

2023 Budget Address

In accordance with the terms of the Oneida County Charter, I come before you today to present the proposed operating budget and capital plan for 2023.

I thank the members of the Board of Legislators for being my valued partners especially, Chairman Gerald Fiorini, a colleague and a friend, who 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, Dmitriy Sidorevich and Anthony Carvelli for putting in the work on this budget. It is never an easy task and even more so as we continue to navigate these uncharted waters.

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

I am once again humbled by our outstanding employees who are the best in the state of New York. They serve the public tirelessly and honorably and our gratitude for their hard work cannot be measured.

2023 represents the 225th anniversary of this county. A long and storied history. This is the 16th budget I have presented to this board. When I was re-elected in 2019, the unprecedented challenges our county, state and nation would face were unfathomable. Contentious political strife in Albany and Washington we haven't seen since at least the 1960s. An embarrassing scandal that forced yet another governor of our state to resign in disgrace. A global pandemic that has taken six and a half million of our husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, daughters and sons.

We worked through the pandemic, fighting the Governor's executive orders — all delivered to us via press conference — in order to get businesses open, distribute PPE, increase testing and vaccinate our residents so we could beat back the virus. We also put money into our residents' hands through the largest vaccine incentive program in the state, injecting \$3.5 million into our local economy.

With over 25 departments, five countywide elected officials and this board, the everyday work is easy to take for granted and often goes unseen by the public. We tackle the problems that larger governments either refuse to address or are unable to solve.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, we face crippling inflation with skyrocketing gas, food and energy prices leaving people struggling to have their wages keep up with their bills.

These are national issues, but I believe county government has a role in addressing these problems head on. We work to find solutions locally and move this region forward despite missteps, corruption and incompetence in Albany and Washington.

This budget is the blueprint for how we accomplish those tasks day in and day out, but it is just that — a blueprint.

The 2023 operating budget stands at \$493 million. Once again, I will not — for the tenth consecutive year — raise the property tax levy. A decade of zeroes. An unparalleled achievement in the history of this government. I'm proud of this accomplishment, this board should be proud as well.

It wasn't that long ago, when a decade of zero increases would have been simply unthinkable. When in the years before, we were totally at the whim of outside forces. I have always adhered to my fiscally conservative principles when constructing these budgets. I don't borrow more than we can afford. I don't pass on undue tax burden to our residents, and I never mortgage our financial future for my own political gain. Together, we have created a stable and sustainable government structure that has withstood tests and enabled significant investments.

A zero today is responsible, honest budgeting.

- 10 years of zeroes.
- 10 years of holding the line.
- 10 years of protecting taxpayers.

That is an incredible accomplishment that we made together.

Ten years of holding the line didn't mean 10 years of standing still. We have made incredible investments and launched significant initiatives. Let me remind you of just a few:

- Millions of dollars in flood recovery and mitigation projects.
- The historic Oneida Indian Nation settlement.
- Increased credit ratings.
- Replaced our antiquated coroner system.
- A new state-of-the-art waste treatment plant.
- Sold former county airport to New York State, creating its largest homeland security training center.
- A consolidated and constantly improving 9-1-1 system.
- Restoration of the REA Wing and creation of a public market at Union Station.
- Became the best FAA drone test site in the nation.
- A new terminal building at Griffiss International Airport.
- The Innovare Advancement Center
- Skydome, the largest indoor drone test site in the nation.
- Renovated the Adirondack Bank Center at the Utica Memorial Auditorium.
- Nexus Center
- The Wynn Hospital
- Wolfspeed

The facts are clear. Our sound fiscal stewardship has created the means to make real investment. Real progress. All while protecting the long-term financial future of our taxpayers. This is a proven course that we must continue.

Revenues from our historic pact with the Oneida Indian Nation continue to play a pivotal role in this budget. In 2023, we have budgeted an estimated \$23.85 million for this revenue stream. 2023 will be the 10th year of this agreement. A deal I negotiated, and this board approved, that has brought \$135.6 million dollars to the county coffers. The Nation continues to be the most steadfast of government partners, and I congratulate Nation Representative Ray Halbritter on the continued success and commitment to their ancestral homelands and our community. Our partnership is strong and grows stronger each year providing benefits to the county, the Nation and the entire region.

That isn't to say there weren't challenges in this budget. State mandates continue to be the vast majority of our costs, but the state continues to decrease its contribution, pushing more and more costs onto the counties. The same prices that have skyrocketed in every one of our homes, have gone up for the county as well. Every cost crunch a private employer faces, we do as well.

As we do every year, we also have to look within our own government for when and where we can tighten our belts and bring forward innovative solutions to address the issues facing us.

Like employers throughout the state and the nation, we are facing challenges hiring and retaining our county workforce. The inability to hire employees to perform the essential functions of government has pushed us to a crisis point.

We have not been idle in addressing the issue.

To be more competitive, we have raised the pay of our employees in an unprecedented manner by adjusting the white and blue collar contracts midterm. We also settled the correction officers' contract which puts us on par with state corrections when it comes to pay equity. Finally, we have implemented a comprehensive marketing campaign to attract potential employees in critical areas.

Despite these efforts, like most employers, we still face a hiring crisis. We continue to lose employees and have trouble attracting new ones. As we see a possible prolonged economic downturn, we must all remember that when the national economy goes down, county government's business picks up.

We will continue to find even more innovative ways to address our workforce challenges, but it will take time, effort and money.

In the process of assessing our personnel needs, we took a comprehensive look at our job titles, positions and the very makeup of our workforce. This thorough review has allowed us, in this budget, to unfund over 130 positions. The result is a restructuring of this government, focusing on what positions are essential and at what cost. This budget calls for no new positions.

When we talk about county government, it can be a challenge for the community to understand the multitude of things we have to do. We provide funding for public health, mental health, human services, our seniors, the legal system, workforce and economic development, elections, emergency services, hazard mitigation, our community college, tourism and aviation. And on top of that, we do the things other levels of governments do, including public safety, public works, finances and youth services, just to name a few. County government is the only government that every day is steeped in all of these efforts.

We continue to invest in our community assets and the agencies that strengthen our region. This includes \$300,000 for the Utica Zoo. \$800,000 for our libraries. \$200,000 for our humane societies and \$115,000 to investigate animal abuse.

In addition, we allocated \$885,000 for Cornell Cooperative Extension, continuing our unwavering commitment to Oneida County's number one industry: agriculture. These funds are even more critical than ever as just this week Albany decision makers from New York City, who have never stepped foot on a farm in their lives, have made another devastating decision that will force farms out of business. They did this without adequately taking into consideration food security, farmers or even the very farm workers they claim to want to help. The decision was made in a bubble and now our farmers' and consumers have to suffer the consequences of this decision. The Governor should reverse this action immediately.

To continue our great run of economic development success stories, we have increased our funding to Mohawk Valley EDGE to \$400,000.

Oneida County leads the way on the issues surrounding mental health. We are the only local government in Oneida County that provides funding for mental health services and substance use disorder. This budget funds our fight against opioid abuse with over \$1 million in funding to continue the work of our Opioid Task Force. We will also provide over \$18 million to agencies in our community to provide necessary help to those in crisis.

This budget provides the funding we need to care for our homeless including funding for a new shelter and warming center. It provides \$11 million in aid for those who need assistance to heat their homes, feed their children and pay their rent. It provides \$14 million funding to protect our community's most vulnerable citizens — our children and elderly — from abuse and neglect that is unimaginable to most people, but happens all too often. It also provides \$9 million for daycare, so that many of our residents can stay in the workforce or get an education. This is what we do every day, and clearly outlines why county government is unique in that regard.

Our budget includes \$2.3 million in funding for work training, job placement and other initiatives and programs that aim to get people off of public assistance or guide them through unemployment and restore the dignity that comes with work. Again, we are the only local government that provides this function.

The District Attorney, Sherriff and I continue to be laser focused on public safety, despite the challenges we face based on the ill-advised, and quite frankly, nonsensical bail reform law thrust upon us by Albany. Let's be honest, Albany broke our criminal justice system. We are left to deal with more criminals on the streets, more gun violence, burglaries, drunk drivers on our roads, more domestic violence, and all of it now a revolving door that enables criminals and hamstring law enforcement.

We provide funding for emergency services that strengthen first responders' ability to communicate with 9-1-1 and allows them to continue the vital practice of sharing records. \$10 million in funding goes to patrolling our streets and investigating crimes. \$6.2 million to prosecuting crimes, as well as \$3.7 million for indigent legal defense. That's right, county government does both. And we are the only government who does either.

County government is the only local government that continually assists our veterans. This budget keeps that commitment to our nation's heroes. We recapture millions in benefits for our veterans, provide legal services, and this year, we secured \$2 million for veteran suicide prevention.

This budget also provides for our seniors, with \$7 million in funding for meals, case management and other services.

As I have always said, we will only grow our region if we invest in our infrastructure, and we are doing just that. This capital budget includes more funding for road and bridge repair than ever before. We will continue to invest in our sewer infrastructure without which a community simply cannot grow or prosper. It invests in our county assets and our community college.

The capital budget is for our long-term investments that are essential to our vision for the future of this community.

The capital budget stands at \$17 million while retiring \$19 million in debt. At the federal level we hear a lot about the debt ceiling — how much the federal government can borrow and how many times they must raise that level, which seemingly happens every year. County government has the same type of limit. Currently Oneida County is only at 17% of our constitutional debt limit. I continue to borrow only for what we need and what will move this county forward, while not passing on unsustainable debt to our children and grandchildren.

While American Rescue Plan Act funding is not included in this operating budget, some of it is reflected in two capital projects.

We are using this money to rebuild our community for the next decade. Broadband expansion is a \$5 million commitment to our residents. We are eager to launch the program and partner with local municipalities to leverage rescue funding to fill in the final gaps. The state continues to make this more complicated than it needs to be, but we will act and get this done.

Our Main Street Program is a \$5 million capital investment using rescue money that will reshape 11 of our local communities' main streets, helping our businesses and residents. Taken together, the plans we have collaborated with municipalities on, will result in over 120 projects, representing nearly \$40 million in possible improvements. This is how you create long-lasting impactful investment.

We will not waste this money. In the coming days, I will outline our ARPA spending plan in full.

In the book, *The History of Oneida County*, Dr. Harry Jackson, professor at then Utica College, wrote in his introduction that “Oneida County is an idea – not a unity caused by nature.”

What Dr. Jackson was referring to was the foresight of those, who 225 years ago, saw the beauty of the land before them and forged ahead with the boundaries that could best serve as he put it “men’s usage of resources both natural and human.” “This” he said, “is the history of Oneida County.”

As we approach that milestone in the months ahead, we are still focused on that idea. This government has weathered many storms, and in my time as County Executive, there have been a few. But we have emerged stronger and as a leader in the areas that our forefathers saw as the future of this county and its people.

The strength of agriculture was for a century the sole industry and remains strong to this day. The emergence of textile mills and manufacturing morphed into electronics and defense production. Today it is nanotechnology and cybersecurity along with a myriad of financial services.

My point to all of this is that it began with this government and continues today. The very decisions that we collectively make impact everyone in this community. No other government can say that. We serve our people through means like no other. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless and protect the most susceptible — our children, the elderly and developmentally challenged — from abuse and neglect. We provide healthcare to those most vulnerable, and we save our seniors and veterans from poverty and abandonment. And we invest in infrastructure and development from healthcare to industry to recreation to transportation, like no other governmental entity.

This budget continues that “idea.” We are on the right path forward. It is smart, it is efficient and it is fiscally conservative.

In the days ahead, scrutinize and give this budget a thorough review. My administration is eager to answer any questions and work with you as a partner in progress.

But as you review this budget, look not only at the numbers on the pages but the people that are served by those numbers. Look at the projects that are in progress and have been completed by this government. And most importantly, look at the foundation we have established and how we have been able to deal with all that has been thrown our way over the past few years. We are standing tall and strong and ready for the future that is now.

I am proud to lead this government. I'm proud of our fiscal accomplishments. We are financially strong with high credit ratings, strong fund balance, one-of-a-kind gaming revenues and no tax increase for a decade straight.

As Dr. Jackson concluded in his article some 45 years ago, "Oneida County faces the future with all its talents."

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