

Monthly Report
Tompkins County Council of Governments
for January 14, 2026

by Councilperson Robert Lynch
Enfield TCCOG Representative

The Tompkins County Council of Governments (TCCOG) met on December 11. The meeting was long, dominated by two subjects: Emergency Medical Services and matters involving TCCOG's compliance with New York Open Meetings Law (OML). TCCOG membership did not adopt resolutions on either subject, or on any other issue, aside from on matters of routine housekeeping.

EMS: Paul Bishop, principal of the consulting firm, Center for Governmental Research (CGR), briefed TCCOG on a report his firm had prepared for the Tompkins County Legislature, an "Emergency Medical Services Evaluation," including recommendations for short-range improvement of EMS services and a longer-range, 25-year forecast of where local emergency services are headed. Bishop first presented his findings at a meeting of the Legislature's Public Safety Committee October 28. Bishop's repeat presentation, this one to TCCOG, broke little new ground in itself. Yet subsequent discussions raised valid points. At the close of TCCOG's discussion, Dan Klein, then-Chair of the County Legislature, now retired, predicted that the incoming Legislature would take up the CGR report sometime later this year.

For the immediate term, the CGR recommendations would expand Tompkins County's Rapid Medical Response (RMR) program under a county-wide Certificate of Need and permit RMR staff to elevate to paramedic-level care, most likely with one ambulance or two.

The more basic "*Bridging Gap Ambulance Service*," which Bishop called a "First Baby Step," would purchase a single ambulance, make it ready 24/7, but deploy it only sparingly. Under this plan, there'd be another paramedic first response vehicle in house and a staffing budget of \$1.7 Million, up from RMR's current \$684,000. A more ambitious "*Safety Net Ambulance Service*" would purchase two ambulances, employ more people, and incur a staffing budget of \$2.5 Million. Investment in ambulances would be on top of the staffing expense.

More prominently placed during the TCCOG presentation was Bishop's "*Vision for the Future*," the CGR Report's most controversial element. "A single EMS provider that was adequately staffed, well led and properly funded covering the whole county would lead to better patient outcomes for the residents and visitors to Tompkins County," Paul Bishop reiterated to TCCOG his earlier committee message.

"This would be a dramatic paradigm shift," the consultant cautioned as to what he saw lying ahead. Most notably, privately-run Bangs Ambulance, he said, would no longer be a provider (although Bangs' exit was never fully explained). Municipally-run ambulance services would also dissolve. Either a governmentally-run or nonprofit agency-operated service would handle all transports. Transition would involve "difficult or unpopular decisions," Bishop acknowledged. "However, this will likely be the EMS system in Tompkins County by 2050," the consultant forecast. "The question is how fast you're going to get there," he said.

Representatives of Bangs Ambulance had not attended either the legislative committee or TCCOG meetings. But minutes before TCCOG met, Meghan Bangs, a member of the Bangs Ambulance Board, directed to TCCOG a statement. It reacted in part to a news article that had, Bangs said, alleged that Bangs hasn't done enough to address the EMS situation or has acted mainly out of self-interest.

“For more than 80 years, Bangs Ambulance has been the backbone of emergency medical care in Tompkins County.” Meghan Bangs wrote. “But it is deeply discouraging to see public commentary from elected officials framing Bangs Ambulance as the problem rather than acknowledging the structural deficiencies that challenge every EMS provider in the region,” she stated. “We are not asking to be rescued,” Meghan Bangs continued. “We are asking to be included—in planning efforts, in system-wide reform discussions, and in any future funding or training initiatives intended to strengthen EMS countywide. We have the infrastructure, the expertise, and the commitment to remain a central part of the solution. But we must be treated as partners, not scapegoats.”

Addressing TCCOG, Paul Bishop raised for the first time a possible funding model for a county-coordinated ambulance service. It would resemble funding for Tompkins Consolidated Area Transit (TCAT), one in which municipal partners share governance and subsidies. In TCAT’s case, Tompkins County, the City of Ithaca and Cornell University each share one-third responsibility and funding.

“I expect that a TCAT model would be a no-go for the City,” outgoing Alderperson Pierre St. Perez, the Ithaca City’s then representative on TCCOG, reacted to the suggestion. St. Perez argued the concept would incur “double taxation” for Ithacans. Bishop qualified that the city’s share would not necessarily be one-third. St. Perez still objected. Trumansburg Mayor Rordan Hart held similar concerns.

Mayor Hart noted that all agencies, including Bangs, answer calls based on a “centralized dispatch model,” coordinated by the Tompkins County’s 911 Center. Under that dispatch model, Hart said, the only response model making sense is one similar to that of the Sheriff’s Department. Under that arrangement, County Government would provide some “baseline level of EMS coverage.” And communities like Dryden and Trumansburg (which have their own ambulance companies) and the City and Town of Ithaca (which have Bangs) could supplement that baseline service at local expense.

I raised to Paul Bishop the point that some in the Enfield Fire and Rescue community were “very skeptical” of his 25 year projection that Bangs Ambulance would “just kind of dry up and blow away.” Bishop answered that he sees the replacement of small ambulance companies that serve smaller communities by non-profit or governmentally-run ambulance services as a trend. “Unless there’s a change in how ambulance transport is funded, it’s a really hard trend to buck,” Bishop maintained.

The funding problem, Bishop explained, lies in the lack of “call density” in rural communities. Bangs may make a profit serving Ithaca, but would lose money were it to attempt county-wide service in the decades ahead. One idea arose at TCCOG that could address the problem and retain Bangs as a player. That plan would have County Government contract with Bangs, and under such an “agreement of service,” government would pay Bangs (as well as any other agency) a fee for each 911 call response.

I also posed to the consultant my suspicion that much of the problem with Bangs being overstretched lies with the Ithaca Fire Department’s unwillingness to answer low-level “Alpha” calls for such tasks as bed lifts, tasks Enfield Fire Company volunteers routinely answer as a matter of policy. “That is a political decision that you really need to refer to the Town and City,” Bishop deflected.

Impatience arose from some circles for quick implementation of a county-centralized model. “If it’s something that we’re going to need by 2050, I at least don’t see a need to wait,” Ithaca’s Pierre St. Perez told the consultant. “How quickly if we really just go for it, would that be viable?” the Alderperson asked. Perhaps misreading St Perez’s question, Paul Bishop defaulted to short-term expansions. He said were Tompkins County to secure a Certificate of Need and maybe rent an ambulance or buy a used transport vehicle, first-level expansion could happen by the end of 2026.

TCCOG Open Meeting Law Compliance: As was discussed at length in my December 10 report to this Town Board, the Clerk of the Tompkins County Legislature and County Attorney have raised questions concerning TCCOG's alleged non-compliance with New York State Open Meetings Law (OML), particularly in the way some of TCCOG's subcommittees have operated outside the OML's and Tompkins County's own standards for public openness and transparency. TCCOG members failed to resolve these questions at their December meeting. Then-Legislature Chair Dan Klein had offered a multi-point resolution that would have established stricter standards of OML compliance. But instead of acting on Klein's measure, members reached impasse. Upon my motion, TCCOG postponed its vote until January.

Two schools of thought emerged during TCCOG's nearly half-hour of discussion. Some members, perhaps a majority, viewed TCCOG itself, and not just its committees, as an "advisory" board not bound by the OML. Others, including Legislature Chair Klein, favored erring on the side of transparency.

"On a legal question, is TCCOG legally obligated under the Open Meetings Law to follow its provisions?" Klein asked. "I think it is, but I'm not an attorney," the chairman answered hesitantly. But on a "philosophical or moral" basis, Klein stated, "Shouldn't we be doing this? We're all elected officials, and we are here discussing public business, and so it just seems like it's hard for me to understand why we wouldn't want to follow the Open Meetings Law." Klein acknowledged that OML compliance can be "pesky and inconvenient," but to him it's a matter of "checks and balances," that the public deserves

County Attorney Maury Josephson was more emphatic. "My opinion is that (TCCOG) is a public meetings body," Josephson insisted. "It meets all of the requirements." Josephson rattled them off: It requires a quorum. "It conducts public business, and it performs a government function." Toward that end, "TCCOG is able to effectively recommend legislation to the Tompkins County Legislature," Josephson observed, citing the day's prior discussion about emergency medical services as his example.

As to an opinion of the Committee on Open Government, one advanced by the Village of Trumansburg's Counsel (Guy Krogh), purportedly to buttress the claim that TCCOG is a "purely advisory" body, Josephson countered that it actually supports his own position and that of the Legislature's Clerk.

Rordan Hart, Trumansburg Mayor and member of the Emergency Preparedness Committee whose private meetings precipitated the OML discussions, took a different view. "If we make a policy that says we are subject to Open Meetings Law when we are in fact not, that is philosophically as big a mistake as is saying we're going to be a closed group," Mayor Hart maintained. What's more, Hart said, "For the Emergency Services Subcommittee, (OML compliance) would effectively cease most of our conversations," discussions over "non-public, personal information," much of it not even subject to FOIL.

I raised what I stated was Enfield's somewhat "nuanced" position, one advanced by our Town Board the night before. It held that while TCCOG, itself, may be subject to the OML, its subcommittees may not be, providing those subcommittees only advise TCCOG and do not pass resolutions or act independently.

TCCOG took a nonbinding straw poll that day as to whether TCCOG was legally bound to follow the OML. On that narrow issue, only I and Cayuga Heights' Mayor, Linda Woodard, were seen raising our hands.

Respectfully submitted,

Robert Lynch
Councilperson
Enfield TCCOG Representative