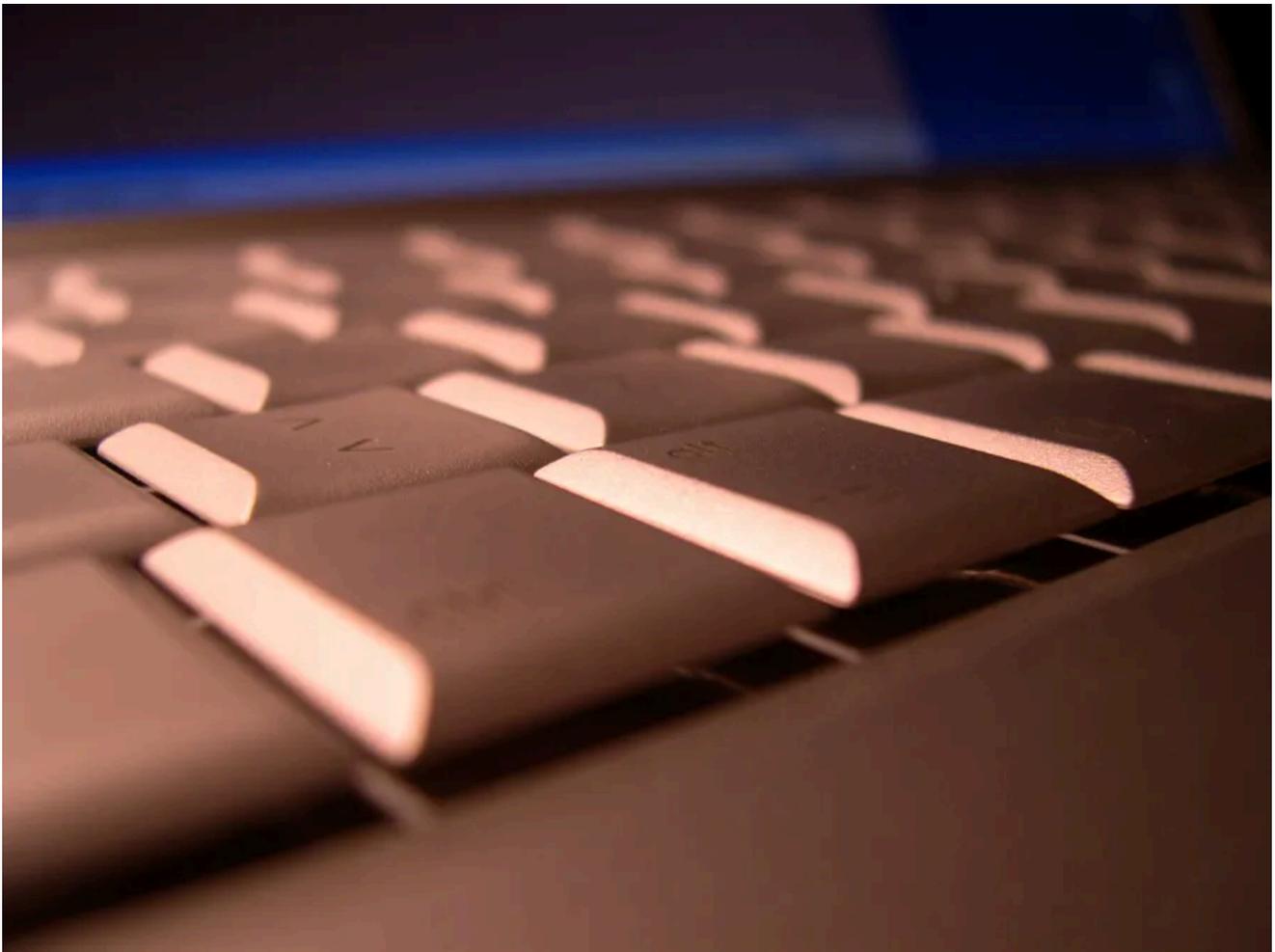


The Ithaca Voice

Opinion: What does our local democracy look like?



by **Guest Contributor**
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This is an opinion piece written by Tompkins County Legislator Deborah Dawson. It was not written by The Ithaca Voice. To submit opinion pieces, please send them to Editor in Chief Matt Butler at mbutler@ithacavoiced.org.

Hey, Tompkins County! I see you rallying, protesting, and counter-protesting Federal policies and global events. I hear you shouting that “**This** is what democracy looks like.” I share your concerns and commend your engagement in national politics. I just wish you all would bring some of that engagement to local government — and specifically county government — because democracy in Tompkins County just doesn’t look all that healthy to me.

Case in point: this November, there will be 16 Tompkins County Legislature seats on the ballot. Only three of those seats will be contested in the general election, and only two of them were contested in primary elections.

According to our Board of Elections, there are 4,162 registered voters in the new Legislative District 7, which includes pieces of the “old” Districts 6, 10, and 11. Only 579 of those registered voters voted in the last three legislative elections. 2,589 didn’t vote in any of them. Subtracting the 1,075 voters who registered after 2021 (and so had no opportunity to vote in a county election), that still leaves 1,514 — over a third of the registered voters in the new District 7 — who didn’t vote in county legislative elections in 2013, 2017, and 2021.

This level of voter “disinterest” is likely attributable to the fact that most of our Tompkins County Legislature elections have been uncontested. Local media reports that countywide voter turnout for elections in 2017 and 2021 was a dismal 36%, although it exceeded 50% in legislative districts where the race was

contested. But uncontested elections are just another symptom of the lack of civic engagement in county government. To have more contested county elections, we need more people who are willing to run for county office.

With compelling reasons, we're all deeply concerned about what's happening in Washington, D.C. But we must be equally concerned about what's happening at the local level. County government provides us with a plethora of services, including the board of elections, social services, public, environmental, and mental health services, the District Attorney, indigent legal services, your public library, and highway maintenance. It contributes funding to TCAT, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and numerous local nonprofit organizations that provide a variety of services in Tompkins County. It assesses our real property. And every year, it develops a budget that has a much larger impact on our daily lives than most things that happen in our nation's capital. Shouldn't we all be more engaged in that process?

This year, our county budget process will be particularly difficult. As we face cuts in Federal (and likely state) programs and funding streams, we're seeing higher need in our community and higher "asks" from our county departments and nonprofits. In the aggregate, those asks would leave us with an \$11 million operating deficit. Clearly, the legislature is going to struggle to find a balance between raising your taxes and cutting county programs and services. We legislators need to hear from you this year, more than ever. In past years, citizen input into our budget process has been small, and largely driven by people with a vested interest in seeing a particular department or nonprofit receive more funding. I hope that this year we will hear more from our residents and taxpayers. We need to know: What services are you willing to pay more for? What services are you willing to see cut?

Our local democracy depends on everyone’s informed participation to function properly. Truly effective citizen participation in democratic government (please note the small “d”) means being informed about and engaged in every level of government: knowing what the issues are, knowing which level of government controls what, communicating your concerns to the appropriate elected officials, supporting candidates, voting consistently at every opportunity, and even running for office yourself. Please, Tompkins County — I know you can do better!

Deborah Dawson,

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