

Home is Where We Begin. Let Us Begin.

The State of the County

February 20, 2020

The great poet T.S. Eliot wrote, “Home is where one starts from.” It is where all journeys begin – the foundation upon which a life is built, a safe place to rest, rejuvenate, and find the strength to carry on. A true home is where love resides and dreams are born. It is where we feel most free, where we are our truest selves, where it's safe to disagree and argue, but also to compromise and heal. The power of home is not mystical or magical; it is a simple and essential feeling of stability and safety.

We grow and prosper when we have a home. We flourish when our basic needs are met. We climb when we have a foothold. We love, we cherish, and we grow when we are secure.

The challenge is to make our community a home for everyone, to ensure those in need have both a safety net and a ladder, to provide our residents with the opportunities to succeed and skills to flourish, to create a sense of belonging and stability, and to foster hope. A strong community, a resilient and open community, is the fertile ground where not just houses are constructed, but where homes are built.

Home is where we begin. So, let us begin.

A few weeks ago, as I took the oath of office for the third time, I promised this new year, and new term, was going to be about taking on the big challenges, helping those too often forgotten and setting the bold goal of doing as President Lincoln said and “elevate the condition of men — to lift artificial weights from all shoulders — to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all — to afford all, an unfettered start, and a fair chance, in the race of life.” In other words, to provide an opportunity for all – regardless of who you are or where you come from, to whom you pray or who you love, your station of birth or your perceived ability – to support building a meaningful life as you define it.

With this broad and bold goal in mind, it is essential we address one of the most pressing and complex problems facing communities across America: the housing and homelessness crisis.

From 2018 to 2019, Dutchess County experienced an 18-percent increase in our homeless population. As of December 31, 2019, our Department of Community and Family Services was providing placements for 80 homeless families, 101 homeless singles, and 1 couple, all here in our community.

Yet these numbers don't give you the full picture of this multifaceted problem. The face of homelessness has changed. The problem is different today than it was 20 or 30 years ago – before the last real estate bubble, before the acceptance of addiction as an illness, before the closure of mental health institutions across New York, and before this strong economy. The needs of those neighbors relegated, often by the cruel fate of circumstance, to sleeping in crumbling buildings, emergency shelters, or motel rooms are more complex than ever.

Between July and September of last year, 63 percent of adults and 22 percent of children in federally funded housing programs reported at least one health condition, with the most common co-occurring being mental health and substance use. Many of the individuals placed by our Department of Community and Family Services are employed. Many have been exposed to physical or emotional trauma. Homelessness was never simple, but the problem has become more vexing, varied, and recalcitrant.

Because it is our duty to protect and preserve life, and because the precious gift of life is to be lived not merely survived, we will confront this intractable problem. After all, what kind of home would we be if we did nothing?

Working to end homelessness is not only about compassion; it is also about common sense. Individuals experiencing housing instability and homelessness are highly dependent on public services, emergency rooms, and the criminal justice system. Leaving these individuals to suffer on the streets or in shelters drives up costs to taxpayers and strains the systems of care and service.

Homelessness is not only about those without a roof to sleep under, but also about having homes people can afford. According to the Census Bureau, Dutchess County's gross median rent in 2018 was nearly \$1,200 a month, which would require an annual income of over \$48,000 to support. Fifty percent of rental households in Dutchess are above HUD's affordability threshold, and over 28 percent face severe cost burdens. Despite adding 360 new apartments in 2019, 137 of which were affordable – the highest amount since before the recession and the third-highest in 37 years – our vacancy rate remains far below what is considered a healthy market. There are signs of change, with more than 1,200 new residential rental units under construction throughout Dutchess. But too many families are stretched too thin; too many landlords are stuck between lack of rental income and eviction proceedings; and this extremely healthy economy is producing too few housing options within reach of lower and middle-income families.

A home should not be a burden; it should be a place of hope and a launching pad to greater opportunity. A home is not a street corner or a crowded shelter. We have the capacity to solve this problem, if we act smartly and comprehensively, if we give people a true and real chance at a fulfilling life.

Now, we have been playing our part, yet our work has just begun.

In 2020, thanks to Hudson River Housing's Fallkill Commons project and Pathstone's mainstream vouchers, individuals who are homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless will have access to 55 units of truly affordable housing. The Department of Community and Family Services applied for funding to help struggling families afford permanent housing. We are working with Siena College to evaluate our system and help improve outcomes. Over the last eight years, HOME funding supported the development of 156 units of senior and affordable housing. In partnership with RUPCO and their development team, the Town of Poughkeepsie, Department of Environmental Conservation, and the EPA, we will solve the long-standing issue with the former Schatz Federal Bearing property, ending our subsidy of delinquent tax payments and, more importantly, remediating a potentially serious environmental hazard. Successful development will return the property to our tax rolls and connect with our urban rail trail while providing an estimated 150 units of market- and submarket-rate housing.

Last year, an interdisciplinary team of housing service providers and officials from Dutchess and local governments met to reimagine and reinvigorate how we address homelessness. This team identified areas of concern, including the increasing length of stay for those in shelters; cost and inefficiency of placing individuals and families in local motels; lack of diverse housing options; and difficulty in providing services to a dispersed homeless population.

To address these concerns, we will take four bold steps to reduce the homeless population, provide more effective transitional housing, and increase the availability of affordable housing:

First, to assist supportive landlords, help individuals in need, and help lower the number of evictions, we will establish a housing support center and hotline. This one-stop center will centralize our established housing services to provide information and support to those searching for affordable housing, help access available financial assistance, and connect with financial planning and legal services.

Second, to reduce the number of individuals directly discharged into shelters, we will engage local hospitals and nursing homes, as well as state-run correctional facilities, to ensure appropriate re-entry planning prior to the release of patients or incarcerated individuals. You'd be shocked how often the State's entire release plan is to simply drop an individual off on the steps of the nearest shelter or our Department of Community and Family Services. Release planning should be proactive and engage appropriate partners early to create a path to stability for the individual. We are currently working with Project MORE to increase available beds for individuals leaving prison. We will seek State support and potential legislation to address this statewide issue.

Third, to reduce reliance on costly motels for providing temporary housing, we will develop a new centralized transitional housing solution. A more centralized setting will enable service providers to better engage with clients and provide support. Sadly, motel placements, the only option, cost nearly \$2 million a year and limit our capacity to truly help families transition to a permanent home. A new model is required. We will start by prioritizing rapid re-housing for families, and we are working with our partners to create a centralized transitional housing center. The focus will be on providing temporary housing and mental health and substance abuse counseling – addressing the underlying causes of homelessness; offering job skills and personal finance training; and better-preparing people for permanent housing.

Fourth, to increase access to affordable housing, we must diversify new housing construction. We will work with local municipalities to add zoning language and land use policy to expand rental and housing options. We will engage builders to earmark market- and submarket-rate housing as part of larger projects. And our Department of Planning and Development will train local municipal, planning, and zoning board members on what affordable housing is and why it's important.

To aid us in our local investment, we will also leverage Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds and our Municipal Innovation Grant to help build infrastructure that supports new affordable housing. The Village of Wappingers Falls is using CDBG funds to build the water and sewer lines and sidewalks to support a two-family home built by Habitat for Humanity; we will encourage others to do the same. We will also give priority for County financial assistance to communities that implement housing plans and we will appoint an individual to lead our housing efforts. Earlier today, we announced a partnership between the City of Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County to take necessary steps to create a land bank, with the hopes of transforming vacant lands and abandoned properties into productive uses, such as affordable housing.

Creating a true housing ladder – touching all price points, from affordable to luxury – and providing opportunities for people of all incomes is critical. And the ability to live in a safe, clean, and accessible home must be an option in every corner of Dutchess.

We will not end homelessness in a day or even a year. We will, however, persist. There are success stories and good projects to point to. So, we will keep working. Every individual, every family, deserves our respect. So, we will keep caring. The solution lies within our willingness to try new things and insistence on providing a better life for all Dutchess residents.

After a troubling and rare decline in our nation's life expectancy, widely attributed to the opioid epidemic, for the first time in four years, Americans are living longer. Additionally, according to 2018 data, our nation witnessed its first decline in drug deaths in 28 years. For those following the opioid epidemic, and even more, for those who are truly engaged in it – supporting a friend or family member, providing treatment to patients with substance use disorders, responding to 911 calls for overdoses, or sitting with a family who just lost a loved one – this is welcome news.

While there are many trends around the nation that we are happy to not be a part of, we are deeply and profoundly glad to be part of this one. In 2019, Dutchess County experienced its first year-to-year decline in opioid-related deaths since 2014. In 2018, there were 93 overdose deaths in Dutchess County; last year, there were 77 – 16 fewer lives lost, 16 more families who still have their loved one, 16 more people able to seek help and find a path to a fulfilling life. We are grateful for this bit of good news; however, we realize there is so much more work to be done to put an end to this destructive epidemic.

Seventy-seven deaths are far too many, yet there are so many reasons for hope as our community embraces the message and mission of Breaking Through.

Just over two years ago, our methadone program run by the Lexington Center for Recovery reached its census cap, highlighting the demand for Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) throughout the county. Thanks to the hard work of our Opioid Task Force, Healthcare and Treatment Providers, and the Department of Behavioral and Community Health (DBCH) staff, Medication-Assisted Treatment options are now more diverse, less stigmatizing and restrictive, and more readily available than ever.

Last year, the Dutchess County Jail, in partnership with Prime Care, DBCH, and the Lexington Center, began maintaining inmates on Medication Assisted Treatment, implemented supports for individuals re-entering the community and placed Narcan kits in inmates' personal belongings. In 2020, we will further expand access to Medication-Assisted Treatment for criminal justice-involved individuals, including offering treatment to all inmates who suffer from an opioid-use disorder.

Our hospitals have stepped up to the challenge, as well. Studies consistently show those who receive initial treatment for opioid addiction in the emergency room are more likely to continue treatment. We are grateful to our partners at MidHudson Regional Hospital and Vassar Brothers Medical Center. Both Vassar Brothers and MidHudson Regional now offer this treatment in their emergency departments, in addition to providing Narcan to opioid-involved patients. This is a momentous change, the culmination of years of outreach and coordination, that will have an enormous impact on the lives of those struggling with addiction.

Connection to Medication-Assisted Treatment is also available at the Stabilization Center, thanks to a system of coordinated care with MidHudson Regional and partnership with HRHcare.

Speaking of the Stabilization Center, a very simple, but truly important next step will happen: We are taking the lock off the door, opening our arms to all in need, to all searching for an answer in a time of crisis, for all who want to take the first steps to a better, healthier life.

This simple change is symbolic of our overall effort to break down the barriers between help and those seeking it and to meet people where they are, not where we want them to be. This was always the Stabilization Center's true purpose, and as it grows and changes, it is finding its way there.

Our strategy at the Center and in the community supports multiple pathways to recovery and is sensitive to complex co-occurring mental health and health disorders. Incorporating this philosophy into all of our efforts allows us to intercede where people are and gives us the opportunity to encourage safety and build relationships that lead to long-term recovery.

Street outreach is a critical part of this philosophy. That is why we added a recovery coach on the streets in the City of Poughkeepsie, with a meeting space right on Main Street. As part of the Rural Overdose Disparities Project, in partnership with HRHcare and NextDistro, we added a recovery coach in eastern Dutchess, as well. Thanks to Assembly Member Didi Barrett, we will purchase and utilize a mobile help center to serve the Harlem Valley and provide access to mental health and substance-use support and treatment. One of the many lessons of the opioid epidemic is that it affects every race, income level, and family, so we need a network of care that reaches rural, suburban, and urban communities alike. Whether you are on the bustling streets of Poughkeepsie or Beacon, or a quiet back road in Eastern Dutchess, we will be there to offer support, guidance, and a helping hand.

The opioid epidemic does not end at municipal boundaries. It doesn't stop at a bridge, town sign, or county line. It is a national, state, and regional problem and requires regional cooperation and coordination. This year, we will host an Opioid Summit at Marist College with Ulster County. Both counties will share best practices, learn from one another, develop comprehensive solutions, and strengthen our response. After our initial meetings, we hope to expand to more counties.

For the first time in years, we can see a slight and distant glimmer of light, over the horizon, just out of reach. One day, if we persist in our efforts, continue to find strength in each other, and believe in our capacity to change lives, we will see a time where the opioid epidemic is confined to history – a lesson of pitfalls to avoid and new ways to address addiction, but a lesson that is learned and not tragically lived, a lesson we embrace as we take on new challenges, but one that does not cost the precious resource of human life. On that day, we will look back with sadness for those who we lost, gratitude for those who offered care, and pride in our community's overwhelming response to the crisis.

But today, we will continue to fight, support, and work for those living with addiction and their families. We will continue to ring out a message that Dutchess County is your home, and home is a place to heal. So let us push forward to end the suffering and end this epidemic.

Each of us shapes the communities in which we live, but our communities also shape the way we live and the things we value. Our lives are woven by our own hands, our homes built for our own needs. We have a duty to shape our communities – our homes – to be welcoming, stable, and safe.

This spring, we will launch our new emergency management app, providing information on trainings, road closures, emergency plans, power outages, shelters, and other critical emergency and preparedness information. Also, our access and functional needs registry will be up and running, enabling first responders access to the unique circumstances of the individuals they're serving, ensuring their safety and enhancing their capacity to assist every individual of every ability.

To assist school districts and provide parents peace of mind about the safety of their children, the Department of Emergency Response coordinates concept of operation plans and hosts Dutchess County Safe Schools' meetings, bringing together district administrators and School Resource Officers. And later

this year, we will implement school bus safety cameras with local districts to prevent and respond to those who illegally pass school buses.

Volunteers have historically been the lifeblood of our fire and emergency medical service departments. It has become increasingly difficult to recruit volunteers, threatening the ability to provide services and ensure the safety of our community. We are enlisting the support of colleges and high schools to incentivize volunteering and launching a public information campaign on the importance of emergency service volunteers. To bolster the staffing pipeline, we will need your help to spread the word, take up the cause, or help put someone on a path to serving their community. Let us all be part of making our community, our home safer and more secure.

We are building a community that takes care of our most vulnerable and serves those who have sacrificed for us all.

Through investment in home care, home-delivered meals, and transportation services, we are giving our seniors the choice to age at home. Our enhanced “Handyman Program,” a collaboration between the Office for the Aging and Rebuilding Together, will provide minor home repairs and accessibility modifications for our clients. Our transit review will lead to more robust transportation options for seniors, veterans, and those differently abled.

We will never stop repaying our veterans for their sacrifice. Last year, Marist Professor and Poughkeepsie VFW Post 170 Commander Tommy Zurhellen walked from Portland, Oregon, to Poughkeepsie to raise awareness and money to combat veteran homelessness, mental illness, and suicide. To help address these issues, we created the Tommy Zurhellen Fund to provide one-time emergency assistance to veterans in need, helping them pay for rent, electric bills, or car repairs. And we will again support Senator Sue Serino’s fight to restore State funding for the successful Private Dwyer Vet-to-Vet mediation program, she and Assembly Member Barrett helped bring to Dutchess.

We are confronting sexual assault and domestic violence with an additional \$100,000 for specialized training for law enforcement and expanded outreach and prevention throughout the community. We expanded financial support to the Hyde Park Police Department to maintain their Domestic Abuse Response Team (DART) advocate – DART is in four police agencies throughout Dutchess – and we are one of four counties in the United States chosen to pilot the Intimate Partner Violence Intervention Program aimed at early intervention and preventing escalating acts of violence.

We live in a time of great anxiety and fear. In the dark crevices of our society, hate grows. Its roots slither under the surface at first, but eventually and violently wind their way into the open; hate can be stealthy and subtle, but never peaceful. Last year’s brutal attack on a Hasidic rabbi’s home, just across the river, during a Hanukkah celebration shocked us all. Anti-Semitism is an old and insidious hatred, allowed time and time again to fester in the shadows, where it waits to contort ignorance, anger, and fear into ugly ideologies, dangerous thoughts, and deadly acts.

Hatred has never stopped with just one “-ism.” It is an insatiable curse searching for more races, ethnicities, orientations, and religious beliefs to threaten and attack. We must confront hate. We must bring those who spew hatred and commit acts of violence and degradation to justice. But we also must do more; we must correct a society that allows such evil to be spread.

Of course, there is only one true cure for hatred, and that is love – love for one’s self, love for one’s family, love for one’s neighbor, love for one’s community, love for one’s country. Love.

Love bears all things. It is born from understanding, and mutual understanding is what we foster through the work of our Human Rights Commission. We re-established the Commission in 2016 to help heal divides, root out discrimination, and hold open and honest dialogues where people are heard. This year, we will further amplify the work of the Commission, moving it from our Human Resources Department, to the Department of Behavioral and Community Health – a more public-facing organization, with more resources and more experience working directly with residents and organizations. This will also allow the Commission to take on new tasks and contribute to ongoing efforts within its new home to strengthen community resiliency and improve cultural competencies.

As the Commission starts a new chapter in a new home, Dutchess County Government will strive to meet the ideals we espouse. We will hire an Equal Opportunity and Inclusion Officer to increase the diversity of our county workforce and the 73 municipal workforces we oversee.

These changes are only the beginning and, not to keep making you all do the hard work, but we need your help again. A government does not make a community or a home. People make a home. So, I ask: Be respectful to one another; act when we see injustice; speak up in the face of hate; forgive, even when it’s difficult; and cherish our open community.

If these big conversations seem daunting – it’s because they can be. Start with something simple, yet radical: Have the everyday conversations; act small. Talk to your neighbors, shovel their sidewalk, invite them to a BBQ, talk about the weather, complain about the Mets, help them carry their groceries, set treats out for the delivery person.

It was Eleanor Roosevelt who said, “Where, after all, do universal rights begin? In small places, close to home...” Our small acts, our small conversations in the small places, count for something much greater in the end.

One small act begets another, begets another, and you are no longer independently acting; you become part of a movement, like ThinkDIFFERENTLY.

Every day, every week, every month, we expand the reach and footprint of ThinkDIFFERENTLY, and we are at it again. With the Marist College Red Foxes, we will host a sensory-sensitive basketball game next season. ThinkDIFFERENTLY Thursday at the Dutchess County Fair will include more events throughout the day; and for the entire week, the Agricultural Society and Fair Manager Andy Imperati will provide sensory-sensitive cool-down spaces and locations with greater accessibility. Cornell Cooperative Extension is showing what it means to ThinkDIFFERENTLY as we integrate those with disabilities into 4-H groups; and the Hudson Valley Renegades are joining our Think Jobs initiative, creating job opportunities at Dutchess Stadium, giving kids and adults of all abilities the opportunity to learn by doing, work with mentors, and help improve our community.

And this June, we will again welcome the Special Olympics New York Summer Games home to Dutchess as we celebrate their historic 50th anniversary. Registration for volunteers begins March 11th. Come be part of someone’s dream; be a game-changer. I guarantee it will make their day and change your life.

Through our continued efforts, we are building a community of inclusion – more accessible and welcoming to all who call it home.

Home is a place to grow. It is where children should have the opportunity to learn, discover, and be loved – where you take your first steps and learn how to walk through life. It is the first stone in a long path to success. For those who have such a home, and for those who don't, we seek to make sure every child has a foothold to begin their climb to reach their full potential.

To lead our Path to Promise forward, we appointed Karmen Smallwood as Assistant Commissioner for Youth Services. After a year gathering input from young people throughout the county, Karmen, in partnership with the Path to Promise Subcommittee and the Steering and Innovation Team, has set an ambitious agenda for 2020.

In an effort to increase engagement with the community and to support grassroots youth organizations, Path to Promise will provide mini-grants for smaller projects that address some measurable aspect of childhood and youth development.

Path to Promise relies on youth involvement; “Nothing about me, without me” is the motto guiding our work. In 2019, we engaged with youth throughout the County, but we are still working to ensure every young person has a voice in our effort and is being heard. We will increase engagement by holding youth influencer forums; more fully integrate Path to Promise into the Annual Youth Summit; and develop an interactive Path to Promise workshop.

To address a need identified by our community partners, promote positive youth development, and ensure the quality of services, we are establishing a Positive Youth Development Credentialing Program. With universal standards and training support, we will elevate working with young people and treat it as the critical and valued profession it is.

As we looked across the nation for models of success in transforming young people's lives, we found a common thread: the central role data played in developing and tracking solutions. By this summer, we will have Phase I of the Path to Promise website up and running – a user-friendly, searchable asset database of available youth services in Dutchess County.

For Phase II, we are creating an online data dashboard and tool to track indicators and drive solutions related to youth success and well-being. We've formed an interdisciplinary team to identify SMART performance indicators and are working with a technology firm that designed a system for the renowned Harlem Children's Zone. By the end of 2020, we will issue an RFP for the creation of the dashboard and analytics tool.

Our children's future is our most precious commodity. We can ensure their future is bright by building a better, stronger, safer, and more stable community and home. Most importantly, let us all be better examples to our children by respecting one another, embracing empathy, standing up for what we believe in, and by being kind. No program or policy can replace good role models, good parents, good families, good teachers, good neighbors, good homes.

Good jobs help sustain stable and secure homes. Fulfilling work makes for fulfilled people. Our economy is strong: under 3.5 percent unemployment; 27 months of private-sector job growth; 10-percent increase in average weekly wages since 2015; approximately 3,000 net new jobs; and nearly \$5 billion in

development underway right now. Dutchess County's economy is more competitive, more dynamic, and more diverse than ever.

ON Semiconductor is investing more than \$400 million in its new facility in East Fishkill. Brewmation is expanding. iPark 84 has repurposed more than 335,000 square feet of formerly vacant space and attracted 15 new businesses to Dutchess, including 10 manufacturers. Amenia's Silo Ridge acquired an additional 500 acres to develop an equestrian center, bringing the total project investment to nearly \$800 million. IBM reported revenue for the Poughkeepsie made Z systems were up 62 percent, and IBM's first Quantum Computation Center, right in Poughkeepsie, is now the home of three Quantum computers.

Our education industry is expanding, as well with Vassar College investing \$60 million, creating the Vassar Institute for the Liberal Arts, which will attract scholars and leaders from around the world. The new institute will house a hotel and conference center, while Marist College will break ground this spring on a \$40 million expansion of the Dyson Center.

While our economy has grown stronger with record-low unemployment, for those out of work, struggling to pay their bills, put food on their table, the unemployment rate may as well be 100 percent. This is why we are investing more in workforce development and making record levels of investment in Dutchess Community College (DCC), to give people a pathway to opportunity, a ladder to a better and brighter future. Last year, we broke ground on our new hangar for DCC's Airframe and Powerplant program, providing students with in-demand skills for high-paying jobs. In partnership with the Council of Industry, the College will establish the Hudson Valley Manufacturing Workforce Center at DCC's new "Dutchess South" location in Fishkill. And our Workforce Investment Board is embarking on the first-ever comprehensive countywide workforce training and development strategy.

There is a lot to be excited about, and we continue to find ways to improve our shared economic outlook. An aggressive tourism promotion effort will again bring concerts to our parks, celebrations to our communities, and millions of people to Dutchess – bringing with them hundreds of millions of dollars spent at our local businesses, supporting local communities and supporting countless families who call Dutchess home. Film production will keep Dutchess County and all that makes us distinct on the big screen, your televisions, and streaming across platforms worldwide. Our investment in the arts will be used to expand audiences; support young and emerging artists; inspire new performances, productions and programs; and help enrich the lives of so many throughout our community.

County government can be found in every corner of Dutchess, but we are most concentrated in the City of Poughkeepsie, along Market Street. For many county employees, Market Street is a home away from home. Market Street is home to the seat of County government and the main crossroad in the City of Poughkeepsie. For years, because of the complex nature and significant costs, the redevelopment of Market Street has been left on the drawing boards.

At no fault of the City, plans have been collecting dust while the roadway, drainage, and sidewalks have been slowly deteriorating. In 2020, that will come to an end. In partnership with Poughkeepsie, through a city-led community engagement process, we will reimagine, redesign, and redevelop this critical corridor. From reestablishing two-way traffic to implementing traffic-calming designs, new curbing, more pedestrian-friendly and ADA-compliant crosswalks and sidewalks, we will get it done. This long-awaited, long-term project will require us to seek local, state, and federal resources. While Mayor Rolison and I know it is complicated, we agree it is necessary to transforming this block, supporting business

development, enhancing the historic nature of this neighborhood, repairing aging infrastructure, and continuing to propel Poughkeepsie forward.

If Dutchess is a home for all of us, then our parks are our shared backyard. With over 1,000 acres and nearly 40 miles of parks and trails, we have a pretty awesome backyard. Our parks are a critical component of who we are and how we live. They connect us and define our sense of place. As we grow and change as a community, it is important our parks reflect these changes.

With the design underway on our urban rail trail, successful acquisition of the Lake Walton Preserve, and the completion of our Parks Master Plan, 2020 will be a transformational year for our park system.

Design development of the Lake Walton Preserve into a universally accessible park is underway with connections to the Dutchess Rail Trail, including the construction of “the loop” walking path around the lake and viewing areas. So many have fond memories of Lake Walton, but the years have taken their toll on this natural resource. We continue to monitor the health of the lake and will conduct a detailed water assessment. With our investment, attention, and care, the Lake Walton Preserve will be place for all to enjoy nature’s beauty.

The trail along the former CSX rail corridor in the City and Town of Poughkeepsie is in the early stages of design. This unique linear park will connect neighborhoods, local businesses, restaurants, educational institutions, major development projects, and playgrounds to the Walkway Over the Hudson and the rail trail network – along with enhancing riverfront access.

With riverfront access in mind, in addition to the development of the Lake Walton Preserve, we will propose completion of my favorite park, Quiet Cove. Late in 2018, we finished several projects at the park: adding another waterfront deck, the ability to offer kayak rentals through an ADA-accessible launch, and upgrades to the historic naval boathouse. Next, we will open up the viewshed, complete a new parking area on the river side of the tracks, and, with support from the developers of Hudson Heritage, redefine the entrance, improve vehicular and pedestrian access, expand capacity and broaden connection to the Hudson.

The Hudson River is the lifeblood of the Hudson Valley – a sacred source of water, life, and beauty. Perhaps the most culturally, ecologically, economically, and historically significant waterway in America, it deserves our continued commitment. Earlier today, with Ulster, Orange, Greene, Albany and Columbia counties, Dutchess filed our amicus brief with the U.S. District Court in support of the State’s lawsuit against the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s decision to grant GE a “Certificate of Completion” on PCB clean-up. We will hold those responsible accountable for the full restoration and revitalization of our beloved river.

This river is meant to be enjoyed and is integral, not only to our sense of place, but the development of our economy and communities. We remain deeply concerned by Amtrak’s proposal to fence off the Hudson River shoreline in our northern Dutchess communities – limiting access, destroying viewsheds, and hindering development along the riverfront. To provide a course of action that can be supported by river lovers and key stakeholders in Dutchess, Columbia, and Rensselaer counties, Scenic Hudson is developing a Hudson River Shoreline Access Plan. I encourage you to voice your concerns and contribute to this effort by visiting hudsonriveraccess.org. We have so few opportunities to undo the damage and so many to prevent future impacts to our treasured natural resources. We will not let this moment pass.

The Hudson River is not the only waterway in need of our help; its tributaries, such as the Wappinger Creek, are important parts of our heritage and ecosystem. These lesser-known waterways are critical to many communities and many are in need of revitalization and protection. The Wappinger Creek watershed is experiencing deteriorating water quality and reductions in flood storage capacity.

To address this and similar concerns, we will direct Partnership for Manageable Growth funding to projects that address active waterways by including requirements for buffers or active management practices to avoid contamination. To assist the Village of Wappingers Falls and help upstream, we asked the EPA to consider expanding the lower Wappinger Creek Superfund Site Cleanup area to include Wappinger Lake, and we are coordinating a regional approach to tributary and watershed protection by bringing together Clearwater, Riverkeeper, Scenic Hudson, and Ulster County.

We will offer training and create a Greenway Compact guide to provide a clear direction for municipal leaders on how they can protect watersheds and water sources. We will add stormwater and runoff management to our Community Development Block Grant priorities to avoid overburdening sewer systems.

The Hudson River and its many tributaries are the waters that connect us. They run along and through our towns and villages. They've powered industry and spurred development. They've inspired artists and movements. Our waterways have given our community peace, joy, and life, and we must do all we can to ensure they live on forever.

I take pride in this place we call home – in our people and spirit. I take pride in our institutions, in our commitment to one another. What is a home, if not a place where you know everyone who lives under that shared roof loves you, believes in you, and supports you?

I take pride in the people who toil every day to make this county, this community, a better place to live work, and raise a family – our teachers, police officers, firefighters, volunteers, activists, artists, farmers, and business owners. I take pride in our parents who strive to make a better life for our children. I take pride in the long-time resident who built their home here and the newcomer just laying down their foundation.

I take pride in the men and women of Dutchess County Government. I take pride in this place – in its rivers and streams, hills and valleys, its main streets, village halls, and country miles.

I love this place, and I know we are not perfect. We are not free of challenges or devoid of problems. We don't always get it right. But in Dutchess, we don't run from our problems, shrink from our challenges, or hide from our mistakes. When called upon, we act. When challenged, we rise. When we fail, we try again.

We know we are building a home – the starting point in the race for life. We strive to make it a fair start, where when the horn sounds in this grand race, every person of every ability and background is standing shoulder-to-shoulder on that starting line. We know "Home is where one starts from;" it is where we begin, where we launch our lives.

We cannot hope to overcome our greatest challenges, solve our most intractable problems without the opportunity provided by a true home – a loving and supportive place – where one can dare to dream; where we can disagree but come together; where we heal and grow; where we are free to fail and find a

path to greater promise. Home is where we begin and as T.S. Eliot wrote so poignantly, "In my beginning is my end," and "In my end is my beginning."

So, ladies and gentlemen, let us begin.

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