

2024 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 2024.

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 and his staff for putting in the work on this budget. It is never an easy task.

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

And last but not least, I thank the dedicated employees of this government whose unbelievable commitment and dedication carries out our mission with professionalism and skill every day. They are the best government workforce in the state.

This budget is the blueprint for how we accomplish our tasks day in and day out.

The proposed 2024 operating budget stands at \$529 million, an increase of \$36 million from 2023. Now, it is silly season, so let me explain. County governments are faced with the same pressures any other large organizations face. Utilities cost more, salaries go up and these are always going to drive the budget number year in and year out. Ninety percent of this budget is state mandated — same as last year. Ten percent is discretionary— same as last year. Let's be clear about what is discretionary spending. It's dedicated to crucial areas such as meals for seniors, Sheriff's road patrol, our 911 center and public works, just to name a few. When you're the County Executive I can tell you those things don't feel discretionary, and I know they are essential for this community.

Mandates by the State continue to place more and more of an unfair burden on us. So, as is always the case, the biggest driver of our county budget is and will always be the terrible fiscal decisions made in Albany. Governor Hochul and her administration, as well as her allies in the State Legislature, continue to foist more and more responsibilities and costs onto counties to accommodate their out-of-touch policies with no regard for reality or common sense, leaving us to clean up their mess. The laundry list is long:

- They stole our federal Medicaid funding, costing us \$10 million.
- They made our communities less safe with their so-called criminal justice reforms.
- They exacerbated a migrant crisis they now want to pawn off on every other county.
- They continue to pass legislation that impedes our ability to grow.

And they do all of this while forcing more and more of the costs of their horrendous policies onto our taxpayers.

Despite this gross Albany mismanagement, once again, I will not — for the eleventh consecutive year — raise the property tax levy. Eleven zeroes in a row. Unparalleled in county history.

If Albany — and Washington— would spend less time talking at us and more time listening to us, they may learn something about governing. If you remain fiscally conservative and apply common sense in your day-to-day operations, you can do more with less taxpayer money and attack problems head on. You don't have to raise taxes, tolls and fees while desperately pushing off your responsibilities with reckless abandon like they do every single day.

It's a simple formula to follow. We don't borrow more than we can afford. We don't pass on undue tax burden to our residents. We never mortgage our financial future. We strategically invest in our economic growth while tackling tough societal issues. Don't take my word for it, you can ask New York State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli, who just the other day informed myself and the best County Comptroller in the State of New York, Joe Timpano, that Oneida County is under no fiscal distress.

Governor Hochul, Senate Majority Leader Stewart-Cousins and Assembly Speaker Heastie, take a look right here at Oneida County and see how it's done.

We have created a government that is responsive to our residents, our businesses and all of those who utilize our services.

And we have done it without raising property taxes in 11 years. A zero today is a continued commitment to my common sense, pragmatic, fiscally-conservative philosophy.

- 11 straight years of zeroes.
- 11 straight years of holding the line.
- While always protecting taxpayers.

Holding the line doesn't mean standing still. We have made investments that have completely changed the face of this county.

Let me name a few:

- Expanding broadband access to rural Oneida County.
- More money for roads and bridges than ever before.
- Restoration of the REA Wing at Union Station, that will result in a new tourism destination.
- Unprecedented funding to agriculture and Cornell Cooperative Extension.
- Enhanced our FAA UAS test site with SkyDome, the largest indoor drone testing site in the nation.
- Innovare Advancement Center
- Nexus Center
- Wolfsped

And we've improved public health and safety:

- Special Patrol Officers in every school district.
- A nationally-recognized Opioid Task Force, that has helped drive overdose deaths down 50% from last year.

- Invested in Rome Health’s facilities
- Invested in The Wynn Hospital

All of that and more is being done without raising taxes.

I have always been committed to doing big, game-changing things, and nothing fits that bill more than our historic agreement with the Oneida Indian Nation. It’s hard to believe that this is the 10-year anniversary of that monumental occasion.

In 2024, we have budgeted an estimated \$23 million for these returns. A deal I negotiated, and this Board approved, has brought over \$150 million dollars to this government. The Nation continues to be the most steadfast of government partners, and I congratulate Nation Representative and Turning Stone Enterprises CEO 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.

This year, that partnership was on display to the entire state as Oneida County, at Turning Stone, hosted the New York State Association of Counties’ fall conference for the first time ever. The result was the most successful conference in NYSAC’s 98-year history, with over 700 county government officials from across the state attending.

The Nation has just announced its massive \$370 million capital investment. This growth means more jobs — construction and permanent — as well as more visitors. Our agreement paved the way for this growth.

In the past 10 years, median income in Oneida County has increased 32%. That main street economic growth is reflected in our sales tax receipts. I propose the 2024 budget include \$143 million in sales tax collections. An increase of \$11 million over 2023.

Let's talk about sales tax. Everyone pays it. When someone says "cut the sales tax" what they are really saying is "raise the property tax," because you can't have it both ways. Sales tax is paid by tourists, visitors, commuters and anyone who makes a purchase here in Oneida County. Property taxes, on the other hand, are only paid by those who own property. That includes families, seniors, business owners and farmers, and I refuse to place the entire burden on them.

We have taken concrete steps to create critical mass of visitors to our community. All the things that bring more people here means more sales tax collections.

The seeds of this strategy are bearing fruit. Our tourism economy has hit unprecedented heights, and as the Oneida Indian Nation embarks on their expansion, the Utica University Nexus Center is moving forward at full steam. When we envisioned the Nexus Center this is exactly what we thought it could be. Nexus is the perfect name because it means connections and relationships and it has been a world-class partnership between many entities, including Mohawk Valley Garden, the Aud Authority and Utica University. Its success is surpassing all expectations. This is what I mean when I talk about catalytic, game-changing investments. We —my administration and this Board— built this facility together. I'm proud of this accomplishment and I know you are too.

This strategy, and the success of its implementation, is exactly why I was able to budget our sales tax \$11 million higher for 2024 than 2023 and not raise property taxes. We are a destination — for companies doing high-tech research and development, the semiconductor industry, emergency management professionals, students and tourists of all kinds.

As a prime example, in 2024, at just barely over a year old, Nexus will host the largest women's hockey event in the world. Ten teams that represent their countries at the Olympics will be here in Oneida County for 12 days, cementing us as a worldwide destination for sports tourism. Making this possible is a partnership between the County, Mohawk Valley Garden, Auditorium Authority and the Oneida Indian Nation.

This success is paying dividends for Oneida County in economic impact. More visitors mean more dollars being spent at restaurants, hotels and small businesses of all kinds while creating continuous local excitement.

County government is unique. Put simply, we have more responsibilities than any other government. It is an inarguable fact. This budget reflects those responsibilities.

Where does the money go? Let me highlight some of what we do:

- \$225 million goes to health and human services, including:
 - Protecting children who suffer from neglect and abuse.
 - Supplying services and meals to the elderly.
 - Providing veterans' services, including preventing veteran suicides.
 - Providing mental health services to combat the national mental health crisis.
 - Connecting those who need jobs to work.
 - Combating the opioid epidemic.
 - Helping those in need obtain food and shelter.
 - Providing access to quality healthcare.
 - Testing for lead poisoning and conducting lead remediation.
 - Working with families so they can afford daycare.
 - Working with our youth to learn life skills and make good decisions.

- \$79 million goes to public safety, including:
 - Patrolling our roads and streets.
 - Investigating sex abuse and violent crimes against children.
 - Running our correctional facility.
 - Prosecuting those who have been arrested.
 - Ensuring everyone has a constitutionally-protected, competent legal defense.
 - Dispatching 911 calls.
 - Preparing for and reacting to natural disasters.

- \$70 million for public works, including:
 - Road and bridge repair.
 - Flood mitigation.
 - Sewer system operation.
 - Snow removal.

- \$29 million on education —Yes, we are invested in education — including:
 - MVCC
 - Early childhood intervention
- \$15 million on economic development, including:
 - Mohawk Valley EDGE
 - Planning
 - Agriculture

We must continue to invest long term in the projects necessary to allow our community to grow. We hear a lot about debt limits at the federal level. They make it seem complicated. It isn't. They max out the nation's debt limit time and time again and then ask to raise its limit to meet their obligations. Let's be clear, in comparison, we are at 18% of our debt limit — big difference between the two. When we take on capital expenses, we do it responsibly with the goal of solving problems and moving this community forward.

This year the capital review team presented me with a capital budget of \$34.7 million. After taking a hard look, as I always do, I reduced it. Instead, we will bond for \$15 million and we will retire \$19.3 million in debt. I have moved \$8 million for our roads and bridges into pay-as-you-go 2023 funds using our reserves. This saves the taxpayers money and expedites the work on these vital projects.

We are also investing in our agriculture, public health and safety, tourism and technology:

- \$6.5 million to expand Cornell Cooperative Extension's facility footprint.
- \$2 million to continue the success at the REA Wing.
- \$2 million to bring our Utica Health Clinic into the County Office Building.
- \$1 million for technology upgrades.

I'm proud of this budget. I'm proud of the work we have done together, and I look forward to implementing this blueprint in 2024. My commitment to this community and doing this job is unwavering.

You see that in the way I tackle tough issues. I'm not on the sidelines trying to score political points while accomplishing nothing. When New York City and Albany continue to make their problems our problems with their self-created migrant crisis I said no, and acted to prevent it. When an opioid epidemic ravaged communities across the country, I created an opioid task force that is nationally-recognized as a model for emulation. And, while one death is too many, this year our opioid-related deaths are down 50% compared to last year. When we went through unprecedented times, I said we would continue to make game-changing investments and we did, with this Board and the help of our partners, we still invested in major projects like Wolfsped, Nexus, Wynn Hospital, Rome Health and Skydome.

I continue to serve this county with one goal, and that is the goal of a better Oneida County today than the day before. I have not made decisions based on political whim or election cycles. The budget proposed today is the best plan forward for this county based on a record rooted in integrity, compassion and competence, keeping all our people's best interests at heart. Let's continue to move forward together.

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