

County Executive Jen Metzger

2025 State of the County Address

February 20, 2025

Good evening, thank you all for joining me.

We have entered a tumultuous time at the federal level, but I want to be very clear that in Ulster County:

- We will continue to lead on climate and protect the environment;
- Our health Department will continue to protect public health, including free vaccinations for the uninsured and underinsured;
- We will continue to invest in housing, mental health, and our local economy;
- We remain committed as a County government to inclusiveness, respect, and common decency.

I want to express my gratitude to the 1,452 hardworking Ulster County employees who are doing the work every day to maintain our roads and bridges, protect public safety, drive our buses, care for our seniors, veterans, and vulnerable neighbors, and all the other vital work they do. We are committed to their well-being, and I am announcing today that we are creating a County paid family leave program so that employees can take the time to bond with a newborn or adoptive child and still pay the bills. This will be our own program, better than the state's because it pays a full salary for up to 12 weeks' leave.

I wouldn't have traded those precious weeks with my babies for anything, and neither should our employees.

We're developing other new programs to support employee well-being, reduce stress, and improve mental and physical health. We're creating a pay plan that is fairer and more competitive so that we can both attract and retain a quality workforce now and in the future.

This work is all being done as we negotiate new contracts with our five unions, and we look forward to reaching agreements later this year.

I am so proud of our professional civil servants, and so honored to have the privilege of leading this organization with an incredible team: Chief of Staff Johanna Contreras, Deputy County Executive Jamie Capuano, Deputy County Executive Amanda LaValle, Chief Diversity Officer Esi Lewis, and the entire Executive Office crew.

All the work we do, we do in partnership with the Legislature. I want to thank Chair Peter Criswell for his steady leadership, and I want to recognize our Legislators for their dedicated service.

Government is only as good as the people in it.

Housing

Housing remains a top priority, and we will not rest until all of our community members have a home they can afford. We are making inroads:

- **The Golden Hill project** — a partnership of the County, Pennrose, and Family of Woodstock on the former site of the County jail — is under construction and ahead of schedule. That's 164 units of high-quality housing for seniors and families with incomes as low as 30% of median income. There will be childcare, playgrounds, a community garden, a fitness room, and services for seniors. The move-in date for the first apartments could be as early as November.
- **The Quality Inn** redevelopment by RUPCO in the Town of Ulster is under construction. Also benefiting from County support, this project creates 83 units of permanent supportive housing for vulnerable and homeless individuals and families. Move-in date: Summer of next year.
- **Silver Gardens** in Highland, a project of Marlborough Associates and RUPCO that also benefited from County support, is under construction and ahead of schedule. The project creates 57 units of low-income senior housing, with services on-site for frail seniors: Move-in date: November 1.

These projects all received invaluable state support, and we thank the Governor and NYS Homes and Community Renewal for their commitment to Ulster County.

- **The County Housing Action Fund** we established during my first year in office is supporting affordable housing projects in New Paltz, Hurley, Saugerties, and Kingston, with both home ownership and rental opportunities. That's another 119 affordable homes added, thanks to the great work of our expert, all-volunteer Housing Policy Oversight and Review Committee. Most of these projects are under construction, with move-in dates this year and in early 2026.
- Our innovative **Plus One Home program** has awarded 54 homeowners with grants to build an Accessory Dwelling Unit — this is a small home on their property, or an apartment above the garage or in their house. In exchange for County funding,

homeowners agree to keep the rent affordable. ADUs are the quickest way to add housing and they provide extra income to help homeowners pay the bills. What's not to love about ADUs? I encourage local governments to revise their zoning to be ADU-friendly if you haven't already — I know that Marbletown is in the process of doing just that.

Ellenville Affordable & Green Housing Project

We have more tools in our toolbox to expand housing, like the Ulster County Housing Development Corporation, or HDC, which we will use to build housing on County-owned property in the heart of Ellenville, across the street from the Trudy Farber Building. We will bring a proposal before the HDC and Legislature in the coming months.

Elizabeth Manor

We will also utilize the HDC to create affordable housing for families on the Elizabeth Manor property in Kingston, demolishing the former boarding house, which is in poor shape, and building anew. We have an RFP open, with responses coming in, and we expect to select a developer next month.

All of this County-supported housing is together adding nearly 500 affordable homes for our residents. We currently have about 490 individuals and families in emergency housing as I speak, and while we still have much work to do, we are making real progress in creating the affordable housing we need. I want to recognize our housing champions in the Planning Department, Dennis Doyle and Kai Farmer, as well as our very supportive Legislature. None of this would happen without them.

I also want to recognize our staff who are supporting individuals and families in emergency housing through this stressful, uprooted time. We have a great team led by Housing and Homelessness Director Laura Nordstrom, who is coordinating services and working to connect families with permanent housing. Our amazing Youth Bureau Director, Sugely Melenciano-Weed, has created daily summer and after-school programs for children in emergency housing, and we've partnered with SUNY New Paltz to provide tutors for kids who are behind in reading. I want to thank everyone involved, including our many community partners. I also want to recognize the dedicated leadership of County Social Services Commissioner, Mike Iapocce. We are fortunate to have such a caring and capable public servant at the helm.

Housing Smart Communities Initiative

Local governments are critical partners in addressing the housing crisis because they decide what gets built where. Through our Housing Smart Communities initiative — which, by the way, was the inspiration for the Governor's Pro-Housing program — we certify local governments as housing-smart if they take actions like adopting housing-friendly zoning laws; placing caps on the number of short-term rentals; or joining the Emergency Tenant Protection Act. We have a whole menu of options for them to choose from, and the more they choose, the better.

In return, the County provides technical and other assistance to support their housing goals. For instance, we're funding a consultant to help the Town of Rochester develop an inventory of vacant and underutilized properties that could be redeveloped for housing.

I want to take a moment to recognize the Town of Rochester and all our Housing Smart communities for stepping up to address the housing crisis. And congratulations to Mayor Noble and the City of Kingston on winning national recognition for your new zoning. That's tremendous!

Climate

I want to turn to another challenge facing our community and every community on this beautiful but imperiled planet. Unfortunately, the federal government is recklessly abandoning its responsibility to address, or even acknowledge, the climate crisis. In Ulster County, we are staying the course in shifting to a clean energy economy. We will continue our work to protect our children's future and strengthen our resilience to the impacts we're experiencing now.

This mission touches everything we do as a County government, including housing: Every project I mentioned today is being constructed to the highest energy efficiency standards and using clean energy technologies. And through our new "Better Homes for All" campaign with community partners, we are helping our residents improve their homes, and save energy and money — it's especially needed in times like these.

Climate-Smart Transportation

We're also investing in transportation that is climate-smart: We're making it safer for pedestrians and cyclists to get around, we're expanding EV charging infrastructure, and we're

electrifying public transit. We just finished installing 480 solar panels on the roof of UCAT so we can charge our electric buses with the sun.

Public transit is climate-smart, and we're proud to share that last year, for the first time ever, we hit the half-million rider mark. We are thrilled that more people are riding the bus than ever, and we remain committed to keeping this service free. This is especially helpful in times like these, when the costs of housing and other necessities are high.

For those who do take their own cars to get around, we continue to expand EV charging. This is especially important for the tourism sector: More and more out-of-town visitors drive electric, and we want Ulster County to be at the top of their destination list.

We're adding charging that is faster, that reaches more remote areas of the county, and that can provide power under any conditions:

- This year, the Village of Ellenville and the Town of Ulster will see new charging hubs equipped with high-speed chargers, thanks to state funding secured by our County Department of Environment.
- In Boiceville, we're working with NYC DEP to install a bank of chargers at the Ashokan Trail parking lot where visitors can bike, stroll, or ski while they charge.
- In Shokan on Route 28, we deployed the region's first off-the-grid charging station, powered by solar and equipped with battery storage to operate under any conditions.
- This summer, we will open a second round of EV charging grants for towns and villages, thanks to an ARPA-funded program created by the County Legislature.

Greening County Infrastructure

We're also upgrading our County buildings to meet a greener, healthier standard, thanks to an \$18M Decarbonization Reserve we created last year. We're improving efficiency, installing heat pumps and geothermal, and adding solar and battery storage. Just by updating building energy controls, we will save taxpayers nearly half a million dollars on energy costs. Great for the environment, great for the pocketbook.

Climate Resilience

Beyond reducing our impact on climate change, we're also adapting to the new realities we face. With more extreme weather, we have to fortify our infrastructure to keep our communities safe. We're installing bigger culverts and replacing antiquated bridges with new

bridges that have longer and higher spans and deeper foundations. This costs more money but is essential — one of the reasons why the federal funding we receive is so important.

This summer, construction will begin on a new County Emergency Communications Center, located in New Paltz, that will be climate-smart, resilient, and capable of withstanding any kind of disaster or threat. We were thrilled to be awarded a \$2 million NYSERDA grant to help get this done.

Thank you to Ulster County Emergency Services Director Everett Erichsen and Planning Director Dennis Doyle for hundreds of hours of careful planning and project oversight, and I also thank the Legislature for its strong support.

Climate Corps

Ulster County is leading on climate solutions, and we're involving the next generation in this work. Young people have incredible anxiety about climate change and the planet they are inheriting. Through the Ulster County Climate Corps, we're engaging them in positive solutions that can make a difference. In the two years since we started the program, 30 interns have successfully completed 23 climate-related projects with 11 different County departments. We're building the bench of future public servants and problem-solvers. In fact, it's not just in the future — some of our former interns now hold full-time positions in County government!

Agriculture

I want to switch gears a bit and turn to agriculture, going back to our roots, so to speak. We are home to some of the state's oldest multigenerational farms, like Saunderskill Farm in Accord, which has operated continuously since 1680. Think about the changes that farm has seen in 350 years! We also have many new farms started by young farmers. We have to consider ourselves very lucky, because around the state and nationally, many farmers are aging out and the land is being developed or consolidated into larger industrial farms.

Here in Ulster, agriculture remains a robust sector of the economy, with close to 500 small and mid-sized farms that produce a great diversity of products. Together, they generate over \$105 million in sales annually, and that doesn't begin to capture the positive impacts on the rest of the local economy. Think about all the u-pick orchards, craft breweries and cideries, and farmers markets that draw visitors here. Those visitors stay in our motels and B&Bs, eat in restaurants, and visit our local shops. Agriculture is integral to the local economy.

2024 Agricultural & Farmland Protection Plan

Our farms are also vital to our long-term food security. As the saying goes, "No farms, no food." Much of the food you buy in the stores comes from parts of the country and world vulnerable to drought and water shortages. We have to keep farming strong in Ulster County for the long term, and I'm incredibly proud of the work of our Planning Department on the 2024 Agricultural and Farmland Protection Plan. This is the first updated plan in nearly three decades, and believe me, a lot has changed.

Financial Support for Farmers

One of the greatest needs identified by this Plan is capital to help farmers improve their operations. Today I am announcing that I will propose to the Legislature a new Revolving Loan Fund for agricultural projects, capitalized at \$500,000, to help keep farming strong in Ulster County.

We're also helping farmers reduce their environmental impact and strengthen their climate resiliency, thanks to the Agricultural Crisis Relief Program created by the Legislature with ARPA funding. Through this program, Ulster County Soil and Water Conservation District has purchased equipment that it rents at low cost to farms to improve soil health and reduce water needs — and they even deliver and pick up the equipment for free! It's a very popular program with farmers, saving them money and time — two things they're often short on. We're also rolling out direct grants to farms to help them improve energy efficiency and climate resiliency, in partnership with the Hudson Valley Agri-business Development Corporation.

Farmers are on the frontlines of climate change and are incredibly vulnerable to its impacts. They are also an important part of the solution in addressing this threat.

Workforce

Before I leave the topic of agriculture, I want to mention one more looming issue. You should know that Ulster County's farms employ 1,800 workers. We rank 4th in the entire state in the size of our agricultural workforce. Much of the farm labor is immigrant labor, and we also increasingly rely on immigrant labor in other key sectors, like the building sector. We should not lose sight of this.

We need a legal pathway for immigrant workers and their families, and we need to continue the work to skill up our residents for strategic sectors of the economy, like health care, advanced manufacturing, fiber optics, and green careers. I was thrilled to see the Governor's Budget proposal to provide free community college tuition for adults seeking to enter these high-demand fields. This aligns perfectly with our work, together with SUNY Ulster and its president, Dr. Alison Buckley, to expand opportunities for residents who have faced financial and other barriers to pursuing their dream job.

Small Business Support

Ulster County is largely an economy of small businesses, and we are committed to helping new and existing businesses thrive. Our Economic Development team, led by Director Kevin Lynch, is re-energizing the County's dormant Revolving Loan Fund. These loans could help a new business with payroll or the first month's rent until money is coming in, or help an existing business purchase machinery and equipment that could make all the difference for a business's success. The revolving loan fund is currently capitalized at about \$1.2 million, and we plan to start getting low-interest loans out the door this year.

The program is open to all, but we will give additional help to women-, minority-, and veteran-owned businesses and nonprofits that cannot easily access traditional financing.

And we will incentivize certain types of businesses, like childcare, that our working parents so desperately need.

Our Economic Development team is also doing great work to support place-based economic development. We've successfully secured a \$10 million grant for National Resources to transform the derelict IBM property in the Town of Ulster into a modern hub of education and industry. A new Ulster BOCES Career and Technical Center serving up to 1,800 students will open at iPark in the fall, together with a new County training and employment center that will work directly with educational partners and businesses located there. It's been a great pleasure to work with Ulster BOCES, SUNY Ulster and SUNY New Paltz, and I look forward to our continued work together.

Farther north in the County, our Economic Development team has secured another \$1.6 million grant to breathe new life into the beloved old Wellington Hotel in Pine Hill.

The Wellington project is a great example of what a small community with big dreams can do with hard work and unity of purpose. A group of residents had a vision for the old hotel to

create affordable housing, a food market, and a café where the community could gather. They raised the equity to purchase the building, enlisted RUPCO to develop it, and with the grant we helped them secure, they are working to make their dream a reality.

Arts & Culture

A key sector of our economy that doesn't get the attention it merits is the arts and culture. A few facts:

- In Ulster County, the creative economy generates \$537 million in annual revenue and \$148 million in wages.
- The creative economy also directly supports 3,500 jobs.

Beyond the economic contributions, a thriving arts community has so many other benefits — for educational enrichment, mental health, and quality of life, to name a few.

For the last year, the County has undertaken a broadly collaborative process to develop the very first Arts and Culture Master Plan. I want to recognize the great work of the team leading this effort: Peter Criswell, Chair of the Legislature who also got this initiative underway; Joshua Stratton-Rayner, from our Economic Development team; and Sara Pasti, Arts and Development Consultant and City of Kingston Alderwoman.

The Plan is expected to be finalized and presented to the Legislature in April, but we're not waiting. As part of the 2025 Budget, we've created a new position of Director of Arts, Culture, and Open Spaces to give us the institutional capacity to support this work county-wide. The office will develop and maintain a calendar of arts and cultural events around the County, support public art projects, manage a resource hub for artists, and promote our parks and open spaces.

I'm also thrilled to announce that the County government is undertaking its first public mural project. We'll soon be putting out a call for proposals to artists for the Center for Well-Being, our mental health and crisis support hub in Midtown Kingston.

Trails & Recreation

Our public open spaces, trails, and recreational assets are another key pillar of our local economy and quality of life. We completed several major rail trail projects in partnership with the Open Space Institute in 2024 that benefited from County ARPA funding, including a

beautiful new section of the O&W rail trail between Accord and Kerhonkson and another section stretching from the Village of Ellenville to Port Ben.

To the north, we completed the long-awaited O&W Connector Trail to Kingston, which bridges our urban and rural communities and connects to the city's 27-mile Greenline system.

Our world-class trails are an economic engine, drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. They are also a part of our transportation infrastructure that is safe, economical, and environmentally friendly, and this year we will complete the design of a rail trail in Shandaken, on the U&D corridor.

Thanks to an ARPA-funded grant program created by the Legislature, we've also invested \$1.7 million to improve local parks around the County, like Berme Road Park in Ellenville, which now has a brand new handicap-accessible playground and refurbished basketball and pickleball courts. (I did get to shoot some hoops on the new court, though I have yet to try pickleball.) The Ellenville/Wawarsing community will also see a fully refurbished community pool, thanks to help from our grants team in securing a \$3.6 million state SWIMs grant for the community.

In New Paltz, the County-owned pool is being repaired and rebuilt, thanks to another \$3.8M state grant we secured. The pool will be open for business this summer, and I'm happy to announce that, for the first time, we will offer free season passes to seniors on Medicaid and residents who receive SNAP.

Everyone should have access to a safe place to swim and cool off, regardless of means.

We feel the same way about access to the County's incredible natural treasures. Last year, we piloted the Nature Bus — a free service from Kingston and Ellenville to outdoor destinations like Sojourner Truth State Park, the Walkway over the Hudson, and Lake Minnewaska. The Nature bus ran on Saturdays from mid-April through October, and this year we're adding a route from New Paltz, so stay tuned!

We're also improving our regular UCAT service so that you can more easily get to where you want to go, when you need to go. The Planning Department and UCAT are wrapping up the Route Optimization Plan after receiving extensive input from riders and the public, and we will phase in improvements in routes and scheduling over the next three years, beginning with more frequent service between New Paltz and Kingston later this year.

Strengthening Care for Mental Health & Substance Use

Most of us know someone who struggles with a mental health condition or addiction. I grew up with a father who battled depression and alcoholism and understand in a very first-hand way how it affects a person's life and those they love. We are seeing more and more people in need of support, especially young people. Strengthening our system of care has been a top priority of my administration, and we are making good progress:

- We're providing kids with direct mental health care through our Mental Health in Schools program, now in its third year, and this year we are standing up a new mental health clinic for children as young as five and their families.
- In the spring, we'll cut the ribbon on a new crisis support center at the Ulster County Center for Well-Being in Kingston, where anyone can walk in and receive care, no matter the time of day or night. No one should go unsupported when they're in crisis.
- We launched a new street outreach team to help homeless individuals with severe mental health issues and connect them with shelters.
- We've set aside \$250,000 in opioid settlement funds to create a shared residence where people in recovery from addiction can live together and support one another in a drug- and alcohol-free environment.

I can't leave this subject without mentioning the incredible work of our Sheriff, Juan Figueroa, and his team.

The Sheriff's ORACLE program has received national recognition for taking an entirely different approach by law enforcement that focuses on harm reduction, crisis intervention, and treatment, with a caring team of specially-trained officers, peer advocates, and a mental health clinician. The Sheriff's Medication-Assisted Treatment program in the County Jail has also received national recognition, providing care during incarceration for substance use disorder.

Through the collective work of our Mental Health Department, the ORACLE program, and our community partners, we have seen a major reduction in the numbers of overdoses and related fatalities in the past year — by 33% and 45%, respectively. That's huge.

Accessible, Responsive & Participatory Government

Government works best when citizens are well-informed and have meaningful opportunities to weigh in. In 2023, we launched Participate Ulster, an online platform. Many of the initiatives

I've mentioned tonight have pages on Participate Ulster where you can get details about projects, share your ideas, and follow our progress. I also publish an e-newsletter every two weeks that you can sign up for using the QR code on the screen, or through the County website.

This year, we're taking a giant step to improve the County's digital presence. I'm sure everyone in this room has experienced the frustration of trying to find what you need on the County website. I know I have! We're jettisoning this archaic, user-unfriendly website and launching a fully redesigned website that is friendly, accessible, easy to navigate, and responsive to community needs. I want to give a huge shout-out to Assistant Deputy County Executive Rebecca Rojer, who has masterfully overseen this project. The website launch is planned for this summer, so stay tuned!

Conclusion

I have served as your County Executive for two years now. I love this job. Every day brings new challenges, but also new successes. I cherish every success, no matter how tiny, no matter how big.

My amazing staff and all of our dedicated County workers do so many different things, but we all have one mission: to help build a sustainable, resilient, and thriving Ulster County that leaves no one behind.

I know that every one of us here in this room, and every one of the 183,000 residents of Ulster County, faces challenges every day. Sometimes those challenges are life-changing.

The reason we're here is to help you succeed. If we can help in a big way — like helping a family that has lost everything find a home — great. If we can help in a small way, like making it easier for you to find the County service you need — also great. That's our job, that's our mission, and we love doing it.

Thank you.