



Brian B. Cahill
Majority Leader

Robert S. Parete, Majority Whip

Ulster County Legislature

Majority Platform Address

March 11, 2009

David B. Donaldson, Chairman

Gary Bischoff
Thomas J. (TJ) Briggs
Frank Dart
Jon Decker
Donald Gregorius
Roy Hochberg
Alan Lomita
Peter Loughran

Richard A. Parete
Jeanette Provenzano
Hector Rodriguez
Brian Shapiro
Mary Sheeley
Joseph Stoeckeler
Philip Terpening
Susan Zimet

Chairman Donaldson, Caucus Whip Parete, Minority Leader Noonan, Fellow Legislators, Clerk Carey, County Executive Hein, Comptroller Auerbach, members of the press, and to the people of Ulster County, good evening. It is a privilege to stand before you as the first Majority Leader of the Ulster County Legislature under our new charter form of government.

At a transitional moment, we are well served by going back to basics. Webster defines "Legislature" as "A deliberative body of persons, usually elective, who are empowered to make, change, or repeal laws; the branch of government having the power to make laws, as distinguished from the executive and judicial branches of government."

According to Webster, until this year, we were missing a key element to being a legislature. In fact, until we had an executive, one might conclude that our body was something else altogether different.

Our Charter is more specific regarding our role. Not only must we concentrate on our responsibilities as policy and lawmakers, but we are specifically charged with being budgetary watchdogs -- a check of -- and balance to -- the Executive branch of the County government. We will be able, as the definition says, to be more deliberative and thoughtful in our initiatives, proposed policy changes, system improvements and program development. No longer saddled with day to day oversight responsibilities, we should dedicate our time to delving deeper into the substantive background of the issues before us. We should be creative, innovative and now, to a new degree, objective.

With our new Attorney Daniel Heppner, and the exemplary Legislative staff lead by our Clerk, Mary Carey, I am confident that we have the tools we need to bring forward all appropriate initiatives, thoroughly researched, vetted and have been found to be worthy of consideration.

This is by no means a lesser role for the Legislature. Instead it is a new role, more deliberate role -- with a new breadth, and a new depth. And I believe I speak for all or most of us here in saying it is a welcome, if not long overdue change.

But let's not fool ourselves. Our new responsibility will take some getting used to. We are already adjusting to not having the oversight responsibilities of the day to day activities of county departments. For some this comes as a great relief, for others it is like a new pair of shoes that take some getting used to. Either way, we are all mindful of the importance of our newly defined responsibilities.

Legislatures are the peoples' house of government. We should spend our honored time of service here making sure that we remember that with every decision and consideration we undertake.

We are going through this learning process together. I call upon you to join me, shoulder to shoulder and arm in arm, regardless of party, regardless of personal differences, to provide the better form of Government we promised and put before the voters of Ulster County and that they chose. That our Government now has branches does not and cannot mean that we are adversaries.

Our common goals should always be to make the lives of the people we serve better and to be forever watchful of how this government spends the taxpayers' hard-earned money.

In the year just finished, we accomplished a great deal, and it would not have been possible without the support and, many times, vigorous encouragement of the dedicated people who make up the Ulster County government workforce.

I join my fellow Legislative Majority members in saying thank you for all your work in making our agenda a reality and for the changes and improvements that each and every taxpayer deserves. Without our employees, success would not be possible. We were and remain a team. Now our team is joined by the Executive, and Comptroller. We are confident that this new balance will bring us another year of shared successes and improvement for our residents.

Three years ago, this Legislature started down a path of smart, sensible and needed consolidations. We sought out efficiencies, and definitive fiscal control. We are pleased to see the Executive continuing down this path and we encourage him to continue to build on the good work we have done in these three years. Together we have worked hard to transform county government and together we can continue to provide even more reliable and affordable services for the residents of Ulster County.

We turned over to the Executive, a county government that is fiscally sound, well managed and firmly in control of its budget. And given all that we are facing, it's a good thing. As a result, we are in the best position possible to deal with the extraordinary financial challenges that are upon us. Because of the controls that are now in place, the County has the ability to react when needed, adjust when necessary and eliminate waste when it is discovered. This fiscal discipline is essential to our future success.

As the Legislature faces the challenging year ahead, I call upon each of you to embrace a bipartisan approach to governing. Each of us, Democrats and Republicans alike, are in this together. We owe it to the residents of Ulster County to end our tolerance for petty bickering and obstruction. While we Democrats already have a full agenda planned for the upcoming year, we will be looking for ideas and suggestions from all Legislators.

Each of us has the obligation to be involved. Each of us has the responsibility to be heard. And each of us should have the good sense and courtesy to listen. It is in that spirit that I pledge our cooperation with our colleagues on the other side of the aisle for the greater good of the residents of Ulster County.

In the coming weeks and months, we will be dealing with some very important issues that deserve our full attention:

- **Legislator Jeanette Provenzano** is spearheading the effort to once and for all get our vehicle fleet under control. Working with the Executive, Comptroller and the Purchasing Department, Legislator Provenzano will drive this initiative to conclusion.

- **Legislator Robert Parete** has continued his outstanding work with the Health committee by creating the Healthy Eating And Living - Ulster (also known as HEAL-Ulster) program that targets childhood obesity and intended to foster a healthier way of life in Ulster County. We are encouraged to hear that County Executive Hein will work with Legislator Parete on their shared mission to make Ulster County the healthiest county in New York State.
- The increasingly important role of the Arts in every corner of Ulster County cannot be denied. **Legislator Susan Zimet** will bring this home by instituting our “Arts Mean Business” campaign. She will also call upon the Tourism Advisory Board to come forward with new ideas and innovations to attract 21st Century tourists and to promote our many attractions. And the Office for the Aging Advisory Board will play an even greater role in developing policies and programs for our elderly population.
- Local Veterans groups will also be invited to directly participate in the decision making process by offering insight into the needs of those citizens who have given the most and risked their lives for our Country.

With all of the economic problems we face today, it is easy for some to forget that we are still a nation at war. This is as good a time as any to remember those who are sacrificing so much for our freedom. It is fitting, therefore, that we recognize, in this small way, a debt so great it cannot be paid to these brave men and women from this generation and those before them, who defend America when duty calls. Thank you Ulster County Veterans and those who, by the grace of God, will be returning Veterans very soon, for your courage, your sacrifice and your service. We pledge to you our unwavering support and welcome your participation in all facets of what we have to offer you in return.

- One of the saddest and most pressing tragedies of our society is domestic violence. We already have a high number of reported incidents here in our communities. Unfortunately, the domestic violence caseload has increased dramatically in just the past few months. Victims not usually associated with Domestic Violence -- Mothers and Fathers, Grandmothers and Grandfathers, brothers and sisters, elderly care givers, domestic partners, both same sex and opposite sex -- are all experiencing increases in domestic violence. Even one incident is intolerable.

According to the experts in the field, this increase can be directly associated with the failing economy. The needs of victims and the programs necessary to prevent domestic violence create additional strain on our already tight budgets. We will have to be vigilant in our efforts to educate the public and be ready to care for each victim of domestic violence. More than that, we must redouble our efforts to erase it from our homes and community.

I am personally working closely with **Legislator Frank Dart** as he leads the Criminal Justice Committee in reviewing the County policies and procedures regarding domestic violence. Legislator Dart has already convened many of the people with direct responsibility for

providing key services in Ulster County. From those meetings came a forum where an inventory was taken of what is in place, what is working, what is not working, and what improvements are needed.

There remains much to be done. County, state and not for profit groups are working together on behalf of our residents to reinvent our approach to domestic violence. Be it prevention, education or other victims' assistance, we will look at everything. We will implement the needed changes to protect our residents, strengthen the rights of victims and work to improve the services provided to those who have suffered the tragedy of domestic violence.

- No discussion of public policy would be complete in this day and age without addressing what the faltering economy has presented to us.

Thanks to our efforts in the area of economic development over the past three years, we are well-positioned to take full advantage of federal stimulus opportunities. Even though the economy is in such very bad shape, the news is not all bad in Ulster County. While it is certainly not sufficient and we are far from satisfied, we have seen certain sectors of our local economy succeed. There have been some highly publicized losses in the county to be sure, but there have also been some significant successes, as well.

Just as The Legislature's Economic Development Committee, headed by **Legislator Hector Rodriguez**, worked with the UCDC and the Ulster County IDA, to successfully retain some valued employers who were actively seeking to relocate out of New York State, we stand ready to welcome new businesses in and to provide the tools necessary to expand our existing employer base.

We are grateful to those companies who showed faith and commitment to Ulster County by coming here, by staying here and by growing here. We appreciate the example they have set for others considering our community as a place to start up, expand or relocate their business. We are also establishing ourselves as a focal point in the burgeoning solar power industry. Spearheaded by The Solar Energy Consortium or TSEC, we are seeing substantial investment in Saugerties, Highland, Ulster and elsewhere, creating the impetus to a growing solar industry here in Ulster County.

In recent months, we have seen significant and positive activity at Tech City, spearheaded by the kind of local, state, federal and private sector partnership that can and will succeed. Once completed, the active projects Tech City is undertaking will make it the premiere shovel-ready site in the entire Hudson Valley, bar none. Thanks to a new spirit of cooperation and sense of urgency, significant changes at this site will be measured in months and not years.

The vision of developing the Winston Farm into a showcase green industrial site has taken root. The shared enthusiasm and shared sense of purpose have never been more aligned and the prospects for that site are immeasurable. Our infrastructure investments along Old Kings

Highway in Saugerties are also spurring new business development activity, proving that investment by the Legislature, to be a wise decision.

While this is good news, we must do more, a lot more. We have heard the calls of those who want to plant a business here. They tell us to further streamline the processes necessary to get them up and running. They tell us they are encouraged when they see collaboration between our town, village, city and county governments. They reward us with progress when we remove obstacles and respond to legitimate concerns. We hear them loud and clear and they are saying that we are at a place in our county history where we must, frankly, put up or shut up.

We are committed to raising the economic tide in Ulster County. We are mindful of our primary obligation to provide value for our tax dollars and to do all that we can to expand our tax base, create new opportunities and provide a brighter future for Ulster County businesses and residents.

I will close with this thought for my fellow Legislators. These trying times are where we in local government have to make decisions on what is really important to the communities we serve. Why are we here in the first place? Do we do the job or do we bury our heads in the sand and hope the problems go away? Do we commit to economic development or do we turn our heads and leave it for the next Legislature, the next county, the next state? Do we protect and preserve the natural beauty of Ulster County or do we take risks that someone else will do it for us? These are the forks in the road where we can determine our legacy. We enter this new era with new challenges, yes. But we also have new partners, with a shared sense of purpose, with a recognition of what came before us, our feet firmly planted in the here and now and a view fixed on the future.

The choice is ours. We can talk about the past, our friends on the other side of the aisle longing for the days when their party held the majority, or any of us wishing to turn back the clock on the Charter. We can blindly wish that the economic crisis that has gripped our planet did not exist. We can also accept that what is -- will always be. Or we can seize the moment and assure that we, the 2009 Ulster County Legislature has a place in our local history by embracing the circumstance we find ourselves in and doing our utmost to serve the good people who entrusted us with this awesome responsibility. I know what choice I am making.

Thank you, now let's get the job done.