

State of the County
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STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

Delivered By
Genesee County Legislature Chair
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Good evening and welcome to our 2012 State of the County Address. It is always a treat for me to prepare these programs. Although we have all lived through the time period, often our memories are blurred by the cataracts of multiple tasks and layers of activities and responsibilities present in each of our lives. So this is our chance to examine some of the transforming events of 2012 and suggest some goals for the coming year.

This will not be my usual State of the County. In the past I have gone through the accomplishments of each department and perhaps the challenges facing them in the New Year. This year those accomplishments are still most significant, especially remarkable as we are all operating under strict fiscal restraints that place additional duties and responsibilities on all. But this time I choose to take the GPS view of our county...from a height. What major trends are impacting us and how are we, as a county, dealing with this new order? These changes are so significant that every department, every employee, as well as all of our citizens are impacted. Let us start with the national level.

My term of office as the President of the New York State Association of Counties ran from September of 2011 until fall of 2012. As President, I attended three meetings of the National Association of Counties, representing NYSAC. My access to the policy making Board Meetings of that group was total. What an amazing experience. Hopefully, I carried the

message that New York was indeed, “Open for Business” and working hard to improve. I was able to increase my knowledge of how other counties work in this nation and what role they play. Personally, I was impressed with Pittsburgh, the location of the Summer National Conference, and the city of my birth. The results of its comprehensive overhaul were amazing. The leaders in that community never gave up on their city and it does them credit.

During the many networking exchanges I also learned that the frustrations of other states are similar to ours, and yet they can be different in ways that are enormously challenging. We most often are frustrated by state and federal regulations, aging infrastructure and fiscal constraints, although “Sandy” certainly woke us to another level of challenge. Many of them are challenged by shortages of natural resources, climate change, natural disasters and of course, tight revenues. We always have the hope that laws and regulations will be modified and improved...many of them have to face the reality of reinventing themselves to face new unalterable circumstances. We have much to learn from each other. In addition many of the newer trends in government were featured in presentations and workshops. Some of these are becoming familiar to us; collaboration is one of these trends. A myriad of workshops and presentations demonstrating various “how to implement” as well as an equal number explaining “why it is necessary to explore” presented a world of data and opportunities to connect with those successfully practicing what they preach. One of these workshops led to learning about a grant for counties collaborating and sharing a Public Health Administrator. We were able to apply and qualify for that national grant. It

is an exciting concept recognizing our cross jurisdictional sharing. A connection with the National Association is very useful in this fast paced, changing world. I would encourage us to keep that connection alive. In addition, with our new representative, Congressman Collins, recently sworn in right here in our Court House we can work to keep the federal communication lines to counties open, strong, and productive.

At the state level, it was a challenging time for NYSAC, the New York State Association of Counties. Their goal, as established by their membership, was to rein in unfunded state programs that counties administer, or increase the state funding to pay for “their” mandated programs. The Association was recognized by the Empire State Society of Association Executives for their Excellence in Government Relations specifically for their mandate relief advocacy campaign developed by NYSAC’s staff and leadership to educate State lawmakers on the issues that impact counties.

To start with, the Governor’s State of the State of last year was disappointing from a County’s view. Nothing about Mandate Relief, a property tax cap on target to start, and a great deal of emphasis on the fiscal crisis in the state, with advice to the counties to tighten their belts. This, if you remember came after a very active effort during the fall on the part of counties to communicate our overpowering burden of imposed state expenses for our taxpayers. However, the 9 for 90 campaign began to pay off...in the following State Budget Message, a glimmer of better news was introduced. A new pension tier and a phased in cap on county contributions to Medicaid growth promised some small relief in the future.

During the February meeting we were honored by having the governor attend our NYSAC Conference and deliver a speech that appeared to recognize the difficulties counties still faced. A Medicaid Task force was formed and they were given the job of finding some ways to lighten our burden. Hearings were held across the state as the task force sought information from the various regions. We testified at those hearings, as did many members of county government, general taxpayers, and providers. An increased cooperative effort was mobilized by NYSAC with a web site filled with information and suggestions to better communicate the critical nature of the situation. But in spite of increased efforts, including press conferences, letter campaigns, legislative contacts, public meetings and finally Mandate Mayday, there was no additional relief and our budgets for 2013 had to be constructed with great care and frugality to insure that services could be maintained and our bottom line was under the State Imposed Tax Cap. Indeed many counties could not accomplish both. Ours did do both, but how long will this be possible?

Most recently our State Comptroller has recognized the serious nature of the situation; identifying that the federal and state reimbursement has not kept pace with rising operational costs facing local governments over the past 10 years, forcing local governments to rely on sales and property taxes to make up the differences. We knew that. It was our message, but we were encouraged to have our dilemma recognized at such a high level. Recognition did not spell relief.

In a recent statement, NYSAC Executive Steve Acquario cautions that it is worse than stated by the Comptroller. During the last ten years rising costs have outpaced State assistance, and shifted more of the costs of State mandated programs on to county property taxpayers. In nearly every major category of spending, counties are receiving less reimbursement than they did five years ago, while costs and caseloads have risen. New York's county governments cannot sustain the state's expenses at the local government level. Over the last decade, cuts in State funding, lagging reimbursements, and cost shifts have forced counties to raise property taxes, cut jobs, eliminate or trim local programs and services, and sell or close community facilities such as nursing homes and certified community health agencies.

A property tax cap cannot be sustained unless the State reduces the costs of their mandates sufficiently to support local revenues **as was promised** when the tax cap proposal was introduced. This problem is not going away. A strong local government system is essential to a strong and efficient state government...as the local governments are the hands that deliver the state services. Change must occur and it must be implemented at the state level...the locals have done what they can...there is very little more downsizing possible without a collapse of the delivery system.

I suggest that counties have no option but to continue this marathon until our reasonable goal is reached. As with any marathon, help along the way is essential...from the media, in getting our message out there and making the connection between budget cuts and mandate pressure...from community organizations representing business, agriculture, volunteers, not for profit

groups, and community supporters, in speaking up and insisting on action addressing the real causes of escalating taxes...and from governments at all levels, in putting their differences aside and jointly advocating for change ...either the size of the state mandate burden...or the manner in which those mandates are funded.

At the County level we have seen many changes both as the result of natural events such as retirements and as the result of efforts to operate in the evolving fiscal climate, sometimes a combination of both. For instance, the retirement of our Planning Director, led to an exploration of a possible reorganization of that department. After the study, it was established that the present configuration, with modifications, was the best plan for the present and the foreseeable future. But, Genesee County must continue to explore new ways to deliver services as the resources are dwindling and sometimes a change might work for the better...it is always worth examining.

Our Nursing Home administration changed leaders and also experienced a significant retirement, that of the Comptroller, which led to a reassignment of tasks and changes in the management configuration. Cost efficiencies and marketing efforts did result in some encouraging bottom line results, but the County still is facing shortfalls of over three million dollars a year in the Nursing Home budget. Our general fund has to make up that difference. We can expect continued exploration of solutions to funding our four stars rated Long Term Care Facility.

A very significant change occurred in the Public Health Department. A previously mentioned collaborative effort on the part of Genesee and Orleans County and their Boards of Health led to the shared services of the Public Health Director, upon the retirement of our previous director. Now the appointed Public Health Director serves both Genesee and Orleans County. Such a move has enabled us to compete for and receive a national grant for such consolidation. This grant will help us to maximize this opportunity for improving services at a cost savings. This is a fine work in progress and the Boards of Health of both counties are to be congratulated for their willingness to explore new options. In addition, our Mental Health Director has taken a position with the Erie County Mental Health Department...and is presently assigned to serve both Erie and Genesee County as their top Mental Health Administrator. The delivery of Mental Health Services is undergoing a great deal of change at the state level. We are advised that the trend is toward the regional, at the administrative level, so we are watching these changes carefully to insure a continuation of fine essential services to our citizens. The Community Services Board was challenged to break new ground and worked hard to make sure there was no interruption during the transition period.

After many years of service, the retirement of our Veterans' Service Director precipitated a replacement search to find just the right person to help our Veterans with their needs. The swelling number of Veterans, the changing benefits, and the diverse needs of our Veterans makes the position most challenging. With the help of representatives from several Veteran organizations, the Legislature formed a committee to review the applicants

and recommend several candidates to the Legislature. An exceptional candidate was hired and has been working in the position since summer. The offices of the Veterans' Services were changed after trying several locations. The new location suits everyone and has sufficient room and privacy to accommodate their needs.

There have been and will be several other significant retirements, not the least of these is our own Legislative Clerk, who has served for many years in a sensitive and demanding role. She has assisted new legislators as they accepted their new responsibilities and kept us all on track with Robert's Rules, accurate minutes, gentle reminders and policy matters. She will be greatly missed upon her early spring departure.

As people retire from their years of valuable service to our County, we know that each individual cannot be replaced. But when positions can be filled we bend every effort to select a person with skill sets that are tailored to the job...over time they put their stamp on the position perhaps adding something new and retaining some of the tried and true methods that worked in the past.

During the last year a new and very powerful entity has emerged to influence our attention, the way we apply for funding, and our strategic planning. The ten Regional Economic Development Councils were established by our governor as a way to revitalize the economic health of our state. Our county was placed in the nine county Finger Lakes Region. In each region, the voting members were chosen by the governor, with help

from a state panel and co-chairs were assigned by the same panel. Each of the nine counties has a seat and a voice at the table, but not as voting members. The first year was especially challenging as the procedures and time lines were created as we worked through to establish an overall Five Year Strategic Plan. A Consolidated Funding Application (CFA) was created and now is **the necessary application for most funding requests on a state wide level.** It was an effort to simplify the application process and funnel the many applications to the correct funding sources.

The Ten Councils were in Competition for the \$240 million dollars to be awarded and divided among to the top three Regions having the best developed strategic plan for their area. All identified projects requesting funding had to be approved by the Council and demonstrate significant ways they moved the Strategic Plan forward. The first year of competition found the Finger Lakes Council at the top of the award winners...of those not in the top three positions. The second year the Finger Lakes Region received the top award.

As important, perhaps, was the inclusion in the plan of our own Stamp Project as one of the ten Priority Projects chosen by our Region as transformative. This recognition by the entire region certainly was a necessary and appreciated seal of approval. The members of the selection committee had many very competitive projects to judge. Our Stamp Project was chosen for its vision, future impact on the region, and for its perfect use of our local resources to address the needs of the Science, Technology, and Advanced Manufacturing World. A very few sites around this globe have

all the requirements...and one of them is in Genesee County...and the Finger lakes Regional Economic Development Council recognized that.

The Council is now beginning its third of five years of the Strategic Plan and the various focus groups which were established by our region are working diligently to identify the most appropriate and strongest projects for our area.

Two other regional councils are not as new, but are in the spotlight as their work finds new acceptance and importance in today's world. They are the Genesee Regional Transportation Council and the Finger Lakes Regional Planning Council. These hardworking and productive Councils have been producing plans and working with the same members of the nine county regions that the FLREDC serves and so much sharing of information and collaboration has occurred and continues. NYSERDA is now working with both groups and again, the same cast of characters of the nine county regions, to develop the first overall Strategic Sustainability Plan for this region in fifty years. The linkage between all of these groups is pretty strong...and rightly so...hopefully the emphasis on planning, local strengths, and efficiency will raise our level of accomplishments by a measureable degree.

I want to emphasize that much of what is happening is new...new meetings, committees, workshops, obligations, and requirements. In most cases, not of our doing...but our participation is essential to ensure that Genesee County has a strong voice in the regional chorus. That being said...I call your attention to the nine members of this Legislature who are bringing your

voice to the tables. Each of us serves on at least one committee which is Multi County. And there are many other committees and work groups which also impact several departments, legislators serve on those as well. It is my honor to serve with these dedicated individuals. We attend workshops and educational presentations which help to keep us current. It also takes additional time from personal lives. The role of a county legislator has expanded from practical knowledge of our district and how it fits into our county...to how our county fits into our region, how our region fits into our state, and how the federal government impacts all of us. To know less means that laws and or rules and regulations regarding transportation, agriculture, economic development, health care, land use, law enforcement, emergency management, and taxation, etc., all areas impacting us greatly, may be changed without our knowledge and input. Certainly our administrators are also required to be on top of their game on all of these changing laws and regulations which impact county government. It is a daunting task and leads to energetic discussions, continuing education, brainstorming, and the careful vetting of the flood of information we receive. When these individuals bring the requests on behalf of Genesee County to our regional, state, and federal representatives, it must be with a comprehensive knowledge of the matters under discussion. We must have the facts and figures regarding the effect of legislation on our county to be effective and I am proud to say, we do.

Genesee County is productive and attracting business and industries during very difficult time...state wide. But we can always improve. Our Comprehensive Plan is 17 years old. It has not been shelved, nor has it

gathered dust. It is a useful plan and is updated yearly. But, the times may require more. At a meeting of the Genesee County Chamber of Commerce's Business Development Council, it was suggested the Steering Committee for the Plan meet to go through the document and come up with a few key priorities...these might be adopted for more focus. An energetic distribution of the plan would follow with significant outreach to share information as well as gather new ideas and participants. It is not enough that we have a plan and that it works, it should be the best plan possible...one that will move us forward and take advantage of the new technology. This plan would start on a higher plateau...where we are now and enable us to reach higher with a new and clearer vision for the future.

Genesee County enjoys an enviable reputation for solving their local problems in a creative, collaborative, and successful manner. Let's look back at some outstanding examples. The Court Facility, County wide water project, Smart Growth, The Comprehensive Plan, The GCEDC, The Airport, Our 5 active Industrial Parks, The Animal Shelter, The Senior Center, Dispatch Center and Public Safety Building, The reorganized Emergency Management Group, the County Wide Study of Waste Water needs and resources, the consolidation of Agricultural Districts, Relocation of the Mental Health and Department of Social Services Departments, the privatization of a County Wide Ambulance System, the melding of the Treasurer's office and the Real Property Tax and Assessment Office, the continued growth and expanding services of the IT Department in spite of fiscal constraints, recent changes to the Public Health Department and the expansion of our Genesee Community College...both facilities and

curriculum. The list goes on, as we are constantly examining better ways to accomplish our tasks and deliver our services with dwindling resources.

I have been fortunate to have been part of the Genesee County Legislature for over twenty years. During that length of time, I have witnessed significant changes to our local government. Some are very good and of our own making, some are not so good and imposed. The funny thing about change is that sometimes it happens so gradually that we are unaware of its impact. But when we turn around, the world is different. Sometimes we are changed in little ways, sometimes the changes are transformative. For instance, we used to read the minutes of all the Standing Committees aloud at our Legislature meetings, the buildings were not air-conditioned, energy efficient, or handicapped accessible. We used phones, face to face meetings, and letters to communicate...were these small or large changes...? It depends on your point of view.

Let's look at just a few of the transformative changes and how we do business now. We do business now, in addition to the phones, face to face, and letters...we also communicate with smart phones, I pads, I phones, laptops and computers with many webinars and conferences on site and technologically produced. Not only is the technology different, it has made us different with more data and more immediately available data...and the expectation that we are also immediately available. Maybe the biggest transformative change... our local budgets have perimeters set by Albany. Did you all look at your Property Tax Bills? That pie chart on the back says it all. We spend four times as much on just one State Mandate...Medicaid,

43%, as we spend on all our local services, 10%. The other Mandates account for the other 47% of our budget and that local 10% share must cover maintenance and replacement for our local roads and bridges, public safety, services to our elderly, our young people, and our veterans, any cultural or recreational resources for our citizens, and the Nursing Home. Our aging infrastructure needs attention and we must find the resources needed to address this safety, economic, and convenience issue from that same 10%.

During my time on the Legislature, I do not remember when we could ever sit back and say..."There, now we have no issues on the table. No big challenges to be seen this year...or next. All is well." But, you know, the challenges were met, the issues were resolved, and life did go on. The Legislature was and still is, committed to working out the solutions together, whatever the problems. I am confident that will continue...and Genesee County will survive and thrive for another 210 years, stronger, with careful attention to all its resources, and so very well located...in other words, better than ever. Could you all raise your hand...like this? Let us look to the future and toast its arrival virtually and fearlessly. It will come, ready or not, and we are ready!