

2025 State of the County

I want to thank you all for being here today. Once again, we are here at Turning Stone Resort Casino, and I want to thank our host. Nation Representative and CEO of Turning Stone Enterprises Ray Halbritter, thank you for your hospitality and your friendship. The partnership we have forged together over the past 18 years is the bedrock for many of the accomplishments we have seen in those years.

I want to recognize the unbelievable commitment and dedication of all our county government employees. They carry out our mission with professionalism and skill. Without them, nothing I talk about today or have ever talked about in one of these addresses would get done. They are the best government workforce in the State of New York.

I want to thank the members of the Oneida County Board of Legislators for their partnership, especially the Board Chairman Jerry Fiorini, and I must add for all the years I have given this address, wherever I have given it, somewhere in the back of the room has been Jerry. He's my great friend and indispensable partner. This will be his last State of the County as Chairman of our Board of Legislators, and I want to take this time to give him the round of applause he has earned 1,000 times over and has never once looked to receive. Thank you, Chairman.

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

I want to thank Utica Mayor Michael Galime and Rome Mayor Jeffery Lanigan for their partnerships.

And thank you to all the other elected officials who have joined us. You are vital in all we do.

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 Paul Angelicchio for his beautiful invocation

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

We have a lot to talk about today. I will lay out for our community an economic, social and governmental agenda so we are going to get right into it, but first there is something happening next year that I want to touch upon today.

2026 is the semi-quincentennial of the United States of America. For 250, years this country has been, what President Reagan called, that shining city upon a hill, and God willing, we will continue to be for another 250 years. We need to constantly remember and reiterate America's exceptionalism in the history of civilization. For the first time people got together and wrote down in the founding documents of a country that all men were created equal. That mankind had certain inalienable rights. That we were, are and ought to be free and to be free is to be governed by the people, for the people. People of all colors, creeds, heritage, background and economic standing have fought and died to preserve that freedom.

It is a milestone deserving of celebration. Especially in Oneida County where America's first alliance was formed with the Oneida Indian Nation.

A few months ago, we created the Oneida County 250th American Revolution Commission to plan, prepare and execute the celebrations taking place around next year's milestone.

There is a quote often attributed to one of our founding fathers, Thomas Jefferson, he said: "I'm a great believer in luck. And I find the harder I work the more I have of it." While scholars debate whether he said it or not, the old axiom is as true now as it was then.

All of this happened because of an adherence to that axiom. It isn't luck that makes these things happen. It is a lot of hard work, day in and day out by people who live and work here, and not in Albany.

Ironically, Thomas Jefferson would be appalled at the attempts by our state government to take local control away from us.

Albany wants to control our policies on everything. How we deal with issues, how we use our own land, how we build housing and where we put it, where renewable energy can go and to whom it will serve, what services we provide and how we provide them.

And now they want to control our local elections.

On Christmas Eve 2023, when no one was watching, Governor Hochul signed a law dictating to counties and towns when to hold our elections. We immediately went to court to defend our right, as outlined in our charter, to set our own elections and we won. Of course, that didn't stop the State from pursuing their agenda of seizing control over local governments.

On May 8th, the New York State Supreme Court Appellate Division reversed the lower court's decision and gave the State what it wanted.

Meanwhile, while they try to dictate to us, they cannot even pass a budget on time. County government plays the most vital role in our communities and needs to be safe-guarded at all costs. That is why we continue to fight against these outrageous, illegal decisions whose sole purpose is to take control from where Thomas Jefferson always thought it should be — local government— and put it in the hands of one-party rule in Albany.

I ask everyone to get involved in this critical issue. Talk to your state representatives, write letters and emails and call the governor’s office. Tell them to rethink this plan, and if they don’t, go to the ballot box and show them why they should’ve listened to the people they represent.

It is our right to make these choices and others as a local government. And I believe we have chosen well.

Oneida County is a very different place than when I first gave this speech. We live in a much stronger community. Think back to 2007 or even before that. Would anyone have imagined Nexus and the Aud hosting world championship tournaments? Would anyone have thought we would have a state-of-the-art hospital? Did people really believe a semiconductor industry would exist here? A permanent agreement with the Oneida Indian Nation that is the best county/tribal partnership in the United States? I don’t know how many believed it then, but they can see it now.

“I’m a great believer in luck. And I find the harder I work the more I have of it.”

Let’s talk about that historic agreement with the Oneida Indian Nation.

With partnership comes certainty and with certainty comes growth.

- \$500 million in revenue directly to the State of New York
- \$219 million in revenue directly to the County of Oneida
- \$38 million in revenue directly to the County of Madison
- \$75 million in revenue directly to eight surrounding counties
- \$18 million in revenue directly to local municipalities in Oneida County

That’s just the revenue. It also unlocked unprecedented collaboration throughout the county with community investments on events, workforce, public art, health care as well as local charities, school districts, colleges, veterans groups and law enforcement agencies.

Their crucial economic investment has been essential to this region’s continued growth.

- The Cove and Lakehouse on Sylvan Beach
- Multiple Maple Leaf Markets
- Point Place
- YBR
- Wahta Maple Farm
- Upstate Cancer Center at Verona
- Onsite partnership with Rome Health

The result in economic impact for just 2024 from Turning Stone Enterprises is staggering: \$419 million spent with over 2,870 vendors.

And, of course, the investment known as Turning Stone Evolution.

- \$700 million in capital investment
- \$600 million in one-time economic impact
- 3,500 construction jobs
- 300 new full-time employees

When the Evolution is complete, Turning Stone Enterprises will have solidified itself as the premiere convention, gaming and entertainment destination in all the Northeast. Pretty impressive.

Working hard matters. Partnerships matter. This partnership is the single greatest accomplishment of my administration. I thank Ray Halbritter and the Nation again for their unwavering commitment to their ancestral homeland and our community.

The State of Oneida County is strong, in no small part because of leaders like Ray.

On April 22nd, global pioneer in natural foods — and yes, the Greek yogurt we all love — Chobani, came to Rome to announce an unprecedented investment. A huge commitment from another transformational leader, Hamdi Ulukaya.

The creation of a 1.8 million square foot dairy processing facility. A company and culture that truly embodies our community.

Let's talk about it.

- \$1.2 billion — the largest ever investment in a natural foods production facility in the United States
- 1,500 construction jobs
- Not just a building, but a piece of art, a monument as Hamdi said
- 28 production lines
- Over 1,000 full-time employees
- 10 to 12 million pounds of milk used a day, an unfathomable boon to our dairy farmers
- A cornerstone project on the Griffiss Business & Technology Park at the Triangle Development Site that the county owns, invested in and cultivated for a project of this size
- A commitment from Chobani to create an innovation-based food ecosystem by encouraging other companies to be in this area

Hamdi and I have gotten to know each other over these past six months, and I can tell you beyond a shadow of a doubt, his excitement for this project and our community is remarkable. It reminds me very much of the partnership with Ray and the Oneidas. Visionary in its size and scope and investment, of course. Beneficial for their company and our local economy, of course. The creation of jobs and economic impact for other industries is undeniable.

But, just like here, it goes beyond all that. The commitment is to the community. How can they help the place they call home? On April 22nd alone, they filled a tractor trailer with 500 food boxes that were then distributed to 12 local food banks. I packed some of those boxes myself, and alongside me was Hamdi and Mayor Lanigan.

We are a giving community. We believe in the power of people and we believe in the melting pot that made this County what it is today. So does Hamdi and the Chobani family. Most importantly, we both believe nothing is impossible. I welcome Hamdi and Chobani to Oneida County and look forward to the great things we will accomplish together.

How do we get to these big announcements? Oneida agreement, Nexus, chip fab plant, state-of-the-art hospital, Chobani?

“I’m a great believer in luck. And I find the harder I work the more I have of it.”

By leading with vision and passion while constantly preparing we capitalize on opportunities.

Griffiss was a decommissioned Air Force base. But together, with people like my friend, Steve DiMeo, we had a vision. We planned for its future. We did the hard work. We found funding, rehabilitated buildings, developed roads, sewers, water. We created a new destination where businesses and organizations wanted to be; like AmeriCU, AIS, Kris-Tech Wire, Rome Free Academy, Orgill, Family Dollar and Deployed Resources. We solidified our relationship with Rome Lab by creating the Innovare Advancement Center and SkyDome. We became one of seven FAA designated UAS test sites. We identified the Triangle as an opportunity for development. We invested over \$6 million to prepare the site. Then we obtained \$23 million in FAST NY funding and in a remarkably short period of time landed a game changing project.

When vision meets preparation, perseverance, fortitude and partnerships it becomes reality.

Sometimes years of work clear the way and set us on a path. Small victory after small victory that leads us to a Chobani, Wynn, Nexus, Wolfspeed or Turning Stone's Evolution.

That work continues us on a path allowing all who live, move and stay here to take part in these successes.

With the Turning Stone expansion and announcement of Chobani the need for workers in these areas has never been higher. A good problem to have, but one that needs solving.

Our goals are simple. We need to ensure residents are prepared and prioritized for these job opportunities, and many others, build long-term workforce resilience and align workforce development efforts with our employer needs.

We will launch a major league effort to fill these jobs. We will initiate a multimedia campaign and work with MVCC, the Workforce Investment Board and others, to create the training programs we need. We are going to make sure everyone who wants one of these jobs knows about them, can be properly trained for them and will be hired to fill them. We will go door-to-door if we have to.

Perhaps most importantly, we have to remove barriers to employment.

Two of those barriers remain housing and childcare.

Cost and affordability are a barricade for the development of all types of housing.

Our housing plan lays out goals, strategies and action items to create the housing we need to grow.

Implementation has begun.

We will create, through the Oneida County IDA, a new housing tax exemption policy focused on developing new housing.

We will create a countywide infrastructure development program. Build Ready Oneida County will make housing sites shovel ready.

I wanted to highlight these two innovative steps, but that is just the tip of the iceberg in this plan. There are five goals, 14 strategies and 34 action items outlined in the plan.

I ask people to read it on our website.

This is what I mean when I talk about hard work vs. luck. We need 6,000 new housing options of varying kinds. It doesn't happen overnight. We must prepare, plan, invest and collaborate to get there.

Through our childcare task force report, we have implemented new programs. We funded a child navigator position to help connect families with daycare. We launched our Family Daycare Startup Grant Program which has already created nearly 100 new daycare slots in just six months.

We just began our collaboration with MVCC to generate more childcare workers through a micro credential program, and in the coming months, we will begin a multifaceted public relations campaign to rebrand and promote the use of our childcare subsidy. Families of four making up to \$96,000 can avail themselves of this funding making childcare more affordable. The campaign will also promote our family daycare grant and MVCC childcare programs.

The "Every Child, Every Family, Every Day" campaign will begin in earnest this summer.

These are some of the issues that stand as barricades to employment and advancement for so many in this community. We will continue to remove these obstacles for as many as we can.

As we build this bright new future together, we must ensure everyone can take part in it.

That is why we keep working on society's toughest issues; substance use disorder, mental health, homelessness and youth violence.

In the first three months of 2024, we had 18 opioid-related deaths. In that same timeframe in 2025, we had three. While three is three too many, the decrease shows our efforts are working. However, all overdoses, fatal and nonfatal, went from 63 to 60, so there is more work to do.

We had a successful Opioid Task Force meeting on April 28th attended by nearly 100 people. We outlined new workgroups to meet throughout the year and established new and innovative ideas in areas of education, treatment, recovery, harm reduction, data collection and public policy.

I thank all who attended and my co-chairs of the task force, our Sheriff and District Attorney.

But we can't stop there. We continue to find new ways to address these gigantic issues. With Upstate Caring Partners, our stabilization center will be open soon. We launched our OC C.A.R.E.S. smartphone app that connects residents with mental health information and resources quickly and efficiently and our Teen Accountability Court — a new diversion court dealing with youth and guns. And as I speak, we are placing 163 surveillance cameras across Oneida County to assist law enforcement.

Homelessness is a major issue we deal with every day. We need to continue to create new solutions.

Food, shelter, clothing are essential needs for every human being. I know it's easy to be cynical about this. I know it's easy to see a tent under a bridge or a person in the throes of addiction on a street corner and feel contempt. I implore all of us not to do that. That person is someone's friend, brother, sister, parent, child. Don't lose the humanity necessary to carry out God's will to care for those less fortunate.

As county government, we are charged with doing this work but even if we weren't, we should. Everyone deserves a chance to have a better life. A life that isn't sleeping on the street or at a shelter while substance use and deteriorating mental health rob them of who they were to the point that their friends and family don't recognize them anymore.

The cycle of homelessness is clear. A person ends up without a place to stay. Our Department of Family and Community Services place these individuals in emergency housing. This is usually a shelter of some kind or a hotel room or even the lobby of the County Office Building. Then the individual comes to us the following day and we create an independent living plan. From there we find permanent housing as they work that plan. Often they don't make it all the way through. For a variety of reasons, they end up homeless again.

The placement of homeless individuals and families, mostly in shelters and hotels in 2024, cost \$7.1 million, when just six years ago, it cost us \$900,000. That is just placement, that doesn't even include the associated costs of homelessness. For example, the services we provide directly or the tens of millions of dollars in funding we provide to human services agencies annually. Nor does it include the costs for law enforcement and prosecution, defense, family court and child and adult protection.

So, for those who can be cynical, or even callous, and think it's all dollars and cents, I assure you what I propose today is a hell of a lot cheaper than what gets spent now.

We will strengthen our system. We need more emergency housing, more transitional housing and more permanent affordable housing and a commitment to providing services at these locations to ensure people thrive.

When it comes to combatting youth violence, we will begin a grant program, touched upon last year in this address. Together with the Community Foundation, we will launch a multiyear program aimed at putting resources in the hands of organizations that specialize in working with youth.

We have seen success funding these types of programs like our partnership with Hope Chapel and Pastor Baugh for literacy and summer meal programs.

The City of Utica, Community Foundation and the County have been partners in the Cornhill Revitalization Project, anchored by the anticipated creation of impact centers on James Street and West Street. In addition, we must address the entire neighborhood. To that end, we created the Cornhill Neighborhood Improvement Plan.

This plan will be a catalyst for investment and unlocking grant opportunities while improving public space used by all residents. This plan is for a community far too long overlooked and underserved.

Communities that have good public spaces, facades, streetscapes, proper lighting, and so on, are places you can take pride in. Pride in your community means less crime, less vandalism, less recklessness and more investment.

My father used to say the cheapest thing you can do to make something better is clean it and paint it. He took pride in what he did and where he did it. His home, his place of work and his neighborhood.

You know what they say, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree; I'm the same way.

Today, I announce the creation of the Oneida County Community Pride and Place initiative. Now, this is going to be a little bit more involved than what my father had in mind, but the premise is the same.

This initiative will allow local municipalities to apply for funding to address blight in areas where municipalities have ownership or are responsible. Municipalities must bring match funding for any application to be considered. Pride is instilled deeper and stronger when everyone has skin in the game.

This program can be utilized in a variety of ways. For example, if an alleyway is unused and has become blighted or unsafe, this funding can allow it to be activated into usable space. If curbing, crosswalks, grass, trees and planters are necessary to convert a median into an inviting safe space, this funding would be available. If a foreclosed house or vacant lot is falling apart, it can be stabilized to prevent further decay detrimental to the community that surrounds it.

We should not let neighborhoods fall into disarray and disrepair while their residents lose their pride of place and the dignity and self-respect that come with it.

In July of 2024, Rome was devastated by a tornado ripping apart neighborhoods, destroying homes and leaving many displaced. Mayor Lanigan and I worked together to help people recover.

Oneida County put together a fund, with the Community Foundation, Rome Chamber of Commerce and the City, to get money to individuals and businesses respectively. So how did we do?

Five hundred thirty-nine residents received over \$1.3 million in direct aid. Fifty businesses received \$230,000 in funding.

And we got the money out fast. In a matter of days, the first checks were out the door. I thank the Community Foundation, City of Rome and County employees for making that a reality.

We are not done yet. We can't leave the hardest hit areas behind. Together with the City we will invest some of what is left in emergency funding to work with the Mayor in those areas.

We are financial stewards of the taxpayer's money. We built our reserves so we could invest in our future. We continue to innovate to be more effective and efficient saving the taxpayer's money. Now, you could check our credit ratings, which are great. You could check our fund balance and see it is as healthy as it has ever been. But if you really want to know if we are good stewards, I will refer you to Oneida County's property tax levy. It hasn't been raised in 12 years. Twelve zeros in a row.

We continue to be innovative in our approach to government and our delivery of services. We are focused on a rapidly changing technological future. Artificial Intelligence must be understood, utilized and integrated into what we do and how we do it.

We have to embrace this future not only as a government but as a community.

I propose the creation of the Oneida County AI Task Force. This task force will explore AI's integration and impact on government operations, private industry, and residents, fostering education, ethical implementation and proactive policy making to position our county as a leader in the AI-driven future.

This technology's capabilities may well be limitless, and I refuse to have us left behind.

With a commitment to innovation and strong finances we will continue to invest in our infrastructure and assets.

When I took office, I committed to rehabilitating the REA Wing at Union Station in Utica. Then in 2011, we created the Oneida County Public Market. The REA Wing is not the only thing that has changed in that neighborhood though. In addition to our investments, we have seen a renovation of the Bagg's Square building, Doyle Hardware and the old Children's Museum to mixed-use gems with restaurants, offices and living space. We have seen infrastructure improvements with the reconfiguration of Broad Street.

When we invested in our building, we let potential investors know they could invest too. Today it looks diametrically different than in 2011.

In 2023, I said we would turn the REA Wing into an Oneida County Food Hub destination. We have turned that vision into a real plan. You're welcome read the plan and see the vision on our website.

This is a long-term vision for this space. A food incubator, event space, vendor areas and farmers market creating a unique community hub and tourist attraction. When Hamdi Ulukaya spoke about working with companies and investors to create a food innovation ecosystem, I was shaking my head in agreement because we are already in the game.

As an elected leader, I believe you can never stop thinking about a strong vision for your community. Now, everyone who has followed these speeches knows there's usually a couple big swings. Well, here is another one.

I have spoken about the need to repurpose the largest hangar at Griffiss, known as Building 101. Until today, our focus was primarily aviation-related – a focus that resulted in little success. With the announcement of Chobani and the ever-changing face of the entire Griffiss Business & Technology Park, there has never been a better time to think differently and think big.

I'm proposing Building 101 be transformed into a multi-purpose indoor sports and recreation facility for youth tournament-based play that will attract visitors from across the United States and the world.

We won't have to build it from scratch. Building 101 has about 400,000 square feet of floor space. That's enough space for the room we are in right now to fit 68 times. Let me give you one more visual to consider, you could fit 250 pickleball courts in this space.

I propose calling this facility "The Runway." It can host tournaments for lacrosse, soccer, baseball, softball, flag football, basketball, volleyball, pickleball, tennis, wrestling and gymnastics.

The vision doesn't end there.

On top of the recreation component, we will plan for many other amenities like lodging, cafes, restaurants – and maybe even a distillery and brewery. "The Runway" will build on the success of Chobani, Air City Lofts and the Griffiss Business & Technology Park as a whole, cementing the park as a multi-use work, live and play neighborhood that will drive growth in Rome and the County for years to come.

All aspects of tourism are a gigantic and vital part of our economy. We already know we can bring people here from all over the country and the world.

We need to embrace and strengthen this reality.

“The Runway” and its many attractions will do just that. This will be the largest facility of its kind in New York State and the second largest in the nation.

Can all of this be done? Absolutely. Because we believe nothing is impossible.

Let me tell you about a community that has the following:

A world-class resort with 1,000 rooms, a spa, three championship golf courses, a casino, an event center and the largest convention space in the Northeast.

Two hospitals — the first new one built in 25 years at \$700 million, and another expanding with over \$50 million in improvements.

A state-of-the-art hockey, soccer and lacrosse arena that hosted world championship events back-to-back.

Jobs in technology, finance, hospitality, sports, education, healthcare, agriculture by the thousands.

A museum that boasts world renowned exhibits.

A theatre that hosts Broadway shows.

The fourth oldest family-owned brewery in the United States.

A zoo, a children's museum, over 50 parks, 13 lakes, 25 golf courses.

Local governments that work together with the common goal of helping our residents and keeping costs down, far different from one-sided rule in Albany.

And soon, the largest natural food processing plant in the nation.

Sound familiar? That’s Oneida County.

That's why nothing is impossible, unless we don't try.

All of you here have played a role in the success of this county as well as dealing with its challenges. It is never one person, one entity or organization; it is an all-inclusive partnership. One that continues to grow and look at ways to be innovative, better serve our people and never stop moving forward.

"I'm a great believer in luck. And I find the harder I work the more I have of it."

Opportunities are all around us.

We will capitalize on them, together.

So, until the next "lucky" historic announcement.

God Bless you all. God Bless Oneida County and God Bless the United States of America.