



**NIAGARA COUNTY STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS**

**February 20, 2024**

**Rebecca Wydysch, Chairman**

Vice Chairman Nemi, Majority Leader Bradt, Minority Leader Robins, Sheriff Filicetti, District Attorney Seaman, County Clerk Jastrzemski, Treasurer Andrews, County Manager Updegrove.....my fellow Legislators.....neighbors, taxpayers and concerned citizens.

Tonight it is my distinct honor and pleasure to stand before you and deliver my 5<sup>th</sup> State of the County Address. Much has transpired over the last four years in Niagara County – challenges we could have never predicted. But I am proud to say the state of our county is strong. We have weathered the storms that have come our way and done our very best to meet the needs and expectations of Niagara County residents.

I do not take that last sentence lightly. The challenges coming at us in all directions seem to be unyielding. That is why it is important to thank everyone in this room – and the many more who are not here – for your important contributions to delivering the services provided by Niagara County government. We are so very fortunate to have a team of people in Niagara County who will do whatever it takes to get the job done -- from county leadership and department heads to our employees across all of our departments.

To that point, I have often talked about the lessons learned from the pandemic. One of those lessons was indeed, our team could rise to meet the moment, staying focused on the task at hand. We were doing things fast and furious because we had to. But in some ways, that has become the norm.

I want all of us to take a hard look at the way we operate to ensure meeting day-to-day demands in our own slice of the world is not superseding big-picture thinking and long-range planning. This is not a criticism. This is an observation meant to spur all of us, from my office right on down, to engage more in cross-departmental opportunities, to think about new ideas and fresh approaches.

We certainly do this at budget time. County Manager Updegrave regularly discusses the need to balance short-term needs with a long-range planning. Our 13 straight years of staying under the property tax cap is a testament to striking the right balance and certainly being able to plan ahead.

With that said, I call on our departments who have missions that at times run parallel to each other to ensure they are in alignment. A policy choice in one area can have ramifications in others. And I'd like to see more opportunities for sharing ideas, brainstorming and developing innovative solutions.

For example, last year, our Department of Public Works convinced the Legislature to create a Truck Driver/CDL Trainer and four new truck driver trainee positions in an effort to address the shortage of workers with Commercial Driver's Licenses across the county. As many of you know, a CDL is required to drive snowplows and heavy highway equipment used for roadwork and maintenance.

DPW proposed this because of the continuing difficulty in hiring CDL workers, especially when competing with bus companies, private contractors and others for a very limited pool of applicants. The plan was to establish a new program that would have the county hire DPW workers, and as part of their work duties, have them train for their CDL.

I am happy to report that our initial CDL training program has been a huge success. Our four trainees completed their training, passed their road test and were promoted to Full time Truck Drivers. Our belief is that the structure of the program makes these drivers exceptionally prepared for the job.

I want to acknowledge the efforts of Garret Meal, Dean Lapp, Joe Schreier and Max Greco on establishing the program and seeing it through. We are looking to begin recruitment of our next class in the very near future. Great job, DPW team.

While improving collaboration inside county government is important, it's perhaps equally important to ensure we are regularly talking with our local partners. During the pandemic, we held regular briefings with our mayors and supervisors. These were extremely productive, two-way conversations that made sure information was exchanged, concerns were expressed and ultimately we were all on the same page.

As the pandemic faded into history, so did these more formal briefings with the cities and towns. I am going to look at bringing back some measure of consistency to these inter-municipal calls, perhaps quarterly, because there are always things that can be discussed and issues we need to resolve.

At the top of that list is the new county ambulance service. On December 17th of last year, the Niagara County Ambulance Service took its first call. Reaching that day was the result of a lot of cooperation, collaboration and definitely some consternation between stakeholders. But we got there....because there was no other choice.

I think most of us agree that the need for this service was a long-time coming, given our aging population, a declining number of volunteers and state regulations that make the job of a volunteer much more onerous. Couple that with changes in our healthcare systems that often see volunteers on transports to downtown Buffalo waiting several hours for patient admission, and we had a problem.

To address this, the county now has two ambulances. We hired six EMTs, four paramedics, two supervisors and a division manager. Our ambulance is in service during day-time hours which are often the hardest calls for volunteers to take, given their work commitments. The key is great coordination and cooperation between the county service and the volunteers and that is exactly what has been happening.

And let me emphatically remind everyone that our county ambulances are meant to supplement our volunteer crews, not serve as a replacement. Niagara County is spread across 522 square miles and that's a lot of ground to cover. Yet that's what our volunteers do. Volunteers are integral members of their local communities.....they provide a vital service at a very, very reasonable cost to town taxpayers.....they are ready and willing to help neighbors in other towns when needed....and, above all else, they are great at what they do. I send a heartfelt thank you to all of our volunteers.

Yet, while we have addressed the immediate need, there is still more work to be done. The issues that led to the creation of a county-run ambulance service are not going away and certainly are NOT unique to Niagara County. For over a year, I have been reading articles, talking to colleagues in other counties, and taking part in webinars on this issue. There are currently several bills introduced in Albany on the topic. Everyone is trying to figure it out.

You see, what now needs to be created is the long-term structure of how we not only deliver this service in Niagara County, but how do we pay for it. Do towns choose to join a county ambulance district and then assess for the cost? How can we get costs reimbursed? How do we ensure fairness with cities that only need us for backup, or towns that have a bigger volunteer presence versus localities that rely heavily on county service? Is there a role for private ambulance services to play and to what extent?



These are tough issues that we need to grapple with and we need to do so in collaboration with local governments, volunteer fire companies, the Fire Chiefs, the Fire Advisory Board and others. And hopefully, the State Legislature can address any hurdles that are in the way. The one thing I know for sure is that this dialogue must begin immediately.

As the ambulance service shows, public health and safety will always be a top priority of this Legislature. It is one of the most basic functions of government that our residents expect. That is why we are committed to making smart investments in this area, like the new Niagara County Law Enforcement Academy.

I am excited to say that we are nearing the opening of this new facility on the campus of Niagara County Community College. This has been a great collaboration between NCCC, the Sheriff's Office and the Legislature.

The academy is poised to take the training of our next generation of law enforcement officials into the future. As Sheriff Filicetti said when we broke ground on the project last year, “The training requirements for those going into law enforcement are extensive and continue to evolve. Our new Academy will allow us to use state-of-the-art technology to meet these training needs and better prepare future law enforcement officers for their careers.”

Indeed, the new 15,000 square-foot building will have a reality-based training room, a use of force simulator and four new classrooms. The new environment will also provide more learning opportunities for NCCC criminal justice students. I am looking forward to touring the new academy building very soon.

Innovation. Collaboration. Long-term planning – you can see a theme for this evening. These are the building blocks that help us plan for a bright future. And to that end, I’m am excited with the work being done by our Center for Economic Development that is focused on bringing investment and jobs to our community.

For those who may have questions about the status of the Amazon project, I am happy to report that everything is moving forward. The project application has closed with the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency – meaning all the legal documentation that covers the financial package is in place – and work at the Town of Niagara site is underway. This is a significant milestone.

The Niagara County Business Park project in the Town of Cambria also continues forward, as our team recently met with Empire State Development officials to discuss our FAST NY grant application for infrastructure at the site. New York State established the FAST NY Shovel-Ready Grant Program to help prepare and develop sites statewide to jumpstart New York’s shovel-readiness and increase its attractiveness to large employers, including high-tech manufacturing.

The lack of shovel-ready sites in Niagara County – and really, all of Western New York – was one of our driving forces behind creating the business park. The fact is, we just lack sites to compete for big projects. And that means we had to do something about it.

The business park is no small undertaking, but we continue to meet with officials at all levels of government and seek grants from different sources so we can fund the capital infrastructure necessary to bring the park to fruition.

We all know that during the pandemic, businesses were using all funds available to just stay open. For small businesses in our commercial districts, that often meant pushing off much-needed capital investments in their properties. It was for that reason this body created the tremendously successful Façade Program, which helped nearly 200 local businesses improve the appearance of their properties, drawing new and increased customer traffic and encouraging neighboring businesses to follow suit.

And tonight I am happy to announce that we are set to launch the Niagara County Production Program. This is a grant program targeted at manufacturers, who were forced during the pandemic to not only cancel investment in state-of-the-art technology, but even to delay routine maintenance and machinery upgrades necessary to stay competitive. Many are still struggling to catch up.

As such, the Production Program seeks to improve the viability and competitiveness of our local manufacturers. The program will provide matching grants up to \$50,000 for the purchase of machinery or equipment that can be integrated into their current manufacturing process, create an opportunity to enhance their existing process, or open the possibility of constructing an additional production opportunity. This program brings manufacturers, government, and quasi-governmental entities together to research, identify, and implement these strategic upgrades.

In making this investment in the Production Program, we are sending a sign that manufacturing continues to be an important part of our local economy and we are committed to helping our local companies succeed. Stay tuned for an informational webinar on how to apply for these grants.

As many of you know, last month, this Legislature lost a dear friend with the passing of Ed Pettitt, Sr. At the time of Ed's passing, I described him as a champion for our Second Amendment rights, including helping the county form a Gun Owners' Rights Advisory Panel.....as someone who always stood up for the rights of farmers and the need to protect our agricultural industry.....and as someone who believed that government closest to the people was most accountable as he fought to restore the proper balance between state and local governments.

I was going to ask for a moment of silence in memory of Ed....but Ed did not believe in being silent. Ed believed in dialogue, in conversations, in honest debate. Ed was not a partisan individual, but rather sought to work with people of all political stripes in a congenial manner to advance issues near and dear to him.

And so, in Ed's honor, I will replace the moment of silence with a call to action. I am asking those who believe that state government has far exceeded its authority.....has trampled on the concept of Home Rule....and has shown little to no respect for constitutional guardrails to band together and push back.

You see, process matters. History is filled with examples of good kings and bad kings. Benevolent dictators and evil despots. But we reject their style of governance regardless of the individual outcomes because we believe in the right of self-determination and the consent of the governed.

So no matter what side of the issue you fall on things like local elections being held in odd or even years....or whether the state can just ignore Home Rule as spelled out in the State Constitution on voting rules....or whether you think some faceless bureaucratic board hundreds of miles away can plop an industrial solar plant in your backyard over the objections of local residents by calling zoning laws unduly burdensome.....well, you should be concerned about the very flawed process that led to those decisions.

Because we believe in the rights of the governed....we believe that local residents should decide their future...and we believe in the rule of law as defined by the constitution.

When those things are ignored, no matter how righteous someone may believe a policy to be....you are inviting chaos. And when the inevitable cycle of history turns, the precedents that have been set through a flawed process will invariably be used in the future to justify other policy actions that you may not like.

I said last year that this approach would also lead us down of path of constant litigation. And where are we? We battled NYC in court over housing migrants in our community and we won. Then we were sued again by some hotel owners over the same issue and that is still pending. We are still battling over the most recent gun laws.

We have sued the state over unilaterally restructuring the OTB Board of Directors, without even a word of discussion with the impacted counties. This is a clear violation of Home Rule and I am confident we will win. Onondaga County is pursuing litigation on the local election changes and other counties, including us, may join in. This constant game of legal ping pong is not productive and this is certainly not the collaboration we need to move the state forward. But we are given no other choice.



Last year I said I believe we can restore balance between state and local government...and I still feel that way. We often work with state agencies to accomplish very important tasks. But political leaders in Albany must start speaking with us, not at us....and maybe even listening once in a while. In the meantime, I also believe it's time for the many counties who share this point of view to band together with a unified voice and demand better. We are all in this together.

Let me end by saying the long-term outlook for Niagara County is very positive and our immediate future is very bright. This is an ironic choice of words given the solar eclipse, which will plunge us into darkness, is now just a little more than a month away. It appears hotels are fully booked and we could be seeing a tremendous influx of visitors over the weekend of April 5th far greater than anything we normally experience during the height of tourism season.

This will be a great opportunity to showcase our community to tourists and garner national media coverage. Let's be sure we put our best foot forward for our guests....let's be patient with any gridlock and delays that may result...and, of course, let's be safe. Thank you.