

2008 State of the County

In this past year, as County Executive, I have taken the problems that have emerged and developed solutions, not stopgaps. I have focused our efforts on the essential task of building a foundation so that in the years to come, we can develop our economy, our communities and our potential, to the fullest.

A year ago, I came here to promise that we would move forward. I'm here today to report back to you on what we accomplished.

Our sales tax rate is lowered. Through sound fiscal management we began reversing the trend of dependency on one shot revenues and depleting our reserves to balance our budget.

New initiatives are in place to address youth gangs, promote agri-businesses, enforce anti-smoking laws, and forcefully educate teens about the dangers of drinking and driving.

We have continued to nurture new economic growth at Griffiss through Empire Aero and MVCC's A&P program and in New Hartford through the development of a new business park and construction of a new building for The Hartford Insurance Group.

Oneida County has also continued to invest in one of the great community revitalization efforts of our time through the renovation of the Stanley – setting the stage for this landmark to be an even greater asset in the future.

These first steps are just that – the beginning. In the coming year, we will continue to promote our economic development and community infrastructure, take pro-active steps to improve public safety and quality of life, work hard to protect our fiscal gains despite drastic cost-shifting proposed in the state budget, and work in partnership to increase efficiency and effectiveness.

Before I discuss these issues, I want to speak to what is perhaps the paramount issue facing our region – the Oneida Indian Nation’s land-in-trust case. I have made no secret of my belief that the only real end to 34 years of inconclusive and costly litigation is to negotiate a settlement that will develop creative, innovative and long-term partnerships to grow jobs, provide necessary regulatory oversight, protect property owners, and develop a revenue stream to support essential services.

In the wake of the recent decision by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to recommend putting over 8,000 acres of Oneida County land into trust – taking it off the tax rolls forever – the Oneida County Board of Legislators and I have scheduled a special public comment session at the County Office Building beginning at 6 o’clock tomorrow night. Just as we are getting input from lawyers, other governments, and experts, we want and need the input of the people of our region as we plan our response and next steps. I strongly encourage anyone here who wants to make their thoughts known to attend the session, which will continue as long as we have speakers. Once all the comments are in, County Government will weigh our options and share with the people our response to the land-in-trust case and our plans for future action. I have been criticized by many for not immediately vowing to fight this pending decision. I have been told that because I do not live in the affected towns that I do not understand the impact or have the ability to negotiate. To those I say that before I took office there was no meaningful dialogue between the County and the Oneidas. While I do not know if this dialogue will lead to a resolve, I believe I owe it to the people of this entire County to try something prior to another legal challenge. For 34 years only one group has prospered, attorneys. We have been left with a very small time frame in which to determine our course of action. While Congressmen Arcuri and McHugh have been engaged, we have not heard from either of our U.S. Senators on this decision

that will ultimately impact all of New York State. We also wait to see what action our Governor will take. Should a legal challenge ensue, we need to be clear on what we seek as an alternative and need to be unified in such a challenge. Ultimately the Board of Legislators and myself will decide our action, I only hope it is the right one.

Although I believe that reaching a final agreement to resolve all of the land and tax issues connected with the Oneidas is vital to our region's future, I also want to make it clear that we in County Government are working hard to maximize the potential of our existing assets.

The Oneida County Business Park in Whitestown has the potential to be a major source for attracting new employers to our region. Our recent agreement with New York State still leaves us with 400 acres to develop over and above what the state will use for its State Preparedness Training Center. The Business Park is home to some major tenants and more than 3,000 jobs. It's time for a sustained, major investment in this park so that we can upgrade the infrastructure and give the park an exciting, attractive setting. It takes more than money. It takes the right vision, infrastructure, input and follow-through.

To that end, I have commissioned Mohawk Valley EDGE to study the Business Park and develop a comprehensive plan that will outline the best strategies for us to follow in maximizing the Park's potential. We need to look at everything – from signage, identity, road and other infrastructure improvements, marketing, and fully integrating the state center into our long-range plans.

I am very pleased to announce that National Grid is willing to partner with Oneida County in this important project and will support our planning efforts with a \$125,000 grant to

help defray the costs of consultants that will be needed to help us develop the best plan for this very valuable property.

Moving forward with this project is important because with a first-class Business Park in Whitestown, we will be able to offer employers choices as we continue to maximize the potential of Griffiss Park and as we work with Mayors Roefaro and Brown to maximize the unique potential of Downtown Utica and Rome.

County investment in the Stanley has been designed to enhance Utica's standing as a regional arts center. When the Stanley re-opens this spring, we will begin an exciting new era of activity downtown that can help attract and retain young people to the region. Increasing the numbers of people who come to the Stanley and surrounding businesses is the vital first step to helping revive downtown.

The right mix of parking options has long been cited as one of Downtown Utica's needs. In 2007 I submitted a proposal to the Utica Common Council for the closure of Park Avenue from John St. to Blandina St. This would address the parking needs of our county facilities and would free up parking areas for other employers. County government remains as Downtown Utica's largest business with over 800 employees in seven downtown buildings. We commissioned a traffic study, at the council's request, to look at the impact such a closure would have and I believe, to date, I am the only one who read it. I will resubmit my request to this council once again for their consideration and I ask again, let's have an open discussion, look at the study, and make a decision that is right for downtown. Please do not put it on the shelf again without giving it a proper review.

When we look at downtowns, we should look at vast opportunity. In Downtown Utica, revitalization of Main Street to mix residential and commercial uses; finding the right uses for

the Gateway District west of Genesee Street; and building on the success of the Union Station Revitalization Project are all projects where I see County Government as an active partner to help the city re-create its historic downtown as a vibrant, thriving regional center.

Likewise, our commitment to Downtown Rome must be maintained. As we are improving our County facilities in Utica, our Rome offices are scattered and grossly inefficient for the people we serve and our employees. I have instructed the Commissioners of Public Works and Social Services to identify an option to consolidate the majority of our service offices in one location. We will continue to support Mayor Brown in his efforts to improve the housing stock in our most needy neighborhoods. The Canal Village Neighborhood Revitalization Project is a concept we embrace and look to be a major revitalization effort of our county.

The Oneida County Airport at Griffiss is another unique regional asset that offers us vast potential. We are still in a construction and transition phase this year, with plans to build new hangars and rehabilitate buildings to allow for even more expansion at one of our great regional economic success stories – Empire Aero. We are examining a proposal to privatize the Fixed Base Operation of the Oneida County Airport at Griffiss so that we can not only make this a first-class operation, but also a profitable one for county taxpayers. As we develop plans for a new Terminal Building, we will be working with Congressman Michael Arcuri, who has already secured funding for the airfield, to secure more federal funding to support construction of the terminal.

I want to make a point here that all four of these efforts work together – Whitestown, Griffiss, Downtown Utica and Downtown Rome – and that all of them are long-term projects that will require sustained commitment and investment.

County Government has a very unique role. We are the catalyst that develops regional economic development efforts. Our mission is to develop plans with a vision that reaches 5, 10, 20 years into the future. That mission for the future is centered around the Marcy Nanocenter site at SUNY IT. This project is the cornerstone of future economic development for this region. Each day through the work of Mohawk Valley EDGE and my office we are a step closer to realizing this dream. The Governor has also made this a priority for Upstate and with the help of Assemblywoman Destito and Senator Griffo we will garner the state's assistance in the development of this site and soon hope to have a company to call it home.

A bad idea that is being forced down our throats is the New York Regional Interconnect power line proposal which is a clear threat to the Marcy Nanocenter site. NYRI keeps trying to shed one skin and find some kind of a plan that will work. Let me sum up my position simply. We will continue to fight this project in every way possible, and never give up fighting it no matter how many times they try to change it. It has always been a bad project. It will always be a bad project, and Oneida County will not abandon its commitment to fight this on behalf of every community it threatens. I don't want to bury the lines; I want to bury the project – once and for all.

But our mission is also to care for the needy, to protect the public, to fight for the best possible quality of life for people of all ages and to do all that in partnership with communities, agencies, individuals and partner governments. The efforts of County Government reach into thousands of lives every day, and help to make this community a better place to live.

Because County Government is the major point of contact for Social Services programs, we are also the focal point for those who want to beat the system. I want to take just one minute to make it clear that in Oneida County, the system fights back.

Our Social Services Investigation Unit referred 206 cases to the District Attorney, resulting in recovery of about \$550,000. Our Medicaid Early Warning System denied or closed 385 cases that provided false information. Our Medicaid Action and Recovery Control Unit secured Medicaid recoveries by over a million dollars for the eighth year in a row. The child support unit collected \$17.2 million in child support payments that were owed. Yes, we have compassion for those in need. But, let me make it plain, we are aggressive every day in preventing and fighting fraud.

Last year, I convened an anti-gang summit that brought a number of partners together to address the issue of gangs in the city of Utica. District Attorney Scott McNamara has done an excellent job on this issue and of working with my office and other partners to reach out into the community to send a strong anti-gang message. Our Youth Bureau is making anti-gang programming a top consideration in the programs it is funding, and it will continue that focus by monitoring programs we fund to ensure we are getting results. I have been attending several neighborhood meetings over the last year and from Cornhill to East Rome the concerns are the same. Keeping our young people out of harm and trouble and keeping our neighborhoods safe. All of County government will be much more visible to our communities this year and beyond. The Youth Bureau will not just concentrate on recreation in the cities. We will expand with new programming designed to show our city youth what rural Oneida County is like. We will soon unveil a new program with the Black River Environmental Improvement Association. This program will take young inner city youth to the country to see the beauty of agriculture that is just beyond city limits. BREIA is an outstanding example of one man's wish to give back by preserving areas of land in our north country for farming, cross country skiing and snow shoeing. We will in turn take rural youth to the cities to have them experience the neighborhoods and their

activities. Also, the Youth Bureau, Office of Workforce Development and MVCC are teaming up in a Partnership for Youth grant that is designed to take drop-outs who are on the streets, teach them a skill and help them find employment.

Last month I met with the presidents of Utica College, SUNY IT, Hamilton College, MVCC, Utica School of Commerce, and the Pratt Institute as we formed the Oneida County College Council. Oneida County's many outstanding colleges have been a major catalyst for positive change both in the lives of individuals and in the lives of our communities. At a time when Oneida County needs to develop innovative and creative policies to address issues facing our county, we need to harness the vision and expertise of our colleges to help us improve the economy, improve our region, and retain more of the young people whose energy and creativity are needed in our area. The Oneida County College Council's goal will be to strengthen community-campus collaborations in key areas such as economic development, community development, education, civic involvement, and neighborhood visioning.

Retaining these students is one of our most important regional challenges. The Office of Workforce Development, in cooperation with our regional Workforce Investment Board, is seeking state funding to coordinate a regional internship program that will work in collaboration with the Give Back to Utica effort from former Utica resident Steven Oram and the Community Foundation. Oneida County was a leader in developing a strong internship program through the Oneida County College Student Corps, which began in 1998. This new effort will build on a strong local foundation and help us retain more students who can become the workforce and the leaders of the future.

The coming year will include more new efforts because Government can never stand still in its mission of serving the people.

Oneida County was chosen as one of eight lead primary prevention grant sites in 2007 and will receive over \$270,000 to support lead poisoning prevention efforts. The health department's Lead Program, the City of Utica's Departments of Urban and Economic Development and Codes Enforcement and the Safe Housing Coalition of Central New York are working collaboratively to improve the quantity of lead safe housing alternatives for families with young children. We have developed a partnership with St. Elizabeth's Healthcare to educate physicians as to the importance of lead testing and will conduct neighborhood clinics to reach families that can't reach us.

In the coming year, Oneida County will make aggressive steps in our 10-year plan to reduce chronic homelessness. This is a very real and serious problem that requires long-term partnerships to develop solutions that can help men and women who, for whatever circumstances, are left homeless in our communities. We need to look at chronic homelessness as part of a broader spectrum of issues that include substance abuse, mental health issues, education, employment and issues such as domestic violence and post-traumatic stress. I have asked MVCC President Randy Van Wagoner to lead a committee of partners to address this vital issue.

We are currently working to provide all of our veterans with a better network of services to address the complex needs that they and their families face. I am forming a task force of county departments, community groups, veterans groups and individual veterans and their families to help us design a better system, spotlight gaps and develop solutions and ensure that all veterans who come back home receive the services and support they deserve.

They tell me that we are all aging. One of the things that means for County Government is that as the Baby Boomers who make up a large portion of our work force near the age they

may wish to retire, we will have an increase in the numbers of openings to fill vacancies. I see this as an opportunity to increase the diversity of our workforce by getting out into the communities of Oneida County to increase the numbers of people who take Civil Service tests that are required for most positions. Oneida County Workforce Development Director David Mathis, joined by YWCA Racial Justice Director Patrick Johnson, President of Techno-Logic-Solutions Tony Colon and Success Strategies Business Consultant Susan Woods will develop an outreach effort to increase the diversity among test-takers so that the people who serve and the people who are served reflect the same diversity.

Agriculture is one of the mainstays of our economy, and also one of the most important foundations of the rural way of life in so many of our towns and villages. In the coming year, County Government will be supporting our farmers through the development of two projects. The first is a Purchase of Development Rights project. This project helps farmers have the development rights of their farms purchased so that it will always remain a farm. Families who operate farms don't have enough spare time to navigate the complex state program, so in this coming year, our Agriculture Economic Development Board, with strong support from the County Legislature, will be examining the potential of this program in Oneida County as well as helping farmers who want to start the process. To further help our rural communities tap into state and federal programs and grants that can help them, we will be working with Cornell Cooperative Extension to fill a rural planning position that will serve as a one-stop source for communities needing state or federal grant funding to address critical issues.

These initiatives are a part of what County Government does every day – make this county a better place to live. That's an effort that continues day in and day out because the major issues impacting our region do not go away. In the coming year, I will be working with the

interagency group addressing the Hinckley water management issue so that we do not face – again – the same type of emergency we faced last September. Although I am glad to see this group in existence, I am also very concerned by the public position of the New York State Canal Corp. that there was no real emergency last year. As the official who had to declare the water emergency last year, I know that this was a necessary and prudent step because the water supply for 135,000 people had been put into jeopardy. I will remain vigilant and determined that the interagency group develop real changes in communication and collaboration to address this issue so that this does not happen again.

Last year, we were suddenly faced with a threat to halt suburban commercial development because of a Sanitary Sewer Overflow issue at the Sauquoit Creek Pumping Station. It wasn't a problem I created, but it was one I had to address, and I did. I worked with the state, with our communities, and we developed a consent order that will require substantial investment once we fully study the problem and learn what needs to be done. I have formed a steering committee made up of local officials and individual residents of the affected communities to be involved with our engineers as this process moves forward. This issue is not just an Oneida County problem; it is a nationwide one that the Federal Government must address. I have been working with Congressman Arcuri who has brought this issue to his conference and has made it a priority. Make no mistake, not complying with this order meant no development on the eastern end of this county.

Consolidation of services has been the buzzword for most of my time in government. While we have heard the cries we have not answered them and it remains just a word. Today, I propose to complete the consolidation of 911 dispatchers in one call center. One of the major issues facing our region is to develop ways to change the way we deliver services to reduce costs

and increase efficiency. I want Oneida County's 911 Center to be one central place for all police, fire and EMS calls. Currently, Oneida County handles all the calls for the County except Utica and New Hartford. In the past, some technical and procedural issues have hindered consolidation. I believe that we have moved beyond many of those issues and that we can move to a regional 911 Center that will provide quality service and reduce the costs for New Hartford and Utica. I call on the Board of Legislators, the City of Utica and the Town of New Hartford to join me to discuss and examine the feasibility of this merger.

In the proposed Executive Budget, cost shifting by the state could add about \$2 million in costs to Oneida County.

The state is trying to dig itself out of a budget hole by burying counties in a pile of higher taxes. Trickle down costs hitting county governments adds to the local tax burden and is a step in the wrong direction. Let me cite two examples:

The proposed state budget shifts the full cost of juvenile detention onto counties, which will cost Oneida County an additional \$1 million. Costs are currently split 50-50. This is not reform. This is not trying to use better services to achieve better results. Counties have no say in the decisions Family Court judges make. All the state wants us to do is pay the bill so it can walk away from costs that keep increasing every year.

The proposed state budget also cuts the state share of the Safety Net and Family Assistance programs by 2 percent, forcing counties to pay a higher share. Not only does this change impact counties that are already into our fiscal years and working in the constraints of adopted budgets that must be cut if the state gets its way, this cost shift to counties comes at a time of rising needs when economic hard times for our people will drive up costs far beyond state estimates. My question is if it is 2 percent this year, what will it be next year and beyond.

Let me also just clarify the impact of the Medicaid cap. The state cap has prevented huge cost spikes, but it does not take this burden away from County Governments. Oneida County's Medicaid costs will rise about \$1.3 million in 2008, and continue to rise annually. Medicaid costs the county taxpayers of Oneida County more than \$50 million per year. That figure remains a substantial burden on county governments.

Oneida County along with all counties will fight this cost-shifting in Albany, and I encourage you to support our efforts to prevent the state from forcing a tax increase down the throats of county tax payers.

I have made the commitment to serve as County Executive for the full four years of this term. Part of my commitment is to provide a government that earns your trust every day by working with integrity, openness and accountability. Most problems we face are not going to be solved by quick fixes. Big problems – water management, airport redevelopment, sanitary sewer system renovations – require a long-term planning approach that is comprehensive, because when we act on these issues, we change the face of the region for generations to come. I accept the role of County Government to serve as the leader to solve complex problems too big for any one community, but I also understand the need for collaboration to help unite our region behind solutions so that we can move forward to act when action is needed.

I have spoken to you today about our successes and of our challenges. It is as easy to revel in our success as it is to get bogged down in one challenge. This county will not be defined by one issue. We will not govern by fear nor be intimidated by actions of those outside of county government who seek to change our path for independent gain. We will govern instead with the very principles that got us this far, doing the very best for all the people of this county and determining our own destiny.

The future is waiting for us to act. To take the initiative. To be bold. To be creative.

Oneida County's greatest days are still to come. Today, I ask all of you here to join me as we work to make this the day when those great dreams of the future start becoming reality.