

2015 State of the County Address

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County Executive

Good evening ladies and gentleman and welcome to the 2015 State of the County Address. It is both an honor and a privilege to serve you as the County Executive in this extraordinary place we all call home. In many ways I find it almost impossible to believe that this is really my seventh State of the County Address. It seems like only yesterday that our community came together and changed our entire form of government.

With the amazing support of so many, my administration began the daunting task of fixing a broken \$360 million government that was on the verge of bankruptcy. As we began, our nation was experiencing the largest financial crisis since the great depression. For added measure, together we also suffered through two of the largest natural disasters in our history. But the truth is: the people of Ulster County are both extraordinary and amazingly resilient. So together we overcame what appeared to be overwhelming challenges at the time.

From the beginning, my administration simply believed that the people of Ulster County deserved better, that they had a right to expect more from their government. We were idealistic enough to believe that with hard work and a commitment to innovation real reform was possible. We believed that by working together we could begin building a better Ulster County. So we began. Since then, Ulster County, NY has become home to the largest County government turnaround in generations.

I can assure you, my passion for government reform is as strong as ever. My administration remains focused on delivering results with an eye towards an even brighter future for the people of Ulster County every single day. We ask ourselves big picture questions like, “Are we making things better?” or even the most basic, “What does building a better Ulster County really look like?”

“Are we making things better?” Well when you set aside all the rhetoric and all the politics, here are the facts: adjusted for inflation, since 2009 Ulster County property taxes have actually gone down. Spending is down, unemployment is down, private sector job growth is up, and there is more access to critical services for our citizens than ever before. We have moved from a government on the brink of bankruptcy to the #1 most fiscally stable county in our region according to the New York State Comptroller’s Office. So yes, by any measure not only are things getting better... The State of our County is strong!

Regarding the second question, “What does building a better Ulster County really look like?” I am glad to say the answer to that question is as varied as our amazing and diverse 183,000 residents. To me, a better Ulster County is one that respects our taxpayers while it designs new solutions to bring more jobs to our community. A better Ulster County is one that does not shy away from decades old problems like crumbling infrastructure and instead focuses on innovative solutions. A better Ulster County is one that embraces our role as a leader in protecting our environment. And a better Ulster County holds dear to our humanity, working everyday towards a more just and inclusive community that benefits everyone. A better Ulster County is about jobs, it is about taxes and infrastructure. It is about helping our neighbors in need and it is about our environment.

Why do we care so much about our environment? We care because without clean air and clean water nothing else really matters. I am proud to say we are one of the only counties in the State of New York to have a department specifically focused on our environment.

From our unprecedented financial commitment to open spaces to an Executive Order that banned fracking fluids on our roadways years ago, we have understood the responsibility of taking a leadership role in environmental stewardship. We did that even when it meant a bitter and ongoing fight with New York City over ensuring clean water in the Lower Esopus.

It also means getting serious about issues like renewable energy and reducing our reliance on fossil fuels. I believe we must be bold and proactive. When most governments were only paying lip service to the idea of purchasing their electricity from renewable resources, we made the leading edge choice to go all in, becoming the first county in the state of New York - through Executive Order - to buy 100% of our electricity from renewable resources. To offset any additional costs we may have incurred, we aggressively focused on improving our efficiency. Because of better purchasing, we now have enough renewable energy credits to offset 150% of all of our electricity consumption, placing Ulster County among the top municipalities in the entire nation with respect to energy procurement.

As we focus on reducing our carbon footprint and our overall reliance on fossil fuel, I am pleased tonight to make a number of additional exciting announcements, announcements that deliver real change, like charging stations, plug-in hybrids and changes to our entire UCAT bus fleet. First, if we are sincere about change, we as a government must promote and support that change. This year we will be installing electric car charging stations at virtually every public County facility. To further promote their use, these charging stations will be available to all non-commercial members of the public absolutely free of charge.

Second, since I would like for at least some of the County's fleet to be able to use these charging stations, each and every sedan we are planning to purchase this year will not only be a hybrid, they will be plug-in hybrids as well. With respect to our UCAT bus system, a system that is instrumental in moving thousands of people around a County that is the size of Rhode Island, we will be transitioning immediately. Not one, not two, but every single County bus will be transitioned from standard diesel fuel to bio-diesel, significantly reducing our carbon emissions.

The net effect of all these changes is impressive. In fact, with the actions we have taken and the actions we are taking, we are now offsetting the equivalent of 30 million miles of car travel. But maybe the most significant way to discuss this accomplishment is this: we are now able to offset all the negative environmental impacts of all the energy we use. That is all the electricity, all of our fuel oil, all of our diesel and all the gasoline. Everything including our employees commutes!

Ulster County is now among the most environmentally friendly county governments in the entire United States of America. My amazing Environmental Coordinator Amanda LaValle has certified to me that our government has just become the first county in the State of New York to truly become net carbon neutral.

I think we can even do more. I believe Ulster County can also become an energy producer, saving money, generating some of its very own electricity and moving partially off the grid. Once again showing exactly what is possible in a larger municipality.

Today I am asking the County Legislature to join me in fighting for the required NYSERDA grants to complete a major four mega-watt solar project. This project is partially located on the former Town of Ulster landfill and partially located right here on the campus of SUNY Ulster. This project will eliminate the use of the equivalent of over 5,200 barrels of oil every year and benefit our environment. It is my great hope that together we can make this plan a reality. Because regardless of anyone's politics, I believe we should all be environmentalists. Doesn't everyone really want clear air, clean water and a sustainable future for our children?

If our goal is a bright and sustainable future for our children, one in which America's promise remains great then on top of a healthy environment we need a healthy economy supported by well-maintained and regularly upgraded roads and bridges. The incredible infrastructure that was built in the 50s and 60s is now approaching the end of its useful life. The truth is America's roads and bridges are failing at a rate faster than they are being fixed.

This is a national problem, a State problem and a problem right here in Ulster County too. On top of these national challenges, we in Ulster County have also had to deal with the consequences from Hurricane Irene, Tropical Storm Lee and Super Storm Sandy. Add to that the fact that our current infrastructure must be upgraded to support greater traffic loads, increased pedestrian usage plus the additional impacts of climate change. The fact is, if we are to begin reversing the troubling national trend and avoid costly and dangerous breakdowns in the future, we have to dramatically increase infrastructure funding. So we did.

In October I introduced an unprecedented initiative we called *Building a Better Ulster County*, a multi-million dollar infusion of money to greatly expand our repair, upgrade and replacement program. This plan will also help us better prepare and protect our valuable infrastructure from the next natural disaster, though we hope it never comes. With our *Building a Better Ulster County* initiative, we utilized \$3.5 million in one-time revenue to leverage over \$10 million in critical infrastructure projects across Ulster County this year. This will allow us to take important steps towards turning around the local portion of this troubling national crisis before it is too late.

We are not just going to patch roads we are going to make them better. We are not just going to pave over old roads, we are going to repair them structurally and widen shoulders and make things safer for joggers, cyclists and school children everywhere. Places like Lucas Avenue will be widened and our fairgrounds made safer. The area around the Highland High School will not just be paved it will be widened to accommodate greater pedestrian use, because the pedestrians at risk are our children.

In Rosendale the connection from the trestle all the way down to the business district below will be better, and from the Bridge Street Bridge in Phoenicia into town there will be enhanced shoulders for residents and tourists alike. In many critical areas that have been weakened by natural disasters in the past we will utilize enhanced geo-stabilization technology to stop potential future collapses.

In addition to all of this, we are expanding our bridge replacement program, solving complex and longstanding problems before there is a crisis with innovative and common sense solutions. Since we are always looking to make things better, we are also overhauling the entire process by which we replace bridges in highly populated areas with large economic impact and limited detour options. Instead of simply closing traffic for months at a time, I have directed my team to utilize a more inclusive process that focuses on community involvement, greatly improved pedestrian access and last but definitely not least, a co-located temporary bridge.

This new process will dramatically reduce the negative impacts on both businesses and residents alike. I am pleased to say, we will be introducing this new planning process immediately as we focus on the replacement of the bridge that crosses the Walkill River in the heart of New Paltz scheduled for 2016. (Joke: the good news for me is ...this bridge has already been named.)

Our County Department of Public Works will be everywhere this year, coordinating an unprecedented amount of infrastructure work from Saugerties to Marlborough and from Ellenville to Hardenburgh. Though our infrastructure needs are great, our history of fiscal responsibility is what has made all this infrastructure work possible. It has put Ulster County in the unique position of being able to provide a critically necessary and unprecedented infusion of County funds. Though the fact remains that it is not enough, it will make a significant dent in the decades old problem, making our community safer and our infrastructure stronger. Simply put, this is a direct result of responsible government. Because making our community safer and our physical infrastructure stronger -is all part of building a better Ulster County.

We must invest in our educational infrastructure and our job training efforts too. As I said during my budget speech, I believe we as a nation must come to terms with the uncomfortable truth that access to the American dream is not always equal. For some the hope of a better job, a better education and a better way of life remains exactly that, only a dream. This year we are moving forward with a number of programs specifically designed to improve access to higher education, plus provide valuable job training and real job opportunities for people in need.

Often times enhanced education can be the most effective and direct route to greater opportunity. But in today's day and age, exorbitant college tuition costs and crushing student debt are blocking far too many Americans from accessing higher education. The one shining exception has always been our community colleges. That must continue. That is why last year, working with our Legislature, we designed a creative solution that held the line on tuition, ensuring no tuition increase this year. Now we are providing an additional \$120,000 for SUNY Ulster to virtually guarantee there will not be a tuition increase for our students again next year.

It is my great hope that the President's plan in Washington for free community college tuition finds success in some way, shape or form because places like SUNY Ulster play such a pivotal role in providing life altering higher education for so many students. In fact, greater access to higher education is precisely why we fought so hard to create the STRIVE Project in the heart of Kingston. It provides opportunity and a real chance to break the cycle of generational poverty as we work towards building a better Ulster County. I am thrilled to say construction is underway right now and soon it will be open and changing people's lives.

I also know that for others the American dream still remains elusive. Even though Ulster County's unemployment numbers are down and we are actually experiencing the longest period of continuous private sector job growth since the year 2000, for some the recession has not ended. So we must continue to design solutions that expand on the successes of initiatives like our *Guaranteed Jobs Program*.

Just to give you a glimpse into what the *Guaranteed Jobs Program* meant, it was a cooperative pilot between County government, BOCES, SUNY Ulster and our private sector. It was designed to recruit and train employees for jobs in our advanced manufacturing businesses. These are high quality jobs that could completely change the trajectory of someone's life and help them and their families to better participate in the American dream. Let's talk about just two of our success stories.

There was an individual who had not worked in three years, who had fallen on hard times, and who was receiving Safety Net benefits. After completing our *Guaranteed Jobs Program* and improving his marketable skills, he was hired by a participating local advanced manufacturer and he is now making a real living wage with benefits. For the first time in a long time he has an opportunity at a brighter future.

In another case we had a participant who had immigrated to America and become a U.S. citizen. After completing our *Guaranteed Jobs Program* he is now earning a starting wage of almost \$21 an hour with benefits and has a real chance for both him and his family to better participate in the American dream for generations to come. Done right, these programs can change lives.

To build upon this type of success for others who receive public assistance and who may be chronically unemployed we are implementing a new pilot program called *The Career Ladder*. This is a greatly expanded program supported by the Legislature to fill in the gaps between State and Federal dollars, with the ultimate goal of helping our neighbors in need into the workforce and out of the system. This program will be overseen by our Office of Employment & Training and is scheduled to begin later this summer. I am pleased to say we are beginning to identify potential candidates for this program right now.

I also believe that the government workforce itself must change. We must move closer to resembling the demographics of our entire County if we are to truly remain a great nation. That means a serious commitment to things like shattering the glass ceiling, which we have done by leveling the playing field for women in County management positions. It means becoming the first County in the State to eliminate potentially discriminatory hiring practices with an Executive Order that "banned the box" on County employment applications.

It also means taking proactive steps to improve recruitment and retention within Ulster County's minority communities because I believe every citizen should view municipal employment as a viable career path, whether they choose that path or not. In addition to putting real dollars behind it, I have formed a committee not just to impact County government hiring today but also to impact the diversity of our hiring pool for all government employees within our civil service region for decades to come. To me, this is a basic issue of right and wrong and is at the heart of American principles like fairness, justice and equality for all.

I am proud to say that as an administration we have never shied away from discussing complex issues. Now is no different. Sometimes individuals and families are faced with a serious and potentially even volatile mental health crisis: situations that could either become more dangerous and possibly tragic or hopefully be deescalated or even solved by mental health professionals on the scene. The problem has always been, “How do we get mental health professional on site quickly?” I am proud to say, working with the State Office of Mental Health, my team has secured almost a million dollars to create a Mobile Mental Health Crisis Team, the first of its kind in Ulster County. Studies have shown that mobile mental health teams can greatly reduce unnecessary psychiatric hospitalizations and provide real help for people in need and their families exactly when they need it most.

I have always believed in being open about issues that for far too long have remained in the shadows, issues that are hard to talk about and rarely found in typical State of the County addresses, crimes like child abuse, elder abuse and domestic violence, troubling issues that often go unreported. We have been working with the State Office of Children and Family Services to address these terrifying and complicated crimes, national problems that affect every community with issues like human trafficking and child abuse because they take so many different forms.

We have provided more funding to protect victims of elder abuse, whether it is physical, emotional or financial because these seniors at risk are our parents and our grandparents, and it can happen to anyone. The truth is all of these issues require constant attention and a willingness to implement new solutions. This year, in addition to our extensive list of services available for people in need, we are unveiling a domestic violence smartphone app to help victims of this national epidemic at their moment of crisis.

Unfortunately this raises the related issue of animal abuse because the fact is many people who commit acts of violence often begin their troubling pattern by abusing animals. And so I will be submitting legislation to establish a County-wide registry of individuals convicted of animal cruelty. This *Animal Abuse Registry* will identify abusers and it will make clear just how seriously we take this issue. Most of all it will allow us to better prevent animal cruelty in the future. I know all these issues are painful to hear about but they are also a reality and they tear at the very fabric of our society. So if we truly want a better Ulster County, we must address them.

None of the serious issues that we have discussed are solvable at all unless we have the privilege to live in a nation that is free. The individuals who provide that freedom have not only earned our undying respect but sometimes they need our help too. As a County we should all be very proud that we came together to create a solution to the serious challenge of homelessness among our Veterans population with the *Patriots Project*.

Though the *Patriots Project* is a beautiful building where anyone would be proud to live, at its core it is not about a beautiful building. At its core, the *Patriots Project* is really about honor and dignity, it is about community and respect and ultimately it is about attempting to repay a debt for service that we as Americans can never truly repay.

I am proud to report that because of the overwhelming level of community support, Ulster County's home for our homeless Veterans is now up and running and changing people's lives every single day. Some of the success stories we have heard would literally move you to tears. It now stands as a shining example of what is possible when an entire community pulls together.

The *Patriots Project* has an added benefit; it opened a deeper dialog within our County about our community's obligation to our Veterans and exactly what kind of community we would like to be. I was appalled to learn there was no one single place in Ulster County where the County officially honored and remembered those brave soldiers who fought and died for our nation. As I stood on the tarmac when yet another flag-draped coffin was returned home, I knew that had to change.

Once the *Patriots Project* was complete my administration turned its attention to creating this long overdue memorial to honor all of the fallen soldiers of Ulster County in one prominent location. To remember those brave heroes who fought for our liberty and bought and paid for our freedoms with their lives. I formed the *County Executive's Veterans Advisory Committee* and asked those amazing Veterans who helped on the Patriot's Project to help once again and they stepped up. They were joined by even more Veterans as well as members of our County Legislature from both of the aisle.

Tonight I ask that they rise and you join me in thanking my Director of Veterans Services, Captain Steve Masee, our Deputy Director Keith Bennett and all of the amazing members of the Committee for their hard work and dedication.

Their new task was not simple. It required painstaking research and a focus on results. They had to identify over 1,300 names of all the fallen soldiers from Ulster County dating back almost 240 years. In addition to recognizing the Committee, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to others who helped, people like our County Clerk Nina Postupack, our Town Clerks, Town Supervisors, Veterans organizations and families all across our great County who were involved in helping complete this solemn but important task.

I told the Committee from the beginning that I would ensure that necessary funding was available, and with the Legislature we would provide the most prominent location in County government: the front lawn of the Ulster County Office Building. It was the Committee's task that was truly massive. Not only did they have to assemble all the names. I asked them to design the entire memorial of honor as they saw fit, since I believe only our County Veterans have earned the right to do so. Tonight it is my great privilege to show everyone an artist's rendering of what the monument of honor will look like, and also thank Woodstock Harley Davidson for the Battle Marker located in the center.

We live in the greatest nation on the face of this earth and I pray every single day that we never need to add another name to this monument. I also know we live in the greatest nation because of these brave soldiers and so we continue to owe a debt we can never truly repay. To show our respect and to honor both our fallen heroes and their families, I would like to invite each and every one of you to join me at the dedication ceremony for this long overdue monument, a sacred place where Ulster County residents who have made the ultimate sacrifice will be honored and remembered forever. This event is scheduled for Sunday May 24, one day prior to Memorial Day.

I also never forget that our Nation, our State, our County and all our freedoms emanate directly from the sacrifices made by these brave men and women. I believe that we have an obligation to them and as a government of the people to do our jobs well, to help build a better America and to help build a better Ulster County in the process.

We take our responsibilities seriously. I believe the single best thing that we can do as a government for our residents and our businesses alike is not tax them out of existence. That is why we have fought so hard to lower your property taxes in an era when virtually nobody else does. We have also created Ulster County's first tax stabilization reserve to protect both you and our local businesses from higher taxes. Plus we have designed an exciting new strategy that will deliver yet another property tax decrease next year, as long as the Legislature continues to join me in exercising fiscal restraint.

Property taxes are only one part of the solution. In our role as an economic development advocate we have delivered real results in a number of other key areas with creative ideas like the *Ulster Advantage Program*, a program that provides real savings directly to you while it also encourages everyone to buy local and support our area businesses more often.

As we move from fresh ideas to big dollars, we are extremely pleased with our successful efforts to secure almost \$28 million from the Governor's highly competitive Consolidated Funding Application process over the past four years. That is funding to help area businesses, not-for-profits and local municipalities. That is money for local entrepreneurs to expand and compete in businesses that employ over 1,000 people in Ulster County. What many people may not be aware of is that our Director of Economic Development Suzanne Holt and her team have also assisted over 330 business leaders and entrepreneurs this year alone.

As we work to design more solutions that help our taxpayers and create a more welcoming business climate, we must also insure that there are enough appropriate "shovel ready" sites available to meet the need. Today I am asking the Ulster County Legislature to partner with me in exploring the feasibility of demolishing the old jail and converting that potentially prime location into a new shovel ready site for responsible and sustainable business development. This will provide a great opportunity for more jobs, an enhanced tax base and the type of smart growth that our community now longs for.

Together we as a community have experienced many successes and unfortunately more than our fair share of challenges. It is our resiliency that has always been our greatest strength. In the past Ulster County was forced to completely reinvent itself after the catastrophic loss of IBM and in many ways we have now become more diversified and less vulnerable to the loss of any one employer. The proof of this diversity is found in the facts. As I said earlier, unemployment is down and our private sector job growth is among the best in the State outside of New York City.

We are in the midst of an exciting expansion in our tourism and hospitality industry with projects like Williams Lake and others all around our County. Our \$500 million agricultural industry is evolving through our Farm Hub. The growth of emerging technologies like 3D printing at SUNY New Paltz and more advanced manufacturing taking place every day is very promising.

We must also remember that our County is geographically huge. While some parts are doing well others still are struggling. The Ellenville and Wawarsing area clearly exemplifies a portion of our County facing profound and longstanding challenges. This beautiful and proud region with amazing citizens and some of the most breathtaking scenery anywhere has been disproportionately negatively impacted by both the financial crisis of 2008 and also the complicated and sweeping problems that have affected traditional Catskill resort areas since they boomed in the 50s and 60s.

We hope that a gaming license at the Nevele can be a part of a future solution. We all hope that the extraordinary community support and compelling economic story will be enough to sway the State Gaming Commission. But I also know that we cannot allow anyone else to predetermine the future of our community. The people of Ellenville and Wawarsing are extraordinary and we as a County must face these longstanding challenges together. To be quite frank with you, if others will not help us, then we must find a way to help ourselves. I will step in and I will act. Though I do not control the same amount of resources I can assure you I am committed to doing everything in my power to help.

Tonight I am announcing an initiative we are referring to as the *Ellenville Million*, a million dollars specifically dedicated to helping the people and the economy of Ellenville. A million dollars set aside from funds due to the County and collected by the State to offset any casino impact from neighboring counties, a million dollars towards projects that help Ellenville and Wawarsing. A million dollars to simply make a difference,

To that end the County will look for recommendations from an extraordinary taskforce of well-respected citizens as well as community input and ultimately projects will be voted on by the entire County Legislature. Please join me in recognizing this special taskforce that will advise the County on the *Ellenville Million*:

1. President of the Rondout Valley Business Association Richard Travers
2. Business person, former Ellenville Village Manager and former County Legislator Mary Sheeley
3. Community leader Reverend Julius Collins from the Shiloh Baptist Church
4. Ellenville Hospital CEO Steven Kelly
5. Attorney Julie Lonstein
6. Business owner Philip Coombs
7. Business owner Candido Perez

I am looking forward to their recommendations and with our Legislature, to funding some valuable community projects that make a difference as soon as possible. I believe the Legislature and my administration have an opportunity to accomplish extraordinary things this year. In addition to the *Ellenville Million* it is my great hope that their agenda includes other key areas like: the 4 mega-watt solar project, the animal abuse registry, converting the old jail into a productive shovel ready site; and partnering with my administration to ensure a 2016 property tax cut for everyone.

On the State level, the County Legislature must focus with our entire State delegation on delivering the timely passage of a sales tax extension that our towns, the City of Kingston, as well as the County rely upon to deliver essential services to our citizen without incident.

Yes we have lofty goals for our County and much work to do. Over the past six years we have come so far and accomplished so much together. Our community has actually redefined what possible looks like. I have always believed that our citizens should not have to choose between a government that is fiscally responsible and a government that is socially responsible. People are more complex than that and they have every right to expect both.

You can have clean air and clean water and still want smart growth in your community. You can embrace with profound respect those brave individuals who enforce our laws while we all work towards creating a fairer and just society. I believe in operating an efficient and effective government the same way I believe in providing a warm bed and all of the services needed by anyone facing freezing cold nights on the streets.

I once heard President Bill Clinton refer to himself as a bleeding heart cheap skate and I smiled. As humorous as that comment was, I believe there was a valuable lesson in it, one that reminds me exactly why we work so hard to run the County government well: we do it to protect our taxpayers and we also do it to make sure we have enough money to help those among us most in need. I can assure you as we move forward we will continue to root out fraud, waste and abuse with the exact same intensity that we bring to designing compassionate solutions for people in need like our children and our seniors.

We will continue to reinvent County government every single day and strive to make it better for you because our hard working middle class has every right to both prosper and participate in the American dream just like everyone else. I never forget, we live in the greatest nation on the face of this earth and the finest place anywhere to live, work and raise a family. I also know it can get even better. With your support, together we will build a better Ulster County today and an even greater Ulster County for generations to come.