



# NEWS FROM **ULSTER COUNTY**

*County Executive Jen Metzger*

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## **Ulster County Executive Unveils Initiatives in Housing, Workforce, Community & Small Businesses at 2023 State of the County Address**

**ELLENVILLE, NY** - Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger delivered her 2023 State of the County address on Wednesday night at Ellenville High School to an audience that included local elected and County government officials, business, nonprofit and labor leaders, and members of the public. During the address, County Executive Metzger announced plans for a significant County investment in a new Housing Trust as well as plans to create a Workforce Innovation Center for the Green Economy, among other initiatives intended to address immediate needs and expand economic opportunities for residents and businesses.

“I’m very pleased to report that the County is in a very strong fiscal position, which allows us to put funds away for a rainy day and still have significant resources to invest in what our County needs now,” said **Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger**. “That’s why I’m proud to announce new initiatives tonight that lead with fairness and reach underserved areas of our County – initiatives that will create housing that people can afford, leverage new opportunities for the green economy, tackle mental health and addiction challenges, and support our local businesses. Together, we can create a sustainable, resilient, thriving Ulster County that leaves no one behind.”

The County Executive's address was offered in real-time Spanish language translation and American Sign Language interpretation—a first for a State of the County address in Ulster County.

The evening's program also included performances by youth from the Center for Creative Education's Energy Dance Company and the Ellenville High School Chamber Singers, along with a ceremonial Posting of the Colors by the Ulster County Sheriff's Office Honor Guard.

Recordings of the event can be found on the Ulster County Executive's Facebook page and will be posted on the Ulster County Government website and youtube channel.

Some of the many initiatives announced in the address include:

- A renovation and reimagining of the **Trudy Resnick Farber** building in Ellenville, with the goal of transforming it into a central hub of community resources. This project will leverage significant community input into the plan and offerings of the site, and a community survey for public input is available at <https://tinyurl.com/UlsterTFRsurvey>
- A **Centralized Grants Office**, which will position Ulster to pursue state and federal resources for County programs while reducing reliance on taxes.
- An **Ulster County Housing Trust** and **Land Bank**, with a dedicated housing reserve of **\$15 Million** to catalyze the development of housing options that residents can afford now and in the future.
- A plan to create a **Workforce Innovation Center for the Green Economy** at iPark87, the site of the former IBM complex in the Town of Ulster, to equip local workers with the skills for the well-paying, family-sustaining jobs coming to Ulster County in clean energy and other industries—and to attract further investment by companies looking for the trained workforce they need.
- A new **Corrections to Careers** program in partnership with the Carpenters Union Local 279 to provide a pathway for criminal justice-involved individuals in the County Jail and on probation to jobs and future success, which in turn reduces recidivism rates.
- Implementation of new mental health and substance use programs, including a **street outreach program** in partnership with Hudson Valley Community Services to reach people in the community where they are. The outreach team will provide harm reduction education, naloxone, transportation to appointments, and connections to medication and treatment.
- A second round of small grants to local small businesses as well as a new **"Boost for Main Streets"** program that will make nearly **\$2 million** in grant funding available for capital improvements to commercial and mixed-use buildings and business districts, especially in economically disadvantaged areas. Both programs are funded with resources the County received through the federal American Rescue Plan Act.

Metzger is the first woman elected to the Office of County Executive in Ulster County. The State of the County was her first major address since taking office in January of this year, after having been elected in a special election to complete the remainder of the term left by Pat Ryan, the former County Executive and now Congressman. Metzger plans to run for a full four-year term this November.

**The County Executive's full remarks are included below:**

"Hello everyone! I want to give a big thanks to Ellenville School District Superintendent Lisa Wiles and the Ellenville High School for hosting us this evening.

I also want to recognize my partners in governance, the County Legislators here today as well as those who couldn't be here. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have such smart, knowledgeable, and committed colleagues like these to work with. I'm confident that together we will be able to deliver important wins for Ulster County in the coming year.

I want to say a few words about why I picked Ellenville as the location for my first State of the County address. We live in a big, beautiful County covering over 1,100 square miles, with 23 unique towns and villages outside of the City of Kingston, and it is important to me that our County services and programs reach them all, including here in Ellenville, in the Town of Wawarsing, nearly 30 miles west and south of the County seat. When I served in the State Senate, I represented this community and other towns in the western and southern-most area of our county that, quite frankly, often felt under the radar, and I worked to address that concern at the state level, and will continue to do so as your County Executive.

Another reason I wanted to give this address here is that Ellenville presents a stark picture of both the challenges we face and opportunities before us to address them. Like so many communities across the country, industry and manufacturing jobs dried up here and the local economy has struggled to fill the voids they have left. Over 21% of the community lives at the poverty level--that's about 3X the County average. 18% of Ellenville residents do not own a car, which really limits your opportunities unless there is robust public transit. And the disparities are not just economic, they are racial, as the County Comptroller's 2022 Racial Equity Report makes clear.

Like many other communities in our County, Ellenville also faces a severe shortage of housing people can afford. And like many communities, mental health and addiction crises have been taking a real toll.

But while these are challenging conditions, the outlook for the future is very hopeful, provided we do the real work to create the conditions for all of our community members to thrive. Ellenville is a richly diverse community--racially and ethnically, and in the talents and skills of its people, with an incredible arts and cultural scene and world-class theater--and it is surrounded by extraordinary natural and scenic beauty that made it a borscht-belt destination for so many decades and a hub for eco-tourism today.

There is a new, positive, can-do energy with the formation of the Coalition of Forward-Facing Ellenville, a community-based organization of new-comers and old-timers working on revitalization.

And there are new, significant investments on the way, including, notably, CRESCO Labs, which is building a major cannabis facility on the site of the former Imperial Schrade knife factory with the promise of creating hundreds of jobs.

We have to make sure that everyone shares in the benefits of economic development, and not just those who are already well-off and can afford to live here. There is a lot we can do to support new and existing small local businesses, and to expand opportunities for those who haven't necessarily had those opportunities in the past.

One of the initiatives I am announcing today is a County commitment to breathing new life into the Trudy Resnick Farber building here in Ellenville, making it the central hub of community resources that it once was.

I was speaking recently with Ulster County Legislator John Gavaris, who remembers as a kid going to Trudy Farber with his mom and what a lifeline the services provided there were to his family and to the community. We can do so much more with this County-owned property than we currently are, and I'll be holding a community meeting to get input from you about the services and activities you'd like to see there. You can also share your thoughts in an online survey, which you can access with the QR code right here or on the County website.

And we have the tools to get it done. I'm very pleased to report that the County is in a very strong fiscal position. While we won't have the final figures for 2022 until later this Spring, we know that as of now sales tax revenues exceeded our budget by over \$20 million. This is on top of an excess fund balance of over \$84 million from the previous year due to a stronger than expected recovery from the pandemic.

Thankfully, because of the strong financial footing we are on now, we can put funds away for a rainy day and still have significant resources to invest in what our County needs now. Things like housing, transportation, and investments to improve climate resilience and reduce waste. But we also have to be mindful that the economy is cyclical and that a recession will hit us sooner or later, and I was pleased to see the Legislature add nearly \$6 million to the tax stabilization fund as part of the 2023 budget. We want to keep your taxes down in the future.

We're also creating a centralized grants office, which will position us to pursue state and federal resources for County programs while reducing reliance on taxes--and we want to support our local governments in their efforts to secure grant funding, as well. We were leaving a lot of funds on the table, and I'm going to make sure Ulster County gets our fair share.

Tonight, I'll be talking about initiatives we're launching within six broad themes:

1. Housing that people can afford;
2. opportunities for a green economy;
3. leading with fairness;
4. tackling mental health and addiction challenges;
5. supporting local businesses;
6. and reaching underserved areas of the County.

So make yourself comfortable--we've got a lot of ground to cover!

#### 1. Housing that We Can Afford

I know the struggle that many families are experiencing. When I was young, from the time I was seven years old, my family moved constantly because we couldn't afford a place to live.

We moved from one relative's home to another, one rental to another, one house-sitting arrangement to another, and that's the lived experience of too many people right now in our County.

One in three renters in Ulster County are spending more than half of their income to keep a roof over their heads, leaving them with too little to pay for food, transportation, and all the other necessities of life. The constant moving, and the anxiety of not knowing where you're going to sleep that night, is incredibly destabilizing.

Having a roof over your head is a basic need and right. It's recognized in the International Declaration of Human Rights that was signed by this country back in 1948. We have a duty to act.

And it's not just our community members who suffer--it's our economy and businesses that suffer, too. Many of our businesses cannot find enough workers, and that's in part because of the high cost of housing, and the disconnect between what they can pay those workers and what it costs to live here.

The housing crisis is not just an Ulster County crisis--it's a national crisis, and one that's not going to be solved overnight, but in 2023, we will pursue solutions to address this most basic of needs.

First and foremost, we must expand the supply of housing people can afford. Working with the Legislature, we will establish an Ulster County Housing Trust to catalyze housing development by lowering costs for such things as infrastructure, predevelopment costs, and clean energy investments.

I am proposing that we dedicate \$15 million of the County's excess fund balance, or about 15% of the budget surplus, to a Housing Trust reserve account so that we can make a meaningful impact on housing options for our residents now and in the future.

We have successful models in other counties to look to, like Tompkins County, where their Community Housing Development Fund has supported the development of over 800 units of new housing that people can afford, with an average per unit investment by the Fund of only \$7,000. And the best part, in exchange for County support, these homes must remain affordable for at least 50 years.

We also have to make sure that we're building these buildings. Buildings are the largest source of climate-damaging emissions in NY, and a cost burden on our residents paying the heating and utility bills. Indoor spaces are also where we spend most of our time, and the quality of the air we breathe in those buildings has a big impact on our health. By making housing energy efficient, and all-electric, we not only reduce our carbon footprint and utility costs; we create healthier, more comfortable and more affordable living environments for our families and seniors.

In tandem with the Housing Trust, we will pursue a Land Bank, which the Legislature last year took important first steps to create. Land Banks work hand-in-hand with a Housing Trust to redevelop tax-foreclosed, vacant and abandoned properties to better serve the public interest, and bring these properties back to productive use as homes for our residents.

But the County can't do this alone. The housing crisis can't be addressed without engaging our towns and villages in solutions. The buck stops with local governments when it comes to zoning and permitting, and we want to support them to reduce barriers to housing that people can afford.

To this end, our County Planning Department has launched an innovative program called the Ulster County Housing Smart Communities Initiative, which fosters healthy competition among local governments to become a certified Housing Smart Community, based on the number of actions they take--everything from supportive zoning changes to short-term rental regulation to streamlining the approval process--and to help them, the County will provide guidance, technical assistance, and financial incentives.

Since its launch in October, eight municipalities have joined the program, including the Village of New Paltz, Town of Woodstock, City of Kingston, Town of Saugerties, Town of Marbletown, Town of Olive, Town of Rochester, and the Village of Ellenville. These communities deserve a round of applause for helping address the housing crisis head on!

Lastly on the housing front, I also want to mention two projects under way to address emergency housing needs--those situations in which individuals and families lose their homes and have nowhere to go. We are converting a former boarding house in Kingston, called Elizabeth Manor, into a family shelter that can house up to 35 people. And it is desperately needed as the number of housing insecure families in our communities continues to climb.

The County will also begin work this year on water and sewer infrastructure to support a project by RUPCO to convert the Quality Inn in the Town of Ulster into 81 apartments for our most vulnerable residents. It's much more than just a roof over their heads: RUPCO will also provide services on site, including health and mental health care, career counseling and job training, childcare and support for finding permanent housing solutions.

Government exists to ensure that everyone has the necessary tools not simply to survive, but to thrive. If we provide the tools and opportunities to everyone who needs them, we can all flourish together.

## 2. The Climate Crisis and the Green Economy

Of course, we have to have a healthy planet to thrive. My administration is leading responsibly on the climate crisis and positioning Ulster County to realize the tremendous benefits of a green economy for our residents and businesses.

We know from a well-established international scientific consensus that climate change is causing dangerous and widespread disruption in nature and affecting the lives of billions of people around the world.

If you have any doubt that humans are having an impact on climate, just take a look at the graph on the screen. Global mean temperatures were fairly consistent for thousands of years, until the industrial revolution.

We really don't need the science to tell us, of course--we can see the impacts of climate change right here in Ulster County.

- One year ago last week, an ice storm left people stranded without heat and power for as much as a week in bitter cold February temperatures--my house was among them.
- Last summer, we saw a prolonged drought that reduced reservoirs to such low levels that the City of Kingston had to declare a drought emergency and institute mandatory water-use restrictions.
- Every year, the number of extreme heat days grows, putting our health and safety at risk.

We must do our part to reduce the risks to our children's future. It would be reckless and irresponsible not to. And, I cannot emphasize this point enough, the benefits to our residents and businesses of shifting to a green economy are enormous.

We are all experiencing the financial squeeze of sky-high heating and utility bills--and that is a direct result of our dependence on fossil fuels, which are affected by world events beyond our control, like the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The price of fossil fuels is inherently volatile--it's primarily set in international markets--and the more we can reduce our reliance on them the better off we'll be. Energy-efficient electric heat pumps are flying off the shelves because who can afford \$5 or \$6 a gallon for home heating oil?

And then there are the health benefits. Combusting fossil fuels is bad for our health and is associated with all kinds of diseases and conditions, from asthma to heart disease to cancer. Switching to clean, energy-efficient alternatives is just better for our health.

Shifting to a green economy is also a huge job creator: Ulster County could see tens of thousands of new jobs in manufacturing, buildings, transportation, renewable energy, and other green economy sectors.

The 500 jobs that Zinc8, a cutting-edge battery storage company, will create at the former IBM site in the Town of Ulster is just the beginning.

We must seize the opportunity and realize all of these benefits for our residents and businesses,



and that is why I am announcing today a plan to create a Workforce Innovation Center for the Green Economy to equip our workers with the skills for the well-paying, family-sustaining jobs we are bringing to Ulster County!

And you better believe we will be working with our partners in labor to make sure as many of those jobs as possible are UNION JOBS.

The Center will be sited at iPark87, the site of the former IBM complex, where several clean energy industries are already planning to locate their operations. It will serve as a magnet for more companies, creating a virtuous cycle, because the #1 attribute businesses look for when deciding where to locate is whether there is a qualified workforce.

We want Ulster County to be at the top of the list for cutting-edge industries looking for a place to set up shop, and that's exactly what the Green Economy Workforce Innovation Center will do.

Our model is unique in a number of respects:

The Center will involve an unprecedented collaboration among our educational institutions--SUNY New Paltz, SUNY Ulster, and Ulster BOCES--along with community-based organizations, the County, and the trades; and we will work directly with cutting edge companies locating here to co-create curriculum so that our workers are ready to step into these jobs on Day 1.

And it's not just clean energy industries--although we do want to make iPark a hub for this kind of investment--it's other sectors as well, including, potentially, medical cannabis, film and television, and local food and beverage industries.

And these opportunities will be available to everyone, especially underserved communities, because we will offer childcare on site and free public transportation to get there.

Too often, the people who need the job opportunities the most don't have access to them because of these other barriers. We're going to break those barriers down and create a national model for how we should be doing workforce development in the 21st century.

Our County will also continue to lead by example in reducing climate-damaging emissions. When I served in the State Senate, I worked hard to pass the Climate Leadership and

Community Protection Act. It's the most forward-looking climate law in the country, both in terms of reducing harmful emissions and doing it in a way that is fair and equitable.

Now we have to implement this law, and Ulster County is in a position to lead the way. Two weeks ago I issued an Executive Order that includes 13 directives to fully align our County government with the State's Climate Act and aggressively reduce emissions from government buildings, facilities, and operations. Government can and should be a model for the community, and that's what we're going to do.

I'll just highlight a few of these directives:

We will assess all government buildings for on-site solar and battery storage to help us reach the County target of generating 100% of government electricity needs from local renewable resources by 2030--that's 10 years ahead of the State's target.

We will require new construction and major renovation of County buildings to meet stringent energy standards, to be all-electric and equipped with EV charging.

We're also setting a goal of diverting 100% of countywide organic waste from landfills and incinerators by 2030--that's food waste and yard waste--and we'll start with the government's own operations, putting an organic waste recycling program in place this calendar year.

On the transportation front, we will undertake an assessment of our public bus system, UCAT, with the goal of expanding routes and scheduling; and we will continue the work to fully electrify the fleet. (BTW, if you haven't ridden one of our electric buses yet, it is a smooth ride.) Public transportation is not just about reducing emissions--it's about expanding access to education and job opportunities and healthcare for folks who cannot afford a car or the gas to get around.

We will also develop a public outreach and engagement program to help connect our residents and small businesses with state and federal incentives and assistance so that you can improve your energy efficiency, reduce your energy costs, and adopt clean energy technologies--and we want to especially focus on underserved communities.

### 3. Leading with Equity and ensuring opportunity

Our commitment to fairness and equity is not limited to addressing climate change--this commitment will inform everything we do as a County Government. One of the first actions I

took as County Executive was to elevate the position of Chief Diversity Officer to the executive level, and I appointed Esi Lewis to this position to help ensure that not just County hiring practices, but also County programs, operations, and initiatives are viewed through this important lens. We have to make sure that information and services are accessible to all members of our community.

We also want to make sure we're giving people a fair shot, including those who have been incarcerated or are on probation. Here, too, Ulster has long been a leader. The first County Executive, Mike Hein, issued an Executive Order in 2014 banning the practice of asking job candidates about their criminal histories to prevent bias in hiring. In 2021, this Order was codified in law by the Legislature.

Building on this commitment to fairness, I am proud to announce a new initiative today: We are partnering with the Carpenters Union to create a pathway for folks from the Ulster County Jail and from Probation into union apprenticeship programs, which provide the support system and the necessary training for well-paying jobs in the trades, and for future success.

Matt Ross of Carpenters Local 279 has suggested the name "Corrections to Careers," which I love. Thank you to Local 279 for partnering with us to give everyone the opportunity to be productive members of our community, and get another chance to succeed in life.

#### 4. Addressing the challenges of mental health and addiction crises

I now want to turn to two, often related, challenges we face as a County: people experiencing mental health challenges and addiction. Everyone in this room has been touched by this need in some way--a family member, a friend, an employee, or you may yourself have experience with it. I am particularly concerned about our young people, as challenges became so much more acute as a result of the pandemic.

We've started a new "Mental Health in Schools" program targeted to middle school students to promote overall wellness and offset the effects of trauma. Every school district in Ulster County will have access to an additional clinician and an additional case worker, significantly increasing mental health capacity in our public schools.

We are also building our capacity as a County, hiring a new full-time clinician in our mental health department focused on youth, who will provide clinical care to at-risk young people in their home and community, working in partnership with the Sheriff's Anti-Violence Effort Response team, also known as AVERT.

And since I mentioned our Sheriff's Department, I just want to take this opportunity to recognize Sheriff Juan Figeroua, who has shown real statewide and national leadership in reinventing the role of law enforcement and partnering with peer advocates, social workers and mental health professionals to get people the assistance and treatment they need. We are creating models here in Ulster County on so many fronts. Thank you Sheriff, for your leadership.

As part of the budget, the Legislature approved \$3 million to create a Crisis Stabilization Center in Kingston that will run 24/7, connecting those in need of mental health and addiction services with a team of clinical counselors, peer specialists and addiction professionals from partner organizations, including Ellenville Regional Hospital.

We also continue to be laser-focused on the opioid epidemic. Too many of us have lost a loved one to an overdose, and tragically, we have seen an increase in deaths driven primarily by the prevalence of fentanyl on the streets. It is extremely potent and deadly, even in small quantities.

With funding from settlements reached between states and major U.S. drug companies which are much to blame for this epidemic, we're implementing new programs to prevent addiction, reduce harm, and provide treatment and recovery.

One of these new initiatives is a street outreach program in partnership with Hudson Valley Community Services to reach people in the community where they are. The outreach team will provide harm reduction education, naloxone, transportation to appointments, and connections to medication and treatment.

This and other work by the County to address substance use disorder and mental health is work that saves lives, and I want to thank our staff and our many community partners for their dedicated efforts day in and day out.

#### 5. Supporting a thriving economy of mainly small businesses

Here in Ulster County, we are largely an economy of small businesses--it's part of our character as a region and one of the things that makes it special and draws people to visit. Earlier I talked about some of the benefits of a green economy, but a green economy is not just about clean energy and sustainable products; it's also about localism and sustaining an ecosystem of businesses with roots in our communities that serve our local needs.

Our local businesses face many challenges, with thin profit margins and stiff competition from online businesses, worker shortages, and other issues. We need to help them thrive. In 2022, we provided \$1 million in direct financial assistance to 34 small businesses through the Ulster County CARES program. Over half of those grants went to women and minority-owned businesses and spanned a variety of sectors. As a direct result of this funding, these businesses added 38 new full-time jobs and 27 part-time jobs, on top of the 82 full- and part-time jobs they retained.

This program was a first for Ulster County, and because of its success, our partners in the Legislature have authorized us to expand the work in several ways. This year, we will provide small grants to another 30+ businesses through a second round of funding.

Our Economic Development Department will also launch a new program called "Boost for Main Streets" that will make nearly \$2 million in grant funding available for capital improvements to commercial and mixed-use buildings and business districts, especially in economically disadvantaged areas. All of these projects are funded by federal grants and not County taxpayers, something I always like to emphasize.

And of course we can't talk about Ulster's local economy without mentioning tourism. Our County accounts for fully 44% of all visitation to the Catskills. Visitor spending is up 126% since 2019, and it has created a lot of jobs--nearly 8,000 in 2021, alone.

We can continue to expand tourism by marketing Ulster County on its strengths: its scenic beauty and outdoor recreational opportunities, the arts, agri-tourism, and a commitment to sustainability, which more and more visitors are looking for when planning their vacations.

A strong local economy is a diverse economy that doesn't rely on any one sector or industry, and we'll also be taking advantage of new economic opportunities in other sectors, like developing a craft cannabis industry and expanding value-added processing of foods to support our local farms. When I chaired the Agriculture Committee in the State Senate, I focused on ways we can help ensure that our small and family farms can thrive for the long term, and I look forward to continuing this work as County Executive.

We have a lot going on, and we have endless opportunities to do more.

## 6. Serving the Whole County

Which brings me full circle to the theme I mentioned at the beginning--making sure that these opportunities extend to the whole County, north, south, east, and west.

This includes services like broadband internet, which in the modern age is an essential service for health, safety, education, work, and social connection. Expanding broadband access was a priority of mine in the State Senate where I introduced the Comprehensive Broadband Connectivity Act, now law, to identify gaps in access, reliability, and affordability of service.

As County Executive, I will focus on closing our gaps in coverage as well as bringing new providers into the market to increase competition and provide better prices and service to customers. I want to recognize the great work done by the County Comptroller's Citizens Commission for Digital Inclusion, which will be a real help in our efforts to close gaps in service. Thank you Comptroller Gallagher and Commission Chair Jenny Lee and colleagues for your work.

Another major gap we need to close is in the delivery of Emergency Medical Services. Our dedicated EMS volunteers and professionals are doing all they can, but unfortunately there just aren't enough of them to cover the whole county. In 2023, a new EMS division within the County Department of Emergency Services will coordinate improvement in service delivery, provide training opportunities, and deploy trained paramedics in different areas of the County to begin to fill coverage gaps.

I want to thank Ulster County Legislator Ken Ronk - a Captain with Wallkill Volunteer Ambulance Corps -- along with Legislators Heppner, Uchitelle, and Hansut for their work to make this happen in the 2023 budget. Thank you all, for your work.

I am now just six weeks into the job as your County Executive, and it is the greatest honor of my life to serve you all and the County I love, our home. It's important to me to hear from you--the best ideas come from the people we serve--and in the coming months, I will host listening sessions around the County to hear your thoughts and priorities. Together, we can create a sustainable, resilient, thriving Ulster County that leaves no one behind. Thank you all, and good night.”

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