

Good evening, members of the Legislature, Majority Leader Heppner, Minority Leader Ronk, Vice Chairman Donaldson, honored guests and citizens. It is a privilege to stand before you as your newly elected Chair. In the short time that I have served in this position, I have developed a newfound respect for the work of my predecessors – three of which still serve in this body. Former Chairs Gerentine, Donaldson and Ronk, thank you for your commitment to Ulster County and for your ongoing collaboration.

Ulster County is in a state of extraordinary transition. For the first time since the Charter's adoption, we have a new County Executive – albeit appointed rather than elected. Tonight, the Legislature will set the date for a special election to determine her replacement, followed by the possibility of a primary and a general election in November. Through it all, the Legislature will be called upon to provide continuity and calm.

Having served in the previous form of county government, I have a sense of historical perspective. I was a member of the Ulster County Efficiency Committee that oversaw the drafting of the Charter. Prior to its adoption, Ulster County was in financial crisis. Significant tax increases and cost overruns at the jail had led us to look for a better way. The Charter created two branches of government with separate powers and duties, each accountable to the public.

We have come a long way. Today, the state of our county is sound. Together with the County Executive, we have delivered seven years of lower county property taxes. In fact, the 2019 tax levy is at the lowest level since 2009. We deliver critical services and have made significant investment in infrastructure. Ulster County is a leader in environmental stewardship and we have been recognized for our achievements on the national stage. These are our shared successes - the executive, the legislature, and county employees working together for the benefit of our 183,000 citizens.

Yet, sometimes, the legislature is called to task for claiming to contribute to executive achievement. Once, when I referenced tax cuts in my campaign literature, a member of the press sent me a personal letter - “Really, Tracey? You are smarter than that.” He was implying that I had nothing to do with the balancing of a budget, that none of us do. The truth is more complicated.

While the charter assigned sole power to the Legislature to make policy by vesting in it both duties of appropriation and legislation, it hasn’t always worked out that way. As the chief budgetary officer, the County Executive has functionally legislated policy through the budget process. The privatization of the Golden Hill Health Care Center, creation of the STRIVE project, Ellenville Million initiative, and the county take-over of Safety Net were all executive policy initiatives effectuated through the budget process. Without a doubt, the Legislature partnered in their successful passage but we have struggled to fully realize our potential – both as the designated policy-makers and as the appropriating body.

Our challenge is not unique. In 1974, the Congressional Budget Office was created to provide objective, impartial information about budgetary issues. Before that time, executive branch agencies provided cost estimates on budgetary and legislation issues, and those estimates had a history of varying depending on how much the president supported them. The CBO was designed to make Congress less dependent on the executive branch when it came to analyzing and effectively challenging its numbers. I propose that we work toward a similar solution.

I ask Legislators Archer and Gerentine, Chair and Deputy Chair of Ways and Means to work together to determine the changes necessary to provide the legislature with a truly independent means of fiscal analysis. During last year’s budget cycle, we approved an additional position to aide in that endeavor. We are preparing to

interview candidates for the position and expect to hire a financial analyst by the end of next month. This is a critical opportunity to define our place and to ensure more active participation in the budgetary process.

I want to thank all those legislative members who have agreed to serve as committee chairs and deputy chairs. Your willingness to dedicate your time to the service of your communities and this body does not go unrecognized. Starting in March, I will institute monthly joint meetings of standing committee chairs. We will all benefit from improved communication and cross committee discussions.

Additionally, I am working with Acting County Executive Reiter to establish a regular working meeting between Deputy Executives, Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs, along with department heads when appropriate. Allowing for more time to review and discuss proposed resolutions will result in an increased understanding of operations and the ability to focus more of our attention on shaping policy.

To that end, I look forward to establishing a working relationship with the Office of the County Comptroller. The Comptrollers' office was created to provide the internal auditing function of the county. The Charter gave the Legislature the authority to direct the Comptroller. We have yet to exercise that option. I ask the Laws and Rules Committee in consultation with the standing committees, to formalize requests to evaluate those departments, agencies and programs that would most assist the Legislature in the function of it's duties.

We must cast aside politics and past disagreements. The time has come for a clean slate.

Criminal justice reform is coming to Ulster County. Initiatives contained in the Governor's budget would see transformative change at the local level, including the elimination of cash bail for misdemeanor and non-violent crimes, expansion of the discovery process, and a state ban on asset seizures without an arrest. Our new Sheriff, Juan Figueroa, is already hard at work. Thank you Sheriff. With the announcement of the retirement of the Ulster County District Attorney Holley Carnright and the Ulster County Court Judge Don Williams, change is certain.

The Legislature will be instrumental in that change. The Law Enforcement Committee, under the leadership of Legislator Eckert, will undertake an analysis of current county programming and policy. In support of this important and timely work, I once again call to commission a study to evaluate the Ulster County jail population and criminal justice systems currently in place that affect that population. Are we adequately providing for alternatives to incarceration? Are we utilizing Drug Court effectively? What improvements can we make through the enactment of policy to improve recidivism and ensure equal justice?

Law enforcement has become the front lines of engagement for issues of mental and behavioral health as well as diseases of addiction. As the policy making body for this community, we must look for ways to support both our first responders and our citizens.

The Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency was created in 1986 for the purpose of developing, financing and implementing a comprehensive countywide solid waste management plan. Initially created to site a local landfill, that task was abandoned in favor of a county-wide solid waste transfer station program. Currently Ulster County exports approximately 120,000 tons of solid waste at an annual cost of \$6.9 million dollars.

Recent trends in the worldwide market for recyclables have focused the issue and changed the discussion. Chinese regulations instituted in early 2018 resulted in a backlog of materials and a national crisis. In Ulster County, as in the nation, we are called upon to reinvent ourselves – to rethink our consumption.

The issue of dual versus single stream has hit home. With disappearing markets for glass and paper, our understanding of the true cost of recycling is challenged. If there isn't a market - is diversion really diversion? States like Washington and Pennsylvania have already created, or are proposing, state legislation to incentivize market incubators for recycling. There are no easy answers.

Solid waste disposal is just as complicated. Seneca Meadows, where we currently haul our MSW some 240 miles away, is nearing capacity. At the end of this year, we are set to rebid our transportation and disposal rates. We are warned to be prepared for the possibility of a significant increase in cost. New York State DEC estimates that the total landfill capacity in the state, including municipal and authority owned landfills, will be fully expended by 2037. Others estimates place that date as much as seven years sooner. We can no longer afford to push off decision making.

Former Chairman Ronk and the UCRRA began the work of investigating a regional approach to waste management in the form of the GUS initiative - Greene, Ulster and Sullivan. It was the beginning of an important conversation. I will be reaching out to my counterparts in those counties to continue that discussion.

As Ulster County's designated planning unit, the UCRRA is in the process of drafting revisions to the long ago submitted Local Solid Waste Management Plan. In the face of new State regulations, and a call for self-reliance, we must, once and for all, take ownership.

I am announcing today the formation of a joint commission made up of members of the Ulster County RRA and the County Legislature. Together, for the first time in this county's history, we will inform the creation of a Solid Waste Management plan from the outset. We will commit to action. We will succeed where those before us have failed.

I want to extend a special thanks to Fred Wadnola, our past Legislative Chairman and present Chair of the RRA, for his partnership and his commitment to action. I also want to thank Legislators Petit and Greene and their respective committees. I look forward to our work together for the benefit of future Ulster County generations. We cannot afford to delay. The status quo is unsustainable.

Twelve years into my service as a legislator and I still get asked what, exactly, is it that county government does?

To answer that question, I state proudly that county government provides critical services. We take care of the most vulnerable among us – administering nearly all federal and human service mandate programs. We administer foster care, daycare, heating assistance, emergency housing, food stamps, and domestic violence prevention programs. We provide veteran's services. We test for lead in homes and we provide rabies vaccinations. We inspect food service establishments to ensure that health standards are met. We coordinate disaster preparedness, patrol our waterways, run criminal background checks and prosecute felony crimes in county court. We maintain infrastructure – including over 400 miles of county roads and more than 150 bridges. And we coordinate and fund services for special needs children from birth until five years of age.

For all this and more I want to thank the dedicated workforce of Ulster County. Ulster County has over 1300 employees – men and women that work to make a difference in the lives of our residents.

They are the everyday heroes of this county and they deserve to be recognized and applauded.

In closing, I look forward to the coming year of opportunity. I want to thank Acting County Executive Reiter for her willingness to work together to navigate the coming months in a spirit of partnership. To my fellow legislators, I extend to each of you my respect, my commitment to listen to your concerns, and my thanks for giving me the opportunity to serve as your chair. Legislative success depends on our ability to rise above partisan politics and to put the interests of Ulster County residents first. Working together, we will continue to deliver real reform within the confines of a responsible budget.

Thank you very much.

