

2012 State of the County Message

Oneida County Executive Anthony J. Picente, Jr.

Before we begin today, could we all please take a moment to remember all of our men and women in uniform in service to our country? They are not here in body, but they are always with us in spirit.

I want to thank the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce for hosting this event. I believe very strongly that public-private partnerships are the hallmark of a strong community, and I look forward every year to informing you about our work in County Government.

I also want to acknowledge my partners in government. First and foremost I want to thank the members of the Oneida County Board of Legislators for all of their service and dialogue. I also want to thank the members of my administration and my Department Heads who take the vision we outline and implement it through programs and services that meet the needs of our people.

When I first appeared before you as your County Executive, I laid out for you a vision that we have implemented year by year -- to build a region of innovation, to develop a culture of transformation, and to establish a rock-solid fiscal foundation without which no plan can succeed.

We are on course. I am very proud to tell you that, based on the projected numbers we are seeing as of today, Oneida County will end 2011 under budget, which will mean that in every year of my administration, we have achieved an operating surplus while providing critical services to the people of Oneida County. That's five consecutive years of sound fiscal stewardship and strong management oversight that ensures the fiscal stability of this county and allows us to look at the needs of our communities and our region from a position of strength. We are not borrowing money to run our operations, or running a deficit. Throughout my administration, mandates have chewed up more and more dollars, but we have found the ingenuity along the way to deliver services in ways that save money. This past year, our Department of Social Services saved more than \$2 million through reducing contracts and increasing efficiency.

I want to highlight a historic achievement. This past year, the Oneida County Correctional Facility did something I have never seen before – it reduced the amount of county tax dollars spent on overtime, an area that has often run well over budget in the past. On behalf of the taxpayers, I want to congratulate and thank Sheriff Rob Maciol for showing that a sheriff can be tough with a spreadsheet as well as tough on crime.

We continually re-engineer county government to reduce costs. Although we deliver essential services, constantly scrutinizing the way in which we do that has led us to greater efficiencies and economies. Our Health Department has offered clinics specifically for our refugee population as part of our commitment to the community. Since the first of the new year, a new medical group has opened a clinic in Utica. Industrial Medical Associates now offers the same services to the refugee population. With this option now available, we will phase out the county-run operation and shift our resources to meet other community needs and at the same time

achieve some staff reduction. Making this transition in one place does not achieve huge savings. Taking this kind of action over and over in 50 places in the budget per year helps us manage with the lowest staffing levels in 30 years.

Just because we have staved off the kind of red ink drowning other governments does not mean the county will be creating line items in the budget for everyone who wants and needs funding. We are elated that 2011 sales tax was up; but the history of our recent times has shown that a good economy can go bad quickly. My commitment to fiscal austerity was not a short-time gimmick. It's a long-term commitment. The way government worked; the way government spent. That's all history, and we are not going back to those days.

We will need to continue fiscal vigilance because we remain fiscally affixed to the state in a partnership that – as most of you know – has historically given counties lots of mandates and lots of human services obligations without providing enough revenue to operate them. I'm encouraged and appreciative that Governor Cuomo's budget would stop increases in Medicaid, our biggest mandated program, but I continue to believe that the ultimate fiscal and operational efficiencies possible in this program will not take place until the state assumes all the program's costs. However, the issue is far deeper than who pays the bill. Broad and deep reforms are essential because New York must reduce the costs of this program. I, and the other county government leaders who see Albany as our essential partner, are willing to roll up our sleeves and work with the state so that we can provide all the services our people need at a cost we can afford.

When we analyzed trends, we found that from 2001 to 2011, Medicaid went up almost 50 % in those years. That one line item is now more than \$35 million higher than in 2001. When I look at the needs of Oneida County for infrastructure repairs, economic development investments, and community support services, and then I look at the millions taken for one mandate, I am very frustrated and angry that Oneida County's people have been forced to do without because this state has never fully, totally reformed Medicaid and addressed the issue of mandates.

Medicaid is not alone. There is a law called the Psychiatric Expenditures in Criminal Act, which represents the cost of placing individuals in state facilities when they are deemed incompetent to stand trial due to mental illness or developmental disability. For 2012 this will cost Oneida County \$ 1,152,020. What is the county's role in this process? Zero. State authorities exercise control over the judges, courts, and mental hygiene facilities which direct and provide these services. Counties do not exercise authority or control and cannot direct, approve, authorize, limit or plan for these services which they are required to pay for. This is a significant unfunded mandate. As long as the state can change the rules and pass costs along to counties, we do not have the ability to control and shape our fiscal destiny.

I want to leave you with one more example, because you hear about it in the news. Governor Cuomo proposed a Tier VI retirement proposal that is designed to provide essential benefits and lower costs for all of our governments. I am a very strong believer in the worth of public employees. I have spent much of my professional career working with men and women whose service to the public sector entitles them to the gratitude of their communities. However, when we discuss retirement, we must look at some very hard realities. From 2001 to 2010, Oneida

County's retirement system payment went up 548%. State Comptroller DiNapoli has commented that the change to a new Tier VI may cost local governments money. I have this to say: The costs of inaction are far worse than the costs of change. We cannot afford to pretend this issue will go away. This has to be dealt with, and the Governor has taken the bull by the horns to act.

Before we leave behind the subject of Albany, let me just urge all of you here to join me in expressing dissatisfaction with the disgraceful way Oneida County has been carved up in the various proposed scenarios of redistricting. Carving Oneida County into pieces hurts our ability to get the support we need in Albany and Washington. Whether the redistricting gurus of Albany are looking at the state Senate, the Assembly, or Congress, the message should be the same: Oneida County deserves to be treated with respect and kept whole in the final drawing of district lines. Any other proposal is not worth the paper it is drawn upon.

All of you out in the business world know that finding problems is easy. It's coming up with the solutions that is hard. I want to talk to you today briefly about a program that combines many of the themes of my administration – addressing the core mission of county government to serve those no other level of government will assist; providing services to protect public safety and develop our workforce and our economy; minimizing impacts to local taxpayers; and forming transformative partnerships that allow us to achieve success.

There is a program called Second Start that operates out of the Oneida County Correctional Facility. It mostly serves young adults from age 19 to age 21 from the Rome and western Oneida County region who have made a mistake. Program counselors work with these young adults in the jail, and in the community, to get them back in school, to get them to work, and to keep them from turning that one mistake into something more serious. In 2011, 75% of the almost 120 youth served are success stories in progress: they are working, in school, moving forward. Employers now have a worker pool that includes more trained young workers who want a chance; communities have young adults who are more focused on the future. The program is funded through federal grants operated by the Office of Workforce Development, in partnership with Mohawk Valley Community Action, the lead agency that makes this work, as well as BOCES and MVCC. Within the jail, county corrections officers work with the staff to help this program succeed. In short, this partnership operates without any local tax dollars, and it helps our community become stronger, safer and better. That's a job well done, it's being creative to use resources to their fullest, and that's what we do every day – without fanfare -- in the departments that make up county government

I want to cite one more example, because in between the headlines that tell us about problems, county government is working on solutions. One of the first major programs I developed when I came into office was creating the Health Department's Lead Primary Prevention Program to deal with unacceptable levels of lead in the blood of young children in Utica's aging neighborhoods. This program is making a difference. After years of increases in lead, in 2011, new lead poisoning cases of children under age 6 decreased 9.2 percent. That's not just a number to say – that means lives that could have been ruined will be free from the devastating effects of lead poisoning. Please join me in giving our County Health Department staff, our partners in the City of Utica, and our community partners a well-deserved round of applause.

Throughout our county workforce, there are men and women who are daily making a difference in the lives of the people touched by County Government services, from the Office for the Aging to the Office of Veterans Services. I want to say a word here to praise this workforce, because too often the contributions of public workers are never recognized. The work they do day in and day out to help people whose lives need a new direction cannot be duplicated.

We all know that in this past year, we have seen some serious cases of violence that have called for the fast, effective response of the men and women who make up the Oneida County Sheriff's Road Patrol. We are all aware of the risks and dangers in what they do, and in the past year we have seen case after case where they have been on the front lines of danger.

There is one young man who served this county and our nation with heroism and dedication, and who is not with us today. Oneida County Sheriff's Deputy Kurt Wyman was killed in the line of duty this past year. I know that Kurt's mom and dad are here with us today, and I would ask them to stand. Words can never do justice to those who put their lives on the line for us, but I would ask that we pause a moment now to remember Deputy Wyman and all of those who serve, who will ride out today to face dangers they do not know, and who carry with them our hopes and our prayers as they protect our communities.

Thank you. The Oneida County Sheriff's Office was created in 1798. They have protected and served the residents and visitors of this county. Kurt is the first deputy to be killed in the line of duty. While we are still grieving our loss, he serves as an inspiration to the men and women of our Sheriff's Office and the people of this community. We will not forget him, and to be sure of that Sheriff Robert Maciol and I will be sending legislation to the Board of Legislators to name the Law Enforcement Building in Whitestown the Deputy Kurt B. Wyman Law Enforcement Building. This will ensure that future generations of law enforcement personnel, all who visit and, most importantly, Kurt's children, will know what he meant to this community and what he stood for. I want to thank the Sheriff and all of the men and women in that office for their support in our efforts to honor and remember Kurt's service and sacrifice.

As we remember Deputy Wyman, I also want to salute the District Attorney's Office, for all of their work in this case. I know they were driven by a commitment to present their case as a memorial to Deputy Wyman, and to keep faith with his memory. It was a job well done, and I know all of us here today honor you for your work, First Assistant District Attorney Michael Coluzza and Assistant District Attorneys Laurie Lisi and Stacey Paolozzi.

This past year was not only a time when we started turning plans into reality – it was also a time when the human drama of our communities and our neighbors brought us back to the basics of life – neighbor helping neighbor, friend helping friend – whether in joy or sorrow.

The storms of 2011 – Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee – devastated hundreds of homes in Oneida County, coming on top of spring floods that hit many communities hard. As the water rose, men and women across this county left their own families behind to serve as first responders who helped families and pets to evacuate. They protected unwary motorists and put themselves at risk in a hundred ways to serve others. Today, I want to salute all the members of the Fire Departments and Rescue Squads who labored in the rain and the dark and the rising

water to help others, especially the members of the Whitesboro Fire Department for their efforts not only during the days of the storms but the days of cleanup that followed as the community grappled with damage and devastation. Some of our local heroes from the Oriskany, Taberg and Sylvan Beach Volunteer Fire Departments showed their dedication by going to help flood-ravaged Schoharie County. I would ask everyone from these and other departments to stand now to be recognized.

The uppermost issue on the minds of many of you here today, just like most of the community, is our effort to fight off the challenges we face and grow a stronger economy. County Government is taking a strong leadership role, and I want to outline some of the ways we are doing that:

The economy of our future is linked to some of the greatest assets we have – the Air Force Research Lab, the Defense Finance Accounting Services and Eastern Air Defense Sector at Griffiss. We all know the Department of Defense is looking at closing facilities to reduce costs. Oneida County has already begun forming alliances with key state and federal officials to take a pro-active stance and respond to any base closure process. Because we must be an active participant in this defense, I am planning to allocate \$100,000 in economic development funding that will go to the Central New York Defense Alliance as part of a broad-based partnership to convince the Pentagon that our local assets should be enhanced, not reduced. As the process moves forward, we will share the details with the public. For now, let me put it this way: We will defend these assets with the same determination the New York Giants offensive line protected Eli Manning. Even better, instead of simply falling back to protect these vital assets, I will be going to take an active, aggressive hands-on role by going to Washington to serve as a tireless advocate on behalf of our region at the Pentagon, at the Capitol, at any level that will help our cause.

As we build a strong county government, it is important that we use this strength to take community leadership. That's why a year ago I came before you and outlined a vision of a public market that could be created down at the REA Wing at Union Station. That vision is a coat of paint or so away from becoming an amazing reality, thanks to some great work from our county Building and Grounds staff and the strong support from local farmers and growers who made the Oneida County Public Market an instant success last summer. I also want to salute the efforts of Cornell Cooperative Extension, which helped organize this project and recruited many of our vendors; and also Oneida County Tourism, which made this project a top priority and helped make the Market an exciting, popular venue.

This year, now that our initial renovations are completed, we will be working to build upon the 40 to 50 vendors we had each week, and attract more than the 500 people who came each week. Through federal funding we secured, this year will be an exciting next step in a project that has been one of our most popular and successful initiatives. And, let me assure you, our efforts to revive the REA Wing and Bagg's Square will keep moving forward as we work to secure state funding in the upcoming Consolidated Financial Application grant process to revive and expand our facilities to maximize the potential of this outstanding site.

To further the growth of our important agricultural sector, Oneida County will be updating its agricultural plan, through a County Executive's Task Force that will be holding its first meeting

later this month. Agriculture is big business in Oneida County, and we will work hard to support our family farms. As we work to promote agriculture, I want to highlight the outstanding work done by Oneida County Tourism, the former Convention and Visitors Bureau, which just recently awarded grants to community partners and – after a year of hard work to reorganize – is making our agricultural sector one of its top priorities. Tourism is an important part of our economy, and the increases we see in bed tax revenue and hotel stays tell us that Oneida County Tourism is helping us maximize this sector.

Oneida County is a mix of proud communities. The city of Utica is receiving a great deal of attention over its financial condition. The city's concerns should be a signal to all levels of government that the way we do business needs to change. No one should look at Utica's troubles as just an issue for Uticans. I certainly don't. And while we are not a bank, I stand ready to assist the City in any way possible to help them move forward.

We must be prepared for tomorrow and keep our vision firmly focused on the future. Later this year, County Government will issue an RFP to examine development proposals for the former Broadacres Skilled Nursing Facility in Deerfield. We will, of course, work in partnership with town government and residents, but I think it is important that we examine the ideas that are out there. If we can take that empty property and find a use that enhances the community and our economy, I want to move forward.

The process of preparing the infrastructure needed to fully develop the Marcy Nano-Center is not very glamorous, but no business will ever move into a site until it has roads and sewers. The investments we are making are long-range investments to secure an employer with transformational potential. Of course we have a choice. We can sit by and do nothing and be absolutely certain no such employer will come here, or we can work with our state and regional partners and develop this site to its fullest potential. We have already shown positive impacts. For example, more than \$100 million in construction at SUNYIT has taken place that is linked to this effort. These investments set the stage for even more transformation to come.

In the spirit of growth and the belief that our progress in Marcy will bring much-needed jobs to the region, I am proposing that County Government enact a local law, under Section 457 of the Real Property Tax Law, to increase our construction sector. This law, which I will send to the Board of Legislators for their consideration, would create a five-year property tax exemption for first-time homebuyers who purchase or build a newly constructed home. The tax exemption would start at 50%, and then be phased out, and the state sets income limits in order to qualify for the exemptions. I believe this step would spur new interest in expanding our housing stock, which we need, bring jobs to our construction sector and revitalize our communities.

Transforming the economy is not just about buildings. It's about shaping the workforce of the future so that we embrace change and opportunity as part of our culture.

Today's youth are tomorrow's workers and leaders. We know nanotechnology will be a major part of the economy of the future. Oneida County will be implementing the SEMI High Tech U project, in partnership with the Workforce Investment Board and the Community Foundation of Herkimer and Oneida Counties. SEMI High Tech U is an industry-driven, math and science

based career exploration program. Oneida County is funding \$10,000 towards this partnership to assist in training 40 teachers from grades 7-12 this summer. This two day training leads teachers through a unique and highly interactive program that introduces the science of making semiconductors and the many career pathways in math and science based professions. It emphasizes the way teachers can implement program activities in their classes that meet state curriculum requirements. I want to help our schools give our students the tools they need, and help get them excited about opportunities that exist today, and will exist tomorrow.

Energy and enthusiasm are two of the most vital intangibles any community can have. Our county needs the bold, daring spirit that comes with entrepreneurship, as so many of you here today can attest in your personal stories. That's why I'm excited to announce that County Government, in partnership with MVCC and other local colleges, as well as the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce, is developing a wide-ranging continuum of entrepreneurship activities. The partnership and its actions will not only inspire high school students but will also attract and retain young entrepreneurs who need a place to turn their ideas and dreams into products and services that can bring new jobs to our region in the future and new energy to our community in the present. Everyone says we need to grow our own future. Through the anticipated launch of the Young Entrepreneurs Academy by MVCC and the other parts of this plan as they emerge, you will see that we are doing just that.

Going forward means change. I believe government has to change with the times, because the structure we inherited from the past is ill-equipped to meet the realities of the present, let alone the challenge of the future. Consolidation is easy to talk about, but not easy to accomplish. I know. I did it. Oneida County made history in January, when we did what the pundits and naysayers insisted could never happen – our 9-1-1 Center began fielding all emergency calls from all communities in Oneida County. I made this a priority when I appeared before you back in 2008 because it was the right public safety policy and the best use of tax dollars. Now, in 2012, we have an operation that frees Utica police officers for public safety duties and takes a budget burden off of other communities, such as New Hartford.

I look at our work on the 9-1-1 consolidation as a very tangible symbol of what is possible when we all work for the greatest good of all the people of our county. I believe that we need to keep up the momentum of change as we leave behind archaic structures we inherited and move government into the efficient world of the future.

In the coming weeks, I will send our Board of Legislators a proposal that would replace our system of four elected County Coroners with a Medical Examiner's office. With the greatest respect for the efforts of our current Coroners, I believe that we need to maximize the ability of Oneida County to provide high-level expertise to address the sophisticated level of forensics that are possible with today's technology. The structure we inherited should never limit our ability to provide the services our county requires. We must respond to these modern times and technology. I will be working with the Sheriff and the District Attorney in crafting our proposal to the Board.

I know the general way consolidation is mentioned in a speech like this is to say that I'm all for it. Or course I am. My record shows I don't just talk about it; I do it. But I think when we talk

about consolidation there's a juxtaposition of public attitudes we need to consider, because as we know, changing services at the grassroots level requires grassroots support. There was a week back in December when the fiscal necessity of changing eligibility for Social Services-funded day care was being attacked, while at the exact same time the people of a local village were rejecting a consolidation effort that would have saved them money and not changed a thing in terms of services. The facts often make sound sense and a sound case for consolidation. However, when consolidation decisions made on the facts are not the ones our taxpayers think they want, then that calls for stronger community-wide efforts at the grassroots by our employers and our communities to create an environment where we can change and consolidate.

Change is coming. My friends, change is already here.

Griffiss Airport is an investment that is slowly maturing over time. When Oneida County inherited the runway from the Air Force, we acquired an asset with unlimited potential and major infrastructure challenges. The way the Air Force worked in the 20th Century is not the way private aviation works in the 21st Century, and we've been using federal money and targeted investments to grow jobs as we grow the airport. Airports are not designed as profit centers; they are investments to attract jobs and grow the regional economy. Let me cite three things that show you we are moving in the right direction at Griffiss:

Allegiant Air, a commercial aviation company, is exploring coming to Oneida County this fall to offer non-stop service to popular Florida destinations such as Orlando and Fort Lauderdale. This is the proverbial toe being dipped into the water. They are considering flights coming and going, a couple of days a week. But this is just a beginning. They will make their decision if they believe our region can support them and make them a profit. That is a strong vote of confidence in our economy and a first step that can lead to so much more.

Our investments in our larger hangars have made more space available at Griffiss. One of our MRO tenants, MidAir USA, has been very clear in its projections that if MidAir moves forward with a much-needed expansion that could mean another 106 jobs to work on giant 747s, along with the 213 jobs in its existing repair operation. That could bring the total annual payroll of MidAir's local operations to more than \$9 million. We will be finalizing the lease of the remaining larger hangar in the coming months and I will be sending that to the Board for ratification.

MidAir's fellow tenant, Premier Aviation, has recently begun doing repair work for Air Canada, a contract that helps this important employer maintain around 150 jobs. That's a tremendous impact on our region from two employers alone.

Griffiss is a very apt symbol for everything we are doing in Oneida County. In some of our darkest days, it was a symbol of emptiness and defeat. No longer.

We have been to the point where many of us decided success was not in the cards for this county. That is a mistake.

Today is a day to look at our successes and challenges and our vision for things that can be.

I have spent the past five years working with all of you in making a better Oneida County and the results are evident. We are better than we were; we have made government smaller, more efficient. We have improved our system of public health and public safety. And we have withstood the challenges that nature and evil have sent our way.

That continues to be my pledge to you: To make this a better place – a place we can all be proud of and one in which future generations will remain and grow.

The bottom line of everything I do, everything I have mentioned today and the many things there are not time to cover, is this: We are moving forward, we will keep moving forward, and we will never, ever stop. We will do the hard work. We will make the hard decisions. And, in the end, we will succeed.

Thank you, and may God bless all of you, all of us here in Oneida County, and, especially in these difficult times, may God bless the United States of America.