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Comptroller

COUNTY OF ONONDAGA

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## NEWS RELEASE

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### What Would Preet Bharara Do?

Syracuse, NY – Last night Robert E. Antonacci II, CPA, Onondaga County Comptroller, addressed the full Onondaga County Legislature in relation to budget cuts to his office as proposed by the County Executive.

The text of Mr. Antonacci's comments are included herewith. Mr. Antonacci stated, "I appreciate the opportunity to speak to the full Legislature about the Mahoney Revenge Budget. It is clear to me removing oversight from the Comptroller's Office is not in the best interests of Onondaga County taxpayers. I asked the Legislature to restore these positions so that my office could continue to perform its duties required by the Charter and Code."

Mr. Antonacci continued, "I say what would Preet Bharara do and will leave you with this quote from Mr. Bharara at a conference this week, 'It would be a time to actually not be removing watchdogs and not be removing oversight, but increasing oversight.'"

For further information, contact Robert Antonacci II, CPA at (315) 435-2130.



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October 6, 2016

Honorable Members of the Onondaga County Legislature:

The County Executive proposed her tentative budget on September 15 and eliminated six payroll auditors from the Office of the County Comptroller. Along with other cuts, the County Executive's tentative budget slashes the County Comptroller payroll line by 29%. No other elected official, or department for that matter, had the salaries line slashed by that amount. In addition, no other elected official had positions removed from their office. It is incredulous to me such a serious matter would be dropped on your desks a mere three weeks ago. But that is the County Budget process and now we all must address the tentative budget proposed by the County Executive.

First, let us address the elephant in the room. There is no doubt relations have been strained between the Office of County Comptroller, the Onondaga County Legislature and County Executive. And that strain, while it may have had many different beginnings, there is no doubt the filing of the lawsuit by my office has led us to the events of today. I have referred to the County Executive's budget as a "Revenge Budget" and I believe that to be the case as I stand here tonight. The County Comptroller is charged with oversight of County finances and must certify all claims including payroll. That is our job and it does not change with the implementation of a new payroll system. That is what the Charter charges us to do and that is what I was elected to do. With a 29% reduction in payroll and the elimination of six positions, I can only conclude the County Executive's budget is political retribution because clearly my office is being eviscerated and will have an impossible task of performing our duties.

What are our duties? Accountability. Oversight. Audit. Checks and Balances. Whatever you want to call it, to eliminate or prevent our office from performing these duties is not in the best interests of the Onondaga County taxpayers. In light of the very serious allegations concerning developer COR along with other headlines we see on a daily basis, I would think the last thing we want to do is eliminate oversight and accountability within County government.

My payroll auditors audit payroll. It is their chief function and consumes virtually their entire time. To be sure, there might be what some call "processing" in my department, but don't forget that I am also the Chief Accounting Officer and my office is charged with accounting and reporting all transactions in Onondaga County. My office is also responsible for recording all encumbrances and appropriations, and obviously payroll is one of our largest expenditures. To confuse my audit function with that of an outside independent auditor is simply not a reliable way to evaluate the County Executive's Tentative Budget.

Besides, what hasn't worked? For 50 years the Onondaga County Comptroller has provided oversight and accountability in County Government and only this year, subsequent to a lawsuit being filed by my office has there been any question as to the office duties concerning payroll. What hasn't worked? What's broken? More importantly, what will be broken or won't work if this oversight is taken out of my office?

In the aftermath of the allegations involving the developer COR and the SUNY system Albany lawmakers have begun to question why contract oversight was taken away from the State Comptroller in 2011. As stated in a recent news article, “five years ago, in the name of “streamlining”, Cuomo convinced state lawmakers to curtail Comptroller Tom DiNapoli’s oversight authority on contracts and spending by SUNY nonprofits”. I am sure no one would like a similar headline involving Onondaga County payroll?

Even if you allow new positions to be created in the County Administration, my office still needs returned the six employees being cut which are now within my office to audit and certify payroll. The tentative budget leaves my office one payroll auditor, and one person cannot keep an eye on a half billion dollar expenditure and over 3,200 payroll payments every two weeks in County government.

Good government and accountability demands these individuals remain under the auspices of the independently elected County Comptroller. This back and forth of what other counties and auditors do is of little consequence. Sure, I have no problem taking a look at the eight other county governments that have elected comptrollers. The County Comptrollers of Nassau, Oneida, Ulster, and Suffolk, along with the New York State Comptroller, perform essentially the same, and in some cases more duties, than my office performs in payroll. The remaining three have some form of audit oversight. Where do we draw the line in looking at other Counties? The Erie County Comptroller sells the bonds of his County, not a function within my office. Should it be? To go one step further, not every county has a County Executive form of government. With the Consensus discussion, is that something we should consider? Not every County has a full time County Legislature. Many legislative bodies only warrant a half time benefit from the New York State Retirement System. My point is, that exercise is a rabbit hole not worthy of further comparison because we do it **RIGHT** here in our county!

I leave you with a quote from Preet Bharara, US Attorney of the Southern District NY, who at a recent conference said, “You do the right thing in the right way for the right reasons. Always. That’s it.”

What’s the right thing for Onondaga County? I proffer we leave payroll auditors right where they should be. What’s the right way, certainly making a decision of this magnitude with a little more than three weeks of review cannot in any way be the right way to evaluate these proposed cuts. And is it being done for the right reasons? You will have to look yourselves in the mirror and ask—are we eliminating these positions for the right reasons? No matter your disdain for me, are you eliminating these payroll positions for the right reasons?

Robert E. Antonacci II, CPA