



State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

Executive's Office

Jason T. Garnar, Broome County Executive

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2021 State of the County Address

Good evening and thank you. Thank you to the Broome County Legislature for hosting me here via Zoom tonight. Thank you to Chairman Daniel J. Reynolds, Majority Leader Cindy O'Brien, Minority Leader Bob Weslar and all the members of our Broome County Legislature.

Much like my Budget Address in September, this year my State of the County Address is very different than in years past.

As you may know I like to take my States of the County and Budget Addresses on the road and into the community to highlight all the great things that are happening in our own backyard. This year we continue to be unable to do so because of COVID-19. So, a lot changes in a year doesn't it?

We had a State of the County last year where we didn't even talk about COVID. Who knew then that in just a couple of weeks we would be declaring a state of emergency, our schools and businesses shutdown, people would be staying home as much as possible, our whole entire way of life turned completely upside down.

Almost a year into this pandemic we continue to be in the County's longest ever state of emergency. One that has lasted for nearly a whole year. COVID, how it has impacted us, how it has changed us, how we have fought it, and we how will beat it, that has been the State of Broome County for the past year and that will continue to be our main focus for the rest of this year.

COVID has taken over 300 lives in Broome County. Read the obituaries and you'll see these were husbands, wives, grandparents, aunt and uncles. They were friends and family members taken too soon. This was the ultimate and most devastating price.

COVID caused so much pain in so many other ways too Local businesses have greatly suffered, and a number of people have lost their jobs. Our kids have lost out on so many opportunities with the shutdown of our schools, despite the best efforts of our local teachers and staff. It has been such a tough year for all of us, but in spite of it all this community stepped up like never before to help each other get through it.

We will never forget the hospital heroes who worked day and night to save lives or all of the essential workers who kept working to feed us, to care for us, and protect us.

As we faced this pandemic, we also quickly realized it was county government that had to step up and coordinate the entire local response to COVID. and boy did we see our county departments step up. We had to operationalize our COVID response just like we have before

when we have faced snow storms and historic floods. I remember sitting in the Emergency Operations Center for hours, meeting with department heads, municipalities and collecting important information that we would need to communicate with the public.

Getting the information about what was happening to our community was critical, sharing the information every day so our residents could look at the numbers and protect themselves. I will never forget that moment when we had to announce the first COVID-19 death of a Broome County resident. It was so hard. There was so much concern from the public about the uncertainty surrounding this virus. This was a new virus, so we committed ourselves to sharing data every day, to providing daily updates to the community so they could see the information we were seeing.

The Broome County Health Department led the charge in our fight against this virus. Our contact tracing operation expanded beyond imagination. Where there were once only two or three contact tracers now, we have dozens; members of the health department, reassigned county staff from many different departments and new hires who are working long hours every day to keep you safe and stop the spread. More than 60,000 phone calls have been made to people with COVID, to close contacts and to place people into quarantine. These contact tracers were like soldiers holding the line on a battlefield. Our hospitals were stretched to the breaking point, but they were never overrun. The work this team did stopped the spread, flattened the curve, and saved countless lives.

We were in the first region to reopen in New York State, and our health department was right there alongside our businesses and schools helping them open their doors. Their work doesn't stop, as they will continue to work to safely reopen wedding and sports venues, movie theaters, along with our great community festivals and other community events.

Our Office of Emergency Services has been lockstep with the health department, helping these operations run smoothly and providing support to agencies across the county. For months our Emergency Operations Center was up and running coordinating all aspects of our response, working with county departments, hospital providers, school districts, municipalities, and other community organizations. They helped work with schools to make sure our kids were fed when schools shut down.

Alongside the Broome County Security Division, who runs the logistics division of the emergency operation, they acquired and distributed over a million pieces of personal protective equipment. With support from the Broome County Legislature we were able to free up \$150,000 in funding to purchase PPE. We operated a donation drop off center, worked with our hospitals and nursing homes, handed out masks to the community and continue helping our school districts put in purchase orders for these much-needed resources

Remember when testing supplies were extremely limited at the start of this pandemic? Our security team would drive COVID tests up to Albany so that we could quickly get those results. Sometimes we would drive up to collect as little as 50 tests at a time, but we did it because we realized how important testing was and every test counted. Early on in this pandemic we recognized that there was a testing problem in our community and really across the country, not

enough access, not enough tests. I remember sitting in the room at Emergency Services, brainstorming with our department heads, our team. How do we find a way to get people tested and get their results in less than 15 minutes? Our team hunkered down and came up with a great idea, the idea to put our own test site on a bus, to make it mobile and get it out into the community. To be honest with you I didn't know if we would be able to set up an operation like this at first, that it would work, but we did. We got it out there to multiple communities and to date have completed over 12,000 tests.

These two-department saved countless lives.

I can't thank both Directors Rebecca Kaufman and Mike Ponticiello enough for your leadership during this time. Both of you are bright young people with young kids and you are both in charge of the two most important departments to lead up through this pandemic. The future of Broome County is in really good hands with young professionals like Mike and Rebecca.

We had a lot of other departments step up to fight COVID too.

This year the Age Friendly Plan put forth by our Office for Aging was approved by the AARP - and this team stepped up to help our most vulnerable population over the past year through COVID. They found alternative ways to offer services to seniors, offering drive thru pickup for meals at the senior centers and the Meals on Wheels program saw a 26% increase in service. When the schools shut down and we needed more daycare options for our kids, OFA and DSS created Broome County's first daycare at the Western Broome Senior Center so essential workers could do their job while we took care of their kids.

One of the safest places to be over the past year, our Broome County Parks. With hundreds of acres of open space and many sources of entertainment shut down, it was a place for relief for many from this pandemic. Thousands of Broome County rediscovered our amazing parks or experienced them for the very first time. Attendance increased by more than 20% compared to 2019, and that's without being able to host any of the amazing events we are normally able to offer in our parks. The parks department teamed up with Delta Engineers and Spiediefest to bring back the Broome County Festival of Lights at Otsiningo Park, giving thousands of county residents something to look forward to during the winter months.

Broome County Transit implemented numerous COVID-19 safety measures to keep their drivers and passengers safe. Our Office for Employment and training found new ways to get people back to work, hosting several drive-thru job fairs.

As our numbers go down and the second wave of COVID ends we are now focused on our most important mission-getting every single resident in Broome County vaccinated. The Health Department, Office of Emergency Services and Broome County Security Division have been key in operationalizing vaccination clinics and points of distribution, working with community partners like our local hospitals, SUNY Broome, Binghamton University, local churches and more to secure locations, staff, and resources to vaccinate our residents.

Every single day the Office for Aging team is taking hundreds of phone calls, helping seniors who are struggling to get appointments for the COVID-19 vaccine, answering their questions and making sure this important group, the most vulnerable to this virus, are protected.

We were one of the first counties in the state to open a mass vaccination site. This site located at SUNY Broome is now capable of vaccinating 2,500 Broome County residents a day. I have been to several vaccination clinics and I can't tell you how happy and grateful people are to receive their vaccine. Most importantly, there is a look of hope in their eyes. The key to winning the fight against COVID is to vaccinate our community as quickly as possible. It is our most important mission this year in county government.

Broome County stands ready to vaccinate every single one of our residents, all we need is the supply. In a few months, I believe we will have all the supply we will need, and we will be ready to use every single dose of it so we can keep our residents safe and protected as we get back to normal life.

Our County Departments stepped up in response to COVID-19, while continuing to provide the critical services needed by Broome County residents every single day. In 2020 we took in just under half a million calls at the 9-1-1 dispatch center. We continued disposing of the county's garbage, recycling and hazardous materials we stepped in to help the Village of Endicott and the Town of Union when they had nowhere else to put their recycling. We continued fixing, maintaining and plowing more than 300 miles of roads, and that includes responding to a record breaking 40 plus inch snowstorm in December with significant flooding happening as well. A shout out to our entire Department of Public Works for their incredible response.

I cannot say thank you enough to all of our Broome County Employees who have worked around the clock over the past year, putting off vacations, working nights, weekends, sacrificing time with their families, all to protect the people of Broome County during a year that was tougher than ever because of this pandemic. Our County employees went above and beyond, finding alternative ways to serve you, our taxpayers.

This shows we have invested our resources in the right way and will always be able to respond, no matter what the emergency, while still providing these critical services to our residents. We had those resources thanks to our great partnership with the Broome County Legislature. Together over the years, we have crafted budgets, budgets that worked for us to be able to respond to this pandemic. If we hadn't had these resources, we would not have been able to respond in the way we did.

After a year where we were hit hard financially things are turning around. After a historic budget shortfall due to the pandemic, we are in a pretty good position thanks to the budgets we created and the fund balance we built up.

COVID created a financial tsunami for governments across the county, and that was true for right here in Broome County. Over \$20 million was withheld from New York State. Close to \$10 million was lost in sales tax, casino, and other revenues. We were stuck between a rock and a hard place. We had to take the lead in fighting a historic pandemic and we had to do it down \$30

million. We worked with the legislature to make tough decisions. We delayed capital projects, enacted a hiring freeze, instituted a furlough program, and froze salaries of administrative employees. We cut funding to contract agencies and reduced aid to SUNY Broome. We were able to use our fund balance we had grown over the last four years to help pay our bills. We were able to develop a fiscally responsible budget for 2021 that cut taxes again for a third year in a row.

In recent times we have seen governments in financial crisis take money away from their local governments to pay the bills, putting the local governments in a terrible position. I'm proud to say we worked with the legislature and managed our own way out of this crisis without taking a cent of sales tax away from our local governments

As we close the books on 2020, our Office of Management and Budget is calculating where we stand financially. Sales Tax Receipts have been steadily improving in recent months which is a great sign for our local economy. At one point we were looking at a 12-13% sales tax decline, but we closed the year being only down 3% in sales tax for 2020 compared to the previous year, which is remarkable considering many local businesses were closed for months, and an encouraging sign that our local economy is coming back to life.

The state announced some really good news recently that they will now pay back much of the \$20 million they withheld from us by the end of March. We are also finally seeing some very promising signs that the federal government will be supplying much needed relief to county governments which will be on the way in the next few months. We are now back onto a path of growth, things are looking up

We are going to come out stronger. I believe that by the end of this year county finances we be stronger than they were than before COVID. There are also signs that our local economy is starting to come to life as well.

In April of 2020 unemployment rates had skyrocketed to above 15% - compared to just 4% the year before. It has now fallen to around 6%. People in Broome County are getting back to work. We are experiencing a strong housing market. The median sales price of a home went up 29% in 2020. Good things are happening in Broome County.

In 2020 the Kopernik Science Park opened, a free, outdoor STEM-themed playground and learning facility that the County was proud to help fund. Another great project Broome County was excited to be a part of - the Super Cooper Playground in the Town of Chenango - providing more opportunities for kids to get outside and play.

Broome County aggressively went after grants from New York State to improve housing. COVID made it challenging for many people to pay their bills. We applied for these grants so people could stay in their homes. Have you seen the new Beer Tree Factory facility at the Oakdale Mall? Amazing. Shortly after the move of our Office of Employment and Training into the mall this beautiful new business opened, breathing even more new life into the mall. This was a great step in the right direction when it comes to economic development for Broome County.

Those are just a few examples of great projects we saw come to life in 2020 despite COVID - and we have a lot more to look forward to. The Dorchester Park Pathways to Play All Inclusive Playground is headed our way this summer. This project will make accessibility improvements to the park's playground and waterfront. Through a Greater Binghamton Fund grant the Broome County iDistricts Public Art Program will bring innovative public art installations throughout Binghamton, Johnson City, and Endicott beautifying the downtowns of our Triple Cities. Stop-arm cameras will be installed on our school buses this year - which will save lives. The Helio Health Center at the former Broome Developmental campus is expanding, bringing additional access to treatment services. Broome County helped provide property for the Binghamton University Nursing School in Johnson City which is opening this year. A FedEx distribution center is coming to Kirkwood, bringing jobs and more hope to Broome County. The biggest eyesore in Broome County, the former Endicott-Johnson Victory Building, is going to be turned into a beautiful housing complex. For years large companies would bring perspective employees and avoid them having to see this building. Now they are going to show it off as one of the proudest amenities Broome County has to offer.

Exciting projects are on the way with many more to be announced in 2021. Throughout this pandemic we have strengthened and fostered new partnerships in our community, working together with Binghamton University and SUNY Broome, our local hospital systems UHS and Lourdes Ascension, collaborating with our school districts and local businesses.

Speaking of partnership, none of this would be possible without the support of the County Legislature. Responding to the pandemic has created an unprecedented relationship. Thank you for working with me and for helping us get through this challenging year.

This has been a year for the record books. It has been tough, probably the toughest year we have ever seen. COVID-19 is not over yet, but there is a light at the end of the tunnel. We are slowly but surely opening our community, getting back to the way things once were.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel - because what we did as government this year worked and it will continue to work. There is hope for the future and we are getting Broome County back on track. Things will get back to normal and I am excited for the many amazing things to come here in Broome County. Our best days are yet to come.

Thank you and God Bless.