

Tomorrow: We Choose to be Optimists

The State of the County

February 27, 2019

Tomorrow. The word itself evokes hope. It suggests opportunity and conveys the need to be kinder, better. While, tomorrow is when some might put off the challenges of today, for us – for me – it is about coming together like never before to forge meaningful connections and solve the problems of our day. For an individual living with addiction, it is another chance to get the help they need. For those differently abled, it is one more opportunity to break down barriers. For moms and dads, it's the certainty that their children are one day closer to their own successes. For the entrepreneur and farmer, tomorrow is another day to proudly proclaim we are open for business!

The Dutchess County of tomorrow depends on the choices we all make today. In Dutchess, we build our future plank by plank, brick by brick – carefully, deliberately – not because there is time to waste, but because a strong foundation allows one to build higher, to bridge greater divides, to reach our most lofty aspirations, and withstand the test of time.

Eight years ago, we began restoring the county's financial strength while easing the burden on hardworking taxpayers. Together with the County Legislature, we have controlled spending, replenished our fund balance, consolidated government and cut property taxes each of the last five years. An aggressive new approach to community and economic development has led to growth in our tax base – all securing us the highest bond rating of any county in New York State. And we continue delivering critical services to our residents while shouldering the burden of state-imposed mandates.

From working with the City of Poughkeepsie to nurture the "Innovation Quad," to protecting precious natural resources such as Lake Walton, to expanding treatment options for those struggling with addiction, we will push bold initiatives in 2019 and move forward with other projects already firmly started.

Dutchess County isn't only metaphorically building our future, we are quite literally building for the future by smartly investing today. Over the past eight years we've committed to maintaining roads and bridges; dramatically improving workspaces for our dedicated employees; adding to the character of the neighborhoods where our facilities are located; and acting purposefully to better serve our residents. Simultaneously, we are working to become a Clean Energy Community and expect certification as a Climate Smart Community next year.

Our newly constructed Law Enforcement Center is a modern and efficient new space – adding to the neighborhood, improving public access, expanding training space – and it is a service-oriented adaptive reuse of a former manufacturing building, now a modern law enforcement center. The same commitment to service-based design is being used for the Justice and Transition Center, saving taxpayers money, creating better and safer work conditions for our corrections officers, and more room for programming, designed to truly help those in our care.

Construction to improve our Hudson Valley Regional Airport is underway. Our Department of Planning and Development has already moved to new, more connected offices in the Poughkeepsie Journal Building, a month ahead of schedule. We are building a new state-of-the-art Emergency Training Center, offering training and shared service opportunities for emergency responders. We've built a more welcoming entrance to the Department of Community and Family Services; functional office space for our public defenders and their clients; and we are improving the Farm & Home Center in Millbrook. We welcome seniors to our new integrated Office for the Aging offices and Friendship Center, and made significant parking lot repairs, road restoration, bridge replacement, and we are even building a modern parking attendant booth at the County Office Building for Me!

We are creating spaces to enhance the work of our County employees and experience of those we work for: you, the residents of Dutchess County.

We are not alone in our investment; the county is in the midst of a construction boom. Cranes and scaffolding are rising throughout Dutchess with over \$2.9 billion in construction projects and \$1.2 billion in development, adding to our tax base and providing high-paying jobs. This investment is due, in part, to our strong economy, highlighted by the lowest unemployment rate in 17 years and 15 consecutive months of private-sector job growth, outperforming the region, state, and nation!

Behind the data and sustained trends is the hard work of our economic development alliance, Th!nk Dutchess, helping local businesses grow and attracting new companies and new industries from around the state and the world. A year ago, we announced our “Innovation Quad,” an unprecedented agreement between Marist College, Dutchess Community College, Vassar College, and IBM, to cultivate a Start-Up Ecosystem where companies can leverage existing science and technology resources and expertise. Last month, the City of Poughkeepsie adopted innovation district zoning. This, in combination with the City’s designation as a federal Opportunity Zone, the Innovation Quad, and our partnership to establish a land bank, will attract new jobs, new investment, and inspiring new innovation.

One of the most exciting developments this year, located within the Quad, is IBM’s decision to establish the world’s first Q Commercial Quantum Computation Center in Poughkeepsie. This center will bring research and development opportunities, universities, and Fortune 500 companies to Dutchess County to perform the most advanced computations in the world. In addition, their Z mainframe, made in Poughkeepsie, is driving IBM’s revenues – once again making Dutchess a highly strategic location for the corporation.

In East Fishkill, GlobalFoundries is now making chips for the latest cellular mobile communications running on 5G technology, with plant production expected to reach capacity levels.

iPark, another example of our successful innovation centers, will be home to five new companies, including four manufacturers; two of them, Crepini and Country Produce, both attracted from Brooklyn, will create 200 new jobs, adding to our burgeoning food and beverage industry.

Our hosts today, the Culinary Institute of America, along with Dutchess Tourism and Th!nk Dutchess, will host a food and beverage conference for agri-businesses and food and beverage manufacturers throughout the Northeast, further solidifying Dutchess County as the epicenter of the food and beverage industry.

To feed our dynamic economy and ensure all residents are reaping its rewards, we are focusing on creating a more skilled workforce, by closing the skills gap and creating pipelines to jobs.

Our Alliance for Business, with the anticipated receipt of a \$400,000 grant, will expand our summer youth jobs program, providing a path to greater opportunity, success, and mobility. Our \$1.7 million increase this year in support to Dutchess Community College, with the lowest community college tuition in the State, is providing students the opportunity to gain necessary skills at a reasonable price. Community colleges are the institutions of our moment, making education and experiences attainable today, and opportunity and success achievable tomorrow.

A tight labor market due to near full-employment requires us to proactively train the next generation of skilled workers to meet the growing needs of our employers.

Construction of the College's new aviation education hangar at our Hudson Valley Regional Airport will begin this summer. The new facility will host a 12-month, intensive Airframe and Powerplant Certificate program, providing students in-demand skills for high-paying jobs. DCC is planning to relocate its southern campus to the former Dutchess Mall in Fishkill and partner with the Council of Industry to co-locate its headquarters at the new Dutchess South and build a regional manufacturing training center.

While creating new paths to employment, we must also remove barriers to work. Access to affordable childcare is an impediment to both growing and entering the workforce. The high cost of childcare in New York State, rivaling a mortgage payment, means going back to work is too often a net financial loss for families. Across the nation, roughly \$8.2 billion is lost in wages every year due to inadequate access to child care. To remove this barrier, we will bring together providers, business leaders, and community partners throughout the county to identify needs and develop solutions.

We will also leverage public dollars and encourage employers to help expand childcare capacity. Access to high-quality childcare, which is really high-quality childhood education, can significantly improve the life of a child, give parents peace of mind, and have positive effects on the economy. From Day One, let's give kids a better chance of success, parents a real choice about the future of their families, and businesses access to a talented and more diverse workforce.

The opportunities for growth and investment are everywhere. Two HBO series are filming in Dutchess County, and Marist College will host a boot camp developed by Stockade Works to train workers for these projects. Last year, the first stand-alone, co-working space in the county opened in Rhinebeck; and nearby, Unlimited Tomorrow, a high-tech startup, plans to shake up the global prosthetics industry. Joining us tonight are entrepreneurs Easton LaChappelle and Sean Jones of Unlimited Tomorrow. Within their repurposed space in Rhinebeck, Easton and Sean are using innovation as a tool to change people's lives by choosing to create affordable, lifelike advanced artificial limbs, with one of only six of Hewlett Packard's most advanced 3D printers in the world.

Another pair of innovators, Dana Jones and Jacob Ernst, launched their own new business, Accessdoor, using app-based technology to break down barriers by making doors more accessible for those with disabilities. In fact, their innovation was being put to use on the doors as you entered the theater tonight; and the CIA, Marist, Dana's alma-mater, DCC, and Dutchess County Government will provide access to their app on doors and entries as part of their beta-testing the technology.

These are but two companies creating jobs and adding to our innovation-driven economy while working in the spirit of ThinkDIFFERENTLY to improve the lives of those living with disabilities. Businesses that not only add to our economy, but to our sense of community, will always be celebrated in Dutchess.

We have a great story to tell, and who better to tell it than Dutchess Tourism and its leader, Mary Kay Vrba?

Because of their hard work and record county investment in tourism, visitor spending has continued to increase to over \$600 million in 2017, coming from nearly 5 million visitors from every corner of the world. Tourism remains an economic powerhouse, providing more than 11,000 jobs, generating \$332 million of income and \$43 million in local sales tax revenue. Dutchess Tourism's work to attract film projects like last year's smash hit and award-winning "A Quiet Place;" promotion of our breweries, wineries, and cideries; and its efforts to publicize and organize events in Dutchess County like our summer concerts, the return of the Dutchess County Marathon and ThinkDIFFERENTLY Dash, and the 2019 International Women's Leadership Conference speak to all we have to offer visitors and what we have come to cherish as residents.

There is much to be excited about: new business, new visitors, new development, and new jobs. Today's successes lay the foundation for tomorrow's opportunities.

A changing economy is bearing fruit for many, but an evolving market – in combination with changing times, shifting norms, and the constant presence of technology and social media – is, in many ways, pulling us away from our families, friends, and communities. We won't slow progress but we must remain committed to bridging the divides created by unintended consequences and to reweaving the social fabric binding us together.

The solution is for us all to commit ourselves to healing the pains so prevalent in our modern society: isolation and loneliness, lack of self-worth and purpose, distrust and doubt, anxiety and anger. These pains, as David Brooks of *The New York Times* so eloquently put it, all "...share a common thread: our lack of healthy connection to each other, our inability to see the full dignity of each other, and the resulting culture of fear, distrust, tribalism, shaming and strife."

We must be bridge builders, healers of this pain. We must be weavers of our social fabric by taking the time and making the effort to connect with others, affirm their worth, and extend them respect. Together, let us strengthen the associations and networks which connect us all: family, church, community, book clubs, and bowling leagues. We must grow the webs of relationships that form the foundation of our society and allow us to build the capacity to overcome challenges, achieve our collective goals and bounce back from tragedy.

Dutchess County's role is clear: create spaces and opportunities where people can connect, heal, and provide strength to each other. Our Commission on Human Rights is building the bonds of community and trust through listening sessions and "100 Cups of Coffee" transformative dialogues. The Medical Reserve Corps, a part of a national network coordinating community preparedness, giving volunteers from the community the opportunity to learn and better serve their fellow residents.

The Office for the Aging is keeping seniors connected to their communities and one another. The Department of Community and Family Services is strengthening families by recruiting mentors for foster youth, training volunteers to coach parents and caregivers while they visit their children in foster care, and moving children out of institutional care back to their families. This unprecedented reduction in institutional placements is life-changing for families and children and is the envy of New York.

Our Division of Veterans Services is connecting veterans to peer support and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with them – honoring their sacrifice, ensuring they receive their hard-earned benefits, and aiding those in need. The division recently began engaging military veterans in the criminal justice system, connecting them to services, including Mental Health America's Vet2Vet Peer Support Program – proving no matter where our veterans are, we will find a way to help and support them. (Recognize Veterans)

In 2019, our Resiliency Council, doing valuable work to prevent suicide, will broaden its scope and bring together volunteers, stakeholders, and government officials to find ways to build community resilience, correct the ills of social fragmentation, and invest in our social fabric.

We will also set out on an ambitious effort to curtail homelessness. The face of homelessness has changed with time; and with that comes the challenge of serving those with different expectations, needs and hardships. I have asked Dutchess County's homelessness and housing service providers to convene with County and local government to reimagine, redesign, and reinvigorate how we deliver services to those homeless in our county.

Further, we will strive to reduce the length of stay of individuals in emergency housing by prioritizing the placement of high-risk clients, and enhance our shelter services by embedding mental health professionals. We

will better educate local municipalities about the importance of and need for affordable housing, seek to incentivize a more accessible housing stock; and Dutchess County will fight to end source of income discrimination. We will advocate in Albany for programs designed to prevent individuals from losing their homes. The foundation of a community is having a place to call home, and there are too many one paycheck away from losing theirs and so many others one paycheck away from housing stability. Dutchess County will fight for them all.

We will make it our mission to help those struggling, provide those who have wandered astray a light to guide them home, and strive to catch others before they have fallen too far. I know this is who we are as a community. It is up to us to be certain this is how we live: neighbors and friends leaning on each other for support.

And know this: You can always look to us in County Government and the leaders of your city, town, or village; we are here, we have your back – because we are woven together with the same thread, bearing the same burdens, working for the same tomorrow.

The strength of our social fabric and our ability to solve problems will always be tested and is now facing its greatest challenge, the public health crisis of our lifetime: the opioid epidemic. Right now, as we sit here tonight, there is a person who someone loves and is worried about – a parent, sibling, spouse, or child – sending anxious text messages, rummaging through a medicine cabinet, or walking the streets, all searching for a substance to provide them relief from a disease, from a persistent need gnawing at them.

The path to addiction was more likely than not complicated. It may have started with some prescription painkillers following knee surgery; a struggle to quiet a mind and body in conflict with an undiagnosed mental health disorder; or an attempt to escape the hardships of trauma. Whatever the path, reason, or cause, in Dutchess County, we have one solemn and sacred duty above all others: to save lives.

For the first time in U.S. history, Americans are more likely to die from an opioid-related overdose than a motor vehicle accident – let that fact sink in. In 2018, there were 93 accidental overdoses in Dutchess County – far too large a loss of human life and potential. Increasingly these deaths are related to the use of fentanyl often in combination with other drugs. The data can be numbing, and the sheer size and scope of the problem can lead many to turn away in horror, disgust, or hopelessness. But we will not ignore this epidemic, nor the lives it impacts. We accept the challenge to open minds and hearts, and show that our empathy has no limits, our commitment no bounds, and our willingness to try and try again no end.

Our “Breaking Through” initiative is reaching people from all walks of life, circumstances, and levels of need by making meaningful connections, restoring hope, reducing stigma, and providing treatment and support. A \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice will allow us to increase access to information and strengthen our community’s capacity to respond in real-time; identify people and communities most in need; target resources; direct law enforcement efforts; and track substances that present an immediate threat to public health.

Our strategy is organized around serving two broad populations: “those we know,” individuals in institutional care, often the County Jail, or with consistent interaction with the County’s programs; and “those we don’t know,” individuals in the community suffering in silence, in need of help, but afraid to ask.

We have long recognized the importance of the criminal justice system as an intercept for those living with addiction, so we are building on our current efforts by filling gaps, linking programs, and expanding treatment. This year, to serve “those we know,” individuals with a history of substance use will be evaluated, counseled, and connected with services at every level of interaction – the courts, probation, the county jail, and re-entry to the community.

We are also expanding Medication Assisted Treatment, or M.A.T., in our jail – combining counseling and therapy with approved medications, enabling those living with addiction to fully function while managing cravings and the symptoms of withdrawal. Similar efforts in other states resulted in a 61 percent drop in opioid overdose deaths among those recently incarcerated. We are also overhauling our inmate discharge planning and counseling with a focus on connecting individuals with treatment and other supports in the community upon release. We will wrap services around these individuals from their first interaction with the criminal justice system, throughout rehabilitation, and upon re-entry to the community. We have a responsibility to help individuals in our care, and treating them can stem the cycle of arrests and provide an opportunity to live a healthy and crime-free life while creating a safer environment for all.

To serve “those we don’t know,” we must employ a different method, focused on connecting with people where they are. Recognizing pharmacies as a critical point of contact, we are educating local pharmacists on the importance of M.A.T., reducing stigma and increasing access to Narcan. Three community pharmacists have played a pivotal role in this effort – we thank them for their commitment to their profession, their customers, and their community.

We are also building partnerships with local hospital emergency departments by connecting patients in need of help with county resources, and enhancing emergency departments’ ability and willingness to initiate M.A.T. To create alternatives to institutional care, we are training doctors and nurse practitioners in the prescription of medications to treat and manage opioid use disorder. Pharmacists, doctors, and other health professionals are on the front line of this epidemic; by building these relationships and supporting their role, we will prevent some from becoming addicted, find those in need of help, and connect them to proven treatments.

Tying these efforts together is our Stabilization Center, HELPLINE, recovery coaches, and the many other programs offered by the Department of Behavioral and Community Health. The Center, which handled over 3,000 visits in 2018, continues to add functionality, including offering access to Narcan training and kits on demand, 24/7. With the addition of a full-time prescriber, the Stabilization Center will offer certain Medication Assisted Treatments. HELPLINE continues to save lives, through crisis counseling and by connecting people to needed services.

One of our recovery coaches has helped nearly 80 percent of his clients reach the next stage of recovery. The resources and successes of the Center make it the hub of the County’s treatment and recovery efforts – a place to connect with people and treatment, begin your recovery and find hope.

To create spaces for people to heal and recover, Dutchess County will partner this year to offer new long-term recovery housing, providing another opportunity and resource to serve those in need of longer-term treatment.

We are treating the problem and working to prevent use and addiction, as well. Eleven of the county’s 13 school districts have implemented “Second Step,” our social-emotional learning program focused on empathy and communication skills, bullying prevention, problem-solving, and substance abuse prevention. In partnership with The Art Effect, we have created new outreach materials to be used on social and traditional media, aimed at reducing stigma and increasing awareness of the resources we offer.

“Breaking Through” is about ending the stigma and helping those struggling. It’s about building resiliency by giving everyone the capacity to help end this tragic epidemic. It is about saving lives. “Breaking Through” is about tomorrow – ensuring everyone has a chance to get better, fulfill their potential, and wake up in the morning with hope.

It is abundantly clear how important it is to set our children on a path to realizing their potential and fulfilling their promise. Our “Path to Promise” identifies the critical components, needed resources, and effective programs to begin our children on a path to stability, security, and success.

Over the last year, we engaged over 400 young people, along with dozens of stakeholders, parents, and providers. Through this intensive public process and analysis of programs serving youth, we have identified gaps and created a real action plan to give every child a chance to succeed.

Although one’s life will twist and turn through many obstacles, in the words of Plato, “The beginning is the most important part of any work,” just as it is the most important part of any journey. With 90 percent of brain growth and 85 percent of intellect, personality, and social skills development occurring before age 5, we can have the greatest long-term impact on a child’s life before they enter kindergarten; and that is where we will begin. We know the necessary skills, supports, and resources every child needs to flourish by learning from our service providers, caregivers, and young adults who have shared their shortcomings and success stories. With their help, we have created a roadmap to success and promise.

We will begin to implement the action plan, revitalize our Youth Coordinating Council, utilize data to track and measure outcomes, and create a user-friendly database to connect people with needed programs and resources. To lead this effort, we will hire an Assistant Commissioner for Youth Services to revolutionize how we deliver services to young people throughout our community.

Shaping the lives of our youth is an awesome responsibility; it is incumbent upon all of us to undertake this task with great care and consideration. As we build this path, we urge you to set the young people in your life – and we all have children in our lives – on a path to promise. Nurture and care for them. Shield them from trauma. Provide them access to learning opportunities. Read to them.

Literacy is the oar in the water pushing a child forward toward success; it enables them to be better informed, more empathetic, more aware, kinder. The themes, characters, and places within the pages of a book help shape who we are and who we think we can be. “Dutchess Reads” recognizes the intrinsic value of reading and brings together partners inside and outside of government to promote reading and literacy. Through this initiative, we have expanded Literacy Connections’ successful “Book Buddies” program to eastern Dutchess, hosted reading events and encouraged reading through our “Snow Many Books” winter reading initiative.

Our partnership with the Dutchess County SPCA invites children to read to shelter animals, building confidence; our lending libraries in County facilities and buses expand access to great books; and our participation in the “Kids Read: Children’s Book Festival,” being held by one of our Dutchess Reads partners, the Poughkeepsie Public Library District, will celebrate local authors, reading, and the importance of our community libraries.

And, each Monday at noon on the County’s Facebook and Twitter pages, you can learn a new word to sprinkle into conversation. To celebrate the State of the County, we are revealing a bonus Word of the Week tonight; the word is “resiliency,” the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

I take great personal pride in all the work we do, but I am especially proud of how in nearly every way, our community has taken up the challenge to ThinkDIFFERENTLY. We began this journey nearly four years ago and since have accomplished so much: appointing a Deputy Commissioner for Special Needs; providing “Autism Supportive Environment” training to local businesses and civic organizations; hosting the 2016 and 2017 Special Olympics New York State Winter Games; and partnering with Dutchess Community College for “Think Ahead,” providing young adults with disabilities job readiness skills and the opportunity to experience college life.

The enthusiasm for ThinkDIFFERENTLY has only grown with hundreds of residents attending our ongoing inclusive movies, baseball camps, and picnics, and thousands more finding new ways to break down barriers, confront the quiet prejudice of low expectations, and defend the human rights of every citizen regardless of what we perceive their ability to be.

Our efforts are having real results. The first “Think Ahead” class will graduate on May 16th alongside their DCC classmates, marking an end to their time in the program but the beginning of a life full of possibilities. And our own office has expanded to welcome our new intern, Giancarlo Ballon-Ribaudo, who is here tonight, already a valuable member of the County Executive’s team, as well as a “Think Ahead” student. Also joining us are Christine and Steven Snider, proud parents of Jamie, another “Think Ahead” student.

ThinkDIFFERENTLY.net, our award-winning website, launched a year ago has already seen 20,000 hits, helping families and individuals connect to critical resources. And, the Village of Rhinebeck, in partnership with the Anderson Center for Autism will become the first community in the region to become an Autism Supportive Community. We commend their leadership and commitment, and I challenge their 29 neighboring communities to join them and help Dutchess become the first in America to be an Autism Supportive County!

But don’t think we are stopping there. Dutchess County is pushing ahead with new efforts to increase the quality of life, expand opportunities, and enhance services for individuals living with disabilities and their families. Last year, we challenged employers to “Think Jobs” and create new employment opportunities. In 2019, we will help employees connect to these opportunities through the Workforce Investment Board’s One-Stop, serving as the point of entry for job-seeking residents with disabilities. We are partnering with the Dutchess County Bar Association to train family court attorneys on how to best serve individuals with disabilities and their families. We will be collaborating with local school districts to survey special-education classroom opportunities to better identify needs and barriers for students in K-12 special education.

And, this summer, Dutchess County will for the first time ever host the Special Olympics New York State Summer Games. Together, we will welcome over 1,800 athletes and their families from around New York. We will celebrate the spirit of competition and show the world what it means to ThinkDIFFERENTLY.

With all that’s being done, we will challenge ourselves to do even more. That’s why, in 2019, we will contract with New Horizons Resources for a Community Engagement Coordinator to reach out into the community – municipalities, local chambers of commerce – to increase the reach of ThinkDIFFERENTLY by encouraging education and planning for inclusive events.

ThinkDIFFERENTLY is not about a County program; it’s about what we all will do as, individuals and as a community, to build a future where people are judged not by their perceived ability, but by the content of their character, their capacity to persevere, and their ability to fulfill their greatest potential.

We decide what our tomorrow looks like by leading, hiring, and volunteering; by fighting to ensure individuals of all abilities have access to the support and opportunities they have a right to; and by being kind and treating those different from ourselves with the respect and dignity they deserve.

And together, we will build a universally accessible community, where people of all abilities have places to enjoy nature, play soccer, share a picnic, swim, and spend time with one another. Our parks offer these opportunities. But parks are so much more than just a place to pass a couple of hours, walk your dog, or play a game of disc golf. They are a critical component of our social infrastructure, connecting people and defining our sense of place.

In 2019, we will begin a historic expansion of County parks. With our new Comprehensive Plan as the framework for reimagining our parks system, we are updating facilities, adding features, and improving accessibility while developing ThinkDIFFERENTLY principles to ensure all parks in Dutchess County are open to everyone of every ability.

Construction at Quiet Cove was completed late last year, adding another waterfront deck, the ability to offer kayak rentals through an ADA accessible launch, and upgrades to parking and the historic naval boathouse. This spring, Dutchess Stadium will enter a new era and benefit from structural improvements and a much-needed facelift. With a New York State grant and county commitment, we are replacing seating, improving accessibility and making repairs to improve fan experience, enhance stadium safety and give our Hudson Valley Renegades an improved home and residents and visitors alike a comfortable and exciting place to watch a ballgame and make new memories.

We have never seen our parks as individual, standalone places; they fill gaps between all the beloved town, city, and neighborhood parks scattered throughout the county. But we seek to create a truly connected park system. Thanks to our partnership with Marist College, Scenic Hudson, and the Dyson Foundation, we will expand the Dutchess Rail Trail network to include a new urban trail system in the City of Poughkeepsie. We will connect parks, local businesses, restaurants, educational institutions, major development projects, and the Walkway Over the Hudson, now celebrating its 10th year as an international destination.

And, with the City of Beacon, we are taking the first steps toward a parallel trail line and shuttle service connecting Beacon to Main Street Fishkill and surrounding hotels and lodging. One day, perhaps, you may begin in Beacon walk or ride the trails to Quiet Cove, visit attractions in the City of Poughkeepsie, and hop on a train back. In the meantime, though, our rail trail system now plays a central role in the new Empire State Trail, making an invaluable connection between our own communities and others all the way to Buffalo.

Along the DRT, tucked away in the Town of East Fishkill, we are adding another exciting stop. The County is close to purchasing over 230 acres, at a reduced price, from Scenic Hudson for what will become the Lake Walton Preserve, the largest expansion of our park system in over 50 years. This property will allow us to preserve an ecologically unique wetland and create a universally accessible passive park focused on the lake's beauty. The Preserve will provide education on this special natural resource, connect yet another park to the Dutchess Rail Trail, and attract naturalists and visitors.

This project has been met with such enthusiasm, we will establish "Friends of the Preserve" to ensure we include members of the community, and that this exciting project creates a unique experience for individuals of every ability and protects a wonderful natural resource for all of our tomorrows.

Our parks offer so much, so enjoy maple syrup at Bowdoin; attend a concert at the bandshell overlooking the majestic Hudson River; take a stroll at Wilcox; hop on the Dutchess Rail Trail; and get ready for the expansion of the Harlem Valley Rail Trail, as we extend into Columbia County. Just as we are connecting our park system; our park system helps to connect all of us.

Learn more about our parks and everything else County government has to offer by visiting our newly redesigned county website, dutchessny.gov and later this year checkout our new mobile-friendly dutchess county parks and trails website to access trail maps and other important information.

Together, we have built a better and truly unique County with a solid fiscal foundation, dynamic economy, strong social connections, and solution-driven government. Our County today is stronger than ever – not free of

challenges, but more able to overcome them. Who we are today pales in comparison to who we can be tomorrow, if we choose to be optimists.

There will always be those who paint the future of America, and Dutchess County as part of it, with dark shades of gray pierced by searing crimson – the colors of decline, despair, and anger. But I choose to see and paint a future with pale greens, light blues, bright oranges, and soft yellows – the colors of dawn and dreams. Because what is America – and all the cities, towns, counties, and states that comprise it – if not a dream, a dream of a land where all are equal in the eyes of the law, where our common purpose unites us, and our diversity gives us strength? And what is this moment we live in, if not the morning, the precipice of a future full of challenges and struggle, of resilience and triumph, where we stand closer to realizing our dream, fulfilling our promise, and making a more perfect County?

This day will certainly be our best, our grandest and fullest celebration of hope, opportunity, and prosperity – only to be eclipsed by each to follow. We are not perfect, but we are energetic “triers,” defined by our willingness and eagerness to strive and toil for a better and brighter tomorrow – to build, rebuild, reform, and reimagine in hopes of creating a future which eclipses our past.

While others see only the creeping dark of twilight, we in Dutchess County see the beauty in dawn’s early light. We feel the pride in what we have accomplished; and in the dark, we search for the promise of tomorrow, when our lives will once again be graced by daybreak; when through the fading darkness, today meets tomorrow, and we together usher in Dutchess County’s best day yet.

Thank you. May God bless us, and may He bless Dutchess County and the United States of America.