

2006 State of the County Speech

Good Afternoon.

Chairman Sweetland. Floor Leaders Kraft and Ryan. Members of the County Legislature. Honored guests.

As this is their first State of the County Address as Legislators, I would particularly like to acknowledge Jim Rhinehart and Kevin Holmquist. We are proud of your service to your constituents and our County.

County government lost several dear friends and loved ones last year.

Lake Project Director Michael Cunningham, County Recycling Director Suzanne LaLonde, former Medical Examiner Dr. Martin Hilfinger. All made contributions to the public good and the quality of our community.

We mourn the loss of our service men and women locally and across this Nation whose ultimate sacrifice has preserved the freedoms and way of life we know today.

And our community shares in the sorrow of our law enforcement agencies with the recent tragic and senseless deaths of New Hartford Police Officer Joseph Corr and New York State Trooper Andrew Sperr.

Please join me in a moment of silence in their memory and all those we hold near and dear in our hearts.

I'd like to offer a personal note of thanks to so many of you in this room—and many others who are not here—for your thoughts, prayers, and kind words during my recovery.

I am very glad to be here this afternoon, and will be forever grateful for your many kindnesses.

I am pleased to report that the State of the County is also very good.

Our economy is healthy.

Employment levels are up.

Welfare levels are at historic lows.

Property values are rising.

Our mainstay industries are thriving....

....up-and-coming firms are sinking their roots deep into our community....

...and the collaboration between our world-class academic institutions and local businesses has become a working reality.

Our physical environment, already an enviable asset, is getting even better as we continue the transformation of Onondaga Lake.

Our bond ratings are strong and steady.

Every day, this county proves that governmental efficiency and effectiveness are not incompatible goals.

Over the next year, we will build on our successes.

I will propose several initiatives today that will make us a better, stronger, and more unified community.

However, there are three basic goals for our government, and our community, that I place above all others.

First, because I believe attitudes affect outcomes, I propose today that we dedicate ourselves to ending the negativism that too often distorts our view of things that are new or different.

Second, we must create a broad-based economic development effort that is dynamic, unified, and aggressive.

And third, we must make real progress on governmental cooperation and consolidation.

These are not new ideas. In fact, they are the common sense expectations of ordinary citizens. It is what our constituents want us to do. It is what they should expect of us.

If we can make progress on each of these simple goals this year, we will have made a significant contribution to the future of Onondaga County.

Let's begin by acknowledging that attitude matters....and that we sometimes suffer from a negativity that stands in the way of progress.

I am an optimist.

I enjoy the challenges of my job and dealing with the issues facing our county.

I also know that when there is a predisposition to believe that something will fail, chances are it will.

When the first reaction to a new idea is a rush to expose its imperfections, we can lose sight of its essential brilliance.

When a plan is judged based on who proposed it, rather than on its merits, a team approach is impossible.

And when success comes only after a long, adversarial process, the energy for even a moment of deserved celebration is too often lost.

We need to escape that trap.

We can't afford to let turf issues, partisan politics, or any other impediments get in the way of our coming together for progress and growth.

Paraphrasing Robert Kennedy, I suggest we approach opportunities that may arise in the future by first asking "Why Not?" rather than "Why?"

One question opens doors. The other closes them.

Let's also acknowledge that it takes creativity, intelligence, courage, cooperation, and coordination to build something—whether it's an idea, a project, or a consensus.

Demolition, on the other hand, requires little more than brute force.

I suggest we judge ourselves—and leaders throughout the community—for what we have built, not by what we've torn down.

We also need to redirect our competitive instincts.

Competition is a great thing.

But all of its benefits and creative forces are wasted when we compete against each other.

City versus County.

Urban versus suburban.

Democrat versus republican.

Private versus public.

One business organization against another.

Our competition isn't next door or down the street.

It is other regions of the United States.

It is an emerging Asian economy.

It is a world that is changing with blinding speed and leaves behind those who cannot change along with it.

When we stop competing against ourselves—stop focusing on I instead of we—the door will open to a multitude of opportunities.

There will, of course, always be differences of policy and perspective between people and institutions.

But those differences should *shape* our actions, rather than *paralyze* us to the point of absolute inaction.

This isn't pie-in-the-sky rhetoric. It is the philosophy of those communities across the nation that are attracting our best and brightest, our entrepreneurs, our businesses.

We want them to come home to Syracuse. We want to keep them in Syracuse and Onondaga County.

The time is now to deal with why we, as a community, cannot get all of the things done that we want to get done.

Why we as a community take each and every proposal and turn it into a war of words.

Why each innovative approach or concept becomes a tool for indecision or skepticism.

The change should begin here, in County government—the only organization that represents every single individual, business, and interest within an 800 square mile region.

And there is no more important arena for this change than economic development.

Therefore, my second priority is addressing the problems that restrict economic development efforts in our community.

When I stood before you last year at this time, there was a lot on our horizon.

We were ready to build a convention center hotel.

Destiny was finally moving toward construction.

We announced an ambitious plan for a research and development center dedicated to alternative energy and green technology.

We envisioned a year dominated by construction and profound change.

At best, we've lost that year.

The cost to our economy, our community, and our image is enormous. Thousands of jobs. Hundreds of millions of dollars in wages. An image of stagnation and conflict rather than vibrant growth.

We must end the dysfunction that has blocked progress, and replace it with a dynamic, unified, and positive economic development effort.

This will require an acknowledgement that local government has a critical role in economic development that goes beyond basic public infrastructure and "one size fits all" tax abatements.

The nonsense that economic development incentives are gifts from taxpayers to developers must end.

Incentives have just one purpose---to offset economic disincentives that exist in Upstate New York---nearly all of which are outside of our control.

If we don't level the playing field through targeted incentives, we won't compete with other parts of the country or world. It's that simple.

We can't be timid about pursuing our economic development goals, nor can we weigh the benefits of economic development solely in terms of property and sales taxes produced.

I have found that when people are working and the economy is expanding, property and sales taxes have a wonderful way of growing on their own.

If this community is going to move forward, we have to get on the same page.

Therefore, I am inviting Mayor Driscoll, Council President Gonzalez, Chamber President Darlene Kerr, and MDA Executive Vice President Irwin Davis to join me and Chairman Sweetland on an economic development leadership team.

The group will meet monthly to discuss economic development projects, prospects, and initiatives.

When issues involving higher levels of government arise, we will ask our State and Federal representatives to join us too.

The goal will be to communicate, coordinate, and implement our economic development projects and initiatives....TOGETHER.

.....To work to achieve what all of us truly desire—the retention and creation of private sector jobs. TOGETHER.

This will require absolute candor among the parties. No secrets and no gamesmanship regarding credit or turf.

Let's deal with the questions up-front...not through memos, e-mails, or attorneys...but face-to-face with plain talk....talk that will result in our ability to work things out at the front end, and without delay.

As a matter of good faith and founding principle, I will recommend the team identify the growth and redevelopment of downtown Syracuse as its highest priority.

If we can establish trust, good faith, and a unity of purpose at the leadership level, I believe we can then take a serious look at consolidating City and County economic development staff.

Let's target July 1, 2007 as our goal for creating a long-discussed unified economic development organization.

And in that vein, my third priority for 2006 is to make real progress in reducing the waste and inefficiency that results from crowding 36 units of local government into an 800 square mile county.

Two years ago, I devoted much of my State of the County message to a vision of local government based on 21st century needs and abilities rather than 19th century political boundaries.

Since then, some positive things have happened. But not enough.

I propose we commit ourselves to a limited set of achievable objectives in 2006:

First, a plan for the County to assume responsibility for the collection of property taxes. Tax collection is now a municipal responsibility.

Second, a countywide purchasing operation, providing more buying power for all participants—an old idea that still makes all the sense in the world.

Third, a countywide Information Technology Center, hosted by the County, providing enormous computing power to even the smallest unit of local government.

And fourth, as discussed earlier, a plan for the consolidation of the City and County economic development operations.

I also suggest that we could play a positive role in facilitating cooperation and consolidation discussions among cultural agencies we support.

In particular, stronger connections among the Salt Museum, the Erie Canal Museum, and the Onondaga Historical Association might lead to lower overhead costs, allowing more money for programs and exhibits.

I am determined that when I stand here a year from now, we can put a check mark next to each of these objectives....and then move on to accomplish even more.

Beyond these three broad goals, we have an ambitious, forward-looking agenda for 2006.

We will begin 2006 on a high note. This week, we will be allocating \$6.9 million to the City, towns, villages, and school districts as their share of a one-time Medicaid savings in 2005.

As you recall, we tied our share of the 1% sales tax to the size of our Medicaid bill.

Due mainly to a one-time, end-of-year accounting adjustment by the State, we saved over \$12 million in our Medicaid budget last year.

Well over half of that windfall will now be shared with other local governments and schools within Onondaga County in the form of supplemental sales tax checks or credits.

We also begin the year with a renewed confidence in a new convention center hotel. Work will begin this year, and the hotel should be open for business in the spring of 2008.

The 350-room, first class hotel will allow us to again compete for high-impact conventions.

By simply recapturing the business we've lost, the Convention and Visitors Bureau says we can pump an additional \$20 million a year into the local economy.

I think we can do even better than that.

Last week showed--- in a very big way--- that we are back on the map for major conventions and events.

The United States Bowling Congress selected us to host the 2011 Women's Championship Tournament --- a 3-month event that will attract as many as 65,000 participants and generate an economic impact estimated at \$50 million.

We wouldn't be talking about our re-emergence as a convention destination without the efforts of both original hotel development group, headed by Mike Falcone, and the new team headed by Tom Wilmot.

These Upstate developers have kept the hotel project alive in spite of a gauntlet of government-imposed challenges.

Now, with all of its conditions satisfied, it is time for the State to honor its pledge to provide \$15 million to aid the project.

With the hotel project now a go, I am proposing that we move forward with the plan to light up the great architecture in our section of downtown—the old Courthouse, Columbus Circle, the Civic Center, and the Everson Museum.

The money for the project is already in place from our 2001 Tobacco Bond.

Of course, we will remain very active this year in retaining and recruiting businesses.

Marketing ourselves to site location consultants...acquiring land for industrial development....strategically placing Empire Zone acreage....meeting with local businesses—all of these things have enabled us to assist local companies, and to compete for new opportunities--- including one underway right now.

To use a sports analogy, we are now competing at a Division I level for some of the most sought after development projects in the country.

OCC is one of the many assets that help us compete for jobs—and that helps our businesses compete against the world.

This year, the Lean Manufacturing Institute will broaden its mission to include lean training opportunities to virtually every sector of our economy.

Reflecting that change, the Institute will become known as the Center for Continuous Improvement Strategies, or CCIS.

OCC will also make history by opening its first dormitories this year, allowing us to retain students who are now drawn to colleges that offer campus living.

We can't talk about economic development without discussing Destiny.

Hopefully, the courts will soon resolve the logjam that threatens the survival of the project. I am optimistic that the Court will find that the project meets all of the conditions required to trigger the PILOT. That's certainly the way we see the matter.

If that IS the answer from the court, let's respect that decision.

No appeals...

....no new roadblocks...

...Nothing that would further delay a project that will create 1,500 new full time jobs and lay the groundwork for many thousand more.

This project has languished for long enough. Pyramid says its ready to build an expansion that, at 800,000 square feet, would be the second largest building in Syracuse.

If the court finds that Pyramid has lived up to **its** end of the deal, it's time we live up to **ours**.

Let's let construction finally begin.

Developing our economy also requires quality public services delivered at a reasonable cost.

I believe we have maintained that balance better than most, in part because of innovations that have increased the productivity of our workforce.

Innovation has allowed us to maintain service levels with a workforce that is 7% smaller than it was just 4 years ago.

Our reputation as an innovative government is probably greater outside Onondaga County than it is at home.

Just last month, for example, Monroe County Executive Maggie Brooks cited our welfare system as a model of efficiency and effectiveness—and directed her staff to use us as a benchmark.

Some of our innovations are programmatic, others are technological.

This year, we will launch a new, cutting-edge Medicaid fraud and case management system that we believe will save money for the State and County.

We may expand that data mining technology to other areas of County government, allowing us to convert static data to dynamic management information.

We will soon come to you with a technology plan for the library system, beginning with a new automated circulation system that will better serve both library patrons and managers.

We are also exploring a breakthrough technology that has been developed in Dewitt, by a collaboration involving the Sensis Corporation, O'Brien & Gere Engineering, and SUNY's College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

The technology consists of sophisticated sensors placed in water reservoirs. The sensors provide a very early warning of possible contamination that ranges from simple algae to more sinister threats to water quality.

If the federal government agrees, use of these sensors could allow us—and other communities—to scale back on the costly requirement to cover water supplies.

This, in turn, would open a world market for a unique product made here, by local firms and institutions.

Our innovations in the area of energy conservation are already paying large dividends.

We are working right now on energy conservation measures that will save the equivalent of 37,000 barrels of oil annually --- and cut our energy costs by over \$1.8 million a year.

More energy initiatives are on the way through our energy performance contract with Carrier that guarantees both the cost of improvements and the savings we will achieve.

President Bush has made a priority for our nation to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. We join that challenge, believing that using less energy is the "greenist" energy policy of all.

One of the reasons I have been a strong supporter of the Destiny project has been the commitment to alternative fuels and green technology. This certainly would give us a leg up on the rest of the nation in becoming a major center for an emerging alternative energy industry.

Unfortunately, our technology lags behind the nation in one area---and it's something over which we have no control.

Like so many other issues, the federally mandated conversion to modern voting equipment has reached deadlock in Albany.

Last week, the federal government commenced a lawsuit against New York State because of its failure to act---and we understand the State is thinking about a half-baked settlement that could cost counties millions of dollars and still not get us one stop closer to new machines.

We need our State legislators to intervene in this matter to protect the interests of all voters, the counties, and State taxpayers.

We are also using technology to improve public safety throughout the County.

The 911 back-up site is nearly finished.

Our new Computer Aided Dispatch system—the brain of the 911 Center—is being designed now, and will be fully operational in 2007.

The CAD system, combined with our new Mobile Data Communication system, will provide a vast amount of information to first responders quickly and reliably.

Today, with your authorization of a \$4.5 million upgrade of our radio towers, we are taking the first step toward another national priority—the ability of first responders to communicate with each other—or inter-operability.

Over the next several years, we plan to convert our entire emergency communication system to one that will allow seamless communication between every police, fire, emergency medical, and other emergency responder.

And as an added benefit, this project will solve the challenges of radio coverage in the hilly parts of the county.

It's one thing for law enforcement agencies to be able to **talk** with one another. It's another thing for them to **work** with one another.

I'm very proud of District Attorney Fitzpatrick, Sheriff Walsh, and Probation Commissioner Winter for their work with other local agencies, especially the City Police Department, to target our community's limited resources to the areas of greatest need.

This cooperative effort is a great example of what can happen when we place the needs of citizens first, and boundary lines second. When that happens, the citizens always win.

Our effectiveness in getting criminals off the streets has had just one adverse effect—it has increased our jail population almost to capacity.

I have asked former Hillbrook Superintendent Chuck Harmon to chair a task force to analyze ways to address this problem without building very costly new jail cells.

The Task Force will begin meeting later this month, and will report its findings to me by this fall.

Recent events --- from the anthrax scare after 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina --- have taught us that public health is as critical to our emergency preparedness as public safety.

Our Health Department, under the leadership of Dr. Cynthia Morrow, has taken a lead role in emergency planning.

The focus of that effort has expanded to include the potential of a pandemic flu. We have already launched a public awareness and education campaign, and will be working with public and private agencies to make sure that if we are confronted with this challenge, our community responds with intelligence and effectiveness.

Our efforts to clean-up Onondaga Lake are already making a measurable difference.

The new ammonia and phosphorous removal facility is already improving the condition of the lake. Even our critics have noted the positive change.

Our work at Midland continues, although only after very costly delays.

I am concerned that continued roadblocks by the City will cause the local cost of the entire Lake project to balloon.

Let's not forget that the extra money doesn't come from the "County's Pocket."

The County doesn't have a pocket.

The money for this project comes from the pockets of people who live and operate businesses in the Consolidated Sanitary District—many of whom are in the City of Syracuse.

Therefore, as we clean up the mess left by a City that used Onondaga Creek as an open sewer for generations, I again call upon the City to end the campaign against the court-mandated plan to clean up Onondaga Creek.

If we can move forward, we will not only eliminate the environmental insult of raw sewage running through City neighborhoods, we commit to leave those neighborhoods better than we found them.

Maintaining the County-owned Van Duyn nursing home remains my top priority and our greatest challenge.

Van Duyn is an extraordinary community asset—and a source of comfort, especially for our older citizens.

Unfortunately, because of State Medicaid reimbursement rates and other things over which we have no control, Van Duyn is expected to lose some \$8 million next year.

Last month, we were advised that we were in line for an additional \$2 million in federal support for Van Duyn through the Intergovernmental Transfer program.

That certainly helps. But the specific type of aid is very unpredictable and it isn't enough to fill the gap in Van Duyn's finances.

While waiting for a more permanent and stable solution, I am proposing an interim plan to close Van Duyn's 2007 budget gap.

- \$4 million would come from a combination of County subsidies, union concessions, and other cost savings.
- \$2 million from the Federal IGT program.
- And \$2 million from State aid, either in the form of higher Medicaid reimbursements or a State grant.

With this package in place, we can continue to work on a more permanent solution to Van Duyn's problems.

Without it, I believe we have no choice but to transfer Van Duyn to an owner who shares our mission to care for people regardless of their means.

The care we provide at Van Duyn is in keeping with the human service mission of a compassionate County.

Our human service workers must confront and work through the realities too many of us would rather ignore.

Poverty. Illiteracy. Hunger. Addiction. Abuse. Violence. Infirmity.

To a remarkable extent, employees of this County can, and do, help to resolve these awful conditions.

They are the unsung heroes of this government.

This year, I propose that the County actively participate in two new community-wide initiatives that are aimed at helping families overcome difficult life circumstances.

The first will be called the West Side Initiative. It is a collaborative project involving the West side residents, the County, the City, the Syracuse City School District, Syracuse 20/20, the United Way and the Gifford and Community Foundations.

Its objective is to promote the social, emotional, economic, and physical well-being of youth and families of the West Side neighborhood. The details are still being worked on, and there is a strong commitment by all involved to change what is necessary to create a healthier and thriving West Side community.

The second is a literacy initiative—a community-wide effort to encourage parents to read to their children from infancy.....and for kids to keep reading.

The County's goal is to break the cycle of dependence. The most cost-effective strategy to achieve that goal is to give kids the literacy skills that are the prerequisites to academic achievement and career success.

I have asked Library Director Joyce Latham, Health Commissioner Dr. Cynthia Morrow, and Deputy County Executive Ed Kochian to work with others in County government to develop an early literacy and summer reading campaign that the County can implement this fall.

I will close as I opened, with a call for all of us in this room to fulfill three simple goals this year.

First, to replace a self-destructive negativism with a positive, can-do approach to the mission of government. At all levels.

Second, to create a unified economic development approach that has all oars pulling in the same direction.

And last, to take a serious step toward eliminating the duplication of local government services.

I commit myself and my entire administration to achieving these goals that I believe can change our community and its future. I hope that you will join me.

Thank you.