic I'd like to raise is a problem that became apparent during our deliberations and public hearings: a deep mistrust of the county government shared by many towns and villages within the county. We believe that mistrust has grown because of the absence of any formal relationship between the municipal governments and county government. We therefore recommend that the Legislature establish some form of intergovernmental liaison, to create a channel via which local governments throughout the county may regularly express their concerns. With better communication will come better understanding and, ultimately, stronger regional cooperation.

We ask that the Legislature forward a copy of our report to the Fiscal Stability Board and the County Executive.

We do hope the Legislature will consider our recommendations carefully and deem them worthy of placing in front of the voters. We also understand that the schedule for getting referenda on this November's ballot is very tight. If it turns out that giving all our recommendations due consideration is impossible before the deadline for a November referendum, rather than rush the Legislature's deliberations we would prefer they hold some recommendations over until 2007, in order to allow full consideration of the most urgent portions of our report in time for this year's election.