

2013 State of the County Message

Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente, Jr.

Before we begin today, could we all please take a moment to remember all of our men and women in uniform in service to our country? They are not here in body, but they are always with us in spirit. I first want to thank my wife Eleanor, my sisters and my nieces who are here with me today, for their constant support and encouragement.

I want to thank the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event. Public-private partnerships are the hallmark of a strong community, and I look forward every year to informing you about our work in County Government.

I also want to acknowledge my partners in government. First and foremost I want to thank the members of the Oneida County Board of Legislators for their service and dialogue. I also want to thank the members of my administration and my Department Heads who take the vision we outline and implement it through programs and services that meet the needs of our people. I want to thank all the elected officials or their representatives who are with us today. I also want to thank my partners in County Government, County Sheriff Robert Maciol, County District Attorney Scott McNamara, County Clerk Sandy DePerno, County Comptroller Joe Timpano, as well as Mayor Palmieri of Utica and Mayor Fusco of Rome. On your tables, you see some highlights of what we accomplished this past year. These are just a few snapshots of the way this County Government gets the job done.

Let me repeat that: this County Government gets the job done.

Oneida County gets the job done because we are looking forward. It's very attractive to look at the past, when things seemed better, and want to go back. My challenge today is to continue the hard work needed to help us move this region forward.

Our immigrant ancestors understood that vision and dreams brought with it an undeniable power. They worked. They sacrificed. They did this because they knew a very simple message— if you work hard enough, if you work long enough, if you do what you do well enough, you will achieve your goal. For many of those immigrants we know as faded, framed images of young people and white-haired men and women who were our grandparents, we were the goal they had in mind. Picture that a minute, please. Consider working with a future in mind that is not of tomorrow, not next week or even next year, but the next generation. Here in Oneida County we are working towards the future. When I started working on the Marcy NanoCenter project:

They said:

You will never get water there. We did.

You will never get the Parkway built. We did.

You will never get sewer connections there. We did.

Yet they still tell me; you will never get all the permits. Nevertheless, we keep grinding away and sooner or later, we are going to hit the right answer because Oneida County does not give up; we do not go away; we get the job done. We are a permit away from a transformational opportunity. We don't need new ideas as much as some old-fashioned clout. Senator Schumer and Senator Gillibrand, if there is one thing you can do for this region, get us the wetlands permit.

The Marcy project is a transformational project we cannot shrug off and forget. Our region already has the first connections, at SUNY IT, that link us to Albany's College of Nanoscale Science. Albany is attracting research and employers to a region that's barely more than an hour's ride away on the Thruway. We can grow those connections to create good-paying jobs that number in the hundreds transforming this region in the way that the defense sector, the knitting mills and the Erie Canal had done in the past. We have to grow the tax base to keep your taxes down, because costs are not going to simply go away. We all want strong public safety, clean roads and quality education for our children. These essentials come with a financial cost. We cannot shrink our way into survival; we need to get there by being aggressive – by planning big and working hard.

I believe so much in the Marcy project, that I believe it is time we look to the next step. There are vital questions we need to answer: Where's the next generation of workers going to come from? Where will employees live? How will new workers get educated and trained in STEM; Science, Technology, Engineering and Math? How will the region embrace corporate cultures that put a premium on diversity? These issues go beyond development of the site.

I am calling for the creation of Vision 2020. This initiative will develop the roadmap we need. I have asked Mohawk Valley Community College President Randall Van Wagoner and Oneida County Workforce Development Director David Mathis to Co-Chair this initiative. I will send a request to the Board of Legislators to fund this initiative, through the Economic Development Fund. This initiative will enlist experts as needed, and also the services of all county departments. I envision this group including private sector leadership from the Chambers of Commerce, the Genesis Group, the Boards of Realtors, and other community groups including the NAACP, the Mohawk Valley Latino Association and the Mohawk Valley Resource Center

for Refugees. I want this community to stop living for yesterday's faded glory and start believing in tomorrow's possibilities.

Innovation is the core of my approach to government. A case in point: Two years ago I stood here and voiced to you the dream of creating the Oneida County Public Market at Union Station, bringing new life to a landmark that turns 100 next year by connecting our network of family farms with consumers. We found money. We found people. We worked hard. Last year, 12,394 people came to the market, providing thousands of dollars of much-needed revenue for our local farmers and also enhancing the region's quality of life. In a county where agriculture is a cornerstone of our economy, innovation helped make us stronger.

Innovation is contagious. The Oneida County Clerk's Office, led by Sandy DePerno is the third office in the State to start processing land-related records electronically. This innovation is saving tax payer money and making that office one of the most efficient in the state. The County Clerk's efforts are to be commended by and emulated by all of us in public office.

I want to also recognize our two new Election Commissioners, Russell Stewart and Rose Girmaldi. They are bringing innovation and efficiency to the Board of Elections. For the first time, using new technology unofficial results will be available quicker than ever on Election night.

County government is strong because we made it strong. I'm very proud that in every year I have been County Executive, we have finished our year with an operating surplus. Comptroller Joe Timpano and I recently finished a series of calls with 2 of 3 of our credit rating agencies, Fitch and Standard and Poors. I'm pleased to report we have maintained our A+ rating with both agencies and FITCH has revised our negative outlook to a stable outlook. This is excellent news. And it's because of our positive results in fiscal year 2011 and 2012. Every CEO

who lives on a budget – every family that lives on a budget – knows how hard it is to have the discipline needed to stick to the plan even when things go wrong and new costs appear. Whether the crisis was a new mandate, a weather disaster or a spike in needs due to the economy, we have responded, and we have done the job. I know the difficult decisions that went into this achievement, year after year, but I know that the cost of this work was worth the effort, because Oneida County is fiscally strong in times when all governments are being pushed to the limits.

Why is it important to be fiscally sound? We hear a lot in Washington and Albany about fiscal cliffs, sequestration and automatic cuts. A fiscally sound, strong, efficient government means we can better serve the people who are in the most need of Government's help. There are Oneida County citizens who are hurting, who need the services and help, which we as a society and a government can provide. The numbers you see reflected on the handout at your tables, and many more like them, show the extent of what we face every day. During 2012, 110,000 people came to our Department of Social Services in search of help. For anyone trying to do the math in their head, that number is equal to more than 45% of the population of Oneida County. Our food stamp caseload is 17,309 people, up 7.8 percent from just two years ago. The people with needs keep coming. Front line staff of DSS are practicing crisis management with the lives of their clients every day. The system is overworked, drowning in numbers.

It's also drowning in red tape. Here's one for the books. Or rather, one that should be off the books. When someone applies for assistance but fails to provide one particular form of documentation, we are required – by state edict – to turn that case over to Medicaid. Then we are obligated to open a managed care account for that person – that person who upon applying for assistance failed to file required forms – and bear that cost for six months. Today is Tuesday. Every Tuesday every single week we wire transfer \$1,076,942 to Albany to pay our share of the

State's Medicaid's cost for Oneida County. Every week we pay for benefits that we have no voice in creating.

That's just one example. What I say to the state is this: Let us fix these problems. Albany always believes that Oneida County and every county come to them with our hands open waiting for a check. That isn't the case. Albany, if you want to help us out, slide out of the way and provide mandate relief so we can fix our own problems. Let us be involved in these decisions.

Despite the hurdles we face, DSS and Commissioner Lucille Soldato deserve to be recognized for the outstanding job they do.

Job placements through the Employment Unit, operated in partnership with the Office of Workforce Development were up 32.6% in 2012. In this economy, that's not easy.

Through our Pride in Work program, which must be completed before anyone seeking Safety Net benefits receives them, only 174 people of the 1007 who entered the program were put in Temporary Assistance. The Pride in Work Program is about a simple premise. In our society there are those who can work, those who can't work and those who won't work. We will strive every day to provide and protect those who can't work. Those who won't work are not going to be provided for by those who can and those who can't. That's not fair. It's not how we do things in Oneida County.

When people interact with County Government, they are not statistics. Children come to us when they are in the most dire of circumstances, whether they are assessed as unsafe, facing abuse, neglected or adjudicated as Persons in Need of Supervision or Juvenile Delinquents. Ten years ago, we had 176 of these children in institutions, where the costs are high, and the odds of a child bouncing back to live a happy, successful life are low. That's now down 60%, which saves money, but above all helps these children live better lives.

Our County Government doesn't stop there when it comes to protecting families. When I came into office our lead poisoning program was a Secondary Prevention Program. Through innovative ideas and a new plan we moved to a Lead Primary Prevention Plan. This means we moved from a reactive plan that treated sick children to a proactive plan that prevented children from becoming sick in the first place. For 2012 we had a 69% drop in new incidence of lead poisoning cases from when we first began the lead primary prevention program.

The bottom line is people come to us, battered, broken, in need of a place to start over, and need services. I can't tell you what kinds of problems will come into the County Office Building next week or next month, but I know they will be there, because that's where real people come to find solutions.

County Government does not wait to sweep up the pieces of human tragedy. We are all aware that the tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut late last year gave new concerns to school safety. Sherriff Robert Maciol has taken the lead role in joining my administration along with Oneida-Madison BOCES and all of the school districts within the county in creating a police presence in local schools. The placing of trained safety officers in schools can not only provide for a layer of peace of mind and protection, but can also deal with conflicts long before they become serious problems. The challenge is; how to fund this type of pro-active program that we are trying to create, but County Government, BOCES and school districts along with other partners are sitting down to develop funding solutions. Again, we will only accomplish this by working together.

I believe in partnerships. That means true partnerships, where everyone does what is necessary. One of the great successes in this county is the 911 Center consolidation, spear headed by Emergency Services Director, Kevin Revere. The 911 Center is a collaborative effort

that includes 51 Fire Departments, 14 Police Departments, 14 ambulance companies and 5 state agencies working together with the county to keep us safe. The success of the 911 center isn't just about fiscal efficiency, although it does save money and operate more efficiently. It's about public safety. The system is better today than before. The people of Oneida County are safer today because we acted. That's what consolidation brings to the table. That's the true success here. However, the 911 system was designed to be paid by the users. The property tax payer should not bare the complete brunt of this essential service. Again, I call on Albany to allow Oneida County to impose the 30 cent fee that all other counties with county wide 911 centers in the state collect. This fee will allow us to bring new technology to the 911 center so it continues to be a model for safety, efficiency and innovation throughout the state.

I truly believe in solid, strong partnerships. Here's an example of the county and the State working together for the betterment of Oneida county citizens. The state stepped in to close various units at Mohawk Valley Psychiatric Center in Utica. Once this decision was made, there were major consequences to the community in terms of care for the patients. In short, how were very real people with very real problems going to have their needs met? Oneida County Mental Health Commissioner Linda Nelson and her team sat down with the state, and they worked. They planned. They looked at the system as it existed and decided they could do better. Now, with the state an active partner and paying the bill, we have a multi-phase plan in place. This plan provides community-based services and the best crisis response service possible by including mental health staff at the 911 Center to talk to the people in crisis when they call. The people we serve, and their families, will benefit for years to come from a better system that emerged because compassionate, dedicated professionals worked with one goal in mind: Doing the right thing for a vulnerable population.

There's a lesson here that goes beyond one program. We should be focusing our resources on our needs in a collaborative coherent way. We have to become reformers who change what does not work. I see our choice this way: Re-structure the future or simply let the erosion of fiscal stability that we see all around us make the decisions for us. I want to take one minute here and salute our neighbors in Ilion and Mohawk. Those two school districts have generations of tradition. Now, because the people of those communities decided they wanted a solid future for their children, a school merger is moving forward. It didn't just happen overnight. There were challenges and setbacks. But the people who had vision refused to quit. That's the kind of spirit that changes this region for the better.

The Oneida-Herkimer Solid Waste Authority, now over twenty years old, continues to be a beacon of successful regionalization and consolidation. With its award winning recycling program and integrated facilities it is looked upon as a model not only across the State but nationally. With its original goal of developing an efficient, environmentally friendly, self-sufficient waste management system which provides incentive for waste reduction and recycling completed, the Solid Waste Authority continues to reinvent and improve its system. Our two county single stream recycling program and Landfill Gas Electricity Generation facility continue to increase service while decreasing costs. Since its creation, the Solid Waste Authority has been financially self-sufficient while containing disposal rates for our citizens, businesses and municipalities. Since its inception the Solid Waste Authority has never asked either County for direct funding, in fact they have been able to reduce rates not only in 2006 but again in 2013. Disposal rates/fees are lower today than they were in 1992.

I want to unleash that spirit here in Oneida County. From the accrued savings through our operations, I am going to propose to the Oneida County Board of Legislators that we create what

I am calling Project ARGO: Action to Realign Government Operations. I will ask the Legislature to make available up to \$500,000 and we will use this money to fund consolidation and collaboration projects that have a long-term net savings to the county and the partner municipality that has the idea. If Project ARGO gets more ideas than we have money to fund, we'll work to find more. We have to be an active, engaged county at all levels of government and in every community. I do not have a pre-ordained view of how any government service ought to be structured. I believe in what works. Show me what works, show me how to make a change, and we will invest in making that idea happen so we can start transforming the structures of government from the way it was into the way it will be.

Everyone in this room knows that cities, towns and villages spend the most money on two areas: public safety and public works. We have built a strong shared services collaboration in public works between the county and local communities. This year, District Attorney McNamara, Sheriff Maciol and myself will address the other major cost area by convening a Law Enforcement Summit. This summit will have a very clear goal: Identify ways to collaborate that enhance safety and reduce costs. This will be a chance to start new conversations and renew old ones because I firmly believe the status quo is not affordable in the long-term, and public safety is too important to leave coverage to chance.

I was in office 17 days and I faced a problem that had been swept under the rug for generations. The need for a major sewer project costing millions upon millions that is required to preserve our environment and allow communities to grow. With every major improvement, I know we are on the road to solving a problem. This was a problem that left unsolved would have shut down future development for years to come.. There was no magic answer. There were – and

still are – endless meetings over endless details and a thousand complications along the way. But I know we will achieve success, because failure is simply not an option.

In this community, in this region, growth will not happen without partnerships. I believe the utmost potential of our region will not materialize until we fully develop a partnership with the Oneida Indian Nation. Four years ago, I tried to jump-start the process of forging a partnership focused on the future and not the past. To make a long story short, four years later, those who strived for nothing to happen have had their way. I fail to see how this region has gained. I have maintained a strong professional relationship and constructive dialogue with the leadership of the Nation. I've always believed that the day will come when we find the right way to end the logjam that has made neighbors adversaries for more than 30 years. The best deal will not be one that settles the scores we inherited, but instead passes along to the next generation an inheritance of positive partnership. Do we really want to spend the rest of this century, and possibly the next as well, reading the tea leaves of U.S. Supreme Court decisions to find out if we will be true partners with the Oneidas? It's time to come back to the table.

The bottom line here is that County government is getting the job done. Not because I say so, but because the proof is there. We are smaller, more efficient, fiscally sound and moving in the right direction. We can accomplish more. For those who continue to look at the glass as half empty and who dismiss vision as rhetoric, I say I'm sorry. I'm sorry that political agendas and negativism are getting in the way of progress. Our people want us and need us to work together. Washington is currently playing the blame game as we speak, pointing at each other rather than working until a solution is found. Ideas aren't bad just because they come from the other side of the aisle. Real progress comes, not when there are three different plans, but when three parties get together for one great one.

To all those who embrace change and believe that our best days are ahead, thank you. To all of the businesses who continue to invest and believe that this is the best place to grow, thank you. Because as new opportunity looks to Oneida County, it wants to know that those of us who live here, work here and are elected here believe in our possibilities. That we believe in our future. Otherwise opportunity will drive right by.

So what does all this mean today?

The State of Oneida County is strong. Stronger than it has been in years because of hard work, fiscal discipline and innovation. Strong because we made it strong. While Washington has failed to act properly and Albany has yet to give us the meaningful mandate relief we were promised, we are strong.

And you know something else? We can be even stronger. We can be the place that gets written about. We can be that place that was seen through our ancestors' eyes when they came here. America wasn't developed, there were no paved roads. Yet the view to them was beautiful. Because America had promise, and they had hope.

Today we have great promise; the seeds are planted all around us. My hope is that we water them, nurture them and see them grow so that generations ahead of us don't look back and see that we could not fix anything because we could not agree on anything.

A few years ago in this address I spoke of leadership. About why I sought this office and about how committed I am to moving this county forward.

Abraham Lincoln said, "Commitment is what transforms a promise into reality"

No single person, no single government can make the changes this region needs to make. I am here today to offer my hand to every partner in this room, every partner in this county, every partner in this state, to work together to make tomorrow better. Please join me.

May God Bless you, Oneida County and the United States of America.