



## **State of Cortland County Address**

**July 28, 2016**

Good evening, it is my pleasure to update you on the State of Cortland County. I begin tonight by greeting my fellow legislators, Department Heads, our media representatives and guests. I want to thank the members of the Legislature for the continued support and opportunity to serve as your chairman.

The first seven months of this year have been extremely busy as the Legislature works to tackle longstanding problems in the County. The problems include the overcrowded aging County jail, losses in the County Solid Waste program, aging infrastructure, and the safety and security of our county buildings. These issues come as the County grapples with diminished resources and an ever shrinking property tax cap.

The Legislature has been struggling with the best direction to move in with regard to the jail for many years now. Prior studies have pointed out the deficiencies in the current facility including overcrowding, antiquated design, and limited space to provide required services. New York State has patiently waited while the Legislature determines which direction to pursue, but that good will and patience is wearing thin.

Legislators continue to work toward advancing a solution to the jail problem but have been met with stiff resistance. Many Legislators have concerns with respect to the scope of the project, the cost, and the best location for a new jail. I join my fellow Legislators in those thoughtful and justified concerns.

The Legislature's Solid Waste Committee continues to discuss the best solutions to meet our resident's solid waste disposal needs while providing some relief to the already overburdened taxpayers. The County landfill has the ability to generate revenue for this County and I firmly believe that it should. Recently members of the committee toured a neighboring landfill facility and based on that review I expect we will see some proposals coming forth soon to begin to address the on-going financial losses and equipment needs at the landfill.

For too long the leaders of this county have failed to adequately maintain our aging facilities and infrastructure and over the past few years the Legislature has been working to catch-up on a long list of repairs. Our County roads are in much better shape than they have been in a number of years due to

our aggressive 10 year road and bridge capital program. Last year alone the County invested nearly \$8 million dollars in highway projects including the replacement of the Little York Lake Dam. Planning is also underway to maximize use of the Cortland County airport, some short-term investments in the airport will position Cortland County to be more attractive to companies that may wish to expand locally or for businesses that might look to relocate to our County.

Speaking of facilities now is the time to turn our attention to our historic and aging buildings. No doubt you are aware of the failing steps at the county Courthouse and the dilapidated cupola that sits atop our County Office building. These are two obvious examples of the disrepair our buildings are in. I plan to ask the Buildings and Grounds Committee to work with our Budget Officer to develop a similar 10 year capital program that will begin to address the long overdue maintenance in our facilities and better position this County to tap into State and federal resources to help offset these costly but necessary projects.

I am proud that the Legislature has authorized a project that will harness the savings of reduced energy consumption in our facilities in order to fund energy efficient repairs and improvements in our buildings. Aging drafty windows will be replaced in the Courthouse. New energy efficient lighting will be installed, as well more efficient heating and cooling systems along with other measure which will reduce the county's energy usage, save money, and minimize our carbon footprint.

The Department of Social Services' budget continues to trend in a favorable direction with the number of children in foster care remaining low and cash assistance caseloads remaining level in 2016. However, we should not be complacent in accepting the mandates put on counties without adequate state and federal funding. Counties are required to provide the Safety Net cash assistance program by New York State, but the State only funds 29% of the program costs. Safety Net costs are projected to be slightly lower than in 2015, but that amount is still \$2,521,000 with \$1,790,000 of it being paid directly by Cortland County tax payers. Despite promises from New York State for relief in the Medicaid burden the cost to the County is still nearly ten million dollars. Medicaid is still the largest single program impact on our tax levy.

Indigent defense expenses also continue to burden the County. A recent change in the income eligibility guidelines for those individuals seeking taxpayer funded legal counsel has increased the caseload in both the Public Defender and Assigned Counsel offices. While every individual accused of a crime deserves adequate legal representation the costs of providing the mandated service are outstripping the taxpayer's ability to fund them.

In 2015 the Legislature moved to eliminate the County Auditor position and created the Office of Budget and Finance. This change in structure and operations reflects the increasingly complex and expanded role of our fiscal operations. I'm proud to report that we paid down \$2 million dollars in debt toward the emergency communications project and in doing so we were able to restore previously committed sales tax dollars back to our municipal partners who supported the communications upgrade.

This Legislature continues to receive criticism for not filling the vacant County Administrator position, I'm pleased to report that despite the lack of a full time administrator this Legislature has been able stay within the State mandated property tax cap and has continued to maintain all current levels of service while increasing the County fund balance to nearly \$15 million dollars. I attribute this success to a committed Legislature, hardworking Department heads and a thorough budget office.

As we head into the second half of this year I look forward to working with this body to meet the challenges that we face and working together to make the tough choices that our voters have elected us to make. I thank-you for your dedication to your office and your willingness to serve on behalf of Cortland County.

Thank you

Donnell Boyden, Chair  
Cortland County Legislature