

2020 Budget Address

In accordance with the terms of the Oneida County Charter, I come before you today to present the proposed budget and capital plan for 2020.

I thank the members of the Board of Legislators for being my valued partners especially, Chairman Gerald Fiorini who has been a colleague and a friend and has been instrumental in helping us move this county forward.

I want to take a minute to recognize all my department heads and my budget team of Tom Keeler and Anthony Carvelli for putting in the work on this budget. It's not an easy task.

To my other partners in government, thank you for all the great work you do. Comptroller Joe Timpano, Clerk Sandra DePerno, Sheriff Robert Maciol and District Attorney Scott McNamara continue to lead their offices with vision and integrity.

We stand here today at a pivotal moment in our community's history. That is no exaggeration. As this county's chief executive, I make a point to look forward to a better tomorrow.

And tomorrow seems to come faster everyday – never faster than the past three months – when over 20 years of hard work, investment and planning culminated in the attraction of Cree Inc. from North Carolina.

On September 23rd, I met Cree CEO Gregg Lowe at Griffiss International Airport and together we drove the eight miles from the airport to SUNY Poly to announce the cornerstone of a new future for Oneida County.

Cree will build the world's largest Silicon Carbide Wafer Fabrication Facility right here in Oneida County. \$1.2 billion in investment. 700 construction jobs. 614 permanent jobs averaging \$75,000 per year. \$4.3 billion in economic impact with a job multiplier of 4.9, which means those 614 jobs will spawn nearly 3,000 additional jobs.

As Mr. Lowe and I drove down Route 49, I had the chance to share with him our story and relate how far our community has come.

When I took office we were in a very different place.

As we headed into the Great Recession, this community struggled under the collapse of the national economy. We were suffering from job loss, population decline and dilapidated attractions. Our cities were faltering and our infrastructure was crumbling.

We were confronted with monumental challenges that needed commitment, perseverance and leadership to move forward. We had a sewer system that needed to be fixed. We had a public safety communications system that was disjointed, disparate and failing our community while costing local municipalities millions. Our infrastructure was in dangerous disrepair. We were an unhealthy community and we were trapped in never-ending litigation with the Oneida Nation.

Meanwhile this county government was in financial free fall. We were inefficient, our fund balances were nonexistent and there was no financial plan. We hadn't received a credit rating upgrade in nearly a decade.

We were on the precipice of fiscal calamity. I said in my first budget address that county government should be a leader and catalyst to bring this community together, create partnerships and move us forward.

Repairing our government's finances was essential. We streamlined every department, modernized our technology, rightsized the workforce, increased our fund balance, reduced taxes and raised our credit ratings.

I made it clear to Mr. Lowe his company is about to move into a community that has persevered through hard work, commitment and leadership. We built, we grew, we invested, we changed and today Oneida County is a better place to work, live and raise a family.

As Cree and others have recognized, Oneida County is on the move. We have the lowest unemployment rate in the last 10 years. Organizations such as Orgill, Briggs & Stratton, AIS, AFRL and the Oneida Nation are all hiring. There are nearly 1,000 job openings in our community in the fields of hospitality, accounting, IT, cyber security, management, engineering and more.

Oneida County is growing. We are a community that always been a place for people from all over the world to come and start a new life. Our refugee and immigrant population is as critical to this generation as my grandparents were at the turn of the last century. But that's not the whole story. For the first time in modern history - young people are moving back to our community. Our county is one of only a very few in Upstate New York that can make that claim.

The driving force behind these positive developments is our continued commitment to progress.

We are partnering with the State of New York and Mohawk Valley Health System to build a brand new state-of-the-art medical center in downtown Utica. A \$548 million facility. The approvals are in place, decades old blight is about to be removed and a new downtown anchor institution will rise in its place. It is the single most important piece to this community's long term health care future. We are building a new parking garage with the City of Utica and MVHS as we build the hospital this community so desperately needs and deserves.

We also knew we had to make Oneida County a place where people could live, work and play. The U-District was conceptualized and work began on a step-by-step build out. In conjunction with two great partners, the Auditorium Authority and the State of New York, we invested nearly \$20 million in the Adirondack Bank Center. Because we put this county in a strong financial position we were able to advance every penny of cash flow needed for the project. Now, a building that was on the brink of closing its doors is home to the Utica Comets and Utica City FC, and is the premier arena in both of those professional sports leagues. The next step in the U-District is the Nexus Center Sports Complex and construction is scheduled to begin this year.

The U-District is but one piece. Tourism in Oneida County is a \$1.6 billion a year industry. In June, the State Legislature passed an increase in the occupancy tax for Oneida County, and it is awaiting the Governor's signature. With this increased revenue we will be able to do much more to promote our area while creating a capital account enabling us to make critical investments in our area's tourist attractions, like Nexus, and bring in more and more tourists and visitors.

We also invested in other key county assets like the REA Wing at Union Station, a unique space that today is home to one of the nation's best farmers markets. We have purchased the crumbling building directly in front of the REA Wing. It will be removed to dramatically improve access to the Oneida County Public Market and train station, providing a new entrance way, green space and parking.

In Rome, we saw the Plumley Complex at Mohawk Valley Community College as being a critical piece in the Floyd Avenue-Griffiss Business & Technology Park corridor. With MVCC, we invested \$33 million to build a superior campus for higher learning and a bustling community hub.

We invested in our libraries by expanding our funding to provide summer reading programs, lifetime learning programs and digital offerings.

We needed to facilitate more ways for our cities and communities to grow. In addition to improving our infrastructure we needed to create a master plan for our people.

In 2013, I created Vision 2020, a partnership of over 50 community leaders and organizations to identify the gaps in our workforce, transportation, access and housing that needed to be filled to realize our potential. With 2020 only three months away, the results of this initiative have been transformational. Added internships, degree programs, streamlined ESL programs, housing incentives and more. There are dozens of action items that have become a reality because of this unparalleled community-fueled initiative.

We knew the revitalization of Griffiss would be a key to our rebirth. We privatized our Fixed Base Operation and built a new terminal building. We competed with communities across the country and became one of only seven FAA UAS test sites in the United States. We worked with our partners at GLDC and Mohawk Valley EDGE to make strategic investments allowing Griffiss to grow.

We needed to invest in our sewers and our infrastructure in order to prepare for the future and prevent decay that would be irreversible. We completely rebuilt our sewer treatment facility including a \$15 million sewer interceptor essential for development at the very site where Cree will be building. We invested \$80 million on our roads and bridges in the past decade.

We created and implemented a six-year \$12 million flood mitigation program and we have seen the benefits as numerous projects on the Sauquoit, Mud and Oriskany creeks have been completed or are in process.

Public health is our charge. Successful communities are healthy communities. We implemented programs such as Primary Lead Prevention, Community Health Assessment, Healthy Schools and Neighborhoods and Emergency Preparedness. We have an aggressive public health education effort. We have remained innovative with initiatives like sunscreen dispensers in our local parks, made all county properties smoke free and created an award winning wellness program for our 1,600 employees.

911 is now a countywide consolidated system. Not only does that save taxpayers millions annually, it works better, with state-of-the-art technology and makes every resident and first responder safer.

When Albany and Washington did nothing, we made protecting our schools a priority. With Sheriff Maciol, we placed armed Special Patrol Officers in every public school building in Oneida County.

We fixed immense problems and we did it together. We didn't shy away from critical issues. We contracted with the SPCA to handle animal abuse investigations. We passed, and I signed just this week, an Animal Abuser Registry law. Soon we will pass regulations that prevent atrocities like we saw on Broad Street in Utica from ever happening again in our county.

Working with Cornell Cooperative Extension and leaders in our farming community we enacted an action plan that helped our dairy farmers, promoted agri-tourism, fostered Ag-education and streamlined town planning and zoning.

We hit tough issues head on. No bigger issue faced this community than the lawsuits between the Oneida Nation, the Counties of Oneida and Madison and the State of New York. We ended them. We created a real partnership that is one-of-a-kind in this country. At the time the deal was struck, the baseline for gaming revenue the county would receive was estimated at \$12.5 million per year. The last quarter revenue payment was the largest payment we have ever seen. The revenue that flows from the Oneida Nation gaming terminals to the county is budgeted at \$20 million for 2020.

While other casinos struggle, the Oneida Nation continues to be the envy of all gaming enterprises in the State of New York, and I'm proud to have worked to create this partnership with Nation Representative Ray Halbritter. We continue to grow this partnership by working together on workforce and economic development and all things tourism.

I reiterate these successes because real progress takes time. It takes sound management not sound bites. Because of strong fiscal management, real partnerships and a solid financial plan that we never wavered from we were able to increase funding for initiatives throughout this county. From Vernon, Verona and Sylvan Beach to Rome, Utica and Waterville. We have invested in libraries, STEM education, infrastructure, public safety, arts and culture and so much more. We have been able to do all this without raising the property tax levy in the last six years. Let me say that again. In addition to building a new college campus, expanding drone testing, refurbishing the auditorium, constructing a new terminal building and increasing flood mitigation efforts, we have not raised the property tax levy in six years.

And today, for the seventh year in a row this budget will not raise the county property tax levy.

This budget reflects the priorities that will capitalize on the opportunities that are in front of us all.

We will continue to make our schools and children as safe as possible. According to the Governor's Traffic Safety Committee, 55,000 vehicles per day pass stopped school buses. The results can be tragic. I'm directing the County Law Department to create a local law for your consideration to place cameras on school buses and impose consequences for those who recklessly put children's lives in danger. My budget funds this initiative with \$100,000.

Griffiss International Airport and the Business & Technology Park is becoming something many could not imagine when the base closed.

It is a hub for technology and business growth that is leading the nation in scientific research. It is now home to expanding companies in fields such as cybersecurity, renewable materials and UAS.

Just this year we announced another tenant for the park, as Orgill will be opening up their Northeast distribution center, and with it over 225 jobs. Numerous other companies at the park have recently expanded or are expanding their footprints including AIS, Kris-Tech Wire and NYSTEC.

We will continue to invest in the park. We will grow with UAS technology, which is why we are seeking funding from the state, to create SKYDOME, the nation's premier indoor testing site.

A new rare partnership will make the park a leader in Quantum Computing and Artificial Intelligence. Together, County Government, Rome Lab, Griffiss Institute, SUNY Poly and the State of New York will create a new UAS Operations Center and an Open Innovation Campus for Quantum Research. This is a \$12 million investment that will pay exciting dividends into the future. I thank Col. Tim Lawrence, Director of the AFRL Information Directorate and all of our partners for joining us in our vision for Griffiss.

We are facing the deadliest public health crisis in a generation. The opioid epidemic is ravaging communities all across the country. We have faced this head on. We have partnered on awareness efforts, implemented a prescription drug return program, distributed Narcan and created the Opiate Task Force and Overdose Response Team.

We are battling this scourge on every front. We have commenced litigation against the manufacturers and the distributors of the opioids. We are going to hold those who profited from this epidemic responsible. We are battling to ensure that our citizens do not bear the financial burden of this epidemic while others profit from it.

This budget makes the largest commitment in the history of County Government to combat this disease. We will allocate \$1.2 million, a 50/50 split between the county and a grant from the U.S. Bureau of Justice to fund the Opiate Task Force. These funds will include collection of essential overdose data and major education and prevention initiatives, along with funding for the Overdose Response Team, peer advocacy efforts and treatment programs.

I don't have all the answers about the disease that is addiction, but I do know that people don't choose to die from drug addiction. People don't choose to leave their brothers and sisters and friends and family to move on without them. People don't choose to leave their children without a mother or a father. People don't choose to have their parents bury their own children. We must do all that we can to end their suffering.

This budget continues to reflect my administration's priorities for this community and for this government.

We are increasing the funding to our libraries by 6% across the board.

I have always had the strongest commitment to the protection of animals. This year I have included in this budget \$150,000 of new funding for the Steven's Swann and Rome Humane Societies and Spring Farm Cares Animal Rescue.

In human services we work every day to help those in our community who need it the most. In every budget I have found ways for us to be more efficient and to better deliver the services people need.

We received and implemented a \$214,000 grant to modernize our process of handling SNAP and TA cases increasing efficiency. We are revamping our intake ticketing system and added multi-lingual wayfaring to streamline client engagement. From 2018 to today our employment services worked diligently to move 1,674 people from public assistance to a payroll.

In the coming month this board will receive a charter reform proposal to complete our restructuring of the Department of Social Services into the newly-formed Department of Family and Community Services. This restructuring is an essential consolidation that will allow us to better serve the public.

I have always been proud of Oneida County government employees. They're the most dedicated work force in the State of New York.

We are keeping our commitment to our county employees. We have worked to solve recruitment and retention issues. We instituted a multifaceted marketing strategy that has worked. Notoriously difficult positions to recruit for, such as caseworker and correctional officers, have seen record numbers sign up for civil service exams.

This is the fourth year of a five-year plan to bring salaries in line with other counties. This budget does that for our Department of Water Quality and Water Pollution Control, Emergency Services, our public health nurses and others.

The capital budget requests this year totaled \$34 million. The review committee has recommended \$17.6 million. I have reduced that and submit to you a capital budget that calls for just over \$15 million in bonding while we retire \$17.8 million in debt.

These projects address the completion of several ongoing projects at MVCC, continuation of information technology projects, flood mitigation, building repairs and the complete build out of the remaining radio communications towers. The capital budget also includes \$6.25 million for our road and bridge program, an increase of nearly \$2 million over previous years, allowing us to pave more roads and repair more bridges, strengthening our infrastructure.

We must continue to invest in our new economy. The time is now to leverage the over two billion of public and private dollars that are scheduled to be infused into our county throughout the next five years. We must take advantage of this opportunity.

Facing us right now and an immediate priority is the need for an additional \$1 million for final site preparation at Marcy to accommodate Cree's aggressive schedule.

Going forward, we will be faced with similar needs that is why in this budget I propose to establish a \$2 million Oneida County Opportunity Fund, capitalized with revenues from our reserves and Oneida Nation payments. The fund will be utilized to address critical economic development priorities throughout the county including: infrastructure, workforce development, marketing and attraction, as well as housing, and Main Street and community revitalization in our cities and towns.

Ladies and gentlemen we have momentum and the spotlight is on Oneida County. Over the next few years new faces, new people, with license plates from states across America and passports from around the world will come to our community. Some will come to play in a weekend tournament at Nexus – others will come to help build a new hospital or work in a new fab – others will come to partner with Rome Lab on cyber-research or to test drones at our airport. Many will visit, many will stay and many will make Oneida County their new home.

Our opportunity is to leverage that momentum to attract more investment and more jobs. The future depends on what we do today – it is our duty to fulfill the promise of tomorrow. That is what this budget enables us to accomplish.

The pieces are set. We see them in the news every day. Cree, Briggs & Stratton, Quantum, UAS, Nexus, MVHS, Griffiss, Oneida Nation investments and nearly 1,000 real job openings.

There is much more in this budget that time does not allow for us to discuss today. It is \$439 million and 170 pages thick. It funds programs for the elderly, veterans and children. It funds initiatives for public welfare, safety and health. It invests in our infrastructure and community.

In the coming days this budget will undergo a great deal of review and scrutiny. All of it required, necessary and welcomed.

For those who look at this budget in the context of one year, allow me to explain our reality. This budget does not represent one year of work by my administration but rather the continuance of a plan that moves this county forward. Stronger finances, improved infrastructure, advanced technology, collaborative partnerships, increased public safety and quality of life.

Our work doesn't stop when the calendar hits January 1st. We keep moving, making more and more progress along the way.

The future is now. The county will lead, but this will take the whole community to keep us moving forward.

It has been said "There are only two options: make progress or make excuses." I choose progress.

Let's do it together.

Thank you and God bless Oneida County, the great State of New York and the United States of America.