

2018 STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS - FEBRUARY 6, 2018

Ladies and gentlemen, that video shows just part of what Rockland County is all about.

Good evening, Rockland.

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

And I welcome those of you watching this live coverage on News 12 or FiOS, or on Facebook live at home or on a mobile device.

As you know, the County Charter 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 2018 State of our County message.

It is with full confidence that I can report that Rockland County has turned the corner and is poised to transition from the "Era of Renewal" we embarked upon 4 years ago into a full Renaissance of our beloved county.

When I delivered my first State of the County Address in these chambers 4 years ago the situation was dire. Rockland was the most fiscally stressed county in the state and we were literally almost bankrupt.

I presented a plan that night to accomplish 3 goals; stabilize the counties finances; foster economic development; and preserve Rockland for the generations to come.

I asked that you help me "turn the page and write a new chapter in Rockland County's history. A chapter which reflects how our people - working together - provided the dynamic solutions that led to the best of times in our county's proud history."

Together, against nearly insurmountable odds, we did this - YOU - did this. I want to congratulate you and offer my heartfelt thanks for everything you have helped accomplish. Give yourselves a round of applause.

Together we made the hard choices that brought Rockland back from the brink. Together we have paid down the \$138 million deficit much faster than anyone thought possible, all the while holding the line on taxes.

What we have accomplished in 4 years is nothing short of miraculous.

We have seen our bond rating increase from near junk status to "A" category ratings. Just last week Standard and Poor's upgraded our bond rating, the 6th consecutive upgrade since I took office.

We have controlled spending, and created a smaller and more efficient government, while still providing great services.

That fiscal discipline has set the stage for our renaissance - a renaissance that is well underway. A renaissance that will be furthered by the actions we take in 2018, actions that we take together.

Yet as we continue to strengthen the fiscal condition of Rockland we must also strengthen the bonds between us and embrace the diversity of our beloved county.

Helping lead the way is Human Rights Commissioner Constance Frazier. She heads a reinvigorated human rights commission and is supported by many faith-based and community groups, along with concerned citizens.

This year we will take additional steps to ensure a clear understanding that much more joins us than divides us. We have so much in common ... the air we breathe; our dreams for our families; the environment around us; and the blood that courses through our veins. We must continue to find ways to narrow the divide.

(pause)

For the first time in at least 10 years, both branches of Rockland County government worked together to pass the 2018 budget unanimously, and I thank the Legislature for that effort.

Even the state comptroller agreed it was a great budget. I want to thank every single Commissioner and Director for their help creating this year's \$684.25 million spending plan which is less than what it was when I first took office.

I also acknowledge and thank our employees for their part in helping us stay under budget.

I ask tonight for your commitment to continue the spirit of collaboration as we move forward. There's so much that we have accomplished and so much more that we can do together.

Let's look back at exactly what we have accomplished together. After years of decline, we are rebuilding our tax base. Our ratables declined when big taxpayers like Pfizer, Lovett, Mirant, Novartis and others left the county.

The assessment roll hit a low point in 2015 at just under \$35 billion – down \$13 billion from the 2008 peak.

Now we are reversing that trend. Since 2015 the assessment rolls have increased \$5 billion. We are bringing wealth back into the County.

Last year, thanks to our strong advocacy, the US Small Business Association increased loan amounts given to County businesses by a staggering 421%. That is a monetary increase exceeding \$15 million, helping our businesses grow and prosper in Rockland.

I firmly believe that it is not the work of government to create jobs. Rather, it is the job of government to create an atmosphere where businesses thrive and jobs are created. We are doing just that while respecting the lives and communities of our residents.

We are witnessing revival at IRG, on the site of the former Pfizer campus, in Pearl River. There are two new tenants and IRG is drafting a lease with a company who will utilize a portion of their data center.

We are working together to continue to promote the site and have already helped secure several television and movie projects to film there.

Every cent of taxes paid by these new ratables is a cent that local businesses and residents do not have to pay.

We received nearly \$6 million in State Regional Economic Development grants that benefit Rockland.

These grants were made to businesses, municipalities and non-profits throughout the county. They include funds for revitalization efforts in Sloatsburg and West Nyack; infrastructure improvements in Orangetown; rehabilitating trails throughout Rockland; even funding to promote a beer festival at the Garner Arts Center in North Rockland. Cheers! (Drink water)

We thank Lucy Redzeposki, our Director of Economic Growth and Tourism and the Rockland Business Association, for reviving our participation in this program and helping to steer our applications through the process.

Lucy has reached out to enterprises as close as New York City, recently attending the New York Times Travel Show, and as far away as China and Ireland to bring people, tourism, and filming to Rockland County.

The Chinese tourism campaign was expanded to include Chinese investment in our local businesses and promoting our outstanding local colleges to potential students.

We have also begun marketing ourselves in Scotland and Ireland to take advantage of the new direct flights into Stewart Airport in Newburgh.

I don't know if you have had the chance to watch much TV lately but Rockland County locations are making guest appearances on dozens of TV shows and movies.

Check out part of the trailer for Unsane, the newest Steven Soderbergh film, you may recognize where it was filmed.

(dim lights – play trailer)

Yes, that was Building “A” at the Pomona Campus you just saw. Last year, thanks in part to that movie, the Tourism Department generated over \$300,000 in direct revenue for the county due to filming.

Remember, every cent these new ratables, these tourists, these production companies pay is a cent that you, the taxpayer, doesn't have to. It's all about bringing in revenue instead of hitting up our taxpayers.

Revenue not property taxes.

All of this has contributed to Rockland's record low unemployment rate of 4.2%.

(pause)

We are continuing to remake our government – to make it more effective, more streamlined, less costly.

We have moved over 150 employees out of the decrepit and now closed Sain building into renovated and spacious offices in Building “A” at our Pomona complex and to the 2nd floor of this building.

I again call upon the Legislature for the third year now to approve the sale of the Sain Building, as all issues such as parking have been addressed; property tax revenue in excess of \$1 million has already been lost; beautification of the hamlet center that includes a park awaits; the proposed senior housing there is critical; and the \$4.5 million we need will disappear when our only buyer eventually finds another location, leaving us with a five-floor paperweight.

Anyone who has ever said 'You can't do more with less' has never met my Deputy County Executive Guillermo Rosa, Director of Purchasing Paul Brennan and Bob Gruffi the Director of Facilities for Rockland, who managed the move and so much else. Their efforts saved us thousands and I want to acknowledge their outstanding contributions.

We will continue working this year on our vision of creating a health and human services hub for our residents in Pomona. This vision, already partially realized, involves a mixed-use complex that houses county departments like Personnel, Health and Social Services, along with independent, nonprofit health and human service agencies currently scattered across Rockland County.

For our nonprofit agencies, this could maximize their financial viability by centralizing leasing and support services, allowing them to concentrate on their core mission of serving our residents.

For our residents, this blueprint will provide a "one-stop" location for essential county health and human services programs, easily accessible via public transportation.

For everyone involved, our vision provides an opportunity to transform the Pomona Campus into a modern, professional human services hub in real time. One that improves the health outcomes and wellness of the people of Rockland County through the delivery of a continuum of critical services.

(pause)

Our fiscal discipline is paying off. We are paying down bonds that we took out years ago. Due to our strengthening, financial position Rockland County has been given a chance to do something great; a golden opportunity to move beyond Building "A" to reimagine and reinvigorate the entire Pomona Campus.

Our next step is to begin the process of modernizing our Medical Examiner's office. It's currently located in the rear of Building "A" and is well beyond a serious upgrade.

In addition to relocating the office, we will be purchasing state of the art equipment to perform virtual autopsies. This procedure combines MRI and CT scan technology with a non-invasive examination of the body, meeting the need to provide fast and reliable forensic services to our community.

Obviously, no one wants to see their loved one become the subject of an autopsy and we do our best to accommodate people who have religious and other objections to autopsies. We balance that with the fact it is critically important that the demise of any person is fully investigated and we ensure justice for potential victims and their families.

Performing these procedures could also help improve the county's finances. Other counties will be able to bring their cases to our Medical Examiner for virtual autopsies, creating yet another new revenue stream for Rockland.

The facility will also double as a training center for law enforcement. It gives us an opportunity to offer cutting edge internships to local college students; promoting job opportunities and helping attract businesses to the area.

Our next step forward is the creation of a new training academy for the Rockland County Sheriff's Department. The current academy has outgrown their space and will be moved out of the basement of the Fire Training Center, into Building "G" at the Pomona Campus.

Not only will the new academy boast better, more modern facilities but it will also be a revenue generator for the county. There will now be excess space for recruits from other areas to come to Rockland and train.

In addition, our District Attorney has identified needs and opportunities. Currently the County pays nearly a half million dollars in annual rent for space at a remote location for the District Attorney's specialized investigative units. By moving these units into county owned space, we are eliminating that expense.

Our Board of Elections, which has the mission of protecting the integrity and credibility of the cornerstone of our Democracy, needs more adequate and better designed space.

This is a non-partisan effort that has broad support from District Attorney Tom Zugibe, Sheriff Lou Falco, Election Commissioners Stavisky and Giblin and our Department of Health. I have also met with some in the legislature who have had a very positive reaction to the idea of maximizing the synergies between departments.

Now is the ideal time to begin investing back into our County. Our bond upgrade provides a unique window of opportunity to stay in front of rising interest rates and we can accomplish this investment without raising additional taxes.

And while the approximately \$15 million in bonds necessary to fund these projects is significant; transforming the Pomona Campus while we have this chance will provide lasting value to our county and a legacy for future generations to build upon.

I urge you all to join me in supporting this vision to re-think Rockland County's future for our children and grandchildren.

(pause)

And though we are looking forward we have not forgotten the current difficulties of our most vulnerable residents.

I am so proud that for the first time we can offer the services of a warming center for men and women who lack permanent housing or who have been displaced from their housing.

A warming center that offers a safe place to stay, hot food, showers and laundry facilities. But most of all it provides respect, dignity, and recognizes the value of each and every person.

It also gives people the opportunity to meet with staff from our Department of Social Services to find out if they qualify for housing or other assistance, including help finding employment. This is not a hand out but rather a leg up that.

Members of the Rockland County Department of Health are also available to provide flu shots and other vaccinations. We offer much more than just the basics to survive the winter. It shows what we can do when we work together.

Thank you to Department of Social Services and Rockland County Facilities for their effort in laying the groundwork for this program.

(pause)

I would like to also welcome Linda Hill who graciously accepted the newly re-created position of County Auditor. She began working for Rockland County in 1984 and is a classic example of dedication and talent.

Most recently she worked in the Finance Department overseeing numerous county funds and accounts. I have every expectation she will turn her considerable talents to looking under the hood of county government to make sure Rockland is operating at maximum efficiency.

In addition, she can now investigate and analyze any county records, transactions, contracts, etc. to ensure compliance with pertinent laws, regulations, and policies. Hers 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.

I also want to take time this evening to mention other employees who have gone above and beyond in service to Rockland.

CJ Bryant works in the Consumer Protection Department.

He has completely embraced our technology & computer upgrade. Even going so far as to teach himself the SQL programming language to upgrade the new programs we are using to protect consumers.

I'm told that's the equivalent to you or I learning to speak Italian.

His dedication to his job doesn't end when he leaves the office either. When he is at home or on vacation he continues to research ways to improve our systems.

He is dedicated, hardworking and detail oriented; typical of a county employee. Thank you, CJ.

Twice this year, one of our employees was called upon to go above and beyond for her fellow citizens.

Kim Lippes, the Rockland County EMS Coordinator, was deployed to Texas and Puerto Rico to provide medical assistance to those affected by this hard-hitting Hurricane season.

Since 2004 Kim has been the Commander of our Disaster Medical Assistance Team; originally joining the team in 1990. That's almost 3 decades of putting herself in harm's way to take care of those in need.

This year in Dickinson, Texas she set up a mobile field hospital that provided emergency care to hundreds of people.

She also spent over 2 weeks in Puerto Rico performing triage at a tent hospital for the Hurricane ravaged territory.

Her willingness to travel so far under such dire conditions truly speaks to the type of person and employee she is, Rockland is lucky to have her. Thank you, Kim.

Our employees are not only dedicated but brave and selfless.

I give you the story of Russell Crawford, a law enforcement comrade and Chief of Detectives at the Rockland District Attorney's Office.

He was awoken at 3:30AM the day after Thanksgiving by a neighbor pounding on his front door, screaming about a house on fire.

Flames had engulfed the front of the house next door so he ran around to the back where he saw his neighbor stuck halfway out a small window.

He reacted quickly and did everything he could to get the man out alive. Grabbing a sledgehammer and loosening up the window the man was stuck in, eventually pulling him to safety.

The neighbor's wife and a two-year-old relative were right behind him and despite being rescued from the home by Town of Newburgh police officers, later perished.

Chief Crawford, please come up and accept your award.

Thank you, Russell, for your extreme bravery and heroism in the face of a life-threatening situation.

Our employees are the future of this county. With their ideas and dedication there isn't anything we can't face together.

(long pause)

On a brighter note the cats and dogs of Rockland have reason to celebrate.

I recently signed two resolutions allowing the county to bond \$1.2 million to finance the construction of a new building for the Hi Tor Animal Care Center. This day has been a long time coming. I appreciate the Legislature's vote in support of this initiative, thank you.

This money combined with \$350,000 from Hi Tor's fundraising and \$500,000 in state grants thanks to Assemblyman Ken Zebrowski, means a new \$2 plus million-dollar facility can be built in Pomona on the existing animal shelter site.

We are committed to picking up the cost of the shelter as it is the right thing to do. It is also a shared service that will eliminate the requirement for each municipality to spend untold millions on building their own shelter.

In addition, we see money coming back from the State as this is a "Shared Service" initiative!

Smart governance and we already have commitments from all five Town Supervisors, along with the Mayor of Spring Valley to fund the Shelter's operating expenses.

They understand how to save their taxpayers money and they are to be acknowledged.

(pause)

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

Rebuilding, Renewing and Reusing.

In a joint effort of the Youth Bureau, Office for the Aging and the County Solid Waste Authority we will launch the Rockland Intergenerational Initiative to bring our young people and seniors together.

Working with our local Villages and Towns we will host what we've termed as "repair cafe days". We aim to transform our throw away economy, by reducing how much goes into the waste stream.

Unfortunately, the ability to fix or repair items is becoming a lost art. It's easier to buy new than repair the old. But learning to repair has many benefits to you, the environment and your surrounding community.

Mentors from the Office of the Aging will come together and work with young people from the Rockland Youth Bureau. The benefits of this partnership are extensive and transformational; preserving repair know-how skills by passing them on to the younger generation and teaching them respect for our seniors. All while fostering a sense of community, sustainability and resilience.

This first reuse cafe day is planned for this spring in Nyack thanks to the help of Nyack Mayor Don Hammond and the Nyack Village Board. I want to thank them for that.

(pause)

Many of our departments have achieved success by doing things a little differently; thinking outside of the box, so to speak.

Look at our Office for the Aging Director Tina Cardoza-Izquierdo. She took their newsletter, which had previously cost almost \$64,000 a year to produce, and solicited advertising from local companies to completely cover the cost of production and distribution. You heard that right folks another government service provided at no cost to taxpayers!

This even increased turnout at OFA's events last year by 10% over 2016. Our seniors and I thank you.

(pause)

Little over a month ago I pledged during my inauguration that I will travel anywhere, to meet anyone, at any time in support of the effort to unite our county.

In that vein, I am announcing a new community outreach initiative. With the help of the Rockland County Human Rights Commission I will meet with a different community group every month so we can work collaboratively to improve the lives of all our residents.

Much of Rockland's strength comes from our diversity. A diversity of cultures, religions and ideas that when properly focused can bring us all closer together.

We are all Rocklanders, we all chose to live in this beautiful county for the same reasons. Desiring good schools, safe neighborhoods, excellent recreational activities and top-notch government services.

We must work together to foster a better understanding of our neighbors and break down the mental walls that have divided us for far too long.

(pause)

Transportation and infrastructure are some of the most basic responsibilities of County government and critical to every facet of our economic and daily life.

My administration recognizes the importance of improving our mass transit infrastructure. An area where unfortunately Rockland has been behind the 8 ball for many years.

However, we are making progress, in August the County's Tappan Zee Express launched its first-ever Sunday service schedule.

The new service enjoyed immediate success with 235 riders on the inaugural Sunday. We forged an agreement with the MTA to fund the expansion, which was another positive step to continue bridging Rockland County's multimillion dollar value gap.

This fall the Lower Hudson Transit Link service is scheduled to replace the TZx service. We share our TZx riders' concerns that express service to Tarrytown has not been prioritized in the Transit Link project plans.

We're not saying we don't want a faster trip to White Plains – of course we do, and we hope that happens. But not improving the existing, most popular express route to Tarrytown makes no sense what-so-ever.

I have already met with the newly elected Westchester County Executive George Latimer about this issue. We have pledged to work together in a non-partisan manner on this concern and other issues impacting both Counties.

And good news for those taking the bus within Rockland. Thirteen new Federally funded replacement buses for Transport of Rockland (TOR) are currently in production.

The new buses will include features like improved passenger comfort amenities, location and passenger counting systems and state-of-the-art ADA access features. The buses will be in service later this year.

In addition to improving bus service throughout the county we are beginning the process of building a new Park and Ride in the area of Route 59 and Saddle River Road.

The new lot, which will replace the lot the County is leasing at the old drive-in site, will offer over 300 parking spaces, bike racks, a new roadway and sidewalk network, and re-striping of turn lanes on Route 59 & Saddle River Road.

Once complete, the new Park & Ride will be available to serve all public transit service and is intended to be a stop for the new Lower Hudson Transit Link. And the best news, NO county tax dollars will be needed for the project.

(pause)

As I have said time and again, the health and safety of all residents in Rockland County is the highest priority of my administration.

In 2015, we launched the Rockland Codes Initiative (RCI), a sweeping effort to combat unsafe and illegal construction which placed families and volunteer Firefighters at risk.

We're utilizing the broad powers of the Health Department's sanitary code to inspect dwellings and issue violations, which allows us to fight back against those who think it's no big deal to take advantage of those who have little voice.

Last year we expanded the Rockland Codes Initiative; hired two new support staff and will be hiring two additional inspectors this year.

We are continuing to fight back against slumlords with our Rental Registry. We are using every means available to us to demand that everyone follows the law.

I want to commend the good landlords of Rockland for stepping up and helping improve our housing stock. But I send this warning to those trying to take advantage of others. My administration will not tolerate any more illegal development or allow anyone to risk the lives of our heroic volunteer firefighters.

All this is being done under the guidance of Dr. Patricia Ruppert and the Health Department. Let's give them a hand.

(pause)

Surveys have found that while citizens know public health is important to them, they aren't always exactly sure what it is or how it has touched their lives.

Here in Rockland we are bringing county services to the community making them more accessible for our residents.

Our Department of Health put in place a new way to deliver flu shots, in the community. They traveled to Spring Valley, Haverstraw, New City, Nyack and Suffern.

All told they provided over 1500 flu shots where they are needed most. While the nation faces a near flu pandemic, our Health Department's tireless work certainly is a big reason why we have been relatively unscathed, with Rockland having the 4th lowest rate of flu compared to the other 61 New York counties, with only 369 total lab-confirmed cases this flu season.

This year we are facing a more serious strain of flu than usual and the Health Department is still providing shots at our Pomona Campus. I urge you to schedule a flu shot if you have not done so already. It's not too late.

This is yet another example of how we have not only maintained but improved our services under extreme fiscal stress.

(pause)

Tonight, I've spoken about our path forward as a county, united in passion and purpose to improve the quality of life for ALL our residents.

I began this journey by making promises to the people of this county during my first campaign for County Executive. I promised to right the fiscal ship, foster economic growth and preserve Rockland. Given how that has worked out so far, I feel comfortable making a few more promises to you this evening.

I promise that I will continue to put taxpayers first and keep the hands of government out of your purses and wallets.

I promise to continue to focus on jobs and opportunities for all our residents, young and old.

I promise to reach out to those with different backgrounds and ideas and work together to find the best path forward.

I promise to continue to protect our way of life because I love this county. Rockland has given me a lifetime of fond memories and lifelong friends. I will work every day and in every way to repay that debt to all of you.

(pause)

Promise.

Most of all I believe in the promise of this county. The promise of all of you. The promise that we can improve upon what we have already built and give future generations a chance to make Rockland their own.

But I can't fulfill any of these promises without you, all of you. Our future is dependent on all of us not only working together but coming together. Truly unifying this county and proving to everyone what we already know ... that it is the greatest county in the State of New York.

Let us conclude with a prayer for those serving our country in the armed forces of the United States of America. It is they and their comrades before them who secured and now protect the right for us to be part of this wonderful democracy. God Bless you, God Bless Rockland and God Bless this great Nation of ours.

Thank you.