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**MINORITY LEADER**  
**ULSTER COUNTY LEGISLATURE**

**MINORITY LEADER'S ADDRESS**

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Thank you Mr. Chair, Madame Majority Leader, Mr. Majority & Minority Whip. I stand here as leader of the Democratic Caucus, the “Minority” party, for now. Last year I spoke about the challenge of this Legislature to step up and govern. I would say by and large we’ve done an adequate job this past year, not excellent, but adequate.

However adequate is no longer good enough, competent is no longer good enough. I could stand here and give you a speech that gets into the technicalities of county government, of insider comments only those on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor or those that follow us would understand. The banalities of County Government could help even the worst insomniac.

No, this isn’t your granddaddies speech; it’s something more personal, more raw. I remember my friend Marc Molinaro saying some 22 years ago “Politics is who we are, and where we want to be.” I’d say we’re in bad shape as a country on either front. It begets the question: ‘what are we doing here?’

Throughout this country, millions of Americans are resisting the changes in their national government. Hundreds to thousands more are organizing here in the Hudson Valley at this moment. More than 200 showed up last night to speak out in defense of the Affordable Care Act and more will be coming. County government cannot function in isolation from state and national events. It’s not as if we can erect a wall at the borders and say “This doesn’t affect us”; when hundreds of Ulster County residents stand to lose their health care. Sticking our collective heads in the sand is not an appropriate response to what’s happening.

Now I’m not suggesting we become a surrogate Congress, or social justice warriors, but clearly we need to adapt to these times. As we look at our agenda for the year, we must address the national issues that are affecting us now. The public has greater expectations of us, we have to have expect more of ourselves.

While this fight is not of our choosing, we must step up to defend our county, our people. The Democratic Agenda for 2017 reflects that in different ways.

### **A Body of the People**

Much has been made of the Legislature’s memorializing resolutions. Yet, these same resolutions inspire more public debate than anything else we do. As a representative body, it’s our job to hear from the public, our job to be their voice. Sometimes it means that voice has to carry beyond the walls of this chamber.

Now I’ve heard from members that we can accomplish the same effect with a letter. It’s true, letters are important, but engaging the public and hearing from them is imperative. These resolutions take up a small amount of time, yet they generate the most interest. We cannot

muzzle the voice of the public. If members of this body cannot be bothered to listen to our constituents then we have a bigger problem.

### **A County for Everyone**

We all know what is happening in this country. Millions of undocumented and legal resident aliens are being pushed out of this country. Many own business and are productive members of our community. In my own community of New Paltz, a gentleman named Joel Guerrero; a legal resident of this country for 20 years, is in the process of being deported. I assume he's no angel however, he's a father to be and a skill carpenter gainfully employed. He is now sitting in a detention center in New Jersey, while his pregnant wife who is a native born American, works overtime to keep him here. By the way, his brother is a decorated Afghan veteran for this country. It's terrible that national policies are tearing local families apart right here in Ulster County.

There is a sentiment that immigration and human rights are not something for us to address. That would be wrong. We have a proposed Human Rights Law that will come up next month. Myself, Legislators Greene, Berky and Bartels will introduce a proposal based on a Tompkins County resolution to provide protection for all our residents, regardless of legal status. We have the ability to take action in this Legislature, we are not powerless. Protecting all of our residents, including the most vulnerable, must be a priority.

Last month we brought forward resolutions decrying hate speech and the repeal of the ACA, brought up by Legislators Berky and Heppner, respectively. I read from each of those resolutions, and I know regardless of anyone's politics, that we agree with those sentiments. Legislator Chris Allen has a revised version of the ACA that will include some of the more recent changes proposed by Congress and I hope it's something we can pass, for the sake of all our constituents.

The challenge of this legislature is whether we have the guts to fight, to stand up and resist. We have the lives of local residents at stake. I'm not here to say we are going to take on the President or Congress, but in our own way, by embracing our local powers, we can affect change.

### **The Nuts and Bolts of Government**

For all of our activism, we cannot forget our role to establish policies and approve funding for this government. I know its important focus of the Chairman, as well as the whole leadership team.

This year we will have a new tool in our oversight arsenal, a true Audit Committee that will take a hard look at county operations and contract agencies. This was a major initiative in the last budget and something myself and Legislator Bartels made a priority. I'm disappointed that it's been 3 months and the committee has yet to meet, but I am sure Mr. Gerentine, Chair of Ways and Means will convene this meeting presently. It is my understanding that the Chair of the Legislature, Mr. Ronk, will be hiring a new financial staffer, one who has a CPA and has municipal audit experience. It's my hope we can get these pieces in place over the next 30 days. If not, we will not only be failing the public, but ourselves.

Our role in oversight and policy is not always the most exciting, but it's necessary. For example, I know that Legislators Briggs and Bartels are a bit of an odd couple, but both are perfect ying and yang to strike a balance in formulating a take home vehicle policy for the county. It's a necessary step to ensure the county fleet is maintained while protecting the taxpayers' investment.

Legislators Berky and Bartels will also be working on establishing a communications policy this year, to help facilitate when this body gets information. For too long we've had issues of when we are informed by the Executive Branch or agencies. To be clear, I'm not suggesting the Executive is not being open, but we do clearly have issues of when information gets to our side of the building. That's kind of silly considering our offices are located right next door. This may involve changing the resolution deadline to allow legislators more time to ask questions. For example, this past month, the deadline was Wed, Feb 22<sup>nd</sup>, the resolutions were posted Fri, Feb 24<sup>th</sup> and committee meetings started on Mon, Feb 27<sup>th</sup>. That's not enough time before committee meetings to do our job. Unless we want to ask everyone to work weekends.

In addition, I know Legislators Berky and Bartels will continue to work on developing an appointments policy that opens up our appointments process and this Legislature's role in it. I'd also like to take a moment to congratulate the Chairman and Clerk on our new appointments website, a valuable addition to opening up county government.

### **Developing a Future worth Fighting For**

All of our hard work to keep taxes down; to create an efficient government, is for naught if we allow it to fall apart from within. The Democratic Caucus will push for new initiatives for housing, for economic development, for land preservation and health care.

We are blessed with many members of unique backgrounds on the Democratic side (no offense to my Republican colleagues). For example, my friend Jim Delaune is Executive Director of the Orange County Land Trust. There's nothing like having an expert in the field, help provide oversight and guidance on those kinds of projects.

Legislator Delaune will be working with the administration and local land trusts on preserving some local farmland right in our own back yard. He will be running point this year on pushing for a greater county commitment to our farmers and working with our planning department as we finish a vital rail trail connection between the towns of Lloyd and New Paltz, something we share with Legislators Mayo and Litts. The governor's proposed Empire Trail will benefit from the hard work of this Legislature and our County Executive. The years of dedication to rail trails will truly pay off.

Speaking of Planning, our own Jennifer Schwartz Berky will be working with Legislator John Parete on examining the creation of a Housing Trust Fund for Ulster County. We all know of the lack of affordable housing options. Creating seed money for affordable housing projects is a 1<sup>st</sup> step of many towards real change in the housing market. Helping working families stay in Ulster has to be a top priority for all Legislators.

All of these tie back to the economic development in this county, something we obsess over here in Ulster. I am pleased that the County is attempting to take advantage of some of our unique features, such as promoting film in the County, or working with "tech preunuers" as well as local farms producing value added food products. But we still have miles to go to truly sustained economic success. While I understand the administration is reluctant to produce a comprehensive economic plan, at a minimum, this Legislature must create criteria for measuring economic success in this county. It cannot and will not be a blank check handed to the EDA or the Economic Development dept. Indeed, the Administration needs to know, if our expectations as a legislature are not met, we will be voting no on future allocations. I want to thank Chairman Ronk and Vice-Chair Maloney for their support in these matters.

My good friend Pete Loughran has long said we must do something about Tech City. From almost the day I got elected back in 2003, Mr. Loughran has steadfastly maintained the county's largest industrial parcel must be put back to use. I know Pete has several issues about that site that he will bring up during the course of the year. Maximizing its economic potential is our shared goal, one that will take a total effort by the Executive and Legislature.

All of these efforts won't mean much if we cannot combat the terror within. I know Legislators Heppner, Briggs and Parete will continue their efforts on the Law Enforcement Committee and UCAN respectively, to combat this growing problem. It's not just a matter of locking people up, we need real solutions to helping people. It's about healing, not stigmatizing.

### **What does this all mean?**

So besides checking off a "to do list", I want to address what it means to be a Democratic Legislator. For our part, it means listening to our constituents, to both the problems within our control and those that aren't. It means striking a balance between activism for our community

and taking the sober look at how to improve our own government. It means asking hard questions about county operations and advocating on behalf of our constituents.

I want to take a second about operations. We are very lucky to have a County Executive as skilled as Michael Hein. Yes, he can be maddeningly frustrating to deal with. I suspect he and his administration will finish off whatever hair I have left on my head. However, his skill and leadership are a big part of our collective success. There are times I think he forgets us, or forgets that he's part of a longer term trend in reforming government, but it is without question his unique management ability that's helped Ulster County become what it is today. The forum last night on the ACA was remarkable not only in its timing, but in how quickly it was arranged. I give my deepest gratitude, to the Executive and his staff for pulling it together.

That said, the Executive should not expect this Legislature to roll over. We follow the adage of "trust but verify". As we move forward on a County Family Court facility at the BRC, he can expect this body to fulfill its obligation to provide oversight.

Within the Legislature, the Republican side can expect the Democrat side to resist the erosion in our quality of life, to resist national or state policies that hurt our residents. They can expect us to defend the weak and those most vulnerable.

I know many, but not all Legislators share a Judeo-Christian faith. Even those that don't embrace those faiths have some familiarity. I close with a small part of Leviticus, Chapter 19, verses 33 to 34.

#### Leviticus 19 33-34

**33** “ ‘When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them.

**34** The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Not to deliver a sermon, but we have all been foreigners in our past. We all have families that suffered. I was lucky to have been born American. I believe we have an obligation to treat those less fortunate with the same compassion as all of our residents. As we work on our local issues, we shall also confront the national ones. Ulster County shall be that small bright star, in a much larger America. Let us do these things together. Thank you.