

TRANSFORMING SYRACUSE

ALLIANCE OF COMMUNITIES

ACTS Statement on the Consensus Report

**On behalf of its members, the Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse (ACTS) is submitting the following comments on the Consensus “Options Report & Preliminary Recommendations.”**

The Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse (ACTS) is a grassroots, interfaith network advocating for social justice. We are voices striving for a more just and fair community that improves the quality of life for all in Onondaga County.

Our mission is to come together as people of faith and conscience in working to affect the systemic change necessary to rectify the socio-economic, educational, and political inequities that exist in our community.

As such, we believe it essential for our interfaith network and our member congregations and organizations to be active participants in the community discussion as to how to proceed with the modernization of local government. There is no question that changes must be made to improve the operations of government and to enhance the role of the public in these processes of **transforming institutions to better serve the people.**

While much of the focus of the Consensus Report is on improving the efficiency and effectiveness of governmental structures, we believe that the matters pertaining to their costs are secondary to their primary purpose of providing services that are aligned with broader community values.

These values include “smart growth” principles that would turn the tide of suburban sprawl and bring common sense to land-use planning that maximizes community-wide benefits. Our concentrated poverty and housing segregation demonstrate the essential need for affordable alternatives throughout the county. Smart growth would help to rationalize public transit that can serve more people better.

Responses to the Consensus Report clearly point to community values that demand institutional accountability for equitable representation in governance and channels for greater public participation in communal decision-making. “Public hearings” as a model are antiquated for this purpose.

While the stewardship of limited resources is a critical element of ongoing public debate, the inequities of the current socio-economic system in our community point to the need for addressing the vital concerns of the chronically disadvantaged in our midst. An economy and its safety-net that does not do justice to aspirations of all people is built on the sinking-sand of a system undermining its collective prosperity. Positive outcomes in economic success will follow from broadening opportunities.

We do not believe that the Common Good and respecting the choices of people in their local communities are incompatible. However, we recognize that many years of discrimination based on race and social class have fostered areas of concentrated poverty through exclusionary zoning and other policies inhibiting opportunities for all.

To the questions of infrastructure, public safety municipal operations, we add our voice to those of many others who simply say: Let’s get to it and let’s get it done. Certainly the experts on our various service sectors can bring their resources together in modes of consolidation that will eliminate redundancy while respecting the unique characteristics of the city, towns, and villages throughout the county.

We must continue to have our local tax system evolve in such ways that it promotes economic equity and balance throughout the county. For example, it in the self interest of all taxpayers to expand the use of county dollars in such critical educational activities such as the work of Literacy Coalition county-wide and SAY YES to Education for young people in the city school district. Such investments from the broad community have been a win-win for the future of everyone.

Key to the pursuit of our overall economic development is a fundamental change in land-use planning. The Consensus Report points out that “the absence of an enforceable land use plan has exacerbated the incentives to engage in zero sum fiscal growth throughout the County.” While we applaud Recommendation #2 in this section that calls “consistent and enforceable planning on a countywide basis,” we believe that a bolder vision of regional powers is essential to our future.

Onondaga County and the City of Syracuse must work with the state legislature to remove barriers to consolidation of services and eventually to a merger of governance. However, we do not believe that it is in the best interests of the community to try to reach a consensus prematurely. Any notion of a public referendum that comes before all facts are fully understood should be shelved beforehand.

A period of at least 2 years should be given to an extended conversation about governance structure. This conversation should model interactive dialog rather than shouting matches in the public arena. The specifics of important issues such as methods to collect taxes and allocate funds and equitable representation need thorough review. Such proactive inclusive community engagement promises to generate a greater Consensus.

Final, 04/29/16