

2018 State of the County Message

Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente Jr.

Thank you to Danielle's and its staff for the fine job they've done in hosting this event.

I would like to start by acknowledging my partners in government. First and foremost, I want to recognize the unbelievable commitment and dedication of all our county government workers. They carry out our mission with professionalism and skill every single 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 service and dialogue, especially the Board Chairman Gerald Fiorini. I want to thank my department heads who implement the vision we outline through programs and services that meet the needs of our people. I want to thank Sheriff Robert Maciol, District Attorney Scott McNamara, County Clerk Sandy DePerno and Comptroller Joseph Timpano. I want to thank Mayor Robert Palmieri of Utica and Mayor Jaqueline Izzo of Rome for their continued partnerships.

I want to thank my wife Eleanor and my sisters and nieces who are here with me today for their constant support and encouragement.

I stand before you now for the twelfth time. In each address I have told you why county government is relevant and vital to everyone who lives, works and plays here. I have also thrown out some big ideas. Some have worked or are being worked on. Others have not succeeded, but got people talking and thinking. And that's a good thing.

Today as we meet we face challenges and difficult issues as a nation, state and a community. They require leadership. Will the safety of our school children be addressed or will our federal leaders talk past one another and get nothing done? Will our infrastructure inadequacies be met head-on or passed off to the next generation? Will our mental health system be reformed so those in need get the help they deserve?

I cannot answer for our federal and state leaders, but I can assure you Oneida County will meet these challenges.

One thing I do know is we cannot continue our public discourse the way we have and expect anything to get done. Policy is something we can and should debate at great length using not only facts and figures but passion and oratory that can broaden minds. What we must stop is the idea that we have to demonize people with whom we disagree. When people condone violence against planning board members just because they were doing their job, that's wrong. When school children are the only ones looking for solutions after a national tragedy and Congress is affixing fictitious blame, that's wrong. We are better than this. We must raise the bar of public discourse or we will be doomed to division and stagnation.

The state of our county is strong because we get things done. My goal has never changed: improve our community, quality of life and economy. I have always sought to bring people together to move this government and county forward. From the essential services county government provides every day to crisis management situations, Oneida County Government gets the job done.

We are doing the job financially. I am proud of this government's fiscal achievements. Five years in a row we have not raised the property tax levy. We continue to make county government as efficient and responsive as possible. Our partnership with the Oneida Nation has made gaming revenue the third largest revenue generator for the County of Oneida while allowing us not to raise taxes and continue to invest in our community. We have received four credit rating upgrades and created rainy day funds that allow us to plan for the unexpected.

2017 can be summed up in the immortal words of Charles Dickens: "It was the best of times. It was the worst of times." The pall that was cast over the AMS loss was sobering. I cannot tell you today when the site at Marcy will be occupied, but I can say with all confidence that we will not stop our work there until it is completely filled.

Spring brought hope in the U-District and hospital project. However, negative forces unleashed the same old attitude that has plagued this county for decades. I will not allow those whose only goal is to divide us to succeed. I will instead continue to work to keep us together.

We are going to get the new hospital built. We have to. Too many of our people seek other outlets for even the most basic care. Our medical community is aging and while health care continues to grow nationally, our recruitment struggles as new professionals seek facilities above the cutting edge. This is about health care. New facilities, better technology, patient care, advanced research and so much more. We can't lose sight of these goals.

The U-District is creating a sports, art and entertainment district in downtown Utica. This district is already taking shape and changing the face of Oneida County and the entire region. The Adirondack Bank Center at the Utica Auditorium has undergone a transformation that no one thought possible a mere five years ago, a complete renovation and façade reconstruction including brand new luxury box suites, the first of its kind for an American Hockey League arena. The Utica Comets and Utica College Pioneers continue to play for capacity crowds. We have hosted two AHL All-Star Games watched around the world. The AHL, Utica Comets and the Turning Stone Resort Casino have shined the spotlight on our community like never before.

In concert with the Adirondack Bank Center, we are moving forward on Nexus. The eyesore that was the Tartan Textile property is cleared away and the site is being prepared to build a state-of-the-art tournament-based play athletic complex.

This premier facility will yield three sheets of ice that can be converted into lacrosse and soccer fields, and a "sky is the limit" list of partnerships for Utica College Hockey, the Utica Comets, the AHL and many other regional sports associations.

I commissioned an in-depth economic development study of the U-District. This study shows the projected impacts at full build out. There is a handout highlighting the study for everyone to see. The U-District could bring in 1.4 million visitors annually with an economic impact of over \$110 million per year. This will include 1,100 new jobs and \$36 million in annual earnings.

The fiscal benefits for local governments can change our community forever. We would expand our tax and revenue substantially on an annual basis by adding taxpayers, not raising taxes. Occupancy tax would increase nearly \$400,000. Sales tax revenue would increase \$3.9 million. The gaming revenue the county receives would increase \$1.9 million.

The U-District is moving forward and it will attract more people, generate more dollars, more jobs, more development and a new future for our region's quality of life. Stay tuned.

In Rome, the Griffiss Business and Technology Park employs more than 5,000 people, yet only 30 percent live in the city. Under Mayor Izzo's leadership, Rome is creating new ideas to attract these people and more to live in the Copper City. I applaud her effort. In the past few years, we have invested in our Mohawk Valley Community College Rome Campus with a \$30 million expansion and have continued to increase our efforts at Griffiss International Airport by becoming the leader in unmanned aerial systems.

Together with MVCC, Griffiss and the City of Rome we will create a new livable-workable neighborhood that will build on our current successes and assets.

First, we will work with MVCC to add to the new campus's development, building on our entrepreneurial, agricultural and culinary spirit. We will continue to expand MVCC's first rate culinary programs by building phase two of our Agriculture Business Incubator on the campus.

Next, we will create a new social enterprise, the Rome Vertical Garden. The proposed three-story, 13,500 square foot garden would attract students and community members to the new campus while allowing MVCC culinary students and participants in the Ag Incubator to hone their skills, using locally sourced ingredients.

We will continue to expand our UAS footprint in Rome. Last year I announced a UAS Tech Business Incubator. In the 2017 Regional Economic Development Council Awards, this project was identified as a priority, and received \$1.4 million towards the completion of this \$5 million upgrade.

We will partner with the City of Rome to create a state of the art recreation space essential to building a new neighborhood. This facility will be a public-private partnership and focus on health, wellness and educational services including day care and after school programs.

Projects like these in Utica and Rome along with what we do every day are vital to this community in every area of human need. This fact sometimes gets lost in the shuffle. We have provided a handout for everyone to see some of our departmental highlights of the past year.

Our Health Department conducted over 460 cancer screenings and 1,700 children with developmental delays received early intervention services. Our Veterans' Service Agency worked with over 3,000 new veterans to connect them with benefits. The Office for Aging and Continuing Care served nearly 10,000 unduplicated clients with a variety of services ranging from meals to information assistance to in-home services. Our Department of Mental Health processed 960 referrals for care management and residential services. We are helping veterans, children, the homeless and more.

We continue to tackle the opioid crisis in our community. We created the Opioid Task Force and it's making progress. To battle this plague, we have brought people together from our educational, mental health, service providers and law enforcement communities, as well as those directly affected by the devastating loss of opioid abuse. We have increased prescription drug returns. Along with the Oneida County Sheriff's Office, we continue Narcan use by law enforcement. We have worked to start up treatment clinics in Utica and Rome and identified the gaps in services so that no one falls through the cracks.

We have also begun a process of litigation against pharmaceutical companies for pushing these prescription drugs in irresponsible ways using improper practices. We owe it to the taxpayers to leave no stone unturned in recovering any unjustified cost.

We lead the way on juvenile justice. When I first took office, I created the Oneida County Youth Council. It has brought people together to work on problems from combatting youth gang violence to mental health. The next major task in this arena is implementing New York State's Raise the Age legislation. Oneida County is laying the groundwork to successfully adapt to processing and housing juvenile offenders. We have become the model other counties across the state have looked to as they prepare for this new system.

In 2017, we announced we would restructure our Department of Social Services internally to address intake, employment and support. Our DSS Intake Unit is more efficient and is increasing its work with the homeless population. It is interagency staffed and collaborates closely with community organizations that serve the homeless.

Our employment division had a record year assisting temporary assistance applicants and recipients to obtain more than 1,000 jobs. Child support collections brought \$19 million into our community. This is the highest amount DSS has ever taken in. That money offsets temporary assistance costs by \$2 million and reduces the number of people receiving assistance. We are one of only 10 counties with a continued increase in child support collections. Due to this accomplishment, we have been asked to create policy and procedure for New York State.

We have taken unprecedented action to combat the devastating effects of flooding in our community. Washington has once again failed to come to our aid, as FEMA has chosen to ignore our aid request and refuses to look at ways to change its approach to local disasters. Together with the Board of Legislators, we have allocated \$12 million over six years to deal with flood mitigation in our county. We have identified over 18 projects to date and continue to reach out to all our partners to move forward.

We look for bold impact that brings real results. That's why I created Vision 2020, which brought together leaders of our community from all walks of life to create a master plan of action to prepare us for a new economy. The success of Vision 2020 under Co-Chairmen Randy VanWagoner and David Mathis, along with many other committee chairs and members, has been astounding. Over 75 people have lent their time, expertise and thinking to this initiative.

The list of projects, programs and just the sharing of ideas that have come from Vision 2020, is staggering. We increased internships by 190 percent since 2013. Through collaboration, the MVCC and Utica College cybersecurity programs were designated centers for academic excellence by the National Security Agency. We created partnerships to expand engineering educational programs. We mainstreamed English as second language programs in K-12 and we enhanced college ESL offerings. We secured state money to conduct a study to determine priorities to connect all roadways in Oneida County using smart technology. Vision 2020 assisted in the creation of the Greater Mohawk Valley STEM Hub which advances STEM education through innovation. We developed new UAS college programs to focus on emerging markets. The list goes on and on.

An annual Vision 2020 report will be available in the coming weeks to outline all of our goals for the coming year. One major goal for 2018 is a comprehensive pedestrian study. Creating communities that are pedestrian forward is a key tool for growth in a new economy. We look forward to those findings and for the opportunity to implement them.

Vision 2020 has worked for Oneida County. What we know from our experience in the MV500 and the REDC is our economic development approach has to be regional. The Mohawk Valley is one region. I propose building on the success of Vision 2020 by expanding our efforts to include all the counties in our economic development council region. Together we will create a regional master plan for our people.

Agriculture is the largest industry in Oneida County and it continues to be an ever-changing one. In 2017, we completed our 10-year Farmland Protection Plan and have begun to implement the action items identified to assist the growth and sustainability of our farming community. We have increased ag-tourism and begun to institute a comprehensive zoning initiative called Ag-Friendly.

While we continue to make progress in some areas, there are still serious issues facing agriculture sustainability in our community. Like those all across the nation, Oneida County farmers are aging. According to recent studies, more than half the farmers in the United States are 55 or older. Together with Cornell Cooperative Extension, MVCC and other local schools and our UAS Test Site, we will begin an Ag in the Classroom Initiative. This initiative is aimed at increasing our outreach to school-aged children in order to engage them in all aspects of agriculture.

This will be a comprehensive initiative led by Mary Beth McEwen, executive director of Cornell Cooperative Extension. We will begin phase one this year by creating an Ambassadors in Agriculture program. Ag in the 21st century has changed. A focus has emerged on tourism and new technology in addition to traditional farming. This program will use local ambassadors who have excelled in agricultural careers to speak to area kids. This engagement will help us to begin to change perceptions.

In Oneida County there are more than 200 dairy farms with 18,000 milking cows and over 500 full-time employees. Our dairy farms represent close to 25 percent of the land mass in Oneida County.

Dairy farmers are facing obstacles including frozen credit from feed and seed producers and difficulty in receiving loans and financing. We hear horror stories of dealing with the paperwork governing milk regulations from the federal government and problems with worker's compensation and insurance, as well as many other issues. We need to not only recognize how important this industry is to Oneida County but be willing to try and find creative ways to help create solutions. This year we will hold a dairy farmers forum with our partners at CCE and formulate an Oneida County Dairy Farmers Sustainability Plan. Maybe some of these issues are beyond our ability to solve locally, but we can create an agenda and advocate on our dairy farmers' behalf to our representatives in Albany and Washington with a clear message and one voice.

Oneida County is home to a unique set of assets that constitutes a critical mass in the fast-growing area of cybersecurity. We must leverage those assets to create jobs and attract businesses while safeguarding our infrastructure and sensitive data. We have an ecosystem that allows this industry to grow while being at the forefront of protecting our citizens' sensitive data.

The cybersecurity unemployment rate was zero percent in 2016, and it's expected to remain so until 2021. According to John McAfee, founder of McAfee cybersecurity, "The field of cybersecurity is the least-populated of any field of technology." In fact, there are two job openings for every qualified candidate. And the median income for these unfilled jobs is \$92,000 a year.

Today we launch a five-point plan called CyberOneida. We will partner with our centers of excellence at Utica College and Mohawk Valley Community College, The Cyber Alliance and experts from the cyber industry to establish Oneida County as New York's leader in cyber training, skills development and safety.

We will work with our economic development team to recruit expanding cyber-related businesses and technologies to the region. We must create new opportunities for young people in cyber by promoting cybersecurity career awareness. We will redouble our efforts to support academic preparedness of K-12 students through our STEM initiatives. And Oneida County will lead the way in protecting our citizens' data and IT infrastructure through procurement and workforce development consolidating and upgrading local government cybersecurity functions. This is a long-overdue consolidation that will save tax dollars for every community while making all the sensitive data local governments have access to more secure.

We continue to lead the way on consolidation. I believe in consolidation as the way we can locally reduce our tax burden while increasing service. I have said time and time again we have too many governments doing too much of the same thing for too much money. But as always, I start by looking at my own government and leading by example.

We restructured our early intervention program in our Health Department. We consolidated our administration and fiscal management functions in the Office for Aging and Mental Health departments. And we continue to digitize records in every department in county government. In fact, last year our Public Defender's Office became the first in the state to do so.

Last year, I began discussions between the Part County Sewer District and the Mohawk Valley Water Authority about a possible merger of the two systems. Those discussions have been fruitful. Our sewer district has completed a management study that lays a path for the future, and this year, I have authorized, with the cooperation of the Water Authority, a feasibility study necessary to take the next steps.

In 2017, all our municipalities participated in the statewide shared services panel that I convened. The discussions were constructive, and savings were identified, but we can do more. That panel is now permanent and on March 15 we will meet again as we prepare a new plan for this year. We will build on last year's plan and produce new proposals, ideas and initiatives to modernize government.

Shared services and consolidation is more than just a tax saving measure. It has to be about modernizing and breaking down barriers that put people at risk. We must understand the larger issues facing this and every community. All too often we suffer from parochialism that cripples our ability to modernize.

Our police and law enforcement officers do amazing work every single day. However, for these dedicated agencies the sharing of equipment and embracing of new technologies has proven to be difficult. We have pursued and secured state and federal grants, and spent county funds to purchase laptops, radio equipment and specialty vehicles for all agencies to use in order to make first responders and citizens safer. Unfortunately, many of these are not being used, or worse, are being wastefully duplicated. Money spent unnecessarily by individual departments on these items could have been used for training, police cruisers or protective equipment.

One of the valuable lessons that has been learned from Sept. 11, and the subsequent War on Terror, is that now more than ever police agencies must share any and all information that they have. We have completed a police countywide records management system that every police agency can use at no cost. This system breaks down barriers to sharing information across multiple agencies. Oneida County funded it. We created it. We implemented it. Yet, some local agencies don't avail themselves of it. We live in a time faced with complex challenges. There are no more borders or boundaries to criminal behavior. School districts cross municipal map lines and social media's reach is near infinite. Yet, without data sharing on a universal records management system, agencies will maintain walls that leave our first responders without vital information.

The challenges we face today are too large for any one agency to face alone. We must work together. I have instructed Kevin Revere, my Director of Emergency Services, to work with every agency and remove whatever barriers exist, so that once and for all, information will be shared between everyone.

Together we can create better systems. We've done it. When we made a monumental shift from a coroner to a medical examiner it was to fix an antiquated system. We are now able to track information and law enforcement agencies and our District Attorney's Office are being supplied with valuable information to solve crimes. In addition, for the first time we now know how many people have overdosed on drugs, how they overdosed and by what drug. We have data that is essential to informing every decision our Opiate Task Force makes to fight the opioid epidemic. Without this change we would continue to be fighting this epidemic blind like so many other counties. We fixed a system that was impairing our law enforcement, doctors and substance abuse recovery provider's ability to do their jobs. We created a better system.

Facing the deplorable and disgustingly tragic school shooting in Parkland, Florida less than a month ago, every community must make changes. On this and so many other issues, Washington is broken, maybe irrevocably so.

I have zero confidence they are going to address any of these issues. They didn't after Columbine, they didn't after Sandy Hook, Orlando or Las Vegas, and they won't now.

I don't like what our Congresswoman said during the aftermath of this horrific tragedy, but what her and other members of Congress haven't said is even more disturbing. Children are being killed in classrooms. We need our elected leaders in Washington and Albany to stop trying to keep their jobs and start doing their jobs. It's a gross dereliction of duty. There are things they can do. They should do them. Our children need leaders not platitudes. They need real solutions.

There are things I can do and I'm going to do them.

County government is in a unique position to make us safer. But we can't talk past each other or demonize one another when we disagree. This can't be a narrow response. We will address school safety, mental health delivery and gun violence.

We have some pieces in place. Just today, with Howard Mettelman, I met with our school superintendents and representatives from local police agencies to discuss school safety. I believe the partnership between the Whitesboro Central School District and the Oneida County Sheriff's Office is one that can serve as a model for the rest of the state and country when it comes to officers in schools. We will work with our school districts to place armed Special Patrol Officers in every school building that doesn't currently have them. It will cost money. It's money well spent.

I believe we can harden soft targets by looking at single points of entry and other safety measures. I am directing Kevin Revere, Director of Emergency Services to work with schools, day care and senior centers, churches and other community agencies to provide safety and security assessments and emergency plans.

However, the approach must go further. County government is the hub of the wheel of mental health delivery in this state. We have to start locally to address mental health issues.

We have worked with state and local providers to secure additional beds and wrap around services for the seriously mentally ill, for those being released from New York State prisons and for our homeless. We continue to work with the Neighborhood Center to upgrade the Mobile Crisis Assessment Team for onsite emergency interventions. This service will be available 24/7 and will assist police, health care professionals and families in dealing with mental health crises. Along with our partners at the Neighborhood Center and the Utica Rescue Mission, we will open an access center to provide 24/7 drop-in services.

I have directed my Commissioners of Mental Health and Social Services and my Director of Public Health to develop a threat assessment model that aims to prevent violence in our community, particularly in our schools.

We will work with BOCES and other educational partners to formulate and implement guidelines for schools to use in response to transient and substantive threats of violence made by students. We will work with providers such as Kids Oneida to expand their ability to provide direct help to schools facing the risk of such behavior. Our goal is to identify possible attackers and work with the appropriate professionals and agencies to mitigate potentially dangerous situations.

I believe we need a new approach to sharing information and delivering mental health to our people. I'm also directing these department heads to create a plan that makes the sharing of information between all parties a number one priority. This plan must look at realistic ways in which we can assure that mental health providers are in every school. Those providers must also be supported with the resources and information necessary to help children. It's clear we can no longer live in a world where everyone sits on an island and therefore can't work together.

We have to find a way to address gun violence. We will put all our government's resources to bear to study gun violence and use that data to come up with new innovative solutions. Data could provide insight into education strategies, gun storage solutions, identify best practices and a plethora of other options. I propose a partnership between Oneida County Government and our local colleges to outline a way forward to finally study this issue to obtain necessary data.

These reforms are where we start but there is more we can do. I don't have all the answers. I know that. I want to hear from everyone involved so we can create a Comprehensive Oneida County Mental Health and Safety Agenda that will work for everyone. We can create a better system, steeped in data and focused on safety and mental health. We are going to do it here and we are going to start today.

When I think of where I have been in my life, I always start with my very first job. I was a stock boy and bagger at DeTraglia's Foodland in my East Utica neighborhood. One of the owners was Frank DeTraglia. When it came to customers, Frank told me on day one: "If we don't have it, go get it. If you can't get it, find someone who can. People come here for what they need. If we don't have it they won't come back."

Today, 40 years later, I am a public servant and proud of it. I learned then as I learned when I took this job, people come to us for what they need. If we don't have it and we can't get it, they won't come back. We need safe schools and neighborhoods, we need more people, more jobs and more for people to do.

We are public servants, and as such, people do not want to hear from us whose fault it is, was or will be. We need to act. I know I'm only the County Executive. But when I took this job and every day since, I see your problems as my problems. I see your hopes as my hopes. I see your dreams as my dreams. I will not stop looking for solutions to our challenges whatever they may be.

I will not stop making this a better place to live.

The state of our county is you; is us. We control our destiny. We will rise together to meet our challenges. Not based on political party, or color, or heritage or wealth. We are Oneida County.

I don't define myself by a political party. I define myself as a second-generation American who loves and believes in the promise that is America and Oneida County.

Let's make the promise stand for generations to come.

Thank you, may God bless us, may God bless Oneida County and the United States of America.