

Picente: Oneida County Strong As It Faces Future

2009 State of the County Address

Anthony J. Picente, Jr.
Oneida County Executive

As we look for inspiration in these troubled times, I want to share with you some words from a man who knew about crisis, and who knew about overcoming adversity. President Abraham Lincoln once said, "You can have anything you want – if you want it badly enough. You can be anything you want to be, do anything you set out to accomplish, if you hold onto that desire with singleness of purpose."

Three things create the environment for success: You work hard, you never give up, and you believe in yourself no matter what. As we look at the challenges facing all of us here in Oneida County, I want to salute Erin Hamlin. This young woman from Remsen has taken on the best in the world in the luge, and beaten them all. She has known what it takes to focus on a dream and look past all the barriers until those barriers are overcome by pure hard work and effort. Her dedication and her triumph are both an inspiration, and a lesson, for all of us here today.

I also want to mention one man who is with us today who never lost faith in himself – Steven Barnes. Through the hard work of a truly dedicated group of people at the Innocence Project, Steven is a free man today. I am very pleased to note that due to the efforts of District Attorney Scott McNamara, Steven will be working with our Oneida County Re-Entry Task Force to help all of us learn from his experience. Steven's story reminds us all of the power of truth and inspires us to work for the truth in everything we undertake.

We are in difficult times. Times that we have not seen in many years. Families are facing hard times -- with courage, desperation, and fear. I see their needs, urgency and worry every day as more and more people turn to County Government for help, while at the same time I read and hear that this government -- that works in the trenches on the front lines of serving thousands of people -- is unfairly lumped with the Big Spenders through either sheer ignorance or political agendas.

We are in difficult times in our society. Yet in government, it is as Ralph Waldo Emerson once said; "*Can anybody remember when the times were not hard, and money not scarce?*" We swing from the extremes of good times, when no one wants to fund the services used by those in hardship, to times like these, when needs are vast and resources are even more limited. And, as if immune from all of it, Washington, Wall Street and Albany overwhelm us with overspending and increased deficits that cause job loss and fear.

But unlike Washington, Wall Street and Albany, Oneida County has taken steps that other areas of the Country and State have not. Oneida County under my administration began a course two years ago to stabilize a financial situation that in past years was extremely tenuous. A situation that was depleting its reserves and relying on one shot revenues and quick fix tax increases that put a further burden on our local economy. I was heavily criticized for a budget that increased taxes last year, I listened and we reduced the burden slightly, but I insisted we do

so by not further tapping into our fund balance and that will prove to be significant as we close 2008 and continue in 2009.

In a few weeks, when we officially close the books on 2008, we will have come in under budget for the second year in a row. That means we will take less from our reserves than planned, and have even more cash on hand to deal with potential concerns for 2009. This is the type of sound management that allowed Oneida County to achieve the first credit upgrade in 7 years.

In contrast to counties that are talking about doom and gloom, I am looking at a fiscal future in which Oneida County can hold the line on property taxes in 2010 unless the upcoming state budget shifts even more costs onto the backs of county governments. Let me stress that point. At a time when we are seeing tax increases at layer upon layer of government, I believe our fiscal position is strong enough that we can hold down our tax increase in 2010 unless the state piles new costs upon us.

Oneida County Government is able to stand strong amid adversity because that has been my top goal since the day I assumed responsibility for leading this county. I inherited a county that was fiscally shaky and have put us on a road to strength. That's why Oneida County's credit rating has gone up for the first time in more than seven years. That's why today we can contemplate holding down taxes. We manage our budget the same way families do: We don't spend it unless we have to.

I believe actions speak louder than words and results matter more than hype. That's why I am very concerned at the partisan tone of the political debate, and that political opportunism for a headline or a sound bite is getting priority over bipartisan collaboration for the good of the people. I have no respect for the political strategy that instills fear in people by suggesting that they are being left behind because the insiders – whoever they may be – are getting it all. I speak not only for me, but for many elected officials and of dozens of department heads and managers throughout all levels of government when I say that we are not in our jobs because we have to be there; but because we want to be in public service.

It is my responsibility to guide this government and our communities through the storm ahead, maintaining the resolve to build for the future while recognizing that overcoming the fiscal challenges to the present is a critical element in building a better tomorrow. We are making progress, and although there is work to be done, we are building a future on more than just hope – we are building on two years of solid results.

As County Executive, I have positioned Oneida County Government to be a community problem-solver and a catalyst for changing the status quo.

- Last year, when internal discord struck the Oneida County Convention and Visitors Bureau, I stepped in to take strong action, to work with all parties involved, and re-energize this agency which is so very vital to the future of one of our main economic growth areas – tourism. The recent announcement of a new president is a sign of a new, energetic approach to promoting tourism for Oneida County. If we do not believe in ourselves who will?
- I led renewed efforts to develop an agreement with the city of Utica to end a deplorable situation in regards to properties seized for back taxes. Working with Mayor Roefaro, we are addressing an issue that went unresolved for 25 years. My administration has

launched an outstanding collaboration with the City to address the lead issue so that we are saving lives, renovating housing and restoring promise to both Utica's people and its neighborhoods

- I have insisted that we take the potential of Griffiss and make it a growth engine for the future. That's why we privatized the FBO after 40 years of trying, and through the wise use of non-county dollars, we are developing an outstanding facility whose potential is limitless. We are developing our airport with a vision focused on 2020, not 1960.
- I have led an aggressive campaign to fully develop the SUNYIT Marcy campus the by working to land an IBM chip packaging facility and working with state officials to secure funding for the Marcy Nano Site. Oneida County has maintained its position as a leader in the successful fight to stop NYRI from devastating our region and our prime economic development parcel with its ill-considered power line proposal.
- I brought together the leaders of Oneida County's three cities – Rome, Sherrill and Utica – to discuss consolidation issues and develop new ways that we can work together to provide essential services while reducing the cost to the taxpayers.
- I am working to address the urgent need for trained health care professionals and am committed to the community visioning process that is being coordinated through the United Way. Quality health care is a foundation for a strong community. County Government is committed to working with our health care providers and partners to help meet the needs of today and tomorrow.

All this is part of my vision and my purpose to make this county strong enough so that we control our destiny, and that even as we accept temporary setbacks, we never stop moving forward. We need to believe in ourselves again.

As stated before I am not for announcements with a lot of sound but no substance. Since the day I became County Executive, I have believed that giving people more and taking less has been our mission, and I am proud of the work that we do every day to achieve that goal. My philosophy is that we in County Government serve an essential role in our community, and that we need to be strong enough for this challenge, because most of the people we serve are people no one else can help.

This is a time when nothing we have done in the past is fully enough to meet the challenges of the present. But before we look to the future, and we talk about where we as a community are going, I want to mention some highlights from around County Government that clearly illustrate the fact that far from the spotlight, we are touching lives and saving dollars. For every one thing I mentioned, I could add 20 more, because every day we touch the lives of thousands of people – whether through the potholes we fix on our county roads or the down-and-out who come to us for a second chance at life. I have added a partial list of departmental highlights as an addendum to this message, and I encourage you to read it through.

The Department of Social Services is a complex department that deals with a vast array of mandated programs and is the chief component of our region's efforts to help those in need.

In 2008:

- The Department's Employment Division helped more than 1,000 people get a job instead of a welfare check.

- The Department was tough on child support deadbeats, and was recognized by the state for exceeding the state average in increasing the amount collected, which was a staggering \$18.4 million.
- Being aggressive has resulted in the 9th straight year the DSS anti-fraud squad recovered more than \$1 million for the county.
- The Department secured grant funding to give Child Protective workers laptop computers at no cost to the county so they are in the field more, and in the office less. That's greater service at no cost to the county. That's a great job.

Numbers tell the big picture, but not the whole story. Our work is measured in lives. Let me tell you the story of a 13-year-old girl. Back in 1999 Social Services came to her rescue after neglect by one parent. She went into foster care. Then she went to the care of her other birth parent. Caseworkers followed up. DSS had to remove her again due to neglect, and she went back into foster care. Year after year, our caseworkers worked with her foster home to help her deal with the mental and emotional scars of her childhood. Late last year, this girl was adopted into a loving family and has a bright future. County Government made a difference to a lost little girl who had no one else. It took a lot of patience, a lot of persistence and a lot of caring. That's what our caseworkers and hundreds more workers do every day – with care, compassion, dedication and determination never to give up on the people who trust us as their last hope.

There is no price tag on the value of a human life that is reclaimed from homelessness, drug abuse, or a dead-end lifestyle. This past year, the Department of Mental Health launched a 10-year plan to address chronic homelessness. This initiative in partnership with Mayors Roefaro and Brown and chaired by MVCC President Randy VanWagoner, is intended to end chronic homelessness in our county. This population is very expensive to serve and cycle in and out of our county jail, hospital emergency rooms, local shelters, and addiction and mental health treatment programs funded by Medicaid dollars. This project to end the expensive and harmful cycle of the homeless reduces the number of repeat arrests and jail admissions by low-level offenders, enhancing public safety and saving local tax dollars. The Department is also taking a lead to coordinate services to veterans, helping to fulfill our commitment to those who served our nation.

Throughout County Government, there is an urgency to serve people and also conserve resources. Our Office for the Aging and Continuing Care went through a laborious process of reconfiguring the Board of Directors of the Community Elder Wellness Council so that non-public funds could supplement existing program efforts. The Department invested that time because it is already providing on going case management and in-home community based services to approximately 3,000 people.

I now want to discuss the Griffiss International Airfield because the debates over its operations are a microcosm of our area, its opportunities, and one of our greatest challenges – divisiveness in the face of opportunity. Let's back up a step. The closing of Griffiss handed Oneida County a tremendous asset, but one that needed huge investments. Six years ago, the Board of Legislators approved moving airport operations to Griffiss. Going back in time is not an option; it is either go forward or go nowhere.

I'm proud to report that after only two years of full-time airport operations at Griffiss, we have already reduced the county cost of airport operations by \$700,000. We continue to move

towards a self-sufficient airport operation, but I believe it is important to remind everyone here that the airport is more than a profit center; it is one of our greatest economic development opportunities. A massive Airport Improvement Program (AIP), funded by the FAA, State of New York, and the County is changing Griffiss through the addition of several new hangars, conversion of a former hangar for commercial use, construction of a new FBO Building, installation of a modern Instrument Landing System and Approach Lights. All of this means new opportunities. Military Charter flights, flown by commercial airlines, will commence using the new FBO's services at the airport. Later this year, Empire Aero Center will complete the expansion of its maintenance, repair and overhaul services for commercial airline aircraft into Building 100. It's a work in progress, but when the dust settles, we will be ready for a new future.

Upgrading our infrastructure is a primary step to invigorating our economy and our communities. The federal stimulus package offers us the opportunity to take vital projects off the drawing board and make them a reality. Some projects in the county have already made the list for funding. Thanks to some aggressive efforts by the County Department of Public Works, we have a project for renovations along County Route 840 that is now being fast-tracked for inclusion in the stimulus funding. There is a public meeting on the project at 7 tonight at the Whitestown Community Center. I believe this project is vitally important because it opens up new economic opportunities to create new jobs long after the construction is finished. The stimulus investments should alter the economic landscape. Our Route 840 project will do that – connecting the Business Parks of Whitestown and Griffiss Park with New Hartford and Utica. We were able to move this project forward because Congressman Michael Arcuri has been working closely with us to help identify funding opportunities in the vast stimulus package.

Although the federal government is looking for projects that are ready to go, I have been working since the day this was proposed to include some of the major projects facing our region, such as the sewer repair project, to ensure that this money helps us as we engage in this major effort to protect our environment and set the stage for new growth. The sewer project is important to note because it is so vast and complex that for years, action was delayed. Likewise, when I started an effort to consolidate emergency services communications, we found some very daunting technical issues that need time and money to overcome – issues that had not been fully discussed because the hard work of getting to the root of the issues was never undertaken.

One very positive, direct impact of the once-in-history stimulus package is that – through the efforts of our federal representatives – counties are receiving a direct share of aid to offset Medicaid costs. It is estimated Oneida County will receive about \$16 million. That's lower than other estimates that failed to take into account the fact that counties no longer pay part of the costs for Family Health Plus. That funding will be set aside to offset Medicaid costs, and allow us to provide relief to our property taxpayers. I am cautious, because at a time when New York faces serious fiscal concerns, Albany has a track record of solving state budget problems by creating county budget nightmares. But let me repeat what I said earlier: If the state budget does not offset this one-time infusion of money, our property taxpayers will be the ones who benefit.

My efforts to redevelop our economy and help all our communities include aggressive efforts to fight the New York Regional Interconnect Project and maximize the potential of the Marcy Nano-Center site.

Let me update you on the success of our efforts against NYRI, because that project alone posed one of the most devastating threats ever to face our region.

Oneida County played an active role in 2006 when it helped form Communities Against Regional Interconnect (CARI). CARI consists of seven counties and five citizen groups that have joined together to oppose the 190 mile NYRI High Voltage DC Transmission Line. CARI has raised more than \$2 million and has developed a comprehensive strategy that has vigorously opposed this ill-conceived and unnecessary project at the NYS Public Service Commission.

We recently won a major victory in federal court when a judge rejected the implementing authority of a 2005 federal law that would have allowed projects like NYRI to end run the state and get federal approval even if New York says no. This was a much needed victory for the counties and local communities that have had to live with this threat that could allow the federal government to intervene and replace the state's decision making authority with respect to NYRI's proposal. I'd like to say this settled the matter, but Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who hails from Nevada, has indicated that he will submit new legislation that would vest exclusive jurisdiction to FERC to override the state's authority. It is important that this not happen and I ask each of you to reach out to Senators Schumer and Gillibrand to let them know that you oppose this legislation.

I firmly believe that NYRI's fate now comes down to the Public Service Commission. Overwhelming testimony has been submitted not only by CARI, but also a wide range of state agencies, regulated utilities, and other public interest groups who have refuted nearly every claim made by NYRI and underscored the numerous deficiencies of their proposal: including significant environmental, economic and visual impacts that this line would have along this particular route. Experts agree that this line is unnecessary and there are cheaper and better alternatives that would serve the State's long term energy needs.

While the process is still underway, NYRI has failed to demonstrate not only the need for its transmission line but that its proposal has the fewest impacts of any alternative option that may be available. It may be premature to claim that NYRI is totally dead, but more than two years of intense, regional partnerships now have us close to a victory. The PSC needs to decide this application by August 8th of this year in order to maintain sole jurisdiction of this application and avoid FERC intervention. It is essential that the PSC follow through on the staff recommendation and vote to deny this application!

Just as partnerships have helped Oneida County stymie the attempt by NYRI to destroy Oneida County communities, partnerships are also working to help me in one of my top economic development priorities: the development of Marcy NanoCenter at SUNYIT. Working with Mohawk Valley EDGE, we are in a position to begin construction of infrastructure and site improvements while we continue to market this site globally to the semiconductor and nanoelectronics industry.

I want to underscore the word "we" because it takes teamwork and regional collaboration to undertake transformational economic development initiatives like the Marcy NanoCenter project. Senator Griffo, Assemblywoman Destito, Congressman Arcuri, the leadership of the town of Marcy, National Grid, Mohawk Valley EDGE and SUNYIT have all played key roles in the complex effort to develop a project that has the potential to transform our region.

Long before I became County Executive, in fact as long as I can remember, and certainly before our generation of leaders, our County has been grappling with the vexing issue of how to handle our relationship with our neighbors the Oneida Indian Nation.

Our County has tried almost every approach to resolve our conflicts with the nation. Some have held real promise. Other strategies were more defensive in nature, designed primarily to protect the County from legal exposure. And, I think we can all agree that other efforts had good intentions but the results we hoped for did not follow.

One thing, however, is clear and undisputable. Neither we nor the Oneida Nation are better off today as a result of either sides past approaches. Oneida County still is not collecting a penny in revenues from the Oneida Nation, nor have the attempts to enforce County law against the Nation gained any traction at all.

For years we have listened to lawyers tell us that we will win the next lawsuit. That was many lawsuits ago. And if we did win, where did we end up? Back in court yet again, where we remain today.

From the time I took office I thought, “there has to be a better way than this”.

There has to be a better way than continuing to fight with the largest employer in the region. There has to be a better way than to fight with the Native Americans after whom our County is named. There has to be a better way than to continue the negativity that has divided our County for too long and held us back from recognizing the much fuller potential we can achieve if we work together with the Oneida Nation.

There has to be a better way.

That is why when I took office, I promised to pursue a two-track approach for dealing with the Nation. One track would continue in litigation to protect the County’s interests, in case we could not find a better way. The other would be to sit with the Oneidas leadership and have a plain peaceful conversation on whether we could work together to find a better way. And you know what? They were willing to do the same. They are not as they have been portrayed. We have learned a great deal about each other. We both want this County to succeed.

So now it comes to this. We will be proceeding with the State of New York on a path that will hopefully bring forth a proposal within the next month. This will involve compromise from all sides. This will not be the perfect deal that some will look for. For those of you who want the Oneidas to pay full taxes and require full enforcement of County law; that is not reality. For those of you who want no agreement with the Oneidas, and instead wish to keep fighting, there is nothing I can say to convince you to find a better way. I at least hope you will be respectful of those of us who wish to put these differences behind us.

This County, this region, must decide if we truly want to move forward. If we want, in these difficult economic times to remain status quo, or if we reject the notion that it can’t be done or simply has to be done to satisfy but a few, or do we move ahead.

Let’s face it, the easy way out, the less risky political move would be for me to simply rattle the saber, talk tough against the Indians and keep fighting. We could let the courts rule against the county and then blame the courts. We could spend millions more in legal fees without being criticized. I could fall in line with the many public officials who have been elected and re-elected time and again by simply urging more fighting with the Indians.

But then I would think about why I wanted to serve in this office in the first place. Leadership means taking risks when we think our community can be better. Leadership means not hiding in a cocoon of litigation, not blaming courts for bad decisions. It means not passing the buck to the next generation to deal with. Leadership means making hard decisions, presenting difficult proposals and advocating for them when we believe it is the right thing to do.

This business can be messy at times. None of us here today created this mess, but I believe it is our job to clean it up. I am prepared to lead to do that, I ask you to join me.

There is work to be done. I look forward to working with all of you as partners, because when this region works as a team, we can overcome the obstacles we face and build a stronger economy that can uplift our citizens and transform our communities.