



2026 EXECUTIVE BUDGET ADDRESS

Presented by Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger

October 1, 2025

Good afternoon everyone, thank you, Chair Criswell, for setting the table for today's address. I also want to thank the County Legislators, Department Heads, local elected officials, union leaders and community partners for joining us today, and for all the work you do for the people of Ulster County. It's an honor, always, to work with you.

As Chair Criswell underlined, we are in tough and uncertain times. Yesterday, I got a call from the Governor's office informing me that the federal government is cutting over 90% of annual funding to counties under the State Homeland Security Program to protect against terrorist threats. Then, at midnight last night, the federal government shut down over disagreement about cuts to healthcare. We will know better in the coming days how the shutdown will affect federal programs we administer, including employment and training programs and the Women, Infant and Children nutrition program.

What we do know is that the federal budget law that was signed in July, pushes federal costs down to states and counties. That budget also makes deep cuts in the social safety net to help pay for tax cuts largely benefiting the wealthy and corporations, while leaving struggling households with less. There is no disputing this assessment -- it comes straight from the Congressional Budget Office.

These federal cuts are being rolled out over three years, and the negative impacts on the County budget are expected to grow larger each year. How the state responds to federal cuts will play a major role in determining the size of the impact on counties and our communities. I hope you will join me in urging our State leaders to use all the tools in their toolbox to fill federal funding gaps, including changing the state tax code to more fairly tax large corporations and the wealthy, who are receiving an enormous windfall from tax cuts in the federal budget. The wealthiest 5% of New Yorkers will gain an estimated \$13 billion dollars in 2026, alone. The funds have to come from somewhere, and they shouldn't come from our residents who are already struggling to make ends meet.

We will begin to feel the first impacts of the federal cuts next year. The federal government has long paid half the administrative costs of SNAP, but beginning in October 2026, 25% of its

share will be shifted to states. New York is one of nine states that passes these costs down to counties, which means that Ulster County's share will now rise to 75%.

In addition, we'll have to add new positions to the Department of Social Services to meet new unfunded federal mandates for eligibility determinations, work requirements, and more frequent certifications for both SNAP and Medicaid. Additional positions will likely have to be added by amendment to the enacted budget during the next year, because we still do not have federal guidance on the new rules. In the proposed budget, I've sought to keep overall growth in personnel to the minimum necessary, knowing that we'll have to expand DSS staff capacity later in the 2026 budget cycle.

I urge the Legislature to refrain from adding new positions when you adopt the final budget in December, and to keep in mind that costs to the County will only increase in the 2027 and 2028 budget cycles, when the full suite of federal SNAP and Medicaid cuts take effect. We have developed what I believe is a prudent budget, and I am recommending that we keep taxes flat for 2026.

I'm pleased to report that the County government has again received an annual fiscal stress score of 'zero,' meaning zero stress, from the Office of the NYS Comptroller.

The 2026 proposed budget includes \$491.5 million in operating fund spending, a 3.5% increase from 2025. Nearly a quarter of total spending is reimbursed by the state and federal governments.

Among the drivers of the budget increase are a nearly 6.4% increase in costs associated with the NYS Retirement System, an 8.75% increase in employee healthcare costs, and a 2.25% increase in mandated Social Services costs. Together with an increase in bond service, these costs account for half of the total increase in the 2026 budget.

Two other areas of increased spending are on Emergency Medical Services and employee compensation.

The County this year took on a new role to fortify EMS and help close gaps in this life-saving service around the county. In May, the Legislature unanimously approved our Emergency Services Department's plan to directly invest \$4.7 million in strengthening the emergency medical response system. The 2026 Executive Budget reflects this new investment. I want to take a moment and recognize Emergency Services Director Everett Erichsen and his team.

They have received statewide recognition for their innovative approach, which includes targeted financial support, performance-based incentives, and new oversight measures to strengthen service delivery by local agencies. Our County has been recognized by the NYS Department of Health's Division of State Emergency Medical Services as a model for other counties to follow.

It's important to note that County support to local EMS agencies is meant to supplement and not replace the funding Towns are currently contributing. Any reduction in local municipal spending in 2026 will reduce support for their local agencies and affect service delivery.

In addition to direct agency support by the County, we've also created a new EMT certification program to build the pipeline of EMS professionals we need. Staffing shortages have been a huge problem for local EMS agencies, and I'm excited to share that within two hours of announcing enrollment in our program in September, the course was filled and we had a sizable waitlist. There is clearly a demand for local EMT certification, which is going to help tremendously in building the bench of EMS professionals for our county.

A second area of increase in 2026 is in employee compensation. We have a total of 1,183 union employees, and 266 non-union employees. This year we successfully negotiated new four-year contracts with the Police Benevolent Association and the Ulster County Sheriff's Employee Association, and we are working closely with our largest union, CSEA, on a successor agreement. Together the three unions represent 95% of our unionized workforce. Negotiations are ongoing with the 40-member Ulster County Staff Association and the seven-member Superior Officer's Unit. I want to recognize the dedicated work of the union bargaining teams as well as my negotiating team, including Deputy County Executive Jamie Capuano, Personnel Director Dawn Spader, Director of Employee Relations Jim Farina, and Budget Director Ken Juras.

The federal government may be abandoning the collective bargaining rights of its workers, but here in Ulster County we remain fully committed to negotiating and honoring fair contracts for our union employees.

The budget also includes the first year of a new compensation plan for non-represented employees, based on the recommendations of a salary study commissioned by the County Legislature in 2022 and completed this year. In earlier years, long before I was in this office, these employees did not receive even cost-of-living increases, causing wage compression over time and making it very hard to recruit and retain qualified personnel. Across the County

government, we have a vacancy rate close to 10%. This has strained our ability to meet the demand for services we are required to deliver. In fact, we were recently cited by the State for the high vacancy rate in our Public Defender's Office for Assistant Public Defenders. These positions are absolutely essential to fill.

The new pay plan will ensure fair compensation for employees, competitive with public employers in the region, and will strengthen our ability to recruit and retain a quality workforce now and in the future.

Bolstering Food Security in the Face of Federal Cuts

In my presentation to the Legislature two weeks ago, I outlined the painful impacts the federal budget will have on households that are already struggling. In the coming years, healthcare costs will increase for many seniors and working families, the numbers of uninsured are expected to rise, and SNAP benefits will be harder to access for many people, including older adults up to age 64, veterans, the homeless, and families with teenage children. Facing higher costs for healthcare and food, households will have fewer resources to pay for basic necessities. Making matters worse, the Administration in Washington cancelled over a billion dollars in USDA nutrition programs this year. As a result, the Regional Food Bank is delivering two million fewer meals in 23 New York counties, including ours.

To help meet the expected increase in demand, I'm proposing a third round of food security grants for 2026 to local food pantries and community-based food security programs. I'm also recommending that we add \$150,000 in new funding for Meals on Wheels to expand home-delivered meals for seniors in need.

Transportation for Seniors to Medical Appointments & Pharmacies

And speaking of wheels, we're expanding rides for seniors through our Office of the Aging's Neighbor2Neighbor program -- a modest investment that will significantly increase our capacity to organize volunteer drivers, coordinate scheduling, and make sure that seniors who don't have reliable transportation can get to medical appointments and the pharmacy. By strengthening this program, we're reducing missed doctor visits and lapses in medication, improving health outcomes, and lowering long-term costs. This, along with our Meals-on-Wheels investment, will keep more seniors healthy and connected to care.

Housing Security

We must also continue to invest in housing. I'm proud to share that, this fall, over 270 seniors and families are moving into new, affordable homes that the County helped make possible. And later in October, the Legislature will vote on the second round of housing projects I've recommended for Housing Action Fund support.

We're supporting a robust pipeline of affordable housing, but these homes cannot be built overnight, and I am recommending more immediate steps to reduce housing instability and expand alternatives to emergency housing in motels.

This includes expanding our eviction prevention program, a bipartisan initiative of the Legislature in 2023 to improve access to legal counsel by tenants in their most vulnerable moments. This past year, Legal Services of the Hudson Valley provided a wide array of legal guidance to 243 Ulster County households, and directly prevented 38 evictions. If those 38 households had entered our emergency housing system, our county share of that cost would have exceeded what we spent on this program. If we increase the program budget to \$640,000, we can extend legal counsel to all who qualify for it, and keep more residents in their homes and out of emergency housing. This is an upstream investment that pays for itself, by helping to keep families in their homes.

For families who have lost their homes, I propose we allocate \$2 million from the Housing Action Fund in 2026 for a new emergency housing shelter. This shelter would be owned and operated by a non-profit partner that would offer nutritious meals and case-worker support on site until permanent housing can be secured. Unlike the state's reliance on motels, which are too costly, too isolating, and inadequate as a response to family homelessness, a new shelter would provide a healthier and more dignified alternative. It will not eliminate the use of motels altogether, but it will begin to reduce our dependence on them by creating a new option that better serves families in crisis.

The funding would be drawn from the existing Housing Action Fund.

UCAT improvements

One of the biggest household costs after housing is transportation. I am proud that Ulster County is the first to make public transit entirely free, and the idea is catching on elsewhere, with Orange County now offering free service in the cities of Newburgh and Middletown.

We remain committed to increasing service where we have the ridership to support it, and I'm pleased to share that, by popular demand, we will be adding Sunday bus service in Kingston in the coming year. We are also working with the City to create bus transfer points in the uptown area, after losing our hub at the Kingston Plaza. I want to thank riders for bearing with us as we work through this very significant change in our bus system.

In 2026, we will also improve and modernize UCAT's communications tools so that riders can access clear, up-to-date, and timely information on routes and schedules. We will revamp UCAT's website and redesign schedules to be more user-friendly, so residents and visitors can plan their trips more easily.

Investing in our Transportation Infrastructure

We're also working to make sure the County roads travelled by those buses and other vehicles are in good condition. The Department of Public Works is responsible for maintaining 423 lane-miles of County roads across 23 towns and villages. We are very proud of our well-maintained roads, which make travelling safer and reduce wear-and-tear on vehicles. You can identify a County road by the blue route number sign and the lack of potholes, in contrast to the state roads!

This year, DPW paved a record 55 miles of road – the equivalent of travelling from Kingston to Albany – and we'll pave another 30 miles in 2026. The County will also partially or fully replace seven bridges next year, with a mix of federal, state, and County funding.

School Bus Arm Cameras

We continue to prioritize road safety, and in 2026 we plan to launch a school bus safety initiative championed by Legislator Debra Clinton, who is a Middle School principal by day and a tireless advocate of student safety. In New York, every day during the school year, an estimated 50,000 motor vehicles illegally pass school buses, putting children's lives at risk when they cross the street to get on the bus in the morning and return home at the end of the

day. In 2019, when I was in the State Senate, we passed a law allowing the use of stop-arm cameras on school buses, which enables drivers to be fined for passing a school bus. A number of counties, including Orange and Dutchess counties, have implemented these programs with great success: 98% of vehicle owners who receive a fine for illegally passing a stopped school bus do not repeat the offense.

The school bus camera program is administered by a vendor as a turnkey service, with no upfront costs to the County or to school districts. A portion of the revenues generated by fines pays for the service, and the rest returns to the County for investments in other school and road safety initiatives. It's a net positive for the County from a fiscal perspective, and most importantly, from a child safety perspective.

Climate/environment

We remain committed as ever to protecting the planet and our children's future.

Emergency Communications Center

As we build our new Emergency Communications Center on Paradies Lane in New Paltz, we are making it a model for clean energy and resilience.

Construction is underway on the all-electric facility with geothermal heating and cooling, supported by a million dollar grant from NYSERDA. Solar panels on the building's rooftop will generate approximately 25% of the ECC's electricity needs, and the remainder will be supplied by a ground-mounted system to make it net-zero in energy use. We are also planning to install a second solar array on the same property, potentially with battery storage, to cover electricity usage in other County buildings. These investments will lower utility bills, protect against future energy price increases, and bring us much closer to our target of meeting 100% of our government electricity needs with locally generated renewable power.

Supporting Climate Smart Municipalities

I want to take a moment to recognize Legislator Manna Jo Greene and the work of the volunteers on the Renewable Energy Implementation Working Group. The working group has been looking at ways to increase the amount of renewable energy that can be generated in Ulster County, and has highlighted the critical roles that local governments can play. We're very proud of the fact that 17 of Ulster County's 24 municipalities, as well as the County government itself, are active participants in New York's Climate Smart Communities program.

But we also know that renewable energy planning and project development can be highly technical and time-consuming. To better support our local governments as recommended by the Working Group, I am proposing a partnership with the Hudson Valley Regional Council to provide *additional* direct technical assistance to help municipalities in our county achieve their clean energy goals.

Green the Scene

In our continuing work to promote zero-waste, we launched a successful small grant program this year, called "Green the Scene" -- a partnership of the County's Tourism and Environment Departments and the Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency to support composting and recycling at fairs and festivals. I am recommending continued support for the program next year. The County's many festivals and fairs are a vital part of community life and our tourism industry, drawing hundreds of thousands of people a year, and they provide a unique opportunity to reduce hundreds of tons of waste and model sustainable practices.

Adapting SUNY Ulster Campus to the Needs of Today and Tomorrow

As a County we are fortunate to have a community college that has provided affordable post-secondary education and career pathways for our young people for generations. SUNY Ulster has educated legions of Ulster County residents over the last 64 years who have gone on to careers in business, nursing, education, government, and other rewarding fields.

At the same time, our community college, like many community colleges, is at a crossroads because of major demographic and economic changes that have occurred in recent decades. In Ulster County, we have seen a nearly 24% decline in the birthrate – a trend that is expected to continue – and a changing economy and job market that favors Bachelor's degrees over Associate's degrees in many fields. As a result, SUNY Ulster has seen a significant decline in enrollment over time. COVID has also had a lasting impact on the number of students on campus, with many students opting for online classes. The result of all these trends is that the main campus is underutilized, with building space in excess of 2.5 times what is currently needed, according to the recent Space Needs Assessment.

This is not a situation unique to SUNY Ulster. Community colleges across New York are grappling with similar trends.

For 2026, SUNY Ulster has requested that the County add \$115 million in capital projects to our six-year Capital Plan. This is separate from the requested \$7.1 million for operating expenses, which I have included in the Executive Budget. However, in the absence of a plan to guide long-term capital investments in response to changing campus needs, I am holding on new capital funding requests at this time.

With the college's consultants now wrapping up work on a Facilities Master Plan, this is the perfect moment for the County and college to review the plan's recommendations together, and chart a path forward for the campus that will serve the needs of our communities today and tomorrow. To move this work forward, I will be creating a Reimagining SUNY Ulster Committee, in partnership with college representatives, to inform these County investments.

Every challenging situation creates an opening for innovative and creative solutions. We continue to believe that a strong community college has an important role to play in our local economy and in opening doors for people of all ages to meaningful careers.

Rev War 250

2026 is an important year for our County and country as we commemorate the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution and Ulster County's important historic role. Our County Clerk's Office, County Historian, and Tourism Department will be taking the lead in coordinating and supporting events and programs around the County, in partnership with schools, local museums, and cultural organizations. I've included \$80,000 in the Executive Budget to support this work.

Hometown Heroes Program

And to honor those who have served and sacrificed throughout our 250 year history, our Veterans Services Agency has proposed to launch a Hometown Heroes small grant program to help local governments with the cost of banners honoring veterans and other local heroes.

Conclusion

Our nation's history reminds us that progress is rarely born in times of ease. It is in moments of trial, when people choose courage over fear -- and unity over division -- that we have made our greatest strides. We are living through such a time now. The challenges before us are real, but the spirit of this county is resilient.

Today, I see dedicated public servants, committed community partners, and neighbors who care deeply for one another. That is our strength. It is greater than any hardship we face. In the face of uncertainty, Ulster County remains steady. We keep moving forward, strengthening our services, investing in our communities, and laying the foundation for a better future.

If we continue to listen to each other, to act with fairness, and to live by the neighborly spirit that bound our towns and hamlets together, then we will not simply withstand these times, we will rise from them stronger and more united than ever before.

That is our charge. And that is the enduring spirit of Ulster County.