

“We Will Get There – Together”

The State of the County

March 16, 2021

Since the last time I delivered this address, our nation, state, and community have faced unimaginable challenges and experienced indescribable loss. Our lives and the way we live have been turned upside down. It has been a year of turmoil, unrest, disease, and change. We have witnessed terrible events this year – over 400 of our neighbors taken from us too soon by COVID-19 – and felt the collective sadness of those who have lost – I know this firsthand – or are lost during these trying times. But we also saw people come together, help one another, and lift each other up, proving again: Even in the darkness, hope persists.

We felt this in the volunteers who organized food and other essentials for those in need. We heard it in the tired voices of healthcare workers – true heroes – who sacrificed and put their lives on the line to treat and heal the sick. And now, today, we see it in the faces of those in line to receive their first vaccine.

Throughout this year, I witnessed hope that came from the work we did as a county, to fill the breach, provide information, assistance, relief, supplies, and calm, consistent, capable leadership. We will never be perfect; but I am proud that when others were unreachable, this county government answered the call.

As personal protective equipment became scarce, the County was there to help local nursing homes, hospitals, and residences serving those with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

When people were scared and struggling to grasp this evolving disaster, we stepped in to inform, educate, and offer comfort.

As protecting the vulnerable became even more urgent, we provided emergency shelter for those experiencing homelessness, bringing together Hudson River Housing, Mental Health America, and Dutchess Outreach to provide meals, a safe space, substance-use counseling, and other centralized services.

When the pandemic exacerbated the opioid epidemic, and overdose deaths began to rise, we put in place life-saving interventions, putting our recovery coaches the ground and utilizing harm-reduction practices to reach into the community to meet people where they are and offer real help.

As the economic toll and shutdowns devastated local businesses, we stepped in with the Dutchess County Regional Chamber of Commerce and other partners to launch a notification network, keeping businesses up-to-date on shifting state requirements. We provided bridge loans and micro-grants, capped third-party delivery fees, and, with supervisors and mayors across Dutchess, cleared the way for outdoor dining.

When parents were struggling to access childcare, we set up a scholarship, helped coordinate referrals for frontline workers, expanded eligibility for childcare assistance, and made the rules more flexible for those working alternative shifts.

As families struggled to pay rent and electric bills, we allocated over \$1 million for housing stability and eviction prevention.

When our residents faced the dual threat of disease and isolation, we provided over 32,000 additional meals to seniors, coordinated vaccinations for those with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and pushed New York State to create safe protocols for family visitation in congregate care.

And with multiple safe and effective vaccines now available, 2021 is a year of renewed hope: Light meets the darkness, and we punch back! Vaccines are becoming more available, and your opportunity will come; make sure you take it. We are all ready to serve you.

This pandemic destroyed many businesses, crushing the hopes and dreams of far too many along the way. Even in the face of these challenges, our businesses showed such resilience and have helped us begin getting back on our feet. Today, our local economy is rebounding: a 9-percent drop in the County's unemployment rate since April; \$3.5 billion in construction projects and nearly \$1 billion in new development underway; news of Amazon heading to East Fishkill, bringing 500 new jobs; the expansion of ON Semiconductors and 150 additional jobs; and the continued success of IBM's Q commercial quantum computation center in Poughkeepsie. New housing projects, mixed-use developments, and small business innovation are all propelling us forward. With renewed demand and interest in Dutchess County, it is more important than ever to push for more investment, better-paying jobs, and greater access for all in our new economy.

Yet this race is not won, and challenges must still be overcome, but I am as optimistic as ever for what the future holds. I am hopeful because I believe in what we do and who we are – not only the great folks in County government, but our municipalities, leaders, and institutions. I believe in people – the people who call Dutchess home, the people who want to make this a freer, fairer, and healthier community.

So, before us all lies the work of rebuilding, retooling, and rising from this pandemic into a new era of progress, prosperity, and growth.

Meeting this goal depends on many factors, but maybe none so much as a well functioning and affordable housing market. In 2020, a record number of new apartments were built, with so many more on the way. However, the rental market remains tight with increasing prices. We simply need more and better housing options for every income level, from affordable rental units to family-sized homes. To frame this issue for localities and provide the impetus for change, we are updating our housing needs assessment, to better understand and inventory our existing housing stock and affordability levels. With this new data, we will develop new strategies to eliminate the gaps between what we have in housing and what people can afford.

The pressures of the housing market and economic fallout of the pandemic caused more people to struggle to afford housing and face housing instability and homelessness.

We are not only providing direct rental assistance to those in need, but the County, in cooperation with the United Way and other partners, is making it easier to access support by creating a single point of information for all eviction prevention programs. Tenants will now be able to dial 211 to receive customized support to meet their specific needs.

To better provide temporary housing and coordinated services, we will plan the development of a “temporary housing village.” Bringing our partners onto a single location with those in need of multiple support services will better prepare those facing homelessness for permanent housing by offering centralized job skills and personal finance training, substance-use and mental health counseling, and case management. Like the care we provide at our Stabilization Center, this will be a new model for intense support, getting those who struggle the most on a path to housing and personal independence.

We also take seriously our responsibility to work toward correcting historic wrongs and always commit ourselves to addressing the needs of *all* members of our community.

The tragic death of George Floyd spurred a national and local outcry for reform and racial justice and a call to action. In response, the County’s Sheriff Office, municipal leaders, and local law enforcement partnered with stakeholders and activists to engage the community, identify best practices and solutions, and continue our groundbreaking work to modernize and enhance community policing in Dutchess County. This coalition quickly acted to remove barriers to diversifying our law enforcement workforce, added procedural justice and implicit bias to our “first-in-the-nation” use of force, crisis intervention training, and mental health first-aid training. With our municipalities, we are investing in body cameras for our Sheriff deputies and police officers throughout Dutchess. This year, we co-locate our HELPLINE and 911 call center for an integrated approach – providing access to emergency medical, fire, law enforcement, and mental-health services. In 2021, our work continues with the Sheriff’s Office and police chiefs leading the way – implementing their plans, cooperating like never before, and working hand-in-hand with community leaders. We will continue these historic efforts, confronting injustice and supporting the brave men and women who sacrifice in service to us every day.

These last 12 months have shown us all how much bolder and more capable our society must be in taking care of and supporting those with disabilities, our seniors, and our children. These vulnerable lives depend on us and are not dispensable. While layers of government above us overlooked them, County government gave voice to the voiceless and guaranteed no one was left out. Our Office for the Aging adapted its annual events and innovated its approach to provide seniors critical socialization at a safe distance. We will always ThinkDIFFERENTLY and demand others do the same: imploring the state to continue the special-education vital to minimizing student regression. We keep meeting weekly with school district leadership, collaborating to get our kids safely back to the classroom and advocating for their return to playing fields, stages, and concerts. We have utilized every resource, exhausted every tool. Now, we just need more tools.

From safe indoor recreation to job training, from daycare to good health, we must have the courage and capacity to better prepare, teach, support, and inspire our young people. Our Path to Promise is leading this call to action: helping implement an Integrated Student Support project to provide an individualized plan for students in participating schools and piloting Ready4K!, an evidence-based, text-messaging service for parents to support early literacy development. Soon, Path to Promise and our many partners will be offering their services under one roof, at a state-of-the-art Youth Opportunity Center in Poughkeepsie. The center will be a hub for our P2P efforts, a place where young people from around the County can access diverse programs and services, and we can more effectively and efficiently invest in and support our kids.

With our lives relying so much more on web-based services, online platforms, and virtual work, school, and relaxation programs, we simply need faster and more reliable high-speed internet access throughout our county. With new federal resources we will identify gaps in service and develop plans to work together to fill them.

As schools, restaurants, and businesses closed, the availability of recreation and healthy outings were nearly non-existent, except at our parks. They remained open and were one of the few safe and accessible spaces for families to reconnect and for anyone to enjoy.

To build on our award-winning spaces, we will begin major improvements to Quiet Cove and the development of the Lake Walton Preserve, connecting it to the Dutchess Rail Trail and opening this massive new park to individuals of every ability. We are designing the new urban trail along the former CSX rail line in the City and Town of Poughkeepsie, connecting parks, businesses, restaurants, educational institutions, major development projects, and the Walkway Over the Hudson to our rail-trail network.

And in just a few weeks we will welcome you and our boys of summer, the newest New York Yankees affiliate, our own Hudson Valley Renegades, back to Dutchess Stadium, where we will make new improvements to this great County Park. Investing in parks adds to our quality of life and enhances our sense of place.

All of what we do is about investing in people. We will leverage any federal aid, and our own resources, to invest in our streets, buildings, parks, and bus stops – because people walk on those streets, live and work in those buildings, play in those parks, and ride on those buses. We do this because we know honest, engaged, healthy people are the solution to our problems. And to overcome this moment – to recover and move forward – it will demand the imagination, determination, and willingness of all people to work together.

But to do so, we must trust in one another.

It is often said that trust is the currency of leadership, one which has undoubtedly been diminished in the face of overbearing policies, disjointed messaging, hypocrisy, deadly misinformation, and associated political unrest. Rebuilding will require us to restore the public's trust not only in our institutions but, in each other.

I come back to this thought offered by many throughout our history: One cannot love America without loving Americans – not just the Americans you agree with, or those who look like you, belong to the same political party, or believe what you believe – but all Americans. And to love is not to allow the misguided to stay lost, the guilty to face no recourse, or the violence to rage. It is not an empty gesture or a naïve hope; it is a call to commit ourselves to each other and mend what is broken. Love may well be patient and kind, but it can also be tough. We live in a moment when we desperately need all the facets of love.

I have said in the past, and believe now more than ever, our future rests upon our ability to solve problems, seek refuge on our common ground, think big, to build, and dream – together.

To correct injustices, create new paths to prosperity, protect our most precious resource – our human potential – and to now rise above a year of challenge and tragedy, we must truly together.

We must find the common ground, for it is only here where we can build a lasting foundation for our future. Some have further to travel than others to reach this middle land – the place where healing not only happens, but where it is earned – so journey they must. Yet when we reach this place, when we have earned this place, may we move forward together; may we build that big bright future; may we learn, create, and invent together. It is not that we will be saved by that common ground; but it is where we will find the capacity to save each other and better ourselves. It is where we accept and cherish our shared humanity, define who we are and how we hope to live, and achieve the lofty yet needed goal of building a freer, fairer, and healthier community. I am confident we will get there, and we will get there – together.

May God bless the United States. May He bless New York, Dutchess County, and each and every one of us.