



## **State of Cortland County Address**

**June 12, 2014**

Good evening and thank you for attending tonight to be part of the 2014 State of the County Address. I begin tonight by greeting my fellow legislators, County Administrator Martin Murphy, County Attorney Karen Howe, our media representatives and guests. I want to thank the members of the Legislature for allowing me the opportunity to serve as your chairperson for this two year term. It is an honor and a privilege.

The state of our county is strong with a cohesive and cooperative Legislature, and secure with a solid financial base. In the short six months of 2014 much has already been achieved, however, many obstacles must be overcome in the upcoming budget years to retain the stable situation that we find ourselves in today. We are faced with many uncertainties that are beyond our control. New York State continues to become more demanding on counties to fund State programs with little or no mandate relief. This has put a great strain on addressing the needs of our citizens and the fiscal health of our County. Our public transit system is just one recent example of public services that have been compromised by State mandate. We are having discussions with our state representatives now to address this concern.

In 2012 the Governor instituted a 2% property tax cap. To date the County has approved budgets under the mandated cap, despite annual increases in employment contracts, health insurance and retirement costs and other state mandates that exceed a 2% increase. But, staying under that cap has come at a cost. Fewer employees and reduced local services are a direct result of bare bones budgeting, and this process will need to continue as we strive to use limited taxpayer money in the most efficient way possible.

Over time, we have increasingly become more of an arm of the state government, and less of a local purpose government. In fact, state-mandated, state-regulated, but locally administered programs consume nearly 90 percent of the total county property tax levy. This leaves the County to provide services based on very limited and unpredictable revenue sources such as sales and mortgage taxes.

What is needed is relief from unfunded state mandates that for decades burden county taxpayers. This must be accomplished either through a reduction or elimination in the mandates or through the State funding them. As opportunities arise I encourage this legislature to take an active role and send a

message to Albany. We have, and can continue to do this by approving resolutions in opposition to mandated programs and costs; by contacting our state representatives and informing our constituents and encouraging them to do the same.

As Chair of the Legislature I have appointed an outstanding leadership team of Committee Chairs who, with our County Department Heads will help develop and carry out a vision for this County. This year the Legislature approved a Mission Statement for its self which sets goals for us to achieve and a Philosophy to abide by for which we can rely on as important issues face us.

I wish to thank Majority Leader Donnell Boyden and Minority Leader Sandy Price, who have taken a much more active role this year assisting me to lead this legislature in that philosophy which is one that is open, communicative and transparent amongst its members and the public. It was my vision when asked to be your Chairman that the role of Chairman is one of facilitator not one of sole decision maker and also the belief that it is our established committee system as the best way to get the work of the people's business done and that the strength of that system be restored for now and for future leadership. This we believe ensures solid decision making on the very important business in front of us.

We have been confronted with very serious issues in a short 6 months and I believe that this policy that we support has proved and will continue to show that we, as a whole, recognize the issues, discuss them and react to them in an open and timely fashion.

We will tackle very shortly the discussion of compensation for ourselves. I have asked the personnel committee, with Sandy Price as Committee Chair, to bring forth a proposal that is fair to our members and ever mindful of the taxpayers who support our budget. I personally support and have in the past been vocal regarding this issue. Our legislators are at the very bottom of salaries across the state but the issues we are faced with, the time commitment we serve, the dedication we provide is by far, no less than any other county in this State.

This year, the Legislature has tackled a question that has plagued the County for more than a decade, namely, how much money should be kept in our reserves. After countless hours of debate, and scrutiny of the standing policy, and under the leadership of Budget & Finance Chair Kevin Whitney, it was determined that the policy enacted in 2004 should remain intact, allowing for a 10% fund balance of the entire County Budget. Having made this difficult decision allows this Legislature to determine when and how essential projects will be funded, and provides our budget officer direction as to how to prepare the upcoming 2015 budget.

A longstanding concern that is being addressed this year and I call upon this legislature that it be resolved in our term, is the County's Solid Waste program. Under the leadership of Tom Hartnett, Solid Waste Chairman, the committee is determined to continue pursuing a decision from the previous Legislature which is the proposed partnership with Onondaga County namely "Ash For Trash" while at the same time looking at all options to address the concerns they have in the operation of this department. The safety and stability of the environment is a priority in the decision making on this issue. We have supported a full environmental impact study of this proposal in order to make sound

decisions based on science and fact. The Department of Environmental Conservation continues to push recycling; food composting and other much needed solid waste initiatives. If proven to be environmentally sound, this partnership may put Cortland County in a position to provide education and outreach to constituents to increase recycling and reduce municipal solid waste.

Additionally Legislators are very concerned regarding this department's long standing financial strain on the budget and their goal is to achieve at the very least a cost neutral position with the least amount of investment of additional taxpayer money to achieve that goal.

To be clear to the public, this Legislature has not signed a written contract with Onondaga County for Ash for Trash. What we have committed to is the research, both environmental and financial, to determine if this project is one that we can fully support. That decision will be coming most likely prior to the end of the year. And I encourage the citizens of this county to become informed on this subject through our many meetings and public comment periods, our web site or through your Legislative representative.

Another costly issue in recent years has been our County jail. Last year more than \$250,000 was spent housing out inmates because our jail was full. However, just last week renovations were completed at the jail that will not only relieve the County of excessive housing and transportation costs, but may actually generate revenue by housing inmates from neighboring counties. While this is great news, it is a temporary situation. As drug arrests continue to rise, our jail will soon be full again. So JPS Chair Dick Bushnell and his committee are proactively working with our Sheriff and security personnel to evaluate options for the future of our jail.

Speaking of the rise in drug arrests in our county I call on our State Government leaders to put the war on drugs a top priority by enacting laws that are harsh and enforceable and that will curtail the sale and use of methamphetamine and heroin in our State.

It is this Legislature's duty to ensure not only the safety of our residents, but that of our employees as well. As proven in recent years by the horrific shootings around the country, even as close as Binghamton, it is essential that our employees and residents utilizing the County's facilities have a safe and secure atmosphere to conduct business. We will resolve this issue during our term by establishing a system of security for the County Office Building and providing a safer environment.

In February the County successfully went live with our new Interoperable Communications System, a project years in the making, that is now providing better communications among first responders, highway, health and other officials. With more and better communications comes a need to improve data collection and records management. For many years the County has suffered with a complex and inadequate Computer Aided Dispatch System. This Legislature has made a decision to cut ties with the software company that has plagued our county for years, investing \$1 million of which more than half of that amount likely will be funded through State grants, and instead in a company that has proven successes. The JPS Committee along with our Department of Emergency Communications and Information Technology have proven essential in this project and in allowing our Sheriff's Department to do the job they are meant to do in an effective manner.

Our Highway Department is one of the few non-mandated expenditures this county has, but is one that is essential for our quality of life. Three years ago the County committed to funding \$1.6 million of road, bridge and culvert repairs each year. We are still on track to do that, just last month approving culvert projects on East Keeney Road and Young's Crossing, among others. The county highway department maintains 248 miles of county roads, 60 bridges and 121 large culverts and we will continue the commitment to our highways under the leadership of Donnell Boyden, Highway Chairman, to maintain the facilities that are so vital to the community. With the departure of our Highway Superintendent, I have asked this legislature to do an audit of this department so that our new department head will be assured that the policies and procedures in place are proper, in the best interest of the public and supported by this Legislature. I believe this practice is prudent also to safeguard the financial practices of this department and should be a regular course of business for all of our departments when a change in leadership occurs. Our Rules of Order dictate that a committee be formed to recommend a candidate to the position of Highway Superintendent. I can assure the public that the committee has done their due diligence and hopefully very soon the committee will have a candidate to be presented to the Legislature for approval.

Highways are not our only non-mandated and thus underfunded department. The Building & Grounds department has developed a long-term capital improvement plan, and this Legislature will consider the recommendations. Moderate expenses today can help avoid large costs in the future, as proven by the need to reconstruct our parking lots, a project that we hope to complete during this two-year term of the Legislature. Extensive and potentially expensive work still needs to be done on the court house, and other buildings and this legislature is committed to finding the best and most cost efficient way of keeping our buildings safe and presentable. New window replacements in the county gymnasium and 37 Church Street have already been completed this year, and security enabled doors are currently being installed in the County Office Building. That is a step in the right direction.

The building and grounds department should be commended for their work in my vision of redesigned chambers. My hope is that the design will allow for the public in attendance to better view our proceedings and therefore be more informed and for our members to better debate the issues before them.

The long debated question of conflict attorney administration will be resolved this term and possibly this year I believe. With dedication and determination to resolve this issue legislators will hear a proposal from the Bar Association this week. I am delighted that this Legislature will have the opportunity to hear all sides of this issue openly. I am convinced we will make the right decision because of it.

As we prepare for the 2015 budget season we must look at every service and every department as we are faced with the very real possibility of reducing or eliminating programs. We must also look at ways to increase revenues so as to not further burden the taxpayer. I have asked our budget officer to provide for earlier budgeting and so our budget process will begin earlier this year, with a focus on allowing the Legislature time to evaluate all budgeting options, and get a 2015 budget out prior to

elections. Next year with the continued cooperation of the County Administrator who is our budget officer we will have a new plan and procedure in place for budgeting.

We have a lot of work ahead of us that will require diligence, patience and a willingness to compromise. I, as well as the rest of the citizens in Cortland County, am depending on my fellow legislators and department heads to make difficult decisions that will allow the county to continue to provide the high quality of life that Cortland County offers and its residents deserve.

Being elected to office in local government is a great honor, one that few people appreciate and even fewer are willing to take on for themselves. Work hard for your constituents and take pride in what you do. As we take on the challenges that face us in the year to come, let us remember the words of President John F. Kennedy, who said "Let us not seek the Republican answer or the Democrat answer, but the right answer. Let us not seek to fix the blame for the past. Let us accept our own responsibility for the future." Thank you all for your dedication to our great community, and I look forward to facing the many challenges we face together as a team.

Thank you

Susan Briggs