

Good evening to the people of Rensselaer County, and the members of this legislative body. It is my honor to serve as your County Executive and it is my honor to deliver the State of the County address for 2022.

Thank you to Chairwoman Kelly Hoffman for her invitation to speak before this body tonight and to provide all of you with an update on the great things accomplished already for our county and the tremendous future in store for us, provided we continue to make the right decisions and continue a commitment to stay on the path we have forged during the past four years.

Tonight, I will speak of reduced taxes, improved services, better quality of life and historic investment. Tonight, we will also look ahead to a county government that will continue to take impressive action and be reshaped to be more modern, effective and accessible to the people we are proud to serve.

We have dared to do more and to think bigger, and we are winning on every level! Let us continue a legacy of expecting excellence, promoting prosperity and encouraging opportunity for all.

Four years ago, I stood before you, and said “Rensselaer County’s time is now.”

That remains true. This is our moment. We have done so much but there are still greater things for us to accomplish.

As Abraham Lincoln said: “The best way to predict the future is to create it.”

So let’s get to work, continuing to create a new era of excellence here in our county. We have seen success in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 in many areas. Myself and the legislators

here tonight have been elected by the people to, as we say in my administration, provide the best services for the lowest cost possible. I want to express my genuine appreciation and gratitude to the people of Rensselaer County for again choosing me to lead this county during the recent elections, and doing so by a large margin.

The last four years have, by any measure, been outstanding and unprecedented in this county's history, but we should resolve to make 2022 a new chapter of excellence for our county.

We should also take time tonight to acknowledge the tragic events in Ukraine, with members of that democratic nation being victimized by an aggressive and unfounded attack by a dictator. We are sadly again seeing the tragedy of a war being waged on peaceful and innocent people, and as a country founded on the principles of justice, equality and freedom, must oppose Putin's invasion.

Rensselaer County stands with the people of Ukraine, and joins with those around the world who have condemned this attack and who stand united in calling for an end to the invasion. We are now collecting clothes, medicine and material to be sent to the people of Ukraine and look forward to the generous support of our residents.

We also acknowledge our brave men and women now serving this nation in our armed forces and protecting us around the clock. Rensselaer County will never forget the service and sacrifice of our veterans and their families. We are joined by Leonard Roden, a 94-year-old resident of Brunswick who will be acknowledged by the County Legislature tonight for his service in Korea.

There is so much to be optimistic about in Rensselaer County. Despite challenges and complications, a long and difficult pandemic and constant economic uncertainty on the

national level our county has seen significant success and important accomplishments. Some of these victories have been unprecedented and historic and show our county is reaching new heights.

In fact, Rensselaer County continues to emerge as a leader in the state in key economic areas and financial accomplishments.

Many of you here tonight have played a role in that good work and in fostering a better future for our county. We are again looking to you to help Rensselaer County reach new success.

When I took office over four years ago, I made some promises to the people and some of those gathered here tonight. I promised we would take every opportunity to save taxpayer money, to support innovation and investment, to demand results and reject excuses and failed traditions. My team got to work, seeking to make every day and every opportunity count. And we have delivered!

There have been unexpected challenges that we have all faced. We have been tried and tested in new ways. In Rensselaer County, we have stayed focused and on mission, working to fulfill our goals to provide better service for our residents, a stronger future for all and at a cost we can all afford.

Booker T. Washington said: "Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome."

We have faced significant obstacles, but still continued to reach for greatness. That effort is paying off. Now is Rensselaer County's moment.

Look at what was accomplished during these past four years: the continued expansion of Regeneron Pharmaceuticals to a major force in the region and the location of the Amazon center in Schodack. We earned the attention of these major economic forces through our hard work: property tax reductions, service improvements, efficiencies in county government that reduce expenses and effective partnerships with those who grow our county in positive ways.

Our work and our shared efforts have poised this county for further greatness. The difficult choices made during the past four years, our commitment to stay on course despite the pandemic and other turbulence, and our willingness to go further and faster to reach our goal is paying off.

A look at our commitment to the future of Rensselaer County:

We have lowered county property taxes each of the past four years. Each budget has been approved unanimously by County legislators in a county often known for rough and tumble politics. But we have worked together to benefit the taxpayers of today and tomorrow. The four tax reductions combined total nearly 19 percent, bringing the county tax rate to a level comparable to what was paid by county taxpayers in 2002.

I want to acknowledge our County legislators for their effort in supporting my administration's efforts to reduce taxes, and want to acknowledge two legislators who are taking new roles in the county's law-making body. Kelly Hoffman has been selected by her peers as Chairwoman of the Legislature, and Rob Bayly chosen to serve as Vice Chair for Finance. In their new roles, Kelly and Rob join Bob Loveridge, who moves from Vice Chair for Finance to Vice Chair, and continuing in his previous job, Majority Leader Ken Herrington.

I look forward to a strong and productive partnership with Kelly, Bob, Rob and Ken and the other fifteen members of the Legislature during the coming term of office.

The tax reduction for 2022 was 10 percent. That is the biggest county tax reduction in history. We saw revenues increase beyond our projections and made the correct decision to allow residents and property owners to share in the success. Our residents and property owners have invested in our county and have helped generate these outstanding results. The 2022 tax reduction of 10 percent led to an interesting occurrence, where residents have actually been calling or writing us to thank us for the tax reduction.

Other taxpayers, including members of my staff, have reported receiving rebate checks for escrow payments because of our series of tax cuts. Imagine that, a tax bill that brings at least some good news to residents and taxpayers. In Rensselaer County, the proof of our work and our commitment is in your tax bill.

Our county is known across the state for reducing taxes. We can be proud of one simple fact in Rensselaer County, that no other county in New York State has made the commitment and the investment to lowering property taxes and allowing our residents and taxpayers to share in our growth and success.

We have made our financial choices carefully and on a solid foundation. Rensselaer County earned a Zero fiscal stress score from the State Comptroller, all despite the pandemic and economic uncertainty in other areas. Earning the Zero fiscal stress rating was done each day, by taking extra care with purchases, with personnel hires and with careful planning and accurate fiscal forecasts. Many others across the state were not able to earn a Zero rating or even a rating that shows stability. We recognize the Zero fiscal stress rating as an advertisement of our effectiveness in managing county finances and serving as a solid place for investment and growth.

A number of municipalities in the Capital Region were found by the Comptroller's office to be exposed to significant or moderate stress. The report by the Comptroller shows the importance of making careful fiscal decisions so the mistakes of yesterday do not become the problems of tomorrow.

During the past four years, we have been able to reduce our debt by \$35 million, all while improving services in important areas. To fund our efforts at building services, lowering taxes and encouraging investment we have focused on reducing expenses and not incurring new debt. Our care in not issuing new debt further positions our county for strong moves in the coming months and years. In 2021, we continued our efforts to reduce costs, with expenditures for personnel down by \$1 million.

Not issuing debt, making careful and informed choices, especially when estimating revenues and budgeting for expenses each year, have enabled our county to assemble a surplus approaching \$100 million. As a point of reference, the surplus was \$20 million when I took office. These funds will be used to protect taxpayers, safeguard quality of life, ensure strong services and provide for the future while navigating future challenges.

We have achieved financial success, and we have achieved success in economic development and in expanding or improving needed services. Now, I am asking legislators to turn their attention to remaking the operations of county government itself.

Rensselaer County government, with the legislative and Executive branches, was founded over a half century ago. Many of the offices utilized are almost a half century old, and this county continues to utilize rented space for many of our important operations. Utilizing rented space presents some long term challenges for the county. As we have discussed in

my administration, the county is somewhat like someone who builds a home but decided to still rent a garage.

More to the point, if as a county, we know we are going to be providing a service 50 years from now, why would we be housing the central core of that service in rented space?

Thankfully, we have a solution and one that will serve us for today and for the next generations.

Tonight, I am introducing the Reimagine Rensselaer County Facilities effort, a plan that will place the majority of county services on county-owned property and expand access, convenience and service for the residents we serve and the employees who assist in that mission. The plan can be achieved at a lower reasonable cost, especially in light of other long-standing rental agreements and given the county's strong financial position.

I am tonight announcing our intent to purchase the current Rose and Kiernan building on Route 4. Purchasing the R&K building will allow the county to relocate a number of offices now based in the County Office Building and the former Health building, and allow for services to be situated in a modern and accessible location.

The county will then be able to relocate offices and functions for our county Department of Social Services based at Flanigan Square to the County Office Building. County Probation will be located in the Health building, allowing a secure and safe location for that vital service. We believe the public is best served by separating DSS from Probation services, unlike the current configuration, and we also believe each of the services benefits from such a reconfiguration. Keep in mind, the county has paid over \$11 million over 10 years for the current lease for DSS and Probation.

This is a major step forward for our county, a significant and meaningful reorganization in how we serve our residents and ensuring services can be reached easily by those in need. Just as important, we will own the majority of our structures, and when we pass the mantle of leadership to the next generation, we can know that we are providing a strong foundation for the generations that follow.

The Reimagine Rensselaer County Facilities plan addresses several of the challenges we now face with our county buildings. The county's lease at Flanigan Square in Troy is expiring in one year and public statements by the building's owner indicate they are ready to move on from a lease with the county.

We have looked for replacement properties and not been able to find new ones, despite a periodic search over the past four years. This is the best solution.

The Reimagine plan incorporates a structure that is a ready and suitable home for many of the county services now based here, all at a cost that is significantly lower than the cost of the Flanagan Square lease reasonable and by our estimate over \$10 million far less than the cost of new construction. An energy performance agreement with Siemens, similar to agreements with Siemens utilized at other county facilities, will upgrade infrastructure in the approximately 35-year-old building.

We will also strengthen our commitment to these facilities in downtown Troy with a comprehensive plan of rehabilitation and improvement for the County Office Building and the Health office. When completed, in parallel with the East Greenbush facility, we will be able to take pride in these facilities and have a presence in Troy that is convenient, accessible and safe for our residents.

Our county, thankfully and in large part due to the work done during the past four years, is in a great position for this undertaking. When completed, the Reimagine Rensselaer County Facilities Plan will offer the county the following, to summarize:

- More modern and accessible facilities
- Ownership of the majority of county offices
- Flexibility for future county facility projects
- A cost that is over \$10 million less than more affordable than new construction
- A long-term solution to county facility needs

This project will be a landmark for our county, and residents of today and tomorrow will appreciate our efforts and investment. Your support will be crucial in helping us move the county forward.

We are also excited to start work on a new county park in Schodack on a section of former Fort Orange Paper Co. property. The county recognizes the continuation of our partnership to manage the Papscanee Island Nature Preserve, with the Preserve having been returned to ancestral owners the Stockbridge-Munsee community in 2021.

Rensselaer County has been proud to serve as sponsor and major supporter of Hudson Valley Community College since the founding of Hudson Valley over six decades ago. We view our relationship with Hudson Valley as strong and positive, and growing for the future of both the county and the school.

We have expanded support for Hudson Valley Community College and strengthened our partnership with the college. Rensselaer County is proud to have sponsored Hudson Valley since the college was formed over 60 years ago. We are seeing the college continue to be a

force for good, providing education and training to those starting their journey and those changing direction or improving their lives.

How many lives have been changed for the better by Hudson Valley and the generations of instruction provided at the college? So much good is accomplished at Hudson Valley. As we often say at Rensselaer County, our commitment is to keep education at Hudson Valley both excellent and affordable. We saw the college complete the Gene Haas Center for Advanced Manufacturing in 2019, just before the onset of the pandemic. The college has continued to expand its mission, launching a STEM high school that helps give students a head start. We are particularly proud to have partnered with the college in creating new support services for veterans.

Rensselaer County is proud to provide important support for Hudson Valley Community College as the college seeks to develop an Applied Technology Education Center – ATEC. The \$65 million project will be started with \$2.9 million in funding through our county Industrial Development Agency. ATEC will help our region and Hudson Valley respond to the shortage for skilled technical workers, and would join the Gene Haas Center for Applied Manufacturing at the college. The ATEC project would graduate students in fields including mechatronics, plumbing, electrical, welding and automotive and involve leading manufacturers in training and support.

Thank you to Hudson Valley Community College President Dr. Roger Ramsammy and the team at Hudson Valley for their leadership and effort to maintain the college's education mission during some challenging times.

Recognizing the importance of our roads to economic development and quality of life, we also set a record by paving 170 miles of roads in four years. That amounts to paving over half the total miles in the county road network of 330 miles. This included 50 miles of roads

paved in 2020, a record that was broken just last year when we paved 70 miles of roads in 2021.

Along with the 170 miles of roads paved over four years, the county also completed work to improve and replace seven bridges, including three bridges in 2021. We hear regularly from residents how much our work to improve roads and bridges is appreciated, in fact almost daily, and we intend to keep this work a priority in 2022.

We also provided needed updates and improvements to our county Highway equipment to ensure an effective response during snow storms and weather occurrences and our paving, repair and maintenance projects. And we did all those record number of miles of paving and purchases of new equipment without borrowing.

We recognize that a quality road network makes travel easier for our residents and those who work or study here, and encourages visitors and new shoppers. Well-maintained county roads send the message every mile that we are a county that welcomes new investment and growth, takes care of our assets and is ready for the future.

The county also continued to earn good news and high marks across the state. We know of the economic turbulence caused by the pandemic, which reached a height in 2020. A recent federal report showed Rensselaer County as one of only three counties out of the 62 counties in New York State to have shown an increase in the GDP during 2020.

By comparison, the other 59 counties in the state saw a decline in GDP during 2020, and nationally, two-thirds of the counties across America saw a decline in GDP, according to the report compiled by the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis.

During the worst of the pandemic, Rensselaer County was still viewed as a place to shop, spend, create and invest.

For our county to grow our GDP during a time of shutdowns and quarantines is proof we are on the right road to prosperity and better times. We hope this message rings loudly with investors, job creators and anyone else considering a home or business in our great county.

And the good news has thankfully continued.

This winter, Rensselaer County reached an important milestone, with our sales tax revenues for 2021 for the first time in county history breaking the \$100 million mark. In fact, sales tax revenues for 2021 exceeded \$110 million. Never in county history have we received \$100 million in sales revenues, but that was accomplished in 2021, and then some.

Again, that shows great confidence in our county and economic vitality. During 2021, we still faced the pandemic, economic challenges and inflation, and yet, more shoppers came to our county and more residents made their purchases right at home. This is a major success and shows Rensselaer County has arrived as a retail force in our region.

Thank you to those shoppers who have decided to spend and invest in our county, including many of our residents who are choosing to keep their dollars close to home.

What does our county breaking the \$100 million mark for sales tax revenues mean for our county and our residents? It means more dollars are reinvested right here in the county. The added revenues help bolster already strong county finances and support our efforts to maintain and expand needed services. The revenues are also shared by our municipalities, every city, town and village, meaning the good news is extended to every corner of our

county. Everyone shares in the benefits. County taxpayers will see lower taxes and at the same time, towns and villages are better able to maintain streets. This is a major accomplishment for our county.

We have been seeing encouraging success with sales tax in Rensselaer County during the past several years. In 2019, our county led the state in sales tax growth with an 8.4 percent increase. Since then, our county has performed strongly, exceeding budgeted estimates for sales tax revenues thanks to increased economic activity here. Through the pandemic, we have seen sales tax revenues remain strong and consistent and that is definitely a good thing.

The county also received a strong and positive review by S&P Global Ratings, maintaining the county's excellent AA bond rating. This outstanding bond rating was upheld despite the challenges and difficulties presented during the pandemic and are a testament to the work of Chief Fiscal Officer Mark Wojcik and Budget Director Stacey Farrar.

We are working to strengthen services that improve the quality of life for our residents. Work has begun to establish a new state of the art senior center in the College Station complex in downtown, offering a safe and accessible space for our seniors and including modern upgrades for programs and services. Rensselaer County is unique among counties in that we directly provide senior services, including home-delivered meals and senior centers. We believe our seniors deserve support for all they have done to provide, protect and build for our county.

Our county now operates five senior centers, in Troy, Schodack, Grafton, Hoosick and Rensselaer. We are seeking to upgrade the services and the types of facilities, starting with the Troy center, to reflect on the more modern and active seniors of today. We hope to open the new Troy center this year, and then get to work assessing the future for our other

senior centers. Stay tuned for updates on the Troy senior center and what is shaping up to be a state of the art facility we can take pride in.

Early in 2020, just days before the pandemic, we celebrated the delivery of our four millionth home-delivered meal, a significant accomplishment for all of us in county government. And during the pandemic, we tripled the number of meals delivered to seniors at home, to keep them safe. We ask everyone to also stay tuned as we announce another important milestone about the care for our senior services in the county in the coming weeks.

Our commitment to providing and protecting our seniors remains as strong as ever. I am the only County Executive and we were the only county to refuse then-Governor Cuomo's deadly order to place COVID-19 positive residents into nursing homes and will always defend and do what is right for our seniors at any time. We were right every step of the way.

The county is also strengthening emergency services that work around the clock to keep us safe. The county fire training facility and tower was closed several years ago after years of heavy use, training generations of our first responders from across the county. Last year, work started on construction of the new tower and facility, at the same location on Macha Lane as the former site, and progress is continuing even during the winter months. The new training center and tower will provide state of the art training and instruction, and ensure the current and future generations of our first responders get the preparation they need to save lives when needed.

Just as we did by providing a meaningful tax break to our residents during a period of growth and increased revenues, we also provided important support to our fire and ambulance companies in 2021. The Rensselaer County Responds Fund recognized the

importance of our emergency services and the increased demand on fire and ambulance companies during the pandemic, along with a reduction in their fundraising ability. Our county generated a savings of \$18 million in 2021, much of which was not forecast, and we decided to use a portion of that savings to provide \$10,000 to each fire and ambulance company in the county, in every city, town and village.

The Rensselaer County Responds effort helped each of our fire and ambulance departments maintain facilities, purchase new equipment and prepare for the future. A companion effort helped reimburse departments for PPE expenses incurred during the pandemic. One of the features of Rensselaer County Responds was our effort to visit every single one of our fire and ambulance companies and on behalf of the people of Rensselaer County, say “Thank You” for their work.

The training tower is a priority project, one that I promised to achieve when running for this office in 2017. We did utilize bonding for the fire training facility and tower, in part because of our excellent financial position and because of the importance of the project. Our bonding position affords us great flexibility as we move forward, and the county currently has the best bonding rating in our history. Our A++ and AA bond ratings are just under elite status, and we recognize a strong bond rating is one of the best advertisements, along with our reductions in property taxes, to help attract new growth here.

One of the major impediments to attracting growth in Rensselaer County has been infrastructure, and we are now working to change that situation.

The Amazon project in Schodack helped demonstrate that this county has arrived as a major force for job creation in the region. For years, Rensselaer County was often close or in the running for projects, but unable to seal the deal. Amazon helped change that view, along with Regeneron and retail projects in East Greenbush, North Greenbush and

Brunswick. The Amazon project created 1000 new jobs, following creation of several hundred new jobs at Regeneron.

We are now looking at a second phase of the Amazon project in Schodack that will create another 200 to 300 new jobs. And we are regularly fielding inquiries from other companies interested in the county.

Both Amazon projects show the need for an expansion of infrastructure in our county. The American Rescue Plan funds approved in Washington gives us an opportunity to get progress on the issue. At the end of 2021, the county joined with the Town of Schodack to announce an expansion of water lines on the Route 9 and Route 9 & 20 corridors, and possible expansion of sewer lines in the area. The project would open up southern Rensselaer County to better and safer quality of life services, and allow for job creation and investment to continue.

The service will be extended through utilization of funds received by the American Rescue Plan by the county, with the two projects expected to cost a total of approximately \$13.1 million. The town will be covering engineering costs for the projects. The county will cover costs for the project, and the town will cover costs for engineering for the water and sewer lines on Route 9 and Routes 9 & 20, and total approximately \$10.5 million.

This means that from the area near Exit 10 to Exit 12 of I-90 we will have more ability to attract and encourage growth in a vital and underutilized area. Traffic counts on Route 9 in Schodack in particular are below average and there is considerable property awaiting new uses, particularly in the area around Exit 12. We have had opportunities in this area before and lost them because of issues involving infrastructure and we look forward to reversing that trend.

We thank our partners in Schodack for their help with this issue, including former Supervisor David Harris, who worked hard to support this project, and Supervisor Charles Peter, who just took office at the start of this year. Schodack is working with the county to support the types of projects that will create employment opportunities and stable taxes for the future.

I would also like to acknowledge new Schodack Supervisor Chuck Peter, a former member of this legislative body, and thank him for his efforts.

The pandemic continues to be a major issue, and one that we are proud that Rensselaer County has responded to with common sense and compassion. Our motto as COVID-19 descended has been “Be careful, but not fearful.” We have also taken necessary steps to fight the scourge of opioid addiction in our county.

In October, Rensselaer County became the first county in the nation to require those who prescribe opioids to also provide safe disposal products. The Rensselaer County Prescription Opioid Safe Disposal Law will hopefully save lives and ensure these potentially harmful drugs do not fall into the wrong hands. I think members of this legislative body for their strong and unanimous support for this law.

The county saw our first COVID-19 case in March of 2020. We are ready to enter our third year of COVID-19. We have taken stands when needed, and we have been consistently correct. We opposed Governor Cuomo when he tried to force COVID positive seniors into nursing homes. We have advocated for a rational, science-based approach. We have focused on results, rather than pronouncements.

When the state refused to help, our county independently established a testing site and then a vaccination clinic during the peak of the pandemic. Today, we are continuing to provide vaccines and boosters to those who want them three times a week. Rensselaer County has been served by a dedicated and selfless team at our Health Department and volunteers with the Medical Reserve Corps, who for months worked long hours, seven days a week.

When help was denied or slow to come, this county did not present excuses or escapes. We got to work and delivered tens of thousands of vaccines, and tens of thousands of tests. We protected our residents and made a difference during difficult times.

We are fortunate to have a Health Department who has never failed to rise to the occasion. Please join me in thanking our outstanding Public Health Director Mary Fran Wachunas here tonight.

In recent weeks, Rensselaer County was the first county in the state to oppose a new state mask mandate. We said the reasons for the mandate were not detailed, the “science” was nothing of the sort, the guidance unclear and we firmly reminded this Governor that county resources were already stretched thin. Our misgivings about the mask mandate were also proven right when the state mask mandate was struck down by a Supreme Court judge in Nassau County, and when we were quickly joined by more than 40 other counties.

We are encouraged that the state has, just days ago, finally agreed with parents, educators and elected officials including myself to unmask our children. Our children unfairly bore the brunt of COVID-19 policies and have lost too much of their childhood to public health policies that are ill-defined and not backed by clear metrics or goals. Statistics, including in this county, have shown fewer cases of COVID-19 or hospitalizations in children. Unmasking our children was long overdue, and it was NEVER justified or logical. There has been

incalculable damage done to children and this nation will pay the price of these disastrous policies for decades to come.

The mandates and pronouncements on the pandemic are largely rooted in a response formed during the height of the pandemic in 2020. These responses failed to stop a rise in cases, and are also accompanied by almost no science or data. The reason these mandates are objected to in court and generally struck down are because there is no science or data backing the mandate.

The impact we have seen on business is considerable. We believe the state should allow for business owners to manage their business as they see fit and for customers to interact with businesses as they see fit. We have lived with the pandemic for over two years and we will probably be continuing to live with COVID-19 for the foreseeable future. Ever-changing rules confuse the public and muddle the mission, and we advise the state and the federal government to adopt a consistent and clear policy as to how we will respond and stick with that plan.

We need residents to get out and get engaged again, shopping, dining and interacting. Now is the time to celebrate what we have here in our great county. Again, be careful, not fearful.

The pandemic response remains an issue. So too is the ongoing tragedy of bail reform, which has jeopardized the safety of every neighborhood in the state. It is crucial for the State Legislature and the Governor to undo bail reform without delay and allow police and judges to do their jobs and keep those who would do us harm locked away when necessary.

We have seen the damage caused by bail reform. Crime has gone up dramatically everywhere. Police are unable to make a difference on many quality of life calls. The

number of shootings, stabbings and assaults is on the rise. The laws as configured only encourage more criminal activity.

The basic failing of bail reform has to be faced, as it is clear the safety of New Yorkers has been placed in jeopardy. The rise in crime affects neighborhoods often in need of attention. How can new investors be attracted to revitalize neighborhoods when the streets are unsafe at all hours? Can a developer maintain interest in an area when crime is increasing and now answer given to how threats and violence and thefts will be ended? Two-thirds of New Yorkers support changes to the disastrous 2029 Bail Reform Law. So, I am discouraged by the announcement earlier this year by Democrats who control Albany that they will not fix or amend bail reform. I believe restoring judicial discretion would address many of the problems caused by bail reform and improve public safety. Their announcement that they will not fix bail reform is tone deaf, dangerous and senseless and it does not end the need for action on this issue. Just look at the shootings in Troy this past weekend, and sadly, almost every weekend, as proof our laws need to be strengthened and police supported.

I also note the redistricting plan which was recently adopted by the State Legislature. The changes in our state leadership concern me, as our county is now home to three Senate districts. I believe this reduces our shared voice in the State Senate and reduces how issues presented by our county do not receive priority attention. Our Assembly lines are slightly better, but as in my time, one district now covers territory in four counties.

Our congressional lines are also a concern. Rensselaer now hosts three congressional districts, making the lines confusing and possibly counter-productive for residents. There is one bright spot, with the county seeing Congresswoman Elise Stefanik moved into a significant portion of our county north of Troy. Congresswoman Stefanik is now in leadership in her caucus and will continue to be at the forefront in Congress. That would mean good things for our county in the coming months.

As we have discussed the idea of justice, we can turn our attention to the historic Rensselaer County Courthouse, located in downtown Troy. Over twenty years ago, our county reversed decades of neglect and restored much of the Courthouse to a condition comparable to when it was opened in 1898. We were fortunate to have the project guided by a Troy native who has gone on to international acclaim as an historic architect, John Waite. We are revisiting the Courthouse to complete exterior work and update infrastructure at the facility. We are again privileged to work with John Waite on this important project and ensure the Courthouse remains a vital part of Troy's downtown and our county.

The Courthouse and other properties in downtown Troy were among those featured in the HBO historical drama *The Gilded Age*. Viewers around the country and the world can see the architecture and history that we are blessed to have among us each day. We hope this spurs some new visitors to our county, and our Tourism office has worked hard to support or sponsor community and county-wide events. We were particularly glad to see the county's summer tradition, the Schaghticoke Fair, come back strong and have big crowds on each day.

From restaurants and breweries, to small shops, boutiques and craft places, retail establishments, riverfront parks and walking trails, our county is expanding the recreational opportunities and attractions available to county residents and visitors. Later this year, our county will begin work on establishment of a new county park off Brookview Road in Schodack. We are continuing to pursue the idea of a bike trail along the Hudson River to showcase even more of our county.

To give you an idea of what our county offers in a convenient setting, we recently launched an improved and expanded version of our county website, [www.rensco.com](http://www.rensco.com). You will find a

listing of the services we are proud to provide to our residents, a look at convenient ways for residents to access county departments and functions, and news and updates about our county.

The website is just a small picture into our county, a place where we have created a strong foundation for future success and brought about historic achievements. During the past four years, we have remained committed to our goals and our vision of a county reaching full potential and promise. There have been challenges and obstacles, many unforeseen, but we have persevered. Better days are ahead.

Here is a look at the outstanding work being done by our departments:

We are proud to have been one of the few counties to use stimulus funds to provide a one-time bonus to our employees of between \$1,000 and \$500 per employee. The bonus recognized the outstanding work of our employees during the pandemic and their commitment to serve our residents.

Department for the Aging: In 2021, the Rensselaer County Office for the Aging served 180,902 meals, with 90 percent of the meals served as home-delivered meals. This helped seniors avoid the risks of the pandemic when possible and stay safe. Aging also provided 18,364 congregate meals in centers and grab and go. The Expanded In-Home Services for the Elderly Program helps with long-term care at home, vendors are contracted with to provide service, including housekeeping, shopping, companion care, and bathing and dressing. In 2021, EISEP provided nearly 8,000 hours of support to seniors.

The Department continues to provide needed service at our seniors, including Schodack, Rensselaer, Grafton and Hoosick Falls, along with the Troy center. We look forward to the

Troy senior center coming on line in 2022, and we then look forward to improving other centers where possible.

Budget Department: The Budget office, led by Director Stacey Farrar, has helped our county become a statewide leader in reducing taxes, watching over every dollar. We have detailed their work extensively in this State of the County. Thanks also to Marc D'Amore and Ellen Christiansen. Welcome also to Joseph Ryan, a lifelong resident of our county who started as an intern in the County Legislature and is now Deputy Budget Director.

Bureau of Public Safety: Every day, our Bureau of Public Safety helps save lives and protect property. We are particularly grateful for the outstanding work of our emergency services team during a challenging 2021. The July flood brought chaos and destruction to our county. Thanks in part to effective 911 dispatching, our county survived the flooding without a single loss of life. On that day, we remember hearing dispatches of motorists trapped in cars, with water pouring in, but all were rescued thanks to the work of our 911 team and emergency services partners.

Just days ago, we received an email from Troy Fire Department Chief Eric McMahon thanking our 911 team, particularly dispatchers Marcy Pfeiffer and Jessica Large, for alerting fire crews to a trapped individual on an upper floor during a heavy fire. Their teamwork saved a life. Just as we recognize life savers, we can also acknowledge life-starters, dispatchers who helped deliver newborns. Congratulations and thank you to dispatchers Andy Zakrzewski, Dan Farley and Matt Metzger for their work in help newborns be born safely.

Led by Director Jay Wilson and Deputy Director Paul Glasser, the Bureau has helped guide the construction of our new Emergency Services Training Complex and ensured the facility will be a valuable asset as we train current and new generations of emergency services

responders. Jay's commitment to emergency service was recognized by his selection to serve on the Governor's Volunteer Firefighter Recruitment and Retention Task Force.

As I have often said, we simply cannot thank our emergency services volunteers and first responders enough for their brave and outstanding service for our county. We have worked to provide sufficient support, with the construction of the new training complex. My administration was also proud to provide one-time funding of \$10,000 through the Rensselaer County Responds effort to every fire and ambulance company in the county. My team and I visited every fire and ambulance company to express our appreciation for their work and commitment to our county.

Bureau of Finance: Our Bureau of Finance has been at the center of the county's gain in financial strength. Thanks to Chief Fiscal Officer Mark Wojcik, Deputy Tom Santandera and the Finance team for their efforts and work to watch over the assets entrusted to us by the people of our county. A look at some of their work:

- County's cash position increased by \$26.6 million in 2021 to \$83.7 million, demonstrating a strong cash flow for county
- The county fund balance will exceed \$90 million
- Sales tax revenues grew 15.1 percent to \$110 million, marking the first time the county has ever exceeded \$100 million for sales tax revenues
- Total county debt was reduced by \$11.8 million **last year alone**
- The S&P Global rating cited the county's growing tax base, with assessed values growing by over 15 percent between 2017 and 2022. The growth is expected to continue due to sustained commercial development and steady residential development.

- Strong financial profile with reserves that have shown consistent growth in recent years, rising above 30 percent of operating expenditures in 2020
- Effective and responsive internal controls for financial management that have generated significant savings, operational improvements and strengthened oversight

Bureau of Central Services - Last April, the county reaffirmed our commitment to reducing our dependence on traditional energy sources when we rolled out our community solar program. Rensselaer County diverts 7.4 mega-watts of the county's electrical load from grid electric to solar. The County will realize \$3 million in savings over the 25-year lifespan of the solar project while 35,000 tons of CO2 emissions will be avoided, the equivalent of 17,500 gasoline powered vehicles being taken off the road. This initiative does not just benefit the County's operations, it allows for county property owners the opportunity to subscribe and save up to 10% of their electric bill monthly. To date several hundred property owners have taken advantage of this no cost, no obligation initiative. Thank you to Central Services Director Jim Gordon for his continued hard work in these areas.

The County Technology department continues to improve, develop and strengthen our network and network security. Last year we completed our broadband improvement project which provides all county facilities with a more reliable high-speed fiber service allowing departments to better interact with one another, state and other regulatory agencies and provide more reliable constituent services. For years our employees were asked to perform work duties on outdated and underperforming computer equipment. We are now entering the fourth year of our computer replacement program that at year's end will have replaced over half of our desktop computers, over 600 units replaced. This may sound like a nominal task, but it is one that didn't exist and since its implementation we have seen an increase in efficiency and service provided by our employees. In 2018, we undertook an audit by NYSTEC of our IT operation and infrastructure. Since receiving those

results we have worked aggressively to reshape our IT department and its mission and to improve and replace old and tired equipment. I am proud to say that we have come a long way in a short time. Our network is more reliable, secure, faster, and responsive more than ever before. There is still work to do in an ever advancing technology field and we remain committed to the mission. Our IT environment, more than ever, is the backbone of the services we provide and requires our continual investment.

County Clerk – Our County Clerk Frank Merola continues to be a leader among County Clerks across the state. During the pandemic, while other counties and State DMV's closed, Frank worked with my administration to keep our DMV open to great reception in 2020 and in 2021. Thanks to our consistent and common-sense approach, we have maintained the legions of county residents who rely on county DMV services and attracted many customers from neighboring counties.

Frank's office also supervises the filing of mortgages, which meant more good news for local governments, who receive all of the proceeds from the mortgage tax. The mortgage tax increased to \$2.7 million in 2021 from \$1.8 million in 2020, an impressive jump of over \$900,000.

Frank's offices have also seen an increase in fees for background checks being requested, along with the increase in mortgage tax fees. Overall, fees at the Clerk's office increased from \$2 million in 2020 to \$3.275 million in 2021, an increase of over \$1 million in just one year.

Employment and Training: Our Employment and Training office helped residents find employment, successfully facing the challenges posed by the pandemic. Close to 9,500 individuals were served by the Career Center during the 2021 year both virtually and remotely. Services included monthly virtual workshops, our Career Center joining with

other counties, help with resume building, interview preparation, online learning courses, job search assistance and assistance from our Disability Resource Coordinator to help overcome employment barriers.

The work by Employment and Training, coupled with our efforts to grow jobs, has paid off. Again, as of last December, Rensselaer County's unemployment rate was 2.6 percent, the 8<sup>th</sup> lowest county in the state. That is a drop of 1.1 percent from two years ago.

Health Department: Our Health Department provided outstanding and compassionate service to Rensselaer County during the pandemic. During the darkest days of COVID-19, the work by Public Health Director Mary Fran Wachunas and her staff gave our county hope, comfort and care to the people we serve. We thank them again for their service.

The county established independent testing and independent vaccination clinics when help did not come from New York State. Our work to keep our residents safe continued during 2021, with the Health Department administering over 40,000 vaccines during 177 clinics at the mass vaccination site at Hudson Valley Community College. We thank Hudson Valley for their partnership. Over 2200 volunteers assisted in our efforts, including members of the Medical Reserve Corps, emergency services community, college students, insurance companies and the Troy Police Cadet Post. Our MRC logged 29,235 hours, an impressive total and reflective of the dedication of these dedicated men and women that deserves our recognition.

We also took our vaccination show on the road with the county's Vax Bus, in partnership with the Capital District Transportation Authority. More than any other county in the region, we brought vaccines to the people, holding 73 pop-up clinics with the mobile vax buses. Contact tracing was continued.

To fight the opioid epidemic, over 400 Narcan kits through the county's Naloxone Now effort. Rensselaer County is believed to be the first county in New York State to deliver Narcan door to door. Naloxone Now received the Innovative Practice Award by the National Association of County and City Health Officials, and we congratulate members of the department for their work to fight against this tragedy.

Highway Department: Our county Highway Department team led by County Engineer Joe Teliska and Highway Superintendent Dave Anthony has done outstanding work in all conditions for residents. In 2020, Highway set a record by paving 50 miles of roads in one year. We smashed that record with the Drive for 65 in 2021, actually paving over 70 miles of roads.

We also replaced two bridges with improved structures, the County Route 123 (Ford Road Bridge) and the County Route 4 (Van Hoesen Road Bridge), and following a flood, installed a temporary structure on County Route 42 (Taborton Road). The July flood not only destroyed the original bridge, but also wrecked seven miles of county roads, some of which had just been paved days earlier.

In 2022, we will pave 50 miles of roads, which will add to the 170 miles paved during the past four years. Accomplishing that goal next year will mean the county, in just five years, will have paved two-thirds of the county road miles. To say this is unprecedented is an understatement.

We are also investing in equipment for the Highway Department, purchasing three tandem dump truck with plows and wings, one lo-boy trailer, a loader, mobile office trailer, chipper, asphalt roller, three pick-up trucks, one mini-excavator, skid steer and two equipment trailers. The department also saw completion of construction of a new salt shed in Berlin.

Despite the severity of the July flooding, the damage we incurred did not qualify for federal funding. Rensselaer County was responsible for repairing the damage incurred to county infrastructure, just as towns were responsible for repairing their damaged roads and bridges.

Department of Mental Health: Our Mental Health unit has experienced an increase in requests for mental health treatment for children, youth and adults. The pandemic has definitely spurred the increase for mental health services, and our outpatient clinics served 3,252 clients in 2021. Along with an increase in outpatient services from the county, outpatient services at the local hospital have operated with a wait list for months, as have requests for treatment of substance abuse disorder. The crisis unit at Samaritan experienced a higher volume of admissions in 2021 for persons of all ages.

Mental Health is expanding school satellite sites to include Columbia High School and Goff Middle School in the East Greenbush school district, Schodack Central Schools and Berlin schools during the first quarter of 2022. The department has also entered into a contract for professional services of a psychiatric nurse practitioner to provide telehealth-based psychiatric care. The department has expanded the Student Assistance Program and Peer Services, and maintained the Adult Care Coordination and Adult Housing programs.

Congratulations again to Commissioner Katherine Alonge-Coons for earning a state lifetime achievement award from the state Office of Mental Health. The award recognizes Kathy's over three decades of work to support, provide and expand mental health services in our county.

Probation Department: Our Probation Department, led by Acting Director Linda McMahan, has the mission to "protect the community by focusing on offenders and their impact on society". Our Probation Department has provided steady and valuable service and support

during challenging times. Probation interacts productively with law enforcement and our court system, and we are fortunate to have these dedicated men and women serving us.

Probation ended 2021 with 570 active supervision cases. The number includes 62 absconders tracked in a separate caseload. In 2021, an intensive caseload concentrating on individuals addicted to heroin was continued, with 33 offenders. The pretrial release screened 715 offenders, and facilitated 472 releases. During 2021, Probation conducted nearly 500 unannounced random evening checks or computer searches on sex offenders.

Linda McMahon has capably served as Acting Probation Director since the retirement of Laura Bauer last July. We thank Laura and Linda for their service. Next month, for the April, we will be submitting Linda's name for confirmation by the Legislature.

Public Defender: Our Public Defender's office, led by John Turi, has maintained the responsibility of ensuring effective legal representation for residents with financial limitations. During 2021, criminal courts assigned 2779 new cases to the Public Defender, ranging from simple violations to complex homicides with multiple co-defendants. Since 2001, the criminal caseload has increased by over 60 percent. Criminal cases in 2021 included 821 felony cases, 1541 misdemeanor cases and 222 violations. An additional 195 criminal cases, including extraditions, probation and parole violations and others were also assigned.

Family Court assistants were assigned to 642 new cases and 859 petitions in 2021. This brings to 3,638 new cases during 2021. Despite the caseload, the Public Defender endeavors to provide representation of the highest caliber to all clients. John has also done an effective job of attracting new sources of funding to aid in accomplishing this important mission.

Real Property Resource Recovery: Rensselaer County is continuing to see savings from an innovative county program designed to identify and revitalize properties left abandoned because of back taxes or other issues.

The county's Real Property Resource Recovery program generated a savings of \$1.043 million during 2021, the second year the program has been in operation. The program generated a savings of \$317,000 in 2020, the program's first year. The county's Real Property Resource Recovery program gets properties back into active ownership and care earlier than the usual county foreclosure process. Many times, when properties are delinquent, they are left uncared for and deteriorate quickly.

Sheriff's Office: My administration is proud to Back the Blue and we recognize the important work by our Sheriff's Office, particularly during a time of turbulence, unrest and changing situations. Our Sheriff's Office provided outstanding service, safely operating the county jail during 2021 and one of the only jails in the state to have no major COVID-19 outbreak during the year. Deputies stepped up to deliver meals to residents in quarantine, and performed security at vaccination clinics.

Drones were operated to help with search and rescue and responses to major emergencies like the flood, and child ID cards issued to keep kids safe. My office was proud to partner with Sheriff Pat Russo in the purchase of two Harley-Davidson motorcycle patrols that can be used at special events and parades and help strengthen the connection between law enforcement and our public. Our Sheriff's Office also responded to serious crimes and unfortunate tragedies. Tonight, we also recognize the work of our Sheriff's Office in apprehending a person suspected in the murder of a 20-year-old young woman from White Creek.

Department of Social Services: Our Department of Social Services continued to provide support and assistance for county residents facing challenges, and maintained a consistent level of needed service despite numerous challenges during 2021.

DSS has helped coordinate our ER Anywhere program, which was introduced in 2019 to allow Medicaid recipients to access medical attention through smartphones or computers. This first in the nation program won an award from the National Association of Counties, and was expanded to allow all residents to access the service last year. This is also a first in the nation program. We view ER Anywhere as a forward-thinking way to provide needed medical services in a more convenient and affordable format, and appreciate the attention and recognition ER Anywhere has received to date.

We recognize the service of Department of Social Services Commissioner Theresa Beaudoin, who retired early this year. Theresa started with the county in 1983, and continued an admirable legacy of service started by her father John, who served as Commissioner for 40 years during a half-century of work with the county. We are fortunate to have Randy Hall, who preceded Theresa as Commissioner, agreeing to serve as Acting Commissioner as we seek a permanent replacement. Thank you to Randy for stepping forward to ensure the important services provided by DSS are maintained.

Tourism: We are expanding our efforts to attract new visitors to our great county. Our Tourism Office, led by Vito Ciccarelli, produced the first ever Rensselaer County Visitors guide, which was distributed at Thruway rest areas, hotels along the upstate corridor, Western Massachusetts, Southern Vermont, and visitors centers from Westchester to Lake George.

Tourism also assisted communities & businesses throughout the county in the advertising, marketing, and development of festivals, fairs, special events and weekly concert series, and updated info for the production of county Farm Maps, and Craft Beverage guides.

Van Rensselaer Manor: Our Van Rensselaer Manor continues to provide an outstanding level of care and compassion to seniors trusted to us. The pandemic has been difficult and presented many new challenges for the facility, which celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> year since it was constructed to replace the former Manor facility. I remain proud of our stand against then-Governor Cuomo when he attempted to force COVID-19 positive patients into the Manor. We said “No” then and we would say “No” today.

Thanks to Administrator Kenyatta Hopson and Deputy Administrator John Wasielewski for their dedication to our residents during these times. Thanks also to the staff at the Manor for their steadfast commitment to caring for our residents during the pandemic. We recognized staff at the Manor with the bonus, and improved our competitiveness in attracting new employees by boosting the hourly wages of nurses and CNAs. The boost has worked in recent weeks and helped us attract new employees and to somewhat alleviate shortages in staffing.

Veterans Service Agency: Rensselaer County has vowed to never forget the service and sacrifice of our veterans and their families in defending and protection this great nation. Our Veterans Service Agency, led by Director Peter Goebel and Veterans Service Specialist Lonnie Warrington, served 11,612 veterans and dependents during 2021, despite the challenges presented by COVID-19. This service included access to benefits, support, medical treatment and other services. The work also included 1178 medical transports of veterans to the Stratton VA Medical Center in Albany. Notably, the VSA secured \$868,533 in funding for veterans and dependents.

The county also joined with Hudson Valley Community College and veterans last November for the opening of the new Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Support Program, which offers outreach and support to veterans right at the college's campus center.

As part of Rensselaer County Responds, my administration joined with the County Legislature to provide \$5,000 in funding to veteran organizations across the county. This one-time funding will help maintain the buildings, services and programs provided by veteran organizations who do so much for country and community.

Youth Department: Thanks to our Youth Department for their work in providing support and stability to our youth during turbulent times. Led by Director Pierce Hoyt and Deputy Debbie Fleming, the county's Summer Food program celebrated its 47<sup>th</sup> year by serving 61,304 meals at 24 different sites. The county Backpack Program filled 508 backpacks with school supplies.

During Christmas, the Youth Department collected over \$10,000 in donations to purchase new toys, and received 89 bags of toys from Toys for Tots. The annual county Coats for Kids golf tournament was the most successful yet, with 113 golfers participating and enabling the purchase of nearly 900 coats for kids in need.

We also reached out to those facing challenges because of the pandemic with the Food for Families effort with the Capital District YMCA. We helped hand out 5,040 boxes of 25 pounds of food, meaning 126,000 pounds of food were handed out to residents. At some points during 2021, we paired these events near community vaccination clinics to provide help.

Our Rensselaer County Responds effort will also be providing one-time funding to youth organizations across the county in the coming weeks to help keep their facilities open and serving our youth as we head into the 2022 spring and summer sports seasons.

We appreciate the outstanding performance of our departments and our employees during these challenging times. Be proud of the work you do, and the service you provide for a county we love and are proud to call home.

When we set a course for lower taxes, improved and expanded services, major job creation and a more efficient and open county government, there were many doubters. We moved past that negativity. When the pandemic arrived two years ago, there were other doubters who believed our progress would be derailed by COVID-19. We set to work proving them wrong.

They forget the people of Rensselaer County, and members of my team also, are tough, resilient and focused on the future. When I was elected to this office, in my initial State of the County, I said: "I fought hard to get to this office, and I will fight even harder for the people we serve."

That resolve remains today. Our commitment does not waver, my focus does not change and the fight goes on. We will achieve great things for this county.

In public service, there are often controversies and headlines that serve to distract. They fade quickly when compared with the very real accomplishments and improvements made by my administration that can be seen and felt by our people. Future generations will not care about who said what about whom, they will want to know who were the founders of their destiny, the builders of buildings, the creators of jobs and opportunity.

That is what we work for every day.

There will be difficult moments, just as there have been during the past few years. We have shown we are ready to take on new challenges, resolve old problems and find new ways to success. Our resolve is strong. We will be tested. We will be ready.

Legendary college basketball coach Jim Valvano summed up this approach: “Survive and advance.”

We look forward to a year of accomplishment and excellence and achievement that will make us all proud, and give us cause for celebration when we reach 2023 together.

Rensselaer County, we are just getting started!

Thank you!

Thank you to our employees, department heads and partners in public service for their work for Rensselaer County. Thank you also to our Executive office team, including Director of Operations Richard Crist, Director of Central Services, assistants Michelle Franklin Burton, Paula Carpinello Goca and Leslie Wallace, and Tourism Director Vito Ciccarelli.

