

## STATE OF THE COUNTY – FEBRUARY 7<sup>TH</sup>, 2017

Good evening, Rockland.

Hello to the members of the Legislature, community and business leaders, county department heads and employees and citizens who have joined us tonight to hear about the state of the county.

And I welcome those of you watching our livestream at home or on a mobile device.

We will also post a video of tonight's address on the Rockland County YouTube channel, in case you are so inspired you want to watch it again!

This is another example of how we use social media to keep you – our constituents, the people we work for – informed.

Please check our @rocklandgov Facebook page for the YouTube link. And while you're at it, please like our page, which we use to post important information about our county.

As you know, county law requires me to update you, the Legislature, my partners in government, once every year on the State of the County.

I am honored to be with you this evening to present the 2017 State of the County message.

In short, the state of our county is healthy, energized and invigorated. We are ready and eager to meet the coming year and thereafter.

We have been working for three years to transform this county from near bankruptcy with an unsustainable tax-and-spend cycle to what it is today – a county that stayed within a very strict 1.17 tax increase, a county that cut its budget by nearly 10 percent, a county with four consecutive bond-rating increases, a county government that is smaller and more efficient, a county that works to make sure that all of our diverse residents have a voice and a county where the laws apply to all.

I am going to outline for you tonight what we have accomplished over the past year and what we hope to accomplish this year – a road map of where we were, where we are and where we're going.

The promises I made and the promises I kept.

This year, 2017, will be a pivotal one for Rockland County as the final touches are put on the new Tappan Zee Bridge – the largest construction project in the entire nation. The new bridge will mean new opportunities as Rockland is poised to continue to attract business and development.

We're going to make sure it happens responsibly and that we are in a competitive position to take advantage of that growth to expand our tax base, while maintaining the high quality of life that attracted many of us to live here in Rockland in the first place.

We will make Rockland even more attractive to businesses, which are already discovering all we have to offer.

At the same time, we are working hard to use all the regulations at our disposal to reign in uncontrolled, unregulated, unsustainable growth in parts of Rockland that is taxing our infrastructure and natural resources to the breaking point. This out-of-control development threatens all of Rockland.

We are announcing tonight the start of our Rental Registry – another program created by my administration to maintain the quality of life for all residents and to ensure that ALL landlords are following

the rules. A special thanks to our Commissioner of Health Dr. Ruppert and her staff, especially Kate Johnson, for their work on this.

Another promise kept.

We are also announcing the start date for the new Sunday service on the Tappan Zee Express buses on March 4 – another initiative of my administration to improve transportation and address the value gap that still exists when we look at what Rockland residents pay to the MTA vs what they get in return. Also, new bus service from Blue Hill Plaza in Pearl River, the heart of the county's business community, into mid-town Manhattan began yesterday.

Another promise kept.

I will also describe new efforts to combat Medicaid fraud and a proposal to change New York State's unfortunate status as the only state in the nation that charges counties for Medicaid costs – another mandate that we are required to pay.

On a national level, many groups are fighting to make sure their voices are heard.

Here in Rockland, on my watch we created an Interfaith Summit – a partnership of our many diverse ethnicities and faiths – Christian, Jewish, Muslim – to make sure everyone in Rockland has a voice.

I am announcing tonight a new Women's Initiative, which will be headed by Lucy Redzepowski. Well-qualified women play a prominent role in my administration and I want to make sure that countywide, women's voices and their concerns are heard.

Before we get into those initiatives, let's look for a moment at where we started.

Three years ago when I came into office, this county was only \$42,000 away from insolvency.

We could barely make payroll, we were under the threat of state takeover and our bonds were rated as junk.

What a difference three years makes: this year our tax increase was a negligible 1.17 percent this year, a big change from the double digit tax increases we had in the three years before I took office, and we received our fourth consecutive bond rating increase in 2016.

Just as importantly, we have cut spending and stopped the endless cycle of tax-and-spend government.

All promises kept.

The difference is obvious: word is out that Rockland is a great place to live and to do business.

The numbers tell the story – Rockland's unemployment rate in December was 3.9 percent – the lowest in a decade and among the lowest in the state.

Now, as I enter into the fourth year of my term as county executive I will speak tonight about our accomplishments for the people of Rockland and where we are headed as a county.

You've heard me talk before about my administration's three-legged stool – our three core priorities.

- Stabilizing Rockland's finances - Righting our fiscal ship.
- Creating a bright, vibrant job market – Making Rockland work again.
- Preserving the quality of life in our county.

I am happy to report tonight success on all three fronts.

Let's address the first – righting our fiscal ship.

I came into office with one goal above all other: fix this county's finances.

Our financial ship was sinking. I inherited a deficit that was a staggering \$138 million.

I am announcing that as of today that deficit stands at a projected \$10 million. That is more than a 90 percent reduction in our deficit.

My administration has reduced the deficit by an annual average of \$10.6 million – far surpassing the recommended \$4 million per year.

I remain hopeful that this body votes to declare the Sain Building surplus and sells it, which would allow us to wipe out 40 percent of our remaining deficit.

We are paying down our \$96 million deficit finance bond without raising taxes. By making tough, disciplined decisions about spending we have been able to pay that bill within the structure of our annual operating budget, and avoided imposing a ten year surcharge of an equivalent to a 12 percent tax increase.

Our bond rating – near junk when I took office – has been upgraded four times. We are now rated just one notch below “A”.

I came into office on a trail of double-digit tax increases and ever-increasing spending.

I am proud to say that we have reversed that unsustainable tax-and-spend cycle.

We stayed within a stringent state property tax cap of 1.17 percent this year – miraculous when you consider that state mandates, including Medicaid, make up almost all of our budget.

We have cut spending 9 percent during the last three years. That's \$67 million of your money. For comparison, the 2017 budget is numerically comparable to our 2008 budget.

We have focused on cutting spending, reorganizing our government and keeping our hands out of the taxpayers' wallet – all promises kept.

We have reorganized our county government for maximum efficiency — abolishing jobs that are no longer relevant and creating new ones that are. Along the way we have reduced the size of our county government 22 percent.

Imagine that – government getting smaller. And more efficient.

Our workforce, and our leadership, is reflective of our community – diverse.

We made a special effort in our Public Defender's office to make that our staff reflects the county. As a result of these efforts, we have attorneys and investigators of color and of both genders who speak Creole, Spanish and Tagalog. Thanks to Jim Licata for that effort.

We are investing in our employees through the Lead Academy, a training program for managers that enables us improve our workforce and make our services better and more efficient. A special thanks to Personnel Commissioner Joan Silvestri and her team.

Residents of Rockland County still enjoyed top-rate services, even as we, like all counties in the state, transition from being a direct provider of many services to more of an overseer – contracting with agencies and facilities that can do the work more efficiently and for less money.

We are doing all of this as we right our financial ship.

We are on the right path financially. This past year we came within 8/10ths of one percent of being off the state most fiscally stressed list.

My goal for this year is to get off this list entirely.

We will do that by watching every dime that we spend.

Rockland County is still in deficit – a much smaller deficit than we started with. But a deficit nonetheless.

In other words, our checking account is still overdrawn.

We cannot and will not keep writing checks on an overdrawn account.

That is why we will continue to watch every dime that goes in and out of our county treasury.

We will continue to fight vehemently against the urge to overestimate sales tax revenue projections or relying on non-existent revenue – to make the books look balanced.

Those tactics are precisely how we ran up a \$138 million deficit.

**THAT CANNOT HAPPEN AGAIN. NOT ON MY WATCH. AND I ASK OUR LEGISLATORS JOIN ME IN THAT ENDEAVOR.**

Here are some additional ways we are safeguarding our finances:

Our budget called for the creation for the first time of an Inspector General– a new position. This will be a person whose sole responsibility is to make sure taxpayer's money is being spent appropriately. It is a needed checkpoint to combat potential fraud, corruption and criminality.

We all know about corruption – alleged and confirmed criminal acts in the State Senate and Assembly, Town and Village government and Town building departments.

Enough. It must stop here. It must stop now.

We want to head off any problems before they occur. This contract will be funded by a surcharge on those businesses that are awarded contracts with the county.

I am pleased to announce that we were able to fund our \$32 million pension payment as part of our operating budget. This is a positive departure from five years of necessary borrowing that came from years of fiscal management.

And we cut our outside legal expenses in half – special thanks to County Attorney Tom Humbach.

And we are focusing on preventing fraud in Medicaid – which eats up approximate 55 Percent of our budget.

During my three years in office, we have found \$3.5 million in benefits that were received by ineligible people and avoided an additional \$3.4 million in costs by utilizing our highly successful and cost efficient strategy of front end detection strategy. That is nearly \$7 million of your money. Special thanks to Steve Hamilton, coordinator of the County's DSS Special Investigations unit.

Not only that – as your county executive I traveled to Washington D.C., to meet with representative of the County Executives of America, a non-partisan advocacy group of which I am a board member.

As you know, New York is the only state in the nation that charges counties for Medicaid.

I proposed that this influential organization pass a resolution call on the state to change that. It had bipartisan support, with the county executives of Orange County and Albany County co-sponsoring the resolution with me.

And they did. We will continue to fight to get this expensive mandate off our backs.

We have been able to move two-thirds of our nonprofit agencies into contracts for their service. These contracts come with a set of goals and expectations, and, just as importantly, it virtually assures these well performing nonprofits continued funding.

This move has earned Rockland County more than \$1 million in state reimbursement. We have provided \$16 million in funding to our nonprofits and we value the work they do for our communities.

All promises kept.

Another initiative that I started in 2016 has strengthened our finances and sent the message that everyone has to play by the same rules.

At my direction, Finance Commissioner Stephen DeGroat and his team started a push to collect back taxes.

Early last spring we went to a piece of property in Ramapo that topped the list of non-residential tax scofflaws. The owners of that property, Patrick Farm, had gone more than three years without paying taxes. They owed more than \$385,000, including interest and penalties.

Now imagine if you or I decided that we weren't going to pay our taxes for two or three years?

If you don't pay our taxes, someone else has to pick up the tab.

Patrick Farm owed the most in back taxes but those owners were far from the only ones. We had a list of 125 non-residential properties throughout Rockland County that were years behind on their taxes.

For many owners of these non-residential properties, not paying taxes became part of doing business in Rockland. They knew no one was going to do anything to them, so why not?

No longer.

Just 30 hours after we announced the start of this program, the owners of Patrick Farm paid their tax bill. In full.

Many other property owners did the same.

We went to a property in Valley Cottage that owed nearly \$80,000 to announce the start of foreclosure proceedings on the properties if they didn't pay up.

Guess what? That owner paid up too.

The same just last month in Spring Valley when the owner of a commercial property paid more than \$37,000 just three hours before the start of an auction to sell his property and others with outstanding tax bills.

In all, we collected 98 percent of the outstanding bills on non-commercial properties – nearly \$3 million. Thanks to Sean Mathews and Tom Dillon from our Real Property office.

The message is clear: The rules apply to everyone. Equal treatment for all, special preference for none.

Now let's talk about the second leg of our three-legged stool: Driving smart, clean economic development and creating a bright, vibrant job market.

By bringing wealth to Rockland, we form a strong economic foundation that stems the tide of increasing property taxes.

As I mentioned, Rockland's latest unemployment rate was 3.9 percent – among the lowest in the state and the lowest in a decade.

That doesn't happen by accident. We have worked hard to create an atmosphere where businesses thrive, and most importantly do so in a manner that is respectful of our residents.

It's having an effect – look at Warby-Parker, which is hiring for its new manufacturing facility in Sloatsburg, helped in part by a package of tax incentives. They will add 128 new jobs to Rockland.

There is also Urban Electric Power, a new company located on the grounds of the old Pfizer property in Pearl River.

All of us wondered ... and feared ... what would happen when Pfizer, the former Lederle, left town.

Here's part of our answer - we are working closely with IRG to redevelop that property to welcome new and growing, clean businesses that expand our tax base.

We have nothing to fear. Why? Because we will not quit.

Businesses like Urban Electric Power. They were just awarded a \$1 million grant through the State Regional Council to help them continue to grow and create jobs.

Other companies are either starting, moving or expanding their business here to Rockland. Look at Streit's Matzo in Orangeburg. Golden Krust is investing \$37 million world headquarters in Orangetown. We kept Celtic Sheet Metal, which moved but stayed in Rockland County.

We worked with the REDC, Empire State Development, the towns, the Chambers of Commerce and the RBA to make sure that those businesses found or kept a home in Rockland. Another promise kept.

On the retail side – the Shops at Nanuet are continuing to grow and thrive.

And this year we welcomed the opening of the Time Hotel in Nyack.

And let's not forget our small businesses and our downtowns. We gave them a boost when we worked on a tourism supplement through the NY Daily News to bring new visiting to our communities.

I said I would reinvigorate our county Department of Tourism and expand its role to include economic development.

How important is this? Were it not for tourism generated sale and local taxes, the average household in Rockland would have to pay an additional \$555 in taxes to maintain current services.

Look at some of the initiatives from our director of Economic Development and Tourism, Lucy Redzeposki, who has done a marvelous job.

We have reached to the other side of the world to attract both tourism and development.

We have put Rockland on the map for tourists from China with money to spend. We hosted a delegation of tour leaders and showed them what we have here in Rockland – our beautiful parks and waterfront, our excellent shopping, our picturesque downtown.

This day-long tour was so popular it was featured on a Chinese-language television station based in New York City with an audience of 100 million.

It's not just tourists from China that we're targeting. This fall I hosted a delegation of Chinese business executives looking for investment opportunities in the area. They went to RCC to talk about our plans for a Rockland business incubator.

Then to Pearl River to tour the IRG property and learn about investment business opportunities there.

The Chinese visitors accompanied by Stony Point Supervisor Jim Monaghan also toured the former Letchworth site in North Rockland and learned about development possibilities there.

And our Tourism and Economic Development office is also having great success bringing Rockland to the big screen.

Have you watched "Billionaires", or "The Affair", "Blindspot", "Orange is the New Black" among others?

All filmed right here in Rockland, due in large part to the website and promotional activities we are undertaking through our office of Tourism and Economic Development.

These activities earn clean, easy money for the county, towns and village. Every dime those production companies pay in fees to the municipalities is a dime that you, the taxpayer, don't have to.

All promises kept.

We will continue those efforts in 2017 and start new ones.

I recently sent a letter to Gov. Cuomo regarding the closure of Indian Point.

Where is the energy going to come from once this plant is closed? While we do not see direct supply from Indian Point, the power grid will be compromised with a predictable increase in costs to consumers. Part of the answer might be right here in North Rockland.

I reminded him that not long ago, there were two fully operational power plants in North Rockland – one in Stony Point and one in Haverstraw.

Now, the Lovett plant is closed and the Bowline plant is functioning far below peak capacity.

Why not look at those two sites for the development of clean and safe energy to fill the need created when Indian Point goes off line?

Imagine the jobs and imagine the tax relief for the people of Haverstraw and Stony Point as well as the North Rockland School District. They need help as they are at a breaking point right now.

Finally, let's talk about transportation. We all know that transportation is key to economic development in Rockland County.

The new Tappan Zee Bridge, as I said earlier, will bring new opportunities to Rockland.

We are working with the state to make sure that Rockland's needs and concerns, particularly in the Nyack-South Nyack area, are being addressed as construction continues.

The new bridge is only one of numerous transportation components that we are working on with our Department of Transportation.

We continue to chip away at our value gap with MTA.

As I already mentioned, Tappan Zee Express bus riders next month will have service on Sundays for the first time in history, as well as expanded Saturday service – thanks to funding we negotiated from MTA to reduce the gap between what Rockland pays and the services we get.

We just connected bus service to the largest private sector business hub in Rockland ... Blue Hill Plaza in Pearl River ... to and from Manhattan.

We continue to work with the State DOT as they develop and advance the Lower Hudson Transit Link project – a new service scheduled to replace the Tappan Zee Express in late 2018. As we prepare for this transition, we continue to advocate to ensure the necessary highway, technology, parking and station improvements are made, so our TZx commuters can truly be offered a faster, better commute when the new service takes over. Excellent work by Doug Schuetz and his staff in our Public Transportation and Planning Office.

All promises kept.

Which brings us to the third leg of our three-legged stool: Preserving and improving the quality of life for all of who live in Rockland.

Our county is a place of natural beauty.

Our Department of Environmental Resources has done a great job this year of overseeing our many county parks and taking steps to protect our environment.

A pedestrian bridge in our very popular Haverstraw Bay Park was wiped out four years ago during Superstorm Sandy. Allan Beers worked to get funds from FEMA to pay the \$700,000 cost of rebuilding the walkway.

I am happy to report that the walkway opened just in time for our annual Sept. 11 memorial service. A special shout-out to Allan and his staff for this accomplishment.

We look forward to the spring when we will have new floating docks and a handicapped accessible kayak launch at Haverstraw Bay, again thanks to state grants.

In addition to its natural beauty, Rockland is a place of amazing diversity – a county where people of all races, religions and ethnicities live and work together.

Issue occur from time to time and when they do, my administration has worked to face them head on.

My Department of Human Rights created the Interfaith Summit, where faith leaders from our Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities could meet and work together.

And those faith leaders and representatives of their respective communities stood together on the steps of the Old Rockland Courthouse to denounce a shooting at a LGBT nightclub in Florida that killed 49 people. We also stood together to say there is no place for hatred in Rockland when there was an anti-Semitic attack on the homes of rabbis in New City. And tomorrow I will join with Clarkstown supervisor George Hoehmann to clean up the graffiti just found in the woods off Route 304 in New City.



We will continue to make a clear statement that everyone who lives in Rockland must treat all neighbors with respect so we can all live here and prosper.

And we are taking the lead in enforcing regulations to make sure that everyone in Rockland has safe housing.

All too often we have unscrupulous landlords who take advantage of tenants who are at the lower rung of the socio-economic ladder. Typically, the poorest and those with the least voice.

That is why we created the Rockland Codes Initiative – RCI - an effort by our Department of Health to use our sanitary code to make sure that everyone who lives in Rockland is living in safe housing.

Last year we received almost 1,200 complaints. We issued 6,574 violations – a third of them critical, life-threatening and assessed nearly \$1.5 million in fines.

Our goal is not to collect fines. We want compliance with the rules that everyone has to follow. We want to turn slumlords into landlords. And I will not stand idly by as residents and our heroic first responders are put in harm's way by greedy slumlords.

As I said earlier, we are starting our Rental Registry, which will give us an even better ability to make sure that all rental housing is safe. Every rental unit must register and pay a one-time \$25 fee. This enables us to keep better track of this type of housing.

Promises kept.

Our Rockland County code is strong, but it only goes so far.

We had been asking – begging – the state for years to allow us to inspect some of the private schools that open without permits, without approvals and without regard to safety.

That endangers children and it endangers our first responders.

Finally this year, the state moved on our request and our fire inspectors led by Gordon Wren, director of Fire and Emergency Services, began inspecting private schools that had repeatedly failed to file fire safety reports.

We weren't too surprised by what we found – many had serious safety violations.

As a result and in short order all schools filed safety reports.

We are continuing our efforts.

We are now prepared to go to court to get a search warrant so our health department inspectors can inspect a private school in Chestnut Ridge, one that opened without permits or approvals.

Why? We had a mix of hundreds of children and a fire system not connected to monitoring. Worse still, we just identified friable asbestos as present. The Health Department will now move forward with due urgency.

This must stop!

Putting convenience at least, and profit at its worse ahead of the safety of children? Again, putting the cart before the horse – building first, seeking permission second.

Believe me, it's an uphill fight, but we're continuing: Equal treatment for all, special preference for none. We all must abide by the rule of law.

Which brings us to another topic that directly impacts the quality of life for everyone in Rockland County:  
Out of control over-development.

Laws are not being followed. The situation became so critical this year that the state installed a monitor in the building municipal departments in Ramapo and Spring Valley.

The county has no direct control over municipal building departments, unfortunately.

We can, however, use any and all legal means available to us to protect children and our first responders from harm. New strategies are being identified and will be applied towards that goal.

We will also exercise our ability to make decision regarding our natural resources.

We had a drought this year, which again speaks to the fact that Rockland's natural resources are not unlimited – there is only so much growth we can support.

A deficit of just a couple of inches of rain put the entire county into water restrictions for most of the summer.

Water conservation is wonderful but it can only go so far.

We are now working with a multidisciplinary group of departments and experts, including experts from the Lamont Earth Observatory at Columbia University in Palisades, to more closely link the type and amount of development we will allow to the water resources we have.

A drought wasn't the only issue that our Department of Health had to deal with this year.

With very little notice, we and the rest of the nation had to prepare to face the threat from the Zika virus, which is carried by mosquitoes.

Fortunately, there was no local transmission of this disease. We don't know what new, exotic disease will come our way next. But we do know that whatever it is, our Department of Health is prepared. Thanks again to Dr. Ruppert and her staff.

Other examples of how we improved the quality of life in Rockland over the past year.

The Department of Veteran's Affairs wanted to eliminate a shuttle bus that takes our veterans from the outpatient VA clinic in New City to other VA health facilities in Montrose, Castle Point and the Bronx.

They really expected our aged heroes to take public transportation to Dutchess County or the Bronx to go to the doctor.

We set them straight.

Our Veteran's Service Agency, led by Jerry Donnellan, mobilized the troops, so to speak. I joined a group of them to go up to Castle Point to convince the VA not to end this service.

We were successful. Our veterans will continue to get a ride to out-of-town health care facilities.

These heroes got free transportation to combat zones when duty called. The least the federal government can do is to transport them to a facility to get the care that came from the wounds of war.

Our Law Department applied an innovative use of existing county codes governing public nuisances to shut down illegal massage parlors and prostitution businesses once and for all.

Instead of simply arresting the people who work there and their customers, we are closing down these business and running them out of town. We will continue. And a thank you to Lorraine Feiden, who headed up this effort.

We are making sure our young people and our families get the supports and assistance they need to be successful.

There are few things more heartbreaking than a young person going down the wrong path.

As a former law enforcement officer, I remember seeing kids, often still in their teens, in handcuffs headed for the criminal justice system.

We all knew that once a person goes into the system, sometimes they never come out.

What a waste of human potential to see a person, especially a young person, go back and forth between the courts and prison.

We want better for Rockland's young people.

We want them to be at work, in school, at home, with their families – not in court and certainly not in prison.

This past year the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration awarded Rockland County \$4 million to expand the Partnership for Safe Youth, which works to keep young people out of the criminal justice system. This grant allows us to serve more youth and to focus more closely on their mental health needs.

The county's Department of Mental Health will continue to work collaboratively with our community partners, including our Departments of Social Services and Department of Probation and the office of the District Attorney and BOCES on this effort.

A truly collaborative effort by former DSS Commissioner Sue Sherwood, Department of Mental Health Commissioner Michael Leitzes, Kathi Tower-Bernstein in Probation, District Attorney Tom Zugibe and BOCES chief Mary Jean Marsico.

Another grant that we sought and won to help make sure that our young people have the best start in life will encourage breastfeeding.

The Rockland County Department of Health was among only six agencies in New York to win a \$1.2 million grant for this effort.

At the same time, I announced that as the county moves employees into Building A, we will create a lactation room to make it easier for our female employees to continue to breastfeed their babies after they return to the workforce.

Another plus for our workforce – we improved security by working collaboratively with the Sheriff Lou Falco and his department to provide armed officers in our county buildings.

And we made a point of celebrating people who make outstanding contributions to our county and our world.

The first recipient of our new Key to the County award was Grace Vanderwaal of Suffern, whom we all know now as the winner of America's Got Talent.

And all of us should know Ivey Mackle of Pomona, who took a stand by using chalk to make "Hearts over Hate" when anti-Semitic graffiti was found on her street in Ramapo.

Both of them set exemplary standards for all of us to follow.

Now a word about all the people who work so hard to make this county a great place to live and work – our county employees and our volunteers.

You're all heroes in my book. Now I'm going to recognize three of you.

The first is a caseworker in the Department of Social Services.

Ramona Jaime has worked for the county for 22 years, starting in our income maintenance department, then becoming a community service worker. While she was working she got her bachelor's degree in criminal justice then a master's degree in social work.

And she is the mother of five, including a daughter who is a staff sergeant and paratrooper in the U.S. Army.

Another child, a son, Christian Cordero, who works in the electrical workers union, is here tonight along with her husband, Pedro Jaime.

One day last June, Ramona was visiting a family in Spring Valley when she noticed that a member of the family was lethargic, had a headache and wouldn't get out of bed.

It was only because Ramona asked the right questions and knew something was very wrong that it was discovered that the home was full of carbon monoxide.

That family member was sick and the others people in the household would have become ill too if not for Ramona's actions as well as the actions of Spring Valley Detective Eugene Suarez. He is also here tonight and we recognize him.

And I will add that our Department of Health fined the owners of that house \$8,000 for unsafe conditions, including lack of a carbon monoxide detector.

This special county employee took the extra step and saved lives in the process. All of us can learn by her example, and I am most proud to have her in our Rockland County government family.

Next I will honor the efforts of two volunteers who have contributed greatly to our county.

Al Magnatta was born in Rockland Lake. He joined the Congers Fire Department in 1946. That's right, the year was 1946.

Al turned 92 a couple of weeks ago. Guess what? He's still volunteering.

This past year he celebrated his 70<sup>th</sup> year of active fire service. He is still an active deputy fire coordinator, a job he has held for 50 years. Al is an electrician and a member of our Board of Electrical Examiners.

Al served in World War II from 1943-1945, completing 25 missions as a B-17 Aerial Gunner. As soon as he returned home he joined the Congers Fire Department in 1946. He rose through the ranks and served as Chief. And he's still a member.

Al has made many contributions to the county, including a grandson, Ken Zebrowski, who serves Rockland as a state assemblyman.

We thank Al for his 70 plus years of service both to Rockland and to our nation.

And Stuart Gates.

Stu is a relative youngster at 86.

Stu grew up in Nyack and when all the men in the fire department went off to fight World War II, he became part of what was known as the “diaper brigade.”

He was only 14 but he was a member of the fire department. When there was a fire, he was allowed to leave school to go fight it.

Stu has been a member of the fire service here in Rockland for 72 years. First Nyack and then Stony Point, where he and his wife Elinor raised their four children. He became a member of the Wayne Hose fire company in 1963 and has held just about every position there, including chief.

Stu has also been the editor of the Trumpet, the newsletter of the Rockland County Volunteer Fire Association for more than 50 years. Stu is a veteran of the Korean War and he always made sure that Rockland firefighters serving in the military got the latest issue of the Trumpet.

In fact, Gordon Wren remembers that when he was in the Navy in Vietnam, he would look forward to getting his issue of the newsletter and settling down on a boat in a Vietnamese river to read all the news from the fire departments back home.

Stu was a history teacher at Spring Valley High School for many year and he has an uncanny ability to remember all of his students. He is active in his church and always willing to volunteer.

Al and Stu and Ramona have made Rockland a better place for all of its residents.

There is so much we can learn from them.

We can learn how to go the extra step, even if it “isn’t your job.”

We learn how to give of ourselves to help others.

We can learn to believe in ourselves and our capacity to do great things.

And most of all, we learn how we can work together to make this wonderful county of ours even better.

And that, my friends and fellow elected officials, is my overarching goal for 2017.

I want to once again give thanks to all members of the military who put their lives on the line so we may rest easy under the blanket of freedom.

Thank you, God bless you all and may God bless the United States of America.