



STEFAN I. MYCHAJLIW

ERIE COUNTY COMPTROLLER

Wednesday, July 24, 2019 – For immediate release

Contact – Jessica L. O’Neil, Communications Director, (716) 858-4910/ (716) 572-3552

COMPTROLLER MYCHAJLIW FINDS \$6.18 MILLION IN UNSPENT MONEY FOR PARKS IMPROVEMENTS

*County wasted more than \$350,000 in interest payments on the
borrowed money that was never spent on improving parks*

(ERIE COUNTY, NY) – Erie County Comptroller Stefan I. Mychajliw Jr. completed a report examining unspent money by the County Executive in the Parks Department. He found that \$6.18 million authorized at the request of County Executive Mark Poloncarz since 2015 remains unspent. However, that unspent money is still costing taxpayers interest. In essence, the Poloncarz administration has unnecessarily racked up debt on the county credit card, taxpayers are forced to pay interest on that debt, and he didn’t spend a large portion of the borrowed money to improve parks.

Since 2015, the unspent money has racked up more than \$350,000 in interest payments. In response, Comptroller Mychajliw personally visited many County Parks to assess their condition. In a series of videos he will release on his Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages, he documented areas throughout the parks system that are in desperate need of repair. In many instances, Comptroller Mychajliw returned to the same areas County Executive Poloncarz documented on video eight years ago to inspect recent conditions of Erie County Parks.

The report examined capital project funding between 2015 and 2019. It found that taxpayers funded a total of \$13.1 million in capital projects for the county parks. Despite \$13.1 million being borrowed or authorized, the Parks Department only spent \$6.9 million of that money, leaving 47% of the funds unspent.

In total, taxpayers have paid \$841,760 in interest on bonds for park funding from 2015-2019. Unfortunately for taxpayers, approximately \$350,000 of those interest payments is attributed to funds that were never spent on park improvements.

“No taxpayer would take out a home loan to repair a roof, skip doing the actual work, let the roof deteriorate, then pay interest on that loan. No homeowner would needlessly flush money down the toilet like that. Even worse, the money that was borrowed and paid interest on wasn’t used for needed repairs. It is no way to run a home budget. It is absolutely no way to run a county budget. Mark Poloncarz took money earmarked for parks work from hardworking taxpayers. But that money is wasted, parked in an account and incurring interest costs while the parks are poorly maintained. Families deserve better,” said Comptroller Mychajliw.

Essentially, County Executive Poloncarz rang up the county credit card, never spent the money to do a lot of the work, and now the balance is costing taxpayers even more through interest costs. Every day the county incurs additional interest costs. At the time of the report, the county had paid approximately \$350,000 in interest payments on the millions in unspent funds.

“The mismanagement of the parks system is alarming. Every year the County Executive requests money to borrow for parks repairs and improvements. However, in conducting our review of the financial records, we found taxpayers put millions of dollars on the county credit card and paid interest on it for work that was never done. Meanwhile, the parks throughout Erie County deteriorated year after year during the time reviewed,” said Comptroller Mychajliw.

In fact, now halfway through the year, the Comptroller’s Office has not been asked by the County Executive to borrow the funds for 2019. The money earmarked for work in the parks, approved by the Legislature and included in the 2019 budget, which determines how much county residents will pay in taxes, is not being utilized. Additionally, the County Executive has not requested cash advances for any project in the capital budget.

“Not enough work is being done at the parks, but the County Executive is still charging taxpayers. Your tax bill includes funding for this purpose. Unfortunately, after you pay your tax bill, a significant portion of park improvements aren’t occurring. This goes back years. So, my staff and I toured the parks, just as Mark Poloncarz did eight years ago when he served as Comptroller. Unfortunately, we found the same troubling problems that he did. The same problems Mark Poloncarz brought up in his videos eight years ago, still exist in county parks today. As taxpayers will see in our most recent videos, Mark Poloncarz has done nothing to fix these problems that he himself documented in his own videos eight years ago.

“During my tours I found a laundry list of concerning issues. We are more than halfway through the year and the parks are in terrible shape,” said Comptroller Mychajliw. “It’s shameful that \$6.18 million is sitting unspent while the parks are in this condition. It’s wasteful that taxpayers paid \$350,000 in interest payments on park improvements that never got done. Imagine the difference that could have been made with just the interest money alone?”

Comptroller Mychajliw found numerous issues, including but not limited to, rusting playground equipment with extensive peeling paint; crumbling stone pillars supporting shelters; uneven and cracked walking paths; rotting wood on picnic tables and playground equipment, rusted and unsanitary grills; shelters with holes in their roof; bathrooms missing toilets; leaking sinks; exposed wiring; unsafe handicap facilities; and much more.

Within the \$13.1 million examined, \$3.65 million was borrowed from 2015-2018 and another \$950,000 was authorized in 2019 specifically for “Countywide Parks Improvements.” Of that, \$2.16 million remains unspent. This could be used for new play structures; fire alarm upgrades; security systems; paving roadways and paths; and removing unsafe structures.

“As a husband and father, I immediately noticed how decrepit the playground equipment and swings were. I wouldn’t let my kids play on many of these structures,” said Comptroller Mychajliw.

“The walking paths appear unsafe in many areas because of crumbling asphalt. Eight years ago Mark Poloncarz complained about the conditions of picnic tables. Eight years later, some tables appear worse off than what he highlighted them. I would never let my family eat at picnic tables with peeling paint, rotted wood and staples sticking out. The County Executive also complained about conditions of grills eight years ago. Some of the grills I inspected were rusty, full of garbage and not in any condition for food to be cooked on it,” Comptroller Mychajliw noted.

Another account, dedicated for “Shelter, Building and Comfort Station Replacement,” borrowed \$1.4 million since 2015 and an additional \$400,000 authorized for 2019. Only \$515,062 has been spent with an additional \$137,390 committed. This has left \$1.28 million unspent.

“In Emery Park there is a large, main shelter. At least two of the stone support pillars are crumbling. Gaping holes are left where stones should be, with the stones scattered. Garbage cans were placed in front of the crumbling mortar to hide the problem. Money is available to fix not only this shelter but the numerous others we saw that are in desperate need of repair. At some shelters there’s issues ranging from racist graffiti to roofs with holes. That \$1.28 million that is sitting unspent could go a long way in fixing problems at shelters. This can only be described as terrible mismanagement.” added Comptroller Mychajliw.

A third account is specifically designated for “Roads, Pathways and Parking Lot Improvements.” Since 2015, the county has borrowed \$1,025,000 for this account and \$873,014 is unspent. The last time any of the money was expended was in 2016. However, an additional \$250,000 was authorized for 2019.

“It is no secret that this administration has issues maintaining its roads. The same pothole and flooding issues you find on many county roads was observed throughout the parks systems. These roads and pathways are in rough shape. We saw many walkers, joggers and runners trying to utilize the parks but had difficulty navigating the uneven, crumbling paths,” Comptroller Mychajliw said.

The account for “Parks Vehicles and Equipment” has \$851,052 sitting unused. The county has borrowed \$1.3 million since 2015 and an additional \$400,000 was authorized for 2019.

“We are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on interest costs for money to sit in an account. Every day families, young children, and seniors visit the county parks. What greets taxpayers is truly concerning. My office’s strong recommendation to the County Executive and his staff is to repair these dangerous issues and invest the money designated for parks that has already been taken from hardworking taxpayers,” said Comptroller Mychajliw.

Anyone who sees an issue at a county park is encouraged to report it to the Whistleblower Hotline by calling 858-7722 or email whistleblower@erie.gov. This anonymous tip line allows anyone concerned about waste or abuse to report it.

###