

State of the County Address 2021

This address, my fifteenth State of the County, like all things we have faced this last year, looks and feels different.

We could not gather as we have in the past, but I would be remiss if I did not once again thank my partners in government for all they do and have done during this pandemic.

Chairman Gerald Fiorini and the entire Board of Legislators

Sheriff Robert Maciol

District Attorney Scott McNamara

County Clerk Sandra DePerno

And Comptroller Joseph Timpano

They have been with us every step of the way and I appreciate their support and leadership.

I want to thank my wife Eleanor and my family for all their support during these trying times.

This past year presented challenges unlike any we have faced as a community. And even though our economy was for a time shut down, together Oneida County found a way to persevere and move forward in a real and significant way. Let me update you on some of our progress in this COVID year.

I am giving this address from our new Innovare Advancement Center, a county-owned facility. Located in the Griffiss Business & Technology Park, in what was once known as Building 100, the project was conceived in 2018, but built during the pandemic, and today stands as a regional success story.

The Innovare Advancement Center is a 150,000 square foot state-of-the-art, multi-layered, research and development facility. We have created a vital partnership between Oneida County Government, the Air Force Research Laboratory, Griffiss Institute, and the State University of New York.

This building, a new jewel of Oneida County Government, will leverage the research and development going on inside the secure fence line of the lab by attracting researchers from around the globe. Within, you will find 13,000 square feet of open research space, two leading-edge quantum labs and two Neuromorphic and Nanoelectronics-Focused Labs.

The Griffiss Business and Technology Park is also the home of the county's UAS Operations Center. As part of Innovare, this control room - where I am standing now, has also been upgraded, setting our drone testing capabilities apart from the six other federally-designated sites that operate in the United States.

But that's not all, adjacent to Innovare, and currently under construction, is the nation's largest indoor drone test site, SKYDOME. It will attract companies and researchers from around the world to test their drones. Our goal is to encourage these companies to stay and set up shop - bringing jobs and opportunity.

And we are pleased to announce one of the companies that has been testing here for the last six years is expanding its presence at this site. NAVMAR Applied Sciences Corporation, a Department of Defense Contractor since 1977, and a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business, will be taking over Hangar 21, bringing new jobs and investment.

Together, these investments by Oneida County have created one of the world's leading facilities for research, testing and commercialization in quantum computing and autonomous vehicles.

And before we leave the airport, it is important to highlight the work of another growing company. Strategic Global Aviation, also a Service-Disabled Veteran-Owned Small Business, is adding jobs at Griffiss and we will partner with CEO John Hester and his team to add even more. Strategic Global Aviation is a world-class military aerospace Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul facility. The company persevered through COVID, when the need for aircraft maintenance dropped dramatically, and is now taking off again. We will partner with the company and Mohawk Valley Community College to create a painting curriculum to augment the school's premier Airframe and Powerplant Technology Program.

Just down the road, Cree, one of the biggest private sector technology investments in North America, is rising from the ground. When complete, this \$1.2 billion high-tech manufacturing facility will be the world's largest Silicon Carbide Fabrication plant. In just a few short months, Cree CEO Gregg Lowe and his team have become a great community partner and we look forward to strengthening that relationship even more.

Cree is in the business of making the semiconductor chips that power the rapidly emerging electric vehicle industry and we are committed to both.

Today, I announce Oneida County Government will pledge to convert 50% of its fleet to electric vehicles by 2031. We will also update our Oneida County Electric Vehicle Charging Station Plan and begin to implement the infrastructure necessary to embrace the technology long term. We are kicking off that effort by partnering with Beta, a Vermont-based developer of cutting edge electric planes and vertical lift take off vehicles, the air taxis of the future. Beta will install their charging stations for cars and planes at Griffiss.

A growing 21st century economy needs and deserves a first-class healthcare system and the \$600 million Wynn Hospital at MVHS continues construction in downtown Utica. With the hospital will come a connected parking garage, allowing patients, visitors and staff to access the hospital year round, away from the elements. County Government is committed to building this garage. It is a necessity and we will see it to fruition.

Directly across the street is the Nexus Center. This critical tourism project already has seen \$11 million in county investment, and together with the Auditorium Authority, it will be home to hundreds of thousands of visitors annually competing in hockey, lacrosse, soccer and other sporting tournaments. The economic impact inside, and more importantly outside the facility, will be enormous. This project will be completed with an expected opening of June 2022.

The Wynn Hospital and Nexus Center are located in downtown Utica, and to be clear, the city will greatly benefit from these investments and the new jobs and opportunities they will bring, but these projects will move the entire region forward. As we have led every step of the way on these projects, so too is Oneida County leading the way in New York when it comes to high-tech research and development, nanotechnology, tourism and public health.

We've learned a lot over the past year and have made great strides in battling COVID-19, but it's not over. That is why as County Executive I continue to make plans to manage this crisis into 2022 and possibly beyond. While we can see the end of this pandemic, we must never forget what we have been through and those we have lost.

COVID-19 has taken more than 400 of our Oneida County family members from us and infected over 21,000 more. But through that adversity also came inspiration, as we witnessed the heroic efforts of our doctors, nurses and many in county government who fought to pull us through this crisis. And let's not forget the grocery clerks. The retail workers. The delivery people. And everyone else who never stopped working. The gratitude we have for all is endless.

I have asked a group of our county's religious leaders to shepherd the Oneida County COVID-19 Memorial Committee. This committee will plan a memorial that will always remind us of all we lost and how we fought this pandemic together, as one community.

And while we must never forget our past, we must be prepared for a future living with COVID, and at the same time look ahead to other public health emergencies. I have tasked Dr. Dan Gilmore, our Director of Health, to initiate an after-action report that will evaluate our performance and make recommendations for future preparedness.

We have come a long way and we will finish this fight like we began it – by gathering as much information as we can and acting swiftly to protect our residents.

In 2020, as the world descended into the horror of COVID-19, I set out one goal: to protect our citizens as best as I could with all the tactics and tools at my disposal. We knew we had to be decisive and respond quickly. We knew we had to close down efficiently, implement safety measures, increase testing immediately, reopen safely and vaccinate with urgency.

We were the first to close schools and moved to cancel large events that could have been early super spreaders.

We implemented the first-in-the-state mandatory mask order on May 1st – and the truth is that mask order would have been in place earlier, but our requests were rejected repeatedly by state health officials in Albany. That week, we were averaging 30 cases a day, and we had a positivity rate of 11.6%. In the weeks and months that followed, our cases declined and our positivity rate was one of the lowest in the state. Since our mask order was implemented, our positivity rate has never returned to the highs we saw in May. It worked. It saved lives.

When access to testing was scarce, we created a partnership with Rite-Aid to open one of their first seven testing sites in the entire United States – that's right, one of only seven, here in Oneida County. We helped stand up the state-run Griffiss test site on county property. The result, Oneida County tests residents at a higher rate than all but one county in the state.

We knew reopening safely was going to be key to our economic survival. I convened dozens of meetings with leaders from a wide variety of industries including manufacturing, hospitality, personal services, senior living and more.

We released best practice guidelines and toolkits to assist our businesses to reopen safely for their employees and customers. And when businesses and non-profits were desperate for PPE, we worked with Mohawk Valley EDGE to implement a buying consortium to make supplies available at as low a cost as possible. Our collective efforts worked. Oneida County, and the Mohawk Valley region, were the first to enter every single reopening phase.

The first week of January was the turning point in this government's fight against COVID. On January 5th we ran our first vaccination POD. The weapon to end the war against COVID was here.

I firmly believe that getting this community vaccinated is the single best way to return to normalcy. In order to get everyone vaccinated, we needed to make PODs convenient, accessible and easy to navigate.

We opened the only continuous drive thru POD in the region and in my opinion, the best in the state. The Griffiss drive thru site has more than met our objectives. It is easy for the elderly to take advantage of, and was essential during the winter months to keep vaccinating people.

We have operated nearly 200 PODs at multiple locations throughout the county. As a result, over half of all of our eligible residents have received at least one vaccine dose.

And as I stand here today, any eligible Oneida County resident can now walk into any of our PODs and receive a shot.

Our COVID story is one I am proud of. I am proud of where we are. We have one of the lowest positivity rates in the state. I'm proud of how our community came together and supported public health initiatives to educate and communicate to all how to be safe during unprecedented times.

Through it all, we are ready to come out on the other end stronger and more primed for growth than ever before.

Our partnership with the Oneida Indian Nation continues to be a bedrock for not only our finances, but a model for tribal and local government relationships across the United States. Like so many of our businesses, Oneida Nation Enterprises spent three months closed, until the state entered Phase 1 of reopening. We worked hand in glove with the Nation on their reopening plan. It is a perfect example for how an enterprise of that size could begin its operations again safely and responsibly. We also partnered on contact tracing to mitigate the spread of any potential cases. But most importantly, we came together to operate our mass vaccination site at the Turning Stone Event Center, inoculating thousands of Oneida County residents.

Our fiscal health remains strong. We acted swiftly to cut operating expenses in 2020 by \$8 million. We asked our employees to do more and they stepped up to help fight the pandemic, cross training in a variety of ways and volunteering to work vaccination sites.

Our strong fiscal management was recently acknowledged by all three credit rating agencies who reaffirmed our excellent “A” bond ratings this year. They cited our actions managing the crisis as a reason for their continued confidence and commended us for our early action.

It is from this foundation of fiscal strength that in 2021, we will continue to be bold in advancing new initiatives that will move Oneida County forward.

Housing is a key to our community’s future. The Vision 2020 Housing Committee has made a series of recommendations to create new housing stock necessary for our growing economy and I will champion those recommendations in 2021.

The recommendations include: extending the Oneida County Industrial Development Agency’s Housing Policy for the next five years. Re-igniting the construction of new housing through OCIDA housing policy that incentivizes new construction of single-family subdivisions, townhomes and duplexes. And educating municipal planning boards and school boards on the importance of single-family housing.

One thing is clear as we enter a post pandemic world, COVID-19 struck the tourism and hospitality industry more severely than any other. Looking forward, what are the business and leisure travel trends of the future? There is simply no modern precedent for this and so it is incumbent on us as leaders to completely rethink, re-evaluate and reimagine how we approach tourism in this community and region.

Restoring traveler confidence, building resilience and sustainable tourism and adopting innovation are just a few of the concepts we must explore. To address this challenge, we are forming a regional committee, “Reimagining Tourism in a Post-Covid World.” I have asked Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon, Madison County Chairman John Becker, Herkimer County Chairman Jim Bono and Oneida Nation Representative and CEO Ray Halbritter to join me in leading this effort. Together, with other community partners, we will examine all aspects of our tourism economy and create a pathway to maximize our tourism potential.

In Rome, we will build upon our success here at Innovare Advancement Center and the planned Air City Lofts expansion by partnering in the creation of Smart City infrastructure.

Leveraging the partnership between Oneida County, the City of Rome and Mohawk Valley EDGE, we will build the high-tech infrastructure necessary to make our community, not only an amazing place to live, but also serve as a test bed that enables and creates the next wave of innovation in smart infrastructure technology.

This project will include a central nervous system design and development as well as comprehensive and smart infrastructure.

Sounds impressive, and it is. To put it in layman’s terms, it’s a wired-for-internet city within a city, that allows community Wi-Fi, smart street lighting and a connected experience that will make cars with no drivers and drone delivery possible right here in Oneida County.

These have been difficult times, but in Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer we have a strong and powerful voice in Washington advocating for us. I want to thank him for his leadership.

One result of that leadership is that soon every municipality in Oneida County will receive American Rescue Plan funding. The amount of money for our community is more than \$149 million. \$64 million for Utica. \$25 million for Rome. \$14 million for towns and villages. And \$44 million for Oneida County.

It is a golden opportunity that we must seize as one. Only together can we use this money to make the kind of collective impact that will propel this entire community out of this pandemic and into the future.

I ask all our municipalities to partner in the following initiatives using American Rescue Plan funding as a catalyst that will bring unprecedented investment to our county.

One of our clearest infrastructure challenges highlighted by the pandemic is the need to improve access to high-speed broadband. Whether it was employees working remotely or students learning from home, access to high-speed broadband is critical to our future competitiveness.

We all heard too many stories of children parked with their parents outside a local restaurant riding off Wi-Fi because they can't get it at home. This is unacceptable. We will continue our effort to bring broadband to every corner of the county. To target assistance effectively we must know exactly - right down to the specific street address – where we have coverage deficiencies. This year, we will complete a broadband mapping project that paves the way to install the appropriate infrastructure.

The American Rescue Plan funding allows us for the first time to get ahead of this persistent need. That is why I will work with all levels of local government to create a municipal consortium that will allow us to work together to build out our broadband infrastructure.

So what does faster and more robust broadband infrastructure mean? It means better education and more economic development, jobs and private investment.

Our main streets, our downtowns, our village squares, have all been hurt by COVID in an outsized way. Let's revitalize them. Restaurants, retailers and all our small, locally-owned businesses have dealt with closures, capacity restrictions and general hesitancy for people to go out and enjoy what they always have. The best way to help small business owners is to help bring back their customers. That is why we are launching the Boost Oneida County program.

To end this crisis and finally return to normal, we must continue to immunize. This program will provide a cash incentive to encourage people to roll up their sleeves and get their shot

When you get that shot, that incentive will then be used to boost our struggling small businesses by encouraging local spending.

This innovative recovery program, the first in the nation, will use app-based technology to put recovery dollars directly into the hands of vaccinated Oneida County residents for use at locally-owned and operated small businesses, restaurants and retailers.

Every dollar invested leverages on average another 38% of spending.

I'm challenging every municipality to join me in this initiative. I'm also asking business and leading community organizations to join in and contribute. A rising tide lifts all boats. Join our capital with yours and even more areas of this county will see more customers, more revenue and more revitalization.

There is more we can do. We will embark on a long-term Main Street Revitalization Program.

On the county level, I am announcing our next bold initiative to continue the transformation of the REA Wing at Union Station into a unique downtown food destination. A grand food emporium that will celebrate the amazing ethnic diversity of our county through food and cooking, and I can think of no better place to do so than in the birthplace of our county.

Building off our success at the Oneida County Public Market, the emporium will feature unique, high-quality selections of artisan and ethnic products, freshly-made prepared foods and local produce. The emporium will also be home to a demonstration kitchen featuring instructors ranging from our own vendors and local chefs to those who are nationally known. As a home to people from over 35 countries, our community boasts a culinary diversity and excellence only found in cities like New York, Chicago, Houston and Los Angeles. I believe the emporium will become one of our next great tourism destinations.

This is yet another transformational project for our community. I welcome the business and non-profit community as partners in developing this exciting project to its fullest potential.

We stand ready to partner with local communities to improve main streets throughout the entire county. That is why I'm committing a half a million dollars in matching funds for cities, towns and villages to work with our Planning Department to rethink and rebrand their main streets. This will include complete street designs, parking, streetscapes, façade programs, public space design and entrance way development. Plans will be a 50-50 match between the municipalities and the county.

Once approved, participating municipalities will also have access to a new capital fund program that will be a match between the county and the municipality based on the size of the projects articulated in their approved plans. This fund will be capitalized at \$5 million over 2 years.

Fully realized, this program will infuse \$11 million in planning and capital investment directly into main streets all across the county while bringing customers back and creating jobs and private investment.

Once again, I challenge municipalities throughout the county to partner in this program.

Vital Infrastructure improvements, business recovery and main street revitalization is what I'm proposing, but to be clear, together is how we create the collective impact that not only moves us past the pandemic, but thrusts us into a better and more sustainable future.

This rescue plan money is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. To all municipalities, join me. Let's collaborate on additional intelligent investment strategies. Let's get together and make this moment count.

My parents grew up during the great depression and four years of a World War before they were 25 years of age. They moved forward, as did so many during that time, to start a family and work for a brighter tomorrow. They did so with a unified purpose and vision that their lives, and more importantly, their children's, would be better. They didn't dwell on their hardships, in fact almost never spoke of them, because it was always about the next day.

These last 12 months have been challenging for everyone to say the least. But through it all, we channeled our history as a people, determined not to let this or any crisis define us. Our goals and vision should not be based on how this pandemic will impact us, but rather how we will continue to invest, build and grow a better Oneida County for generations to come.

I have challenged this community to be bold since my first address. Now, it is more important than ever before. When they write the story of this pandemic about Oneida County, let them say we did our very best to protect all of our people, and we never stopped looking to the next and better day.

COVID has taken much from us, but it cannot take away our spirit to move this community forward. It cannot take away how far we have come and I refuse to let it rob us of a future that we've fought so hard to secure. Good days remain ahead and together we will get there.

Thank you. May God bless you. May God bless Oneida County. And May God bless the United States of America.