

2023 State of the County

Let me begin today by acknowledging a milestone for Oneida County. 2023 is our 225th anniversary. Two hundred and twenty five years filled with trials and accomplishments. From the Battle of Oriskany and the siege of Fort Stanwix to the creation of the Erie Canal and the Industrial Revolution to the Eastern Air Defense Sector's actions during 9/11. This county has played a pivotal role in American history and we should all be proud of where we have been, where we are and where we will go for the next 225 years.

The success of Oneida County wouldn't be possible without those who push this government to new heights.

I want to recognize the unbelievable commitment and dedication of all our county government employees. They carry out our mission with professionalism and skill every day. They are the best government workforce in the state.

I want to thank the members of the Oneida County Board of Legislators for their partnership, especially the Board Chairman Gerald Fiorini.

I also want to thank my fellow elected county leaders, our new County Clerk Mary Finegan, Sheriff Robert Maciol, District Attorney Scott McNamara and Comptroller Joe Timpano.

I would like to thank the mayors and supervisors who have joined us. Your partnership is how we move the community forward, together.

To my wife Eleanor and my family who are here with me today, thank you for your constant support and encouragement.

A special thank you to Father Joe Salerno for his beautiful invocation.

Lastly, I want to thank Anna D'Ambrosio for her warm welcome and kind words, and the board of this community gem that is graciously hosting us today, the newly-minted Munson. Under any name, this institution is recognized worldwide for its collections, and its commitment to strengthening our community through art, history and education has been our cultural bedrock for decades. The connections between here and our other community assets such as Nexus, Union Station and the Stanley are so crucial. As Munson begins this next chapter, we will utilize our Main Street Planning Program to assist with new and proper wayfinding and placemaking throughout downtown Utica.

I want to thank all of you for taking the time to be here today. I have given this address, well, a few times before. Media sometimes will ask me “What’s the shocker this year?” And I must confess, I don’t intend to be shocking for the sake of being shocking. What I have always intended was to lead this community by being bold. By having vision. By standing for what I believe in, and for what will move us forward. If that sometimes comes with a level of shock value, well, I’m okay with that.

Let’s take a moment and look back at some of those “shocking” things.

Consolidate 9-1-1? No one will ever go for it. Too much politics. We got it done. And every single person in this community is safer for it. It came with new technology, new capabilities, national standards and better service.

Eliminate four elected positions and create a medical examiner system? Impossible. Politically it will never happen. We got it done. And with it came the data and analysis pivotal in solving crimes, fighting the opioid epidemic and keeping our neighborhoods safe.

Fix our sewer problem? Too big of an undertaking. We got it done. We are no longer under a consent order and we have rebuilt a sewer infrastructure system, without which, development would have never occurred. No Wolfsped. No hospital. No Nexus. No housing. Nothing.

Locate the nation’s premier drone testing site in Oneida County? Some scoffed and said not here. Now, we lead the nation with the best technology and most activity, and the world’s largest indoor test site in Skydome. Not Silicon Valley or Texas, but right here.

Land a chip fab? It’s a pipe dream. In my first address I said we would do it. Well, Wolfsped is in Marcy, and Danfoss is next door, and between the two of them, they employ more than 500 people in our community and they will continue to grow.

Settle historic land issues, collect revenue and become real partners with the Oneida Indian Nation? Cannot be done. We did just that. The result is over \$123 million in revenue. The Nation has become such an amazing partner and under the leadership of Nation Representative and Enterprises CEO Ray Halbritter, continues to expand, growing jobs, while attracting millions to our region.

Return AHL hockey to the AUD? Never coming back. Now, what you see is the impetus for unprecedented tourism activity and economic growth. Together, the Adirondack Bank Center and the Utica University Nexus Center are the best AHL arena in the league and the number one tournament-based play facility anywhere. It’s here. Go and check it out if you haven’t. It’s amazing.

In retrospect, these things were not that shocking after all. They certainly weren’t to me.

I've never believed that it couldn't happen here. I have never governed that way. I have never led that way. I'm proud of my administration's record, and while I just highlighted a series of generational investments, our record of achievement is even longer.

We have:

- Repeatedly improved our credit ratings.
- Kept debt low.
- Built the Innovare Advancement Center at Griffiss.
- Created a capital program to address flooding.
- Created the Oriskany Creek Watershed Commission.
- Led the way during the pandemic by keeping people safe, fighting for common sense solutions and against state government overreach.
- Ran the most successful vaccine incentive program in the country, putting \$3.4 million into the hands of our residents, and in turn, into the registers of our local small businesses.
- With Sheriff Maciol, created the first-in-the-state ASCEND program, ensuring all residents who have special needs can get the support and resources that they need in a time of emergency.
- With DA McNamara and the Sheriff, advanced the Opioid Task Force, which is now state and nationally-recognized for its work.
- Invested in our main streets with \$5 million in funding.
- Expanded College Corps and the Summer Youth Employment Program to be year round.
- Improved the Stop DWI Baseball Classic to include softball and educate more youth.
- Committed \$2 million in funding for veteran suicide prevention.
- Increased tax exemption eligibility for seniors and individuals with disabilities.
- Developed the Share the Road initiative, keeping roadways safe for our farmers.
- Created the Ag-Friendly Oneida County initiative.
- Continued our financial commitment to our libraries.
- Restored funding to our humane societies.
- Centralized all animal abuse investigations with the CNY SPCA.
- Created an Animal Abuse Registry.
- Launched the Emerging Worker Recovery Program.
- Became an AARP Age Friendly Community.
- And again, with the Sheriff, created an internship program linking veterans to employment.

This list only includes some initiatives over the last few years. And we did all of this without raising the property tax levy. However, we must also take into account the vital things we do every day, such as:

- Feeding the hungry
- Providing housing
- Protecting children
- Keeping people safe
- Improving public health
- Maintaining and plowing roads
- And much, much more

This government is a team. From the department heads on down to the caseworker, laborer, clerk, examiner and everyone else in between. I could not be prouder of our team and this community should be proud of them as well. I can't thank them enough for the work they do each and every day.

As a government, we believe we can always improve. We must continue to strengthen our workforce, hire new employees for our hard-to-fill positions and find innovative ways to deliver services while being accountable to the people. Let me share with you a few of our new initiatives.

We will soon kickoff our Nurse Navigator Program, which will allow our 911 Center to transfer calls directly to a nurse when the call is determined to be a non-emergency. This will alleviate stress on ambulance services, fire departments and emergency rooms.

Through our Youth Bureau, we are launching a unique initiative to engage students in celebrating our county's 225th Anniversary. They will name the official county animal, flower and maybe even a couple more items.

Our county workforce development services are innovating. We are creating a mobile American Job Center that travels into rural communities to serve residents by recruiting for youth programs, holding job fairs and offering training information.

We will pilot a summer teaching internship, an off shoot of our highly-successful College Corps program, which is celebrating its 25th year. This pilot program will recruit future teachers to work in partnership with community-based agencies to offer academic enrichment for inner city youth.

We are adding speed-tracking signs to roadways; moving work orders to cloud-based applications; upgrading our pavement condition and road-scoring technology and expanding our culvert, bridge and road rehab projects. Want to know when your road will be plowed? We will install GPS tracking equipment in our snow plows to show the public when and where roads are being cleared.

We are creating a flood mitigation mapping analysis, showing the effect mitigation efforts have had to prevent property losses in dollars, acreage, length of roads and vital infrastructure.

These are just a few of the items we will pursue this year in a continued commitment to excellence in government service.

We must continue to be bold. Vision combined with action makes progress. And we see it. In past speeches I have said there is a bright future ahead. Well, it isn't ahead anymore, it's here. The accomplishments are real. The progress is real. The positivity is real.

This doesn't mean we don't face challenges. We do. Every community does. And these challenges are often made more difficult by Albany. Bad ideas. Worse execution. With zero input from local governments and agencies that actually do the work every day.

There is no better example than public safety. As we fight an opioid epidemic, combat homelessness, face a mental health crisis and protect our schools and neighborhoods, we are dealing with a bail reform law that simply doesn't work. I'm not the only one saying it. Ask any DA, Sheriff or Police Chief. Ask anyone in probation or parole. It does not work.

As I have said, many, many times, this law needs to be changed immediately. It makes our streets less safe and is an unworkable burden for the entire criminal justice system. I know it doesn't qualify as shocking to find out that Albany has created an impractical law, but here we are.

I refuse to sit back and wait. During the aftermath of the horrific Parkland shooting, I acted. Together, with the Sheriff, we placed armed special patrol officers in our schools. Once again, I intend to act. Gun violence is a major issue that cannot go unaddressed. I'm announcing today actions I believe will help make our community safer as we continue to work with our state representatives to get this law changed.

First, we will be installing security cameras at all county-owned or affiliated facilities and high-crime, high-density main streets throughout our communities, as we have done right in in Oneida Square. We know crime in these areas is hurting our small businesses and keeping some residents and tourists from patronizing these establishments. I have a message for repeat offenders out there who have been breaking the law. When a crime is committed in these locations, we will see you, catch you and prosecute you to the fullest extent of the law.

Second, we will create an inner-city outreach program. Too many young adults are not connecting with the opportunities that are all around them. Workforce Development has multiple workforce training and educational programs for 18-24 year-olds, but enrollment is our greatest challenge. We will work with the community to connect more young adults with these opportunities.

This country continues to face a mental health crisis. This was reflected in our recent Teen Assessment Project survey, which shed light on some of the consequences and effects the COVID-19 pandemic had on our junior and senior high school students. Thirty-seven percent felt so sad they stopped doing their usual activities. Twenty-five percent felt they had no one to talk to. Twenty-two percent engaged in self-harm. And 13 percent considered attempting suicide. School staff are engaged with students trying to address these serious issues, but they need more assistance.

Seven years ago, and before it was the norm to do so, we partnered with our first district to put armed special patrol officers in schools. Today, there are special patrol officers in every district. Now, we will work with districts to recruit, hire and place more mental health professionals in our schools. Our current mental health professionals, social workers and counselors are doing a great job, but they are simply overburdened. We will also work together to determine what other actions we can take to improve mental health services for students in the short and long-term.

We are going to do everything we can to address the mental health and wellness needs of all students, giving them a better chance to learn, succeed and grow.

The TAP survey also showed that over half of our students experienced changes in their eating and sleeping habits during the pandemic. Consistent, nutritious meals for students is essential. A well-nourished student is much more likely to develop the knowledge, skills and attitudes to function as a lifelong learner and become a responsible citizen.

Recently, Watson Williams Elementary School Principal and President of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Dr. Cheryl Beckett Minor, requested funding from Oneida County for the Childhood Hunger Initiative Power Pack program. The CHIPP program supplies meals and snacks, free-of-charge, over weekends and during breaks for students enrolled at Watson Williams Elementary.

I'm eager to provide support to this program, but I believe as a county we need to do more. We will work with Dr. Minor, other agencies and school districts to expand this program across the county.

No child should go hungry. No child should feel they have no one to talk to. And certainly, no child should feel they have to harm themselves or consider making a fatal decision. Strengthening support systems for these children will create better opportunities in their lives and in this community long term. When that opportunity is not there, the outcomes are disastrous. Every child deserves a real chance to reach their potential.

We are committed to strengthening our healthcare system. Not only by focusing on our mental health and wellness, but through state-of-the-art healthcare facilities. MVHS's new campus will soon be open, and construction on our piece, the parking garage, continues. We have also invested \$3 million in Rome Health to expand and improve services. And we are committed to relocating our health clinic to the County Office Building in Utica. A new clinic is an important piece of our healthcare system, as it is availed by those who need it the most.

We will continue to fight homelessness. We know this problem is multi-faceted, and encompasses poverty, mental health, substance use disorder and other contributing factors. We have seen some success. We have procedures in place for when the weather gets cold. We have process and programs to get people the care they need.

Our Department of Family and Community Services works to help people dealing with housing insecurity every day. Tonight, when the sun goes down, we will have assisted in placing between 75 and 175 people in temporary housing. Tomorrow we will do the same and every day after.

We have been innovative with our partners to create a low barrier drop-in center at the Rescue Mission of Utica, as well as working with ICAN to handle outreach and case management.

We need all of our partners to address this issue. There are charitable and faith-based organizations in this community doing great work. The Red Cross, Salvation Army, The Community Foundation, Cornerstone Church, The United Way and others. We need their engagement, energy and effort.

We have made progress, but we need to keep addressing this issue. Last September, we launched the Oneida County HOMES initiative that works with homeless or those in danger of becoming homeless. We will expand the program in 2023 to specialize in identifying available accommodations, acting as a liaison between landlords and DFCS while pursuing opportunities to improve the availability of safe, low-income housing.

This is not just a Utica problem. It is a societal problem that spans municipal boundaries. And we have many.

We will look to bring more essential homeless services to the Rome area by developing a certified shelter and warming center there.

We have to be creative in how, where and what type of new transitional housing we establish.

There are successful models. The Veterans Community Project is one example. The Tiny House Project is another. We will put a team together to develop a solution unique to our own challenges, with the overall goal of putting more roofs over the heads of those most in need.

We will also look at housing holistically. I will tell you right now, the Governor's housing proposal is not innovative or creative. In fact, it is an Albany power grab, and it will do nothing to stop housing insecurity and should be rejected by the Legislature.

We will begin a housing market inventory, assessment and strategic plan. We will look at the housing supply and demand and the gaps in the housing market. We will also look to see if our housing spatial patterns match up with those of our region's people and jobs.

We can't talk about development, housing or otherwise, without talking about agriculture. Albany's top-down approach to housing is bad enough, but its top-down approach to solar energy development may be even worse. I am opposed to the newly-created Office of Renewable Energy Siting, which has paved the way to turn thousands of acres of our prime farmland into solar panels while giving local governments zero say.

I am in no way against renewable energy. Just last year, we released our own electric vehicle charging station plan. We have our own solar projects. We have passed benchmarking laws and we have made our buildings more energy efficient.

What I am against is this idea that Albany knows better than Camden or Deerfield or Marshall when it comes to how we want to develop our community. They do it with no regard to our land, our region or our future. It must stop.

Agriculture remains Oneida County's largest industry. The development pressure associated with solar energy is an issue we take seriously and must address comprehensively. The Board of Legislators has been meeting regularly on this topic in a special committee and I look forward to hearing its recommendations. Having said that, there are steps I would like to see our Board take. First, pass a local law requiring companies to have decommissioning and soil remediation plans for every project. Second, pass a local law that includes a PILOT program directing these projects to places where they make sense, away from prime soil, and towards brownfield and former landfill sites and other areas in that same vein.

These are two common sense steps that allow solar energy to be created while still protecting our land and communities. We must never forget that once our natural resources are despoiled, it is impossible to get them back.

We will continue to strengthen our Ag industry. This year, we have made a \$50,000 commitment to transform the 2018 Dairy Sustainability Action Plan to encompass all of agriculture, with the help of Cornell Cooperative Extension, and its Executive Director, Mary Beth McEwen.

I know the hardships faced by our county dairy farmers. They have constraints forced upon them unlike any other industry. They don't set the price of their milk. They have very little room to negotiate and are left out of a market-based system while taking on many of the costs and risks associated with the selling of milk.

We will commission a feasibility study for additional dairy processing plants here in Oneida County. Our farmers need to know if additional processing is possible. We will look at the capacity, possible locations and the financial commitments necessary to determine if this can become a reality.

I also propose we try something that isn't being done anywhere else in the country.

First, I have instructed the Planning Department to work with CCE, our co-ops, the Farm Bureau and other partners to safeguard dairy farmers' bottom lines in a worst-case scenario by creating an emergency fund.

When milk is dumped, it is the farmer that takes the brunt of that loss. While they may be able to absorb that financial hit most of the time, there is inevitably a breaking point. And a few thousand dollars in the hands of our dairy farmers when they need it the most, can have a real impact.

Second, we will work with our partners and establish a farm training program that matches the differently-abled community with agricultural work. We have some of the best not-for-profit agencies in the nation here, and together, we can create something unique that helps farmers and those with special needs.

While agriculture is critical to our economy, it is not our only industry. Our economy is diversifying and strengthening. At Griffiss International Airport, we continue to see the benefits of our vision there.

Griffiss is primed for more expansion, more investments and more jobs. We see it in and around the campus with new loft apartments, new housing and new businesses in what amounts to a new neighborhood in Rome with enormous growth potential. That is why we will continue to work on the development of what is known as the Griffiss Triangle site. This will be one of the most coveted mega sites in New York State.

When it comes to the Bagg's Square and the U-District, the proof is there. We see the development of new housing and new parking. Nexus is packed every night. The REA Wing expansion is headed into the next phase, creating another anchor project.

The success of Nexus is evident to everyone. Last week, Tallman's Tires Owner Tim Tallman called me to relay a casual conversation with recent visitors from California. They told him they had come to Oneida County for a hockey tournament. They said they have travelled the country for youth hockey and that we had the best facility they had been to. This was our intention when we envisioned Nexus. We wanted to create a facility that people would come to from around the country to see what we have to offer in Oneida County.

From Nexus, you can see our state-of-the-art hospital. You can walk to our unrivaled restaurants. You can grab a cup of the best coffee in the U.S. You can find interesting items at our retail shops. You can bike our trails. And you can do all of this while your child considers our renowned educational institutions. We wanted the world to see exactly why businesspeople like Tim live and prosper here. We must build on that success.

We will be working with our partners to launch a visitor survey to collect actionable data from the people visiting Nexus. We want to hear from them. Not necessarily on what is or isn't inside the building, we know that gets the highest marks. We want to hear from them on what should be happening outside the building. What did they enjoy? What did they dislike? Where can we be better? What would help connect Nexus to the rest of the district, city and county? This can only assist the County, developers, and entrepreneurs as they look to invest and capitalize on this crucial asset.

We need to find a way to further incentivize private development in and around the U-District. We will take two steps. We will hold a development challenge to allow potential developers to pitch their ideas — Oneida County's own Shark Tank — and we will commit funding to turn those ideas into reality.

We will also work to create our own "opportunity zone" in the Bagg's Square Improvement District. The opportunity zone — in line with our land use plan — will include property tax reductions and incentive packages that will supercharge investments of all kinds, creating more businesses, more jobs and more people visiting this premier destination.

We are in a position like never before. Growth is here, it's real. We have invested strategically, conservatively and with impact, and we will continue to do so.

We already have nearly 2,000 people working in the semiconductor and electronics manufacturing industries right here in Oneida County. We need to capitalize on the emerging need for more supply chain companies. I'm proposing a first-in-the-nation, three-step plan to do just that.

First, we will devise a package of work training incentives —above and beyond the state's— which any company that chooses Oneida County can step right into and avail themselves of.

Second, we will act aggressively for any company that comes to Oneida County to help access the next round of federal funding in the CHIPS Act. This government will be an expert in that funding and how to get it.

Third, working with President Randy VanWagoner, we will create a one-year tuition stipend at MVCC in studies related to the semiconductor industry.

The goals are simple, you bring your semiconductor supply chain company here and you have a partner in Oneida County. We will help you obtain the federal funding available, train your workers and educate new ones.

Our people will always be the key to our success.

Pope Francis has said, “A population that does not take care of the elderly, and of children and the youth, has no future because it abuses both its memory and its promise.”

He’s right. And while most of the time our parents and our children are well cared for, county government is here to protect them when they need us.

Sociologists have a phrase they use to describe social or cultural problems that are difficult or impossible to solve, they call them “wicked problems.”

This government and our employees fight those “wicked problems” every single day. Poverty, homelessness, natural disasters, substance use disorder, to name a few.

Let me tell you about one of these problems that you don’t hear about in the local news, but happens every day. A child is abused, neglected or even dies while living in the most abject poverty imaginable. Or because parents are in the throes of substance use disorder. Or just because of the evil that exists. That call comes to me, this government and our workers.

You want to talk about shocking things that have been said in this speech? Here’s one. I would like everyone to stand up. There are over 300 people in this room. Now, everyone look around. You all represent the number of Child Protective reports this government receives every month. That’s right. Last month we had 410. These are not just numbers. These are children who could not be going to school for weeks at a time. They could be ignored in their homes. They could not be eating. They could be getting physically, mentally or sexually abused. They could be infants failing to thrive. When parents neglect children, it is only this government that is left to pick up the pieces. Go ahead and sit down.

Our caseworkers are walking into those homes. And no one could possibly understand what that looks like unless you have done it. We rescue a child from that home. We find them a place to stay for the night. We then go to court the next morning to make sure they are legally placed somewhere safe and secure. And we do that over and over and over again.

Child protection is extremely complex. We continue to combat these issues every day. We will continue to strengthen this system in every way that we can.

Why do I tell you all of this? That’s what we do every day in this government. It’s more than operating budgets and debt reduction. It is more than what is routinely discussed about government services. It can literally mean life or death. What we do greatly matters.

Two hundred and twenty-five years ago this county was formed. And leading a county is not easy. While history records its evolution, I cannot imagine or presume what vision those before us had or what they believed Oneida County would be over time.

I can however, go back to what this county looked like when I first took the oath of office and the vision that I saw for the future that is today. No one can deny that the view is vastly different. That the attitude is vastly different. That the impression of Oneida County from people who visit here is vastly different. And many are seeing it for the very first time. Nexus was not only built for hockey and soccer and lacrosse, it was built to bring people here. Families from Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Indiana, North Carolina, Utah, Wisconsin, Nevada, Michigan, New Hampshire, Florida, Massachusetts and New Jersey have been here just over the last two months. The hospital will keep people here by bringing more doctors and healthcare professionals. Wolfsped was built to bring people here and keep our young people here. Turning Stone is being expanded to bring more people here.

We did this by working with those who wanted a better community and wanted to cast aside the “It can’t be done here” attitude. We did it by making hard decisions and by investing, not wasting, tax dollars. We did it by not raising property taxes for TEN years. We did it by making this county government relevant with a business community that deserves more than just a handshake at a ribbon cutting. From us, it gets a true partner in growth. All governments use the phrase “Our goal is to keep and attract young people to our community.” My friends we are doing it.

Look around this county. It is different, but we need to continue. In every address, I’ve asked you to join me in this work, and you have. And that is the difference today. The state of Oneida County is strong. Stronger perhaps than any time in our history. Strong because we built a foundation of fiscal stability that has allowed real investment. Strong because we take care of all our people. Strong because when we are challenged, we respond and when we are told it can’t be done, we don’t buy it for a minute.

Serving as your County Executive has been the honor of a lifetime. The honor comes from all who have put their faith in me to run this government. But the credit does not rest in this seat alone. It rests with all who have worked tirelessly to make this county, this community, better. True partners who work together. Governments, businesses, schools, colleges, agencies, clergy and many more.

We are no longer the community that asks “What if?” Instead, we ask “What’s next?”

I truly do love this county and its progress. And I believe in our future, our memories and our promise.

My promise is that I will not stop, nor hit pause, but move forever forward.

Thank you for being here today. God Bless you, Oneida County and the United States of America.