

## 2024 State of the County

Let me begin today by acknowledging the loss of Onondaga County Sheriff Lt. Michael Hoosock and Syracuse Police Officer and Oneida County native, Michael Jensen. They made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty on April 14<sup>th</sup> and I ask we take a moment of silence to honor them, their families and all of our law enforcement and first responders who continue to keep our communities safe.

Thank you.

As I was looking back and preparing for this year's address, I can tell you a lot has changed since I first gave one of these. Many innovative projects and initiatives have moved this community forward, bringing new opportunities while being presented with new challenges. We also face national societal issues we must tackle head on.

The success of Oneida County wouldn't be possible without those who push this government to new heights.

I want to recognize the unbelievable commitment and dedication of all our county government employees. They carry out our mission with professionalism and skill. They are the best government workforce in the state.

I want to thank the members of the Oneida County Board of Legislators for their partnership, especially the Board Chairman Gerald Fiorini.

I also want to thank my fellow elected county leaders: our new District Attorney Todd Carville and our new Comptroller Enessa Carbone, as well as County Clerk Mary Finegan and Sheriff Robert Maciol.

I want to welcome and thank our two new mayors, Utica Mayor Michael Galime, and Rome Mayor Jeffery Lannigan for their partnerships.

I would like to thank all the other elected officials who have joined us. Your partnership is vital in all we do.

To my wife Eleanor and my family who are here with me today, thank you for your constant support and encouragement.

Thank you to the Sheriff's Office and the Oneida Indian Nation Police Department for their honor guard presentation.

And a special thank you to Father Joe Salerno for his beautiful invocation.

Finally, thank you to Nation Representative and Turning Stone Enterprises Chief Executive Officer Ray Halbritter and the Oneida Indian Nation for hosting us today. Cementing our partnership with our historic agreement, now past its 10-year anniversary, has been a benefit to the whole region. In addition, our personal friendship, which goes back much further than 10 years, is something that means a great deal to me.

Under Ray's leadership, Turning Stone Enterprises is undergoing an evolution. This is a transformational opportunity for this entire region. \$600 million in private investment. Our historic agreement paved the way for this unprecedented venture. Hotels, restaurants, convention space, healthcare facilities and so much more. Our tradespeople are going to build it. Our residents will work here. And visitors from all over the world will come here. The positive long-term impact is immeasurable. The Nation and Turning Stone Enterprises continue to be the very best at what they do.

As we talk about our partners, I must mention someone who is not here today. We were the closest of partners. He was a giant in the field of economic development, a pillar of our community and my friend for over 40 years, and that's Steve DiMeo. As you know, we lost Steve on March 6th. Many of the projects we see throughout this community have Steve's fingerprints all over them. Especially the Marcy Nanocenter and Griffiss Business and Technology Park.

Steve was a tireless advocate for this community. He was brilliant. His vision and legendary work ethic have been, and will remain, a cornerstone of the organization he led from its inception: Mohawk Valley EDGE. We are joined today by his wife Dianne, their children and EDGE staff.

What the Griffiss Business and Technology Park has grown into since 1995 is a shining example of Steve's mind and how it worked. He could see what it would become, but he also knew how to make it a reality. I'm truly honored to announce that going forward it will be known as Griffiss Business and Technology Park at the Steven J. DiMeo Campus.

Mohawk Valley EDGE continues to be a thriving economic development agency arm for the County and we will work with them as they transition through this unexpected and tragic loss.

During a radio interview on Keeler in the Morning a few weeks back, I was having a discussion about where we are as a community. The fact is this County continues to see decades of work come to fruition in big ways and in rapid succession.

- Wolfspeed
- Wynn Hospital
- UAS
- Nexus
- And Turning Stone's Evolution

And just last month, The Women's World Hockey Championship was here in Oneida County. How does Oneida County beat out huge markets like Chicago, and world-famous hockey towns like Lake Placid, to be chosen the very first time we bid? I'll tell you how. It's because we have great partnerships, great facilities and a community ready and willing to embrace all that comes with hosting this type of event.

### The Partners

- **Oneida Indian Nation and Turning Stone Enterprises:** To be a host, all 10 international hockey teams, with roughly 35 people per team, have to stay under the same roof during the 12-day tournament. That could only happen here, a world class resort and casino and our premiere destination. The feedback on the hospitality they received has been amazing.
- **Rob Esche, Mohawk Valley Garden and the Upper Mohawk Valley Auditorium Authority:** They have taken this historic arena, plus the Utica University Nexus Center, and done something remarkable. They went after this tournament. They had the knowledge and the wherewithal for the IIHF and USA Hockey to look our way, and then they executed a great tournament.
- **Our Sheriff's Office and the Utica Police Department:** A tournament of this size requires around the clock law enforcement protection and Sherrif Maciol, Mayor Galime and Chief Williams were there every step of the way. Their deputies and officers did an outstanding job and I thank them for their leadership.
- **Oneida County:** Rob called me and said, "Well, we got the tournament," and he knew they could handle the inside of the venue, but we wanted to put on a show outside of the venue as well. I asked the Board of Legislators to support the tournament with \$2 million in funding. The banners, the music, the World Championship Village, the marketing, all done with those funds, and, to borrow a baseball term for a hockey tournament, we hit a homerun.

### The Facilities

- **Adirondack Bank Center:** Twelve years ago, Rob approached me about bringing the Comets here. To make it a reality, we needed to completely renovate what would become the Adirondack Bank Center. The County secured \$20 million in funding, backed by the State of New York, and today we have one of the best arenas of our size in the country and the Comets are still selling out.
- **Utica University Nexus Center:** A few short years ago, in this very address, I decided to create the U-District. The next step after the Aud was a facility that would allow us to host tournament-based sporting events. Today, we have a \$70 million facility that is attracting people from all over the nation for youth hockey, soccer and lacrosse tournaments, and has made events like the Women's Worlds possible.

## The Community

- The numerous businesses who helped sponsor this event.
- Oneida County Tourism and Greater Utica Chamber of Commerce.
- The schools — sponsored by local businesses and the County — that packed the day games with over 6,000 students who were given the opportunity to see world class hockey in a world class facility.
- Finally, and most importantly, our residents who came out to embrace this event with open arms, support Team USA and show the world what we are capable of.

The results are in. More tickets sold than any Women's World Championship ever. We broke the Adirondack Bank Center's modern-day attendance record, twice. Every single person involved who I spoke with, told us over and over what an unbelievable two weeks it had been and how this was their most successful tournament to date.

A few years ago, when I was giving this speech we talked about Nexus as a signature project for the U-District. This is exactly what we had in mind. We know Nexus will be routinely packed in the months ahead, but here's even more good news. In September, we are back on the global stage with the World Lacrosse Box Championships right here in Oneida County. Forty Eight teams. Nine days. The best players in the world. I have no doubt this will be another top-tier event.

Lacrosse holds a special place for the Oneida Indian Nation, and some of the games will be played on Nation land, honoring the tradition of this sport in Native American culture.

We continue to prove there is nothing we cannot accomplish here. We have seen it with Nexus, and we must build on that.

At my request the Board of Legislators approved a capital project for Donovan Stadium at Murnane Field. We will improve the facilities including a new turf surface. This will allow us to increase capacity, have more tournaments and more fans enjoying this venue.

This region needed a better healthcare system on many fronts. Our partners, the Oneida Indian Nation and Upstate University Hospital, opened the Upstate Cancer Center at Verona and will soon be putting an urgent care facility right here on this property along with Rome Health. My administration, with the Board of Legislators, said we were going to lead on this issue, and we have. In October, a state-of-the-art medical facility, the first new hospital to be built in New York State in decades, our very own Wynn Hospital opened its doors. This is a facility for the next 100 years. Without it, we would have crippled our ability to grow as a region. And later this year, the accompanying county parking garage will open.

We didn't stop there. We have invested \$3 million into Rome Health assisting them in creating a new Women's Surgical Suite. We invested in CFLR to expand their substance use disorder services in Camden. We created a new county System of Care to connect families with home-based services, family and youth peer support, parenting education and mental health and substance use services. We launched a program to prevent veteran suicides.

There is more to do. We will continue to build on these services.

We cannot stop looking for ways to improve our system of healthcare and the services available in this community.

SUNY Upstate Medical University has an Air Upstate UAS Program. The program specializes in healthcare drone delivery. The testing required to grow and enable this program starts with the UAS Test Site at Griffiss International Airport, one of only seven FAA-designated test sites in the country. It is because of our test site and our testing corridor that SUNY Upstate, MVHS and Rome Health will be able to develop an on-demand system for the efficient and safe transport of time-sensitive materials, drugs, blood products and lab samples. This will reduce the time it takes to provide quality care in our most rural communities.

The Oneida County Opioid Task Force continues its work. We are committed to harm reduction and erasing the stigma surrounding substance use disorder. These strategies save lives and give time for people to get the help they need. This past year we conducted a series of overdose fatality reviews to assist us in identifying and understanding gaps and weaknesses in our systems that we can improve upon.

A cross-case analysis has been completed, and in the coming weeks we will release the full report, but for now, here is a sample of what we will do:

- Develop a system for law enforcement to note risk factors with individuals they encounter and refer them directly to an agency or program.
- Change how someone is escalated to next-level outreach and intervention services.
- Create a way for loved ones to report concerns or observations anonymously.
- Invest in training for care coordinators as a single point of contact for at-risk individuals to navigate the system.

In Albany, instead of addressing real issues they are passing bills like Good Cause Eviction, which limits when and how a tenant can be evicted. I always thought we had enough rules on that. You don't pay your rent, destroy or do illegal things in the residence, you get evicted. But apparently not. By the way, to all villages, towns and cities, thankfully that law only takes effect if you choose to opt in. I can't imagine why anyone would ever choose to do that and I strongly encourage you not to.

Look, we are here to solve real issues to the best of our ability.

This is why I have implemented two Executive Orders to protect this community from a paralyzed immigration system and a broken border. The orders prevent the bussing of migrants into Oneida County and prevents New York City's attempt at an end run with its homeless population.

Recently, I was part of a National Association of Counties delegation that visited the border in El Paso, Texas and what I saw was staggering. The sheer number of people coming into the country, through legal and illegal places of entry, is unsustainable. The processing of these individuals is fatally flawed and quite frankly dangerous. The ability of our dedicated Border Patrol and Homeland Security personnel — who are doing a remarkable job while faced with unprecedented circumstances — to handle this deluge of people has been stunted by inaction in Washington.

It would be dereliction of my duty to this community to remove those Executive Orders until some form of real progress is made, whether in Washington to secure the border and fix the process, or in Albany to end absurd policies like sanctuary cities that have no basis in law or reality. Adding to the absurdity is the fact that \$2.4 billion has been included in this year's state budget to deal with the migrant crisis. There are so many better ways that money could be used to impact the lives of people who live in this state.

While billions, with a "B," are going to deal with the influx of migrants into New York City, the rest of the state is left to deal with a mental health crisis. What did the Governor allocate in her budget towards new mental health services? Just \$33 million. And most of that is just shifting old money to new priorities. I will never understand how this does not receive more attention and dollars from Albany.

We don't have enough mental health services. We don't have enough mental health beds. We don't have enough mental health workers. And the results continue to be catastrophic.

Homelessness, substance use and mental health issues in our children are all because of a broken mental health system.

We must do more. We are going to strengthen mental health services in our schools by expanding mental health telemedicine. We will create a program to make rapid referrals. And with our districts, we will create mental health clinics for their students.

We will collaborate with our agency partners to establish Crisis Residence Centers. These voluntary, short-term stay facilities serve as an alternative to hospitalization by evaluating and stabilizing those in crisis and linking them to additional services.

We will continue to work with our partners at UCP to bring online a stabilization center that is currently stuck in a New York State-created red tape nightmare.

Finally, we need more mental health workers. We must create a workforce pipeline. We will look at all options: training, internships, residencies, increased rotations and fast track educational programs. We cannot just continue to say, "There isn't enough." We must change the trajectory and it starts today.

Yet another national issue having an impact in Oneida County is the availability of childcare for working parents. Throughout 2023, the Oneida County Childcare Task Force, comprised of approximately 20 separate agencies and over 40 members, worked through a variety of subcommittees to present to me a series of solutions to alleviate this problem for our families.

Three strategies were developed, eight recommendations with 24 separate action items. The report will be publicly available in the coming days, but I will touch on a few highlights.

**Strategies:**

- Improve childcare worker employment training and retention.
- Expand childcare capacity.
- Identify and eliminate barriers to accessing childcare.

**Actions:**

- Create an alternative workforce pipeline in the field of childcare.
- Hire childcare community navigators.
- County funds to pay for family daycare start-up costs.

- Invite state regulators, legislators and other state policy makers to a childcare management simulator, so they can see exactly how the laws and regulations they put in place make it nearly impossible for these agencies.

I thank this task force for their dedication and hard work putting these recommendations together and we are working on their implementation as we speak.

Food insecurity continues to be a reality for far too many in this nation. Here in Oneida County, it is no different. Ask yourself the question, “Have you ever been hungry?” Not because you are late for a meal and your stomach is grumbling, but because you can’t remember the last time you ate, and you don’t know where your next meal is coming from. The answer is “no.” We likely will never know that intense fear of lacking a basic necessity.

Unfortunately, there are many families, seniors and children in this community who know that feeling all too well. Imagine being a child stricken with hunger and uncertainty, trying to learn in school. It’d be impossible to concentrate, which makes it impossible to succeed.

Meanwhile, there’s excess food from banquet halls, grocery stores and restaurants that never makes it to the table.

We can harness technology, for very little cost, and connect those that have extra food with those who need it. There are apps that flag locations that want to donate extra food and coordinate its delivery to food banks, religious organizations and shelters, so it can go into the mouths of those who are hungry instead of going to waste. We will fund the use of one of these apps to organize a better response to this on-going problem.

In the past I have talked about economic development and how important it is to our growth, and that remains true.

We have had unbelievable successes in high-tech industry, especially in the semi-conductor field. Oneida County’s semiconductor industry currently employs over 2,100 people. The Innovare Advancement Center continues to be a conduit for cutting edge quantum computing research and development. SkyDome and our FAA-designated UAS Test Site lead the way nationally in drone technology. In conjunction with these efforts, AFRL has secured over \$400 million in funding to research quantum technology, cybersecurity and counter unmanned aerial systems.



We will build on these successes. We are investing \$2 million dollars with our partners at EDGE in creating flex space at the Marcy site aimed at supply chain businesses that are essential to growing our semi-conductor industry.

We have been awarded \$23 million in state funding for the Triangle site at Griffiss International Airport to create a first-of-its-kind high-tech supply chain campus to be the home of companies to support Wolfspeed, Danfoss and Micron, as well as AFRL, Innovare and others.

The Triangle development is critical to Rome and Oneida County's future.

For Rome, one way to think about the future is to correct something from the past. I've lived in Rome for a long time after my wife, a life-long Roman, convinced this East Utican to move there. In that time, I've heard over and over about Fort Stanwix, which sits in the middle of the downtown corridor.

A legacy of mid '70s federal urban renewal projects, the Fort has always been simultaneously a point of pride and derision. I believe it is time for the County and City to engage with the National Park Service to reinvigorate the monument, build on what it does well and create new opportunities to make this the tourism attraction it should be. New programming, more events and more reasons to be there on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, I believe we have to solve the cause for much of the ire hurled at Ft. Stanwix. The structure divides downtown Rome, hindering traditional main street development. I think the time has come to reestablish the street grid. Now, what that will look like will take time and discussion, but it must be remedied.

When the Fort was first proposed, there was a retail and entertainment development plan that was supposed to surround it. The plan called for stores and other amenities. That never happened. We need a development approach to the space surrounding the Fort that looks to accomplish what was originally intended 50 years ago. It should be something that compliments the Fort and attracts visitors.

Ft. Stanwix can be rejuvenated by physical integration into the city it calls home, unique and engaging programming and a plan for redevelopment in and around it that blends history, entertainment and other opportunities.

We will continue to prepare for this community's future and we are doing that through a series of long-term comprehensive initiatives that will set us up for long-term population and economic growth.

Together with our partners, we are devising detailed plans to address a variety of issues, preparing us not only for the next couple of years, but for the next 20.

- Housing
- Long Range Transportation
- Cornhill Neighborhood
- Street Safety
- Exit 31 Redesign

These are opportunities to secure our future and I know many of you in this room have been and will be involved in these efforts. I appreciate your participation.

Agriculture is vital to this county and our region. We need to ensure it is strong and growing.

We have launched our agriculture sustainability plan to outline ways to strengthen this industry. With EDGE, we have also begun our dairy processing plant feasibility study to identify our capacity and processing needs for the future.

This year we will continue connecting students to the Boonville Fair by paying for local students to attend the fair for a day. For many of these children, the fair is an introduction to agriculture and the first time they will be in that type of setting. The program had great success last year bringing over 350 students to the fair and we hope to increase that this year.

One area of economic opportunity that exists is the reimagining of the former St. Luke's Hospital campus with our partners at EDGE, New Hartford and MVHS. We are in the process of our reuse and redevelopment plan. We have begun neighborhood outreach, public surveys and meetings with stakeholders, and this public engagement will continue. I encourage anyone interested to go to the Reimagine St. Luke's website to learn more.

This is a thorough process and at the end we will have a plan that can be released to developers through a request for expression of interest for the property.

We need to continue to hear from everyone and plan accordingly, but what we are seeing in the early stages is cause for a lot of optimism and excitement.

As we discuss our successes, challenges and opportunities today, we need to talk about crime.

We live in a state that continues to create laws affecting our criminal justice system and our law enforcement agencies. We know the state needs to make changes, and once again, I call on the Governor and State Legislature to fix bail reform, raise the age and discovery laws. These laws are dangerous. Dangerous to law abiding citizens, dangerous to businesses and clearly dangerous to our law enforcement officers who protect us.

While we wait for any type of common-sense action from Governor Hochul, Leader Cousins and Speaker Heastie, we must act locally to do what we can.

District Attorney Carville and I have talked about the problem prosecutors face when residents will not come forward when they witness these crimes. We need to create deterrents to criminal behavior and assist law enforcement in gathering vital evidence allowing us to prosecute those who commit crimes in our neighborhoods and commercial corridors.

Schenectady has done this very thing and the results have been dramatic. They have installed over 300 cameras. The extensive network covers most high-crime areas. Takeaways from law enforcement and prosecutors have been clear. Cameras act as a cost-effective force multiplier, giving police additional eyes on the ground. They are a visual deterrent to crime that can be used to monitor roadways and intersections for traffic issues and help maintain the safety of major community events.

I will take executive action and this government will be placing cameras in as many high-crime and high-traffic areas as we can. We will make a commitment of \$2.5 million. Fights, shootings, illegal drug trade, car thefts, shoplifting, whatever the case may be; if you engage in illegal activity in this county, we will see you and we will arrest you. Enough is enough.

The proliferation of illegal smoke and head shops must end. I'm proposing two local laws to deal with these situations. I want to be clear. I am not talking about legally-licensed establishments that have taken the proper steps to run their businesses. I am talking about the blatantly illegal shops that have sprouted up on every corner in every community. We are going to take action to close them down.

No longer are you going to be able to just open up and peddle illegal marijuana. We will enact a local law to regulate, license and create density and distance requirements for these shops that pretend to be selling just paraphernalia when they are actually selling marijuana through a state-created loophole. This will give the County the ability to regulate, fine and padlock places that are in effect running illegal marijuana dispensaries.

Meanwhile the state budget has given tools to local governments to put an end to this outrageous loophole. Tools we should have had in the first place, but better late than never.

The new regulations allow a county to pass a local law to authorize inspections and enforce regulations. The enforcement powers include civil proceedings to bar unlicensed activities, discovery powers to identify owners, sanctions against those violating the law, the ability for the County to collect fees from these enforcement proceedings and the ability to request police enforcement of permanent injunctions against these unlicensed dispensaries.

I will send those authorizing laws to the Board of Legislators and request the necessary resources to implement this in the coming months. We will shut these places down for good.

Youth violence continues to affect our communities and schools every day. These senseless acts happen far too often and impact everyone.

First and foremost, we must recognize that prevention is key. Investing in programs aimed at steering our youth away from violence and towards positive alternatives is paramount.

Today, I propose the largest investment in our community's youth aimed at preventing violence. We have spent significant funds on facilities in this County but now we have to invest in the children themselves. Oneida County will create a 4-year \$10 million fund to combat this issue.

This fund will invest in programs and initiatives that address youth violence. Like what? After school programs, mentoring opportunities, job opportunities, a new gang assessment study, recreation and educational programs like sports leagues, art classes and academic enrichment programs to name a few.

I'm asking the experts in this community to come forward with their ideas and programs. They must be data driven, result oriented and sustainable. No one person has all the answers. I certainly don't. But together as a community we can give our children the opportunities to be whatever they want to be. They don't have to resort to gang activity or violence. There will be more programs and places for them to learn, play, grow and make life-long community connections instilling pride in who they are, where they are from and what they have potential to be. All while having respect for themselves and others.

An ambitious agenda? Yes, it is, but from this government you and I would expect no less.

How can we do all of this? The simple answer is that we are the government that touches more lives and are looked to when the most complex and difficult of circumstances arise. But there is more to that answer.

We must be fiscally responsible. We must be fiscally sound. And we are. The successes that we have achieved would not be possible if we were not. We have not raised the property tax levy in 11 straight years. How? Budgeting that looks beyond one year at a time. Strict discipline across all cost centers. Investments in projects that generate job growth and visitors. A partnership with the very Indian Nation on whose ground we sit, that has yielded \$200 million in revenue over those 11 years.

This is the point in the speech where the perfunctory "State of the County is Strong" would come. But we are more than that, we are robust, we are solid and most of all we are resilient. Robust, because we are bold in all that we do. Solid, because we have built a foundation of strong fiscal management. And we are resilient because we do not let anything stop our progress.

I started this address speaking of partnerships, because none of this can be done alone. Since I stepped into this job I have done so with an outstretched hand. Asking all who dreamed of a better Oneida County to come with me, bring your ideas, your vision and your passion along. You have. We have. And it shows in all and everything that has been done. But the story is far from over. We are not done and there is much more to do. Let's keep doing it together.

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