

2027 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 2027.

My thanks to this valued Board, especially Chairwoman Mary Austin Pratt whose partnership in her first year has been instrumental in all we do.

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 their hard work on this budget. It is never an easy task. I also want to thank Comptroller Enessa Carbone for her effort.

To my other partners in government, thank you for all the great work you do. Clerk Mary Finegan, Sheriff Rob Maciol and District Attorney Todd Carville.

What is entailed in this, and every budget, is a series of hard choices.

This is the 20th budget I have presented to this Board. During America's 250th year, we have talked about our vision for the next 250 years. This budget reflects on the priorities of our 250 Forward initiative and allows us to build upon our successes so parents know their children and their children's children will be able to stay here. We are working toward that sustained future every day.

Over this past year, I have heard quite a bit about the time I've served in this position and what that means. This being my 20th budget, I have been thinking about that myself.

Let me tell you what it means to me — experience and knowledge.

It also means I've made the hard choices.

I've made them when the nation was going through a recession and the housing bubble burst and we had to rebuild our economy.

I made them through natural disasters — from flooding to devastating tornadoes, and now we have invested millions on mitigation and recovery leaving our communities rebuilt and safer for it.

I've made those choices when parents and educators were afraid the next school tragedy was going to strike their community. Now, we have safety procedures and armed patrol officers in every school building.

I made them through the largest public health emergency in the last 100 years during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that's why we were the first to close, but we were also the first to reopen.

I've made them through the opioid crisis and we have seen a significant reduction in fatalities. We continue to take action by banning kratom as well as K2, spice, deuce and other synthetic cannabinoids.

I've made them when paths to economic rejuvenation were uncertain.

I continued to invest in the Marcy Nanocenter site, when it seemed like an impossible dream, and now it is reality with Wolfspeed and Danfoss.

I was committed to investing in Griffiss and now it is a leader in research and development.

Development at the Triangle Site with no tenant in place was a hard choice, and now it will be home to Chobani, a major boon to our agricultural industry and over 1,200 jobs.

When our two hospitals in Utica and Rome needed to be modernized, I committed to investing in healthcare.

I've made them when it was way past time to put longstanding disputes with our neighbors to rest, and now the Oneida Indian Nation and Oneida County are partners in the truest sense of the word. This agreement has yielded \$260 million in revenue for Oneida County since 2014.

We now find ourselves faced with more hard choices concerning housing, infrastructure, public and mental health and the safety of all our citizens.

As I have said many times, this budget is the blueprint for how we accomplish our tasks day in and day out. In essence, how we make those hard choices.

My conservative philosophy has never changed. Keep taxes low. Don't borrow more than you can afford. Become more efficient. Cut services and programs that don't work while being sure to fund the ones that do. Tackle this community's biggest issues head on. It's easy to talk about this philosophy. Much harder to govern by it. I'm proud that this administration has always practiced what it preaches.

The proof is all around us ladies and gentlemen.

Let's start with the most important thing. Once again, there is no raise to the property tax levy.

In the last 14 budgets I have proposed, you have voted for 12 zeros, one decrease and one increase to the levy. To put that in perspective, to run this government in that time, we have asked for 69 cents more per property taxpayer. Only 69 cents.

I often get asked about the county tax rate, which is different than the levy. There is good news there as well. During the same time frame, the tax rate on full valuation has dropped significantly, and the lower the rate the better. And while there are formulas and equalization rates and a slew of other mathematical calculations involved, the answer is less complicated than that. In 2013, the rate on the full valuation of the County was \$7.06 per \$1,000 of market value, and now it is \$3.95. Currently, a decrease of over 6% from the rate on full valuation of \$4.21 in 2026.

While we have kept the tax levy flat, property values have gone up, and the county tax rate has gone down. That means we are growing, and with growth comes opportunities that we have capitalized on time and time again.

Since 2013, total taxable value of property in Oneida County has gone from just over \$10 billion to just shy of \$21 billion in 2027 — an increase in market value within the County of over 100%. I believe that is in part because of the work we do here and is reflected in this budget. We have kept the tax levy flat, and as property values have gone up, the county tax rate on full valuation has gone down.

That's why, with a 2027 budget that stands at just over \$577 million and a capital program that retires just shy of \$19 million in debt and only incurs \$17.9 million in new borrowing, you and every resident can rest assured that we are staying true to our word. We are investing in what will move our community forward while running a government that doesn't waste your money.

This budget was filled with hard choices. It was not easy. The state and federal government forced that upon us. They have left us holding the bag on many of their priorities. This budget remains 90% mandated by the state and federal governments. When they want something done they make us pay for it.

We are all on notice. And if you think it's bad now, it's about to get even worse. In just the last year, they've done it with our elections, renewable energy and they have been trying to do it with housing.

These decisions are meant to benefit downstate, all at the expense of upstate. Even so, we have to prepare in the best way we can for the unknown. We need to keep making hard choices when the State of New York makes our job harder. That is why we have cut many outside agencies up to 12% in this budget.

Cost shifts are part of those mandated services, and as no shock to anyone, the state and federal government never seem to shift the costs back to them and away from us. That trend will only intensify as the years go on.

Due to federal legislation, we will be forced to take on more of the SNAP and HEAP payments which we have anticipated to the best of our ability and are reflected in this budget.

We have seen hard costs such as fuel, equipment and utilities remain high. Those lines across this budget total \$9.8 million.

We, like many others, have struggled to maintain our workforce, but for us the stakes are especially high. County government has many critical services to deliver, and we can't accomplish that without attracting and retaining the best workforce possible. We cannot do that without competitive salaries. Our collective bargaining agreements now reflect that reality by compensating positions accordingly and therefore reducing our vacancies. These are more hard choices, but essential ones to make as we solidify this government and community for future generations.

It is vital that this budget reflects the priorities that continue to move this community forward.

In my State of the County address, we announced the Home Forward Investment Fund. The fund is part of a comprehensive approach towards implementing our Housing Market Inventory and Assessment Plan and reaching our goal of 6,000 new units by 2040.

The opportunities to reach that goal are there. Chobani is coming online and will be employing over 1,200 people. The investment in Marcy is continuing in order to attract more companies to join Wolfspeed and Danfoss. The plan to redevelop St. Luke's is progressing. Growth is here and we need the housing to match it.

I want to discuss actions coming for 2027 that are necessary to achieve our goals. We need to capitalize on every opportunity to create more housing. Our housing plan outlines 50 action items and identifies dozens of state and federal initiatives that have hundreds of programs that are a complicated web of regulations, deadlines and funding opportunities.

Today, I'm announcing three sets of actions to capitalize on these opportunities. This will begin a larger discussion for 2027 with this Board regarding housing in Oneida County.

First, I have tasked our County Attorney, Planning Commissioner, Economic Development Director, Workforce Development Director, DFCS Commissioner, as well as President of MVCC Randy VanWagoner, to develop a housing division within the Planning Department.

Second, as we work through those details, in this budget, I have placed \$2 million in a restricted fund in order to implement these changes once this team has finished their work in early 2027.

Third, I will convene a meeting this fall with our cities, towns and villages to reinforce the principles we set forth in the guidebook we provided them to erase barriers to housing development. We will also educate them on the IDA's new housing policy that incentivizes all types of housing including single family units.

These are crucial first steps, but from all our work done to date in relation to housing, one thing was always clear, the Home Forward Investment Fund remains critical to this process. While it is not in this budget, I also want to be clear, a substantial capital investment is necessary to reach these goals. That's why we need this new path. We must be able to invest in a variety of items that are barriers to housing creation. Last mile infrastructure for new developments, housing stabilization in our existing neighborhoods, matching opportunities for state and federal programs all involve an impact investment.

We have the plan. We now will have the team inside county government and then we will need long-term financial investment.

This budget will continue to address the ramp up efforts we have seen in Oneida Square and throughout the community to address homelessness.

We are taking a holistic approach. The action we took in Oneida Square and other areas is essential to the public health and safety of our community but there is real cost. Our experience in these efforts has shone a light in how we deal with this issue. We must continue to examine what we do from every angle.

We have sustained our commitment to our partner agencies including allocations for Cornell Cooperative Extension, Mohawk Valley EDGE, our humane societies and our libraries, as well as Mohawk Valley Community College.

This budget includes \$27 million for our Water Pollution Plant, \$24 million for the county road fund and \$15 million for economic development.

How do we do all this and continue to keep the levy at zero? Again, by making hard choices. By being smart, efficient and relying on the experience and expertise of our department heads and workforce.

There are still tough financial times ahead due to decisions beyond our control, but that doesn't mean we do nothing. County governments have obligations and responsibilities that no other governments have. And ours continue to grow while others simply do not. It isn't because they don't want to do more or choose to do less, although both those scenarios may be true, it's because we are charged to do more by law, reality and common sense.

This budget reflects those realities. We have responsibilities that other municipalities do not have:

- Law Enforcement & Corrections: \$60 million
- Medicaid: \$57 million
- Public Works: \$40 million
- Public Health & Mental Health: \$32 million
- Emergency Services: \$9 million
- Aging & Veterans Services: \$8.5 million

And that's just to name a few.

When I began this address, I spoke about the number of times I have come before this body and the people of Oneida County to present a budget. If you forgot, it has been 20 times.

In each of those times, my focus, while on the present, had the never-ending sight on the future of our collective home. Each budget was centered on delivering the very best services to our residents while keeping their share of the burden as low as possible. Each budget had an eye to the future of what we could and would become.

Yes, we have the challenges of the State and Federal governments to deal with. Yes, we have had our share of economic and nature-driven storms. Those are realities that in each case we have little or no chance to either control or avoid. In every instance we could have folded under pressure and taken multiple steps back, or we could have chartered a course of growth and prosperity that could propel us forward. Wisely, we took the latter.

The Oneida County of today is better, stronger and more fiscally sound than it was 20 years ago. Because we made the hard choices. Because we focused on the future, not the past.

Our success is not by chance. It is by the laying of a foundation of progress not procrastination. By advancement, not avoidance. And by reason, not regret.

Twenty times I have presented this budget.

Twenty times where hard choices were made.

Twenty times where our focus was on the future and never on the past.

I'm proud of this budget and stand by all the difficult choices we have made to get here.

I'm proud of the progress we have made together and will continue to make into the future.

The path forward has never been brighter, and we will face our current challenges, and new ones, as we always have — head on and together.

In the coming weeks, this budget will be given a thorough review. My administration is eager and available to answer any and all of your questions.

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