



**NIAGARA COUNTY STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS**

**February 21, 2023**

**Rebecca Wydysh, Chairman**

Vice Chairman Nemi, Majority Leader Bradt, Minority Leader Robins

Sheriff Filicetti, District Attorney Seaman, County Clerk Jastrzemski, Treasurer Andrews, County Manager Updegrave.....my fellow Legislators.....neighbors, taxpayers and concerned citizens.

Tonight, I stand before you to give the State of Niagara County address. Niagara County.....a county of 211,000 people who call this great community their home. A diverse county, a county with three distinct urban centers....a county with farmland as far as the eye can see....a county with bustling suburban communities filled with families....and of course, a county home to a great Wonder of the World.

But for all of our diversity, we are united in a sense of purpose, of wanting to see a prosperous Niagara County that provides services people need, that is fiscally prudent and that respects people's freedom AND the idea that we are all intertwined for the common good.

To this end, I want to say to all of you, my fellow legislators, that your efforts to work together, to produce bi-partisanship agreements when we can, and to respectfully disagree when our positions on issues diverge, is something to be acknowledged and celebrated. For each of us was sent here by our constituents to give voice to their views and to get things done.

And I am proud to say we have accomplished some great things. We adopted a budget that again is beneath the property tax cap....that keeps county-controlled spending under the rate of inflation....that increases our fund balance.....and makes investments in our future. During these stressful economic times, we showed taxpayers that we understand their concerns and proved we are good stewards of their tax dollars.

We created the Niagara County Façade Program to help small businesses from every corner of the county rebound from the pandemic, make necessary capital improvements to their properties and inject some vibrancy into our commercial corridors. Judging by the participation, the façade program has been a tremendous success.

More than 200 businesses across Niagara County took advantage of this program, turning the \$5.2 million in matching funds approved by this Legislature, into \$13.3 million in investment across the county. And remember, the work on these exteriors was mainly done by local contractors, ensuring these dollars recirculated through our local economy. I want to thank our team at the Center for Economic Development who were the backbone of this program and worked hard to turn applications around quickly to get the funds flowing. Great job.

In a year when finding and maintaining workers became a challenge for employers across all market sectors, including government, Niagara County

stepped forward and invested in our workforce. We were able to negotiate contracts with all of our unions that we view as both an investment in worker retention and an opportunity to hopefully garner more interest from job seekers to fill our vacant positions. I want to acknowledge the great work of County Manager Updegrave, Budget Director Huntington and HR Director Lopes in this regard.

Indeed, in a local government, your people....your employees.....really are the strength of your organization. For our role is to deliver a broad spectrum of services to our residents and to do that well, we need professionals with the expertise and talent in their particular fields. And thankfully, that's exactly what we have here in Niagara County.

Just look at the unbelievable team work and effort that was put into handling the December blizzard. Our Emergency Services Department, the Sheriff's Office and DPW all combined for what was just an incredible blizzard response. Our team collectively was rescuing people, plowing roads, clearing cars, answering emergency calls....they were doing it all. For sure, it was a perilous few days and our team literally worked non-stop. Thank you to everyone for your tremendous efforts.

Every day, we are rising up to meet the challenges and provide the services to address pressing needs across our community. Our Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services is a great example of being on the front lines every day. They have been heavily engaged in battling the opioid epidemic and leading the charge to reduce overdoses and deaths.

Unfortunately, during the pandemic, we lost ground in this fight, taking a terrible step backwards. But according to Director Kelemen, the collective efforts of our team and the many partner agencies we work with are paying off. Funds from the pharmaceutical lawsuits are being directed where they can have an immediate impact and fill any gaps in the services we provide. And I'm happy to report we are again now seeing a decline in overdoses, thank God.

Speaking of the pandemic, it proved once again, there is no rest for the weary, including those in the Department of Health. The wind down of the pandemic led into a terrible flu season and the rise of RSV cases, at a time when DOH staff was focused on getting back to the laundry list of other things on their plate. The amount of ground covered by the Niagara County Department of Health – nursing services, environmental health, children with special needs, for example – touches pretty much every Niagara County resident in some way. Thank you for your continued excellence.

Of course, that is the very essence of county government – we are directly interacting with our residents to meet their needs and provide valuable services. Like Niagara County Employment & Training helping someone who is looking for a job or businesses trying to recruit candidates. Or Social Services providing the safety net for a resident or rescuing a child from an abusive situation. Maybe it's the Office for the Aging providing support for caregivers or providing guidance on long-term care. Or the Veterans' Service Agency helping a veteran get the benefits they earned serving our country.

Every day, there's someone renewing a license, applying for a passport or seeking their pistol permit. People are driving on freshly paved roads and across reconstructed bridges. Soon, there will be people enjoying our parks, taking advantage of our world-class disc golf courses and visiting the Niagara County Golf Course that I have heard from many residents has never looked better

I could continue on and on, but I think you get the point. Niagara County has a lot to offer and thanks to the 1435 women and men who work here, we are delivering what the community expects.

Yet, as I talk so proudly about our great county, I also feel tremendous unease about our future, namely because it seems like control of that future is being taken away from us, bit by bit, by policies emanating from the State of New York.

There is a famous quote attributed to Thomas Jefferson that says “the government closest to the people serves the people best.” Indeed, it was a commentary on allowing local communities to govern themselves free from the overreach and intrusion of big, centralized government.

Yet, it seems every day, there is a new example of how the state has enacted some policy or made some decision that completely tramples on home rule. There is a complete disregard for the fact that certain areas of governance are supposed to be left to localities to decide. Government closest to the people is being usurped by a faceless bureaucracy that I doubt can find us on a map.

Consider how we have been battling solar projects that completely run over all historical precedent that zoning is a power that is held by local governments. Whole communities have built a way of life, a culture, a local vibe if you will, that the state now says doesn't matter.

We say, put these solar projects on brownfields, landfills, industrial sites. We say the State Constitution says you must preserve farmland. We say residents don't want this. We say some faceless state agency should not be empowered to simply wave their magic wand and determine all local rules and ordinances are too burdensome and brush them away. And Albany says too bad.

We say these solar projects should be assessed by local assessors like any other property. We say these projects must pay their fair share. We say State Government should not be involved in assessment and should not be giving these developers sweetheart deals to pay far less than they should. And Albany says too bad.

We say the Second Amendment Rights of our residents need to be respected. We say the State Legislation that severely limits where a legal pistol permit holder can carry their gun is blatantly unconstitutional. We say we have no issue with responsible gun owners carrying their firearms in public places. And Albany says too bad.

We say that agriculture is important to us and the policies you are pursuing are going to further erode farms that already are up against it. We say it's outrageous that a board charged with determining overtime rules and pay for farmworkers has a majority that have no understanding of farm economics. And Albany says too bad.

We say Niagara County is a diverse community and that local governments should determine the type of housing they want, should manage the growth of their town...that they have developed comprehensive plans that define what that community wants to be. Albany says too bad.

We say your climate plan ignores the realities of Western New York winters. We say the electric grid can't handle the demand. We say the December blizzard just proved it and that even the state's own Climate Plan recognizes the need for multiple energy sources. And once again, Albany is saying too bad.

Just recently, we came together in a bi-partisan manner – local officials, economic development professionals, labor leaders – and decided that economic incentives are warranted to reinvigorate a vacant property in Niagara Falls to make the site productive again, generating revenue for the community. And we get lectured and criticized by two state legislators who do not represent this community, falsely claiming we found some loophole in the law. It's as if they believe their thoughts on this issue are somehow more valid than the judgments made by those who are actually impacted. The arrogance, the hubris, the complete lack of respect is astonishing. Unfortunately, it's becoming the new normal.

There used to be a time when unfunded state mandates were the bane of our existence. And trust me, they are still bad. The Governor's proposed budget could create an immediate \$6 million dollar hole in Niagara County's budget. This is unconscionable.

Yet these other issues are so much worse. They are eroding the very fabric of self-governance, they are ignoring the constitution and they are making large swaths of the state feel like we don't matter. And that has consequences.

During the pandemic, I was amazed at how many residents wanted us to simply ignore New York State Executive Orders. Now we see regular citizens calling on the Niagara County Legislature and other counties across Upstate to pass resolutions that would divide the state into self-governing regions to restore some measure of local control. There are multiple lawsuits on the gun law. There are multiple lawsuits on the solar projects. There will be lawsuits on the housing plan.

This is not a recipe for building a unified future for the Empire State. We must acknowledge that different regions of the state have different needs, different wants and different priorities and those differences should be embraced. It is time for Upstate Counties to speak with a single voice and demand that our concerns be addressed, that our voices be heard.....and that balance must be restored between state and local government.

Let me end by saying that I believe we can restore that balance. I do not assign ill intent to those making these decisions we disagree with. But I will say the dialogue has been too much in one direction.....Albany speaking at us, not with us. I believe that if we can hit reset on some of these issues and local governments can be included in the debate and decision-making, we can achieve much better outcomes for all New York residents.

Thank you.