
**BROOME COUNTY LEGISLATURE
STATE OF THE COUNTY
WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2007**

The Legislature convened at 6:00 p.m. with a call to order by the Chair, Mark R. Whalen. The Clerk, Eric S. Denk, read the fire exit announcement and called the Attendance Roll, Present-16, Absent-3 (Sanfilippo, Hull, Hutchings).

The Chair, Mr. Whalen, led the members of the Legislature in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. Mr. Whalen then granted the privilege of the floor to the County Executive, Barbara J. Fiala.

Good afternoon Chairman Whalen, Majority Leader Reynolds, Minority Leader Schofield, all lawmakers, departments heads, employees, members of the media and public. Welcome everyone to the 2007 presentation of the State of Broome County. I am happy to report that I strongly believe that Broome County Government is in good shape financially and the region is in good shape economically and strategically right now. No doubt about it, we had a tough 2006. First and foremost, the floods took their toll on thousands of lives, thousands of homes and hundreds of businesses. These were not events you get over quickly. We have, however, persevered, and because this community is so resilient we are on the road to recovery. Rebuilding from the Floods of 2006 does not take days, weeks or months, it will take years. So we will continue to face the challenges of rebuilding our community together. I have been thinking about ways to make our employees aware of how instrumental they were during these disasters and to let them know how much we all appreciate their hard work. I figured the State of our County is what it is today because of these employees and right now would be the perfect time to acknowledge their efforts.

I would like to start with our Emergency Services Department. From all of the residents in Broome County, a big thank you to former Director Mike Aswad, Brett Chellis, now our Emergency Services Director and all of the dispatchers and senior dispatchers for their tremendously coordinated response to the June disaster. I also want to recognize Sheriff Harder and his many deputies who responded to this crisis and remained a comforting presence in the ensuing days. This was a catastrophic weather event, beyond anything this area has ever seen. The fact that we did not lose a single life as a result is credit to the fine work done by Emergency Services, our Sheriff's Office and all of the volunteer and paid fire departments across the area. This community owes all of you a huge debt of gratitude not just for your response to the June floods but the November floods as well. Mike Aswad, Brett Chellis and Sheriff Harder, I would like you all to stand to be recognized and to accept our gratitude for your leadership during these two major disasters. Please extend to all of your employees our sincere appreciation for the work that they did during these disasters and the work they do, day in and day out, to keep our community safe. I would like to present you all with citations of excellence. You make us all very proud. I would also like to announce today that I have submitted the letter asking that Brett Chellis be "interim" no more. Today I announce that I am requesting the official hiring of Brett Chellis as Broome County's Director of Emergency Services and Fire Coordinator. Congratulations Brett! You had big shoes to fill and you have done a great job and we expect great things to come.

Next I would like Public Works Commissioner Henry Weissmann, Deputy Commissioner of Highways Mike Restino and Deputy Commissioner of Parks Dave Cody to please stand and accept these certificates of excellence for the work each of you did as well as the work your people provided during these two disasters. It is hard to even imagine the challenges your employees faced at the height of each storm and in the ensuing days. You and they have provided this community a tremendous public service in that you worked tirelessly to try to get our community's infrastructure back in shape. It is an exhausting and oftentimes dirty and thankless job but all the folks stayed on the job and got it done. In some cases the workers put their jobs ahead of their own personal situations. Again thank you gentlemen and thank you to every Public Works, Highway and Parks Department employee.

Also on the front lines during the height of these disasters and in the days since the June and November floods, were our Department of Social Services, our Mental Health Department and our Health Department. These 3 groups were crucial during the height of the June crisis in getting important health information to the community and in providing staffing and mental health counseling at the huge shelter at the Binghamton University Events Center. They have also continued to provide vital counseling, support and information since both disasters struck our community. Department of Social Services and Mental Health Commissioner Art Johnson and Health Department Director Claudia Edwards please stand to be recognized and I would also like to present you these certificates of excellence. Please share them with your employees and please let them know this community is grateful for all that they have done and continue to do to help all flood victims as well as all of our residents.

There are so many more of you who played a major role during the Floods of 2006. I would like each department head to stand as we acknowledge your department's contributions.

Transportation Commissioner Gary Crandall and all of the Amalgamated Transit drivers and BC Transit staff who played an instrumental role transporting flood victims to safety, this community says thank you!

Michelle Haus and all of the Central Foods staff, you kept the troops fed and as we all know that is the most important task in a disaster and you fulfilled that task with tremendous professionalism. I know it was an exhausting job but there were so many workers out there who were able to do their jobs and stay on the jobs for extremely long hours because Central Foods kept the food coming.

Kathy Bunnell and the Office for Aging staff have also been on the front lines helping hundreds of seniors who were flood victims get the assistance they needed to get their lives back together. Your caring, dedicated staff has made quite a difference in the lives of some of our most vulnerable residents. You are all a godsend.

Vicki Bugonian and her staff at the Dog Shelter even played a vital role in helping to house family pets separated from their owners because of flood waters. Your group we understand worked in tandem with out of town animal rescue groups and provided a tremendous comfort to families already stressed by their personal circumstances. Thank you!

Terry Stark and the Office of Employment and Training were also working hand in hand with the State Labor Department getting local residents the assistance and referral information they needed. Excellent job!

David Donoghue and the staff at the landfill, you certainly had one of the toughest jobs of all. We know those were long hours and many, busy days with truckload after truckload and carload after carload of flood debris. That was a tremendous service you provided this community and we say thank you on behalf of all flood victims for your assistance during this most trying time.

To Jim Dadamio and the Security Division which kept our county properties safe and were on hand to help with security during the height of the storm and in the days following each storm, thank you!

Dr. Blanding and the staff at the Willow Point Nursing Home were also called upon during this disaster. They ended up having to house dozens of clients from Owego and Vestal who were driven from their nursing facilities by rising waters. You provided warm beds and comforting care to a group no doubt terrified by the rising flood waters. Your staff is to be commended for their dedication.

Thank you to Kim McKinney and our IT department who worked extra hours to keep the information on our web site as up to date as possible. Gary Pullis from IT and Doug English from our Planning Department also worked to keep county updates and road information as current as possible during the June disaster.

Thank you to Rita Petkash and her staff for generating the request for grant money to help flood victims and specifically Frank Evangelisti for coordinating the screening and payout process.

And finally my own staff was invaluable during both of these flood disasters. I want to thank my Deputy Pat Brennan for his leadership during the June floods. Pat put in a lot of long hours and I want to thank him for overseeing our county response to the June disaster. I also want to thank my Executive Assistants Darcy Fauci and Colleen Wagner. With the help of numerous emergency services personnel and all of the county employees who volunteered, especially Diane O'Hora, Darcy was able to keep the information flowing to our local media who were able to keep the public informed of developments in both disasters. Colleen Wagner was also instrumental in providing key information and assistance at the Emergency Operations Center.

If I have forgotten anyone, please know that every single one of you that played a role in this disaster made a difference in the lives of our residents and you all deserve a huge thank you!

The State of Broome County Government is strong and one of the main reasons is because of the employees like the ones just mentioned. They are dedicated public servants who put our residents' safety and well being above all else. Since the June flood, we have been meeting regularly with our municipal leaders as part of our flood task force. We felt it important that our local leaders stay in touch and we all stay up to date on where each community's recovery efforts stand. We also felt it was important to have a unified voice when it came to lobbying our federal and state officials for additional flood relief. Our efforts have paid off somewhat in that our state lawmakers are sponsoring property tax relief legislation that will go a long way in helping our flood victims. However, it is going to have an impact on our local municipalities, Broome County and the local school districts. We have made it clear to our state and federal leaders that these groups will need some additional relief as well. They will need help filling the gap that will be left after many property owners are given a break on their flood ravaged properties. The flood victims deserve it and we were proud to work for it on their behalf. Now we are hoping our state leaders will hear our additional requests for relief and they will be able to gain support for some additional legislation so that local governments and school districts will not be left holding the bag.

One very positive note, post flood, is the reimbursements provided by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. We can report that FEMA has been willing to work with us on

pretty much every flood related project and we have received full reimbursement for those projects, which is a tremendous positive for our taxpayers. Broome County has also been able to provide some direct relief for many flood victims through the \$250,000 grant from the Governor's Office for Small Cities secured by our Planning Department. All of that money has been disbursed. We hope to soon announce that through the efforts of our Planning Department, we will have secured additional funds for similar purposes.

Despite the floods and the devastation they caused, I still believe that Broome County's future is bright. We are on the right track and we are turning things around. Yes, these are clichés but never before have I believed so strongly in the meaning behind these words. My administration has spent the last two years assessing problems, developing solutions, creating partnerships and laying out a plan of progress for the future. This year, my 3rd year, many of these behind the scenes efforts, I am excited to report, will come to fruition. The community will be able to not only listen to us talk about progress, they will actually see it.

In less than two months a fence will go up around the George Harvey Justice Building and we will begin to renovate this historic structure, making it a bustling county courts building once again. We will bring back all court related departments to a central justice hub and we will save county taxpayers nearly a half a million dollars a year in the process. I think George Harvey would be very proud.

In less than 3 months, work will begin on the Intermodal Transportation Hub in downtown Binghamton. As you can see from the pictures, this is going to be a beautiful addition to a struggling downtown neighborhood. This project almost did not happen under the previous administration. In fact we were in serious jeopardy of losing \$9.2 million dollars for this project when I took office. I am proud to say through this administration's leadership, the Intermodal is happening now. By 2008, we hope to be able to cut the ribbon and allow the first buses to board passengers.

There was a lot of talk about the Willow Point Nursing Home in 2006. I would like to have moved faster on this project but we had to wait to hear from the state's right-sizing commission. We received that report late last year and we agree with its conclusion that we should build a new nursing home. We will, however, be in talks with the state about the exact number of beds. We are also in talks with Senator Libous' office and other state officials about the proposed location for this new nursing home. We are targeting the Greater Binghamton Health Center and are currently narrowing our options on a specific site within the campus. I can assure our neighbors on the East Side of Binghamton that the so-called "Bowl", is off the table as a possible location. I get asked quite often why we need to be in the nursing home business and why we need a new nursing home. I have answered it before and I want to emphasize once again all of the reasons:

- We owe it to the hard working taxpayers of Broome County to provide them a publicly operated nursing home that will accept Medicaid patients when and if the time comes for them to need nursing care. I will not allow local residents to be shipped out of the area if they cannot afford private care.
- Our original section of the Willow Point Nursing Home is nearly 40 years old. It needs to be renovated. The entire facility is also laid out with a very antiquated design based on an antiquated philosophy of how nursing home care should be delivered. We do not want people to feel institutionalized. We instead want to be able to provide them a more comfortable atmosphere that caters to the every day needs of our local senior and disabled population. We also want to provide those services in a more caring and cost efficient manner. The two are not mutually exclusive.
- The costs of a new nursing home will be much less than the costs of renovating the facility. We are working to be creative with the design and hopefully we will be incorporating several other county services in this new facility that will save county taxpayers money over time.

We also heard a lot about the En Joie Golf Course in 2006. The course was devastated last year because of the June floods. Because the course had to close for much of the golf season we did not attain the revenues we anticipated. However, with the revenue we did generate at the course last year combined with the FEMA assistance we received, the course was able to end the year less than \$60,000 in the red. The better news out of En Joie in 2006 was the announcement that the Dick's Sporting Goods Open, a PGA Champions Tour stop, will call En Joie home for three years beginning in July of this year. This is a tremendous win for our community. I would like to thank all of our legislators who have been supportive of En Joie and our decision to take over its management operations from Endicott. I would also like to thank Senator Libous for working with this administration on this effort and securing state funds which helped seal the deal. The En Joie golf course has been a contentious point for many months and I hope that is all behind us now. Barring any major natural disasters we should be in great shape at En Joie. In addition to the Dick's Sporting Goods Open, Mike Deuel, the Director of Golf says the number of leagues is way up, the number of tournaments is way up and the number of individual memberships is way up. I hope to be able to stand before you next year and report that the En Joie Golf Course has truly become an asset to Broome County.

Also on the sporting front, as you know, the Binghamton Senators have signed a letter of intent to stay at the Broome County Veterans Memorial Arena for the next five years. This deal which you will hopefully approve at your March meeting is good for the Senators, good for

hockey fans and good for Broome County taxpayers. We have a wonderful facility and we are proud to have the Senators be one of its prime tenants for the next five years and beyond. And just last Friday the Senators announced that Binghamton and the Broome County Veterans Memorial Arena would play host to the 2008 A-H-L All Star Game. This is truly an honor and we are excited to play host to this major sporting event. We are actively marketing the Arena and if you have seen any of the promotions lately you know that we are aggressively booking acts and getting people in the seats. The March schedule alone is tremendously gratifying and I want to thank Brian Hoffmann and all of the Arena staff for the work they are doing to keep the facility active and in great shape. We have not written off the possibility of partnering with a private management firm. As we mentioned before, we wanted to wait to finalize the deal with the Binghamton Senators before taking the next step. Right now we are analyzing our next step. Many things have changed since last summer and this is a move that requires careful study and consideration before moving forward. I promise to meet with you and discuss all of our options.

Last year was also a good year for our local economic development efforts. We have been moving forward aggressively on many fronts despite the fact that during last year's budget process Broome County lawmakers slashed the economic development budget by more than \$150,000 dollars. It has been a challenge but through this administration's leadership and its partnering with our economic development partners we forge ahead. I am pleased to report that never before have all of the economic development partners come together to share information and to work on initiatives as they are doing now. We may not always agree but we are talking and we are all on the same page, that this community must partner and come together to present one voice. A team concept is imperative in order to be successful in enticing our local companies to stay and grow and convincing outside companies to consider relocating to the Greater Binghamton area. Through our partnership with Jim DiMascio and the Greater Binghamton Coalition, also known as the G-B-C, we have two exciting initiatives to announce today. We are moving forward with a proposed economic development One Stop Shop and an incubator in Downtown Binghamton.

First I would like to talk about the incubator project which has gone through an evolution since we announced it as one of our projects. Initially we wanted to locate the incubator at the Broome Corporate Park. However, because at the time other parties seemed interested in the Corporate Park location for private interests, we switched our attention to Downtown Binghamton. I am pleased to announce today, we are in talks with the owners of the Bern Building to locate an incubator inside the building located on Court Street. We have a \$250,000 grant secured by Senators Clinton and Schumer and we will be dedicating this money to the incubator project. The incubator can house three start-up businesses and hopefully launch 3 successful, high technology enterprises. It is our hope that these businesses will graduate from the incubator and set up their manufacturing operations in the Greater Binghamton area creating high paying jobs for our local economy. We are also excited about contributing to the improvement of a Downtown Binghamton building. We hope it sparks even more redevelopment on the east end of the downtown area. I am also pleased to announce today that Senator Tom Libous has secured an additional \$250,000 grant from the state to assist with the establishment of the incubator and also help us underwrite a coordinated marketing effort for Greater Binghamton. Marketing Greater Binghamton to the rest of the country and world as "...ideally situated for a company's business, workforce and lifestyle," takes a lot of money. The money secured by Senator Libous will be used to deliver that message to targeted industries and to create and deliver that message so that it has the highest level of impact. The Senator shares our philosophy that creating jobs is the number one priority and I want to thank him for securing these funds for this effort.

Our effort to bring a One-Stop economic development center to Greater Binghamton is also making tremendous strides. I am happy to report that we are teaming up with our partners at the Greater Binghamton Coalition and the Greater Binghamton Chamber of Commerce to house the One Stop at the Chamber offices in the Metro Center in Downtown Binghamton. Our vision is to have agencies like the Chamber, the Greater Binghamton Coalition, the Broome County Industrial Development Agency and Southern Tier Opportunity Coalition, just to name a few, housed under one roof. Our economic development efforts would truly be coordinated efforts and they would truly represent a public-private partnership. The Metro Center is expected to undergo a major transformation in the near future and this One Stop will be at the hub of what is expected to be a major business and financial center. This is a perfect location for the purpose of a One-Stop.

All of our economic development strategies are based on the BC Plan which Broome County's previous County Executive and Legislature commissioned. They believed in the plan and this administration believes in the plan. We have updated parts of the BC Plan to reflect the changes that have occurred in our community since the BC Plan was authored in 2000, but the core messages remain the same. All of our economic development agencies must come together and partner as a team if we are to be successful. We have secured many successes already; the launch of the GreaterBinghamton.com web portal, an almost endless link to everything people and companies would want to know about Greater Binghamton. It is a tremendous resource and I encourage all of you to explore it. Through our initiatives, we convinced Senator Clinton we needed more venture capital. Last year the Senator held her first

Venture Capital Symposium in the region at Binghamton University. And we have a project team in place that includes representatives from all of the major economic development agencies in Broome County ready to leap into action if a prospective company wants to learn more about our area or if a local company is looking for some help with staying in business or looking to expand.

As you can see, we are all working together to promote Greater Binghamton but that is just not enough. We must also invest in ourselves. It has been the "investing" part that has been the biggest challenge. Sustainable funding is crucial to our success. We need funds to market our area, we need funds to leverage future grant monies, we need funds to redevelop brownfields and we need funds to take options out on properties that we feel can be developed to improve the overall economic environment of the Greater Binghamton area. The Greater Binghamton Coalition advocates that by increasing the Hotel/Motel tax and dedicating those funds to economic development and marketing we can move this community forward and become competitive with other regions when vying for new companies or looking to keep a local company and help it grow. Nobody wants to ever raise taxes but this is a tax that will not impact our local taxpayers and will, in the end, benefit them. The goal is to create jobs. Job growth leads to a spreading of the tax burden and that should be the number one goal of all of the elected leaders in this room. Successful communities across the United States are investing in themselves and their strategies are paying off. We have a strategy and we have a strong team of partners dedicated to carrying out that strategy. We just need sustainable funding. Some argue that we should just take it out of the county budget. We can do that but that means cuts in valuable services and I have not heard one person yet identify which valuable county service they are willing to sacrifice. And once again this is not "**sustainable**" funding. One year we can identify the funds, then the next year those same funds may have to pay for an unfunded mandate, skyrocketing fuel or some other unexpected cost. Our occupancy tax is currently at 3%. Every metropolitan area in New York State, of comparable size to Greater Binghamton, or larger, is at 5%. That is where the Greater Binghamton Coalition is proposing we move our local Hotel/Motel tax. We would be no higher than any of these communities and this tax would not impact a single Broome County taxpayer, unless they stay at a local hotel. Even then we are talking about a difference of less than \$2. And that is a small price to pay for a major investment in our future. I am anxious to discuss this more with you in the very near future. Our Broome County budget picture is solid but always a concern. We are about to head into the budget process again and while we are cautiously optimistic, we are also waiting to learn what the full impact of Governor Spitzer's and the New York Legislature's spending plan will be on our budget. We have made the numbers work two years in a row with tax rate increases coming in at less than the rate of inflation but this is never easy in light of skyrocketing health care costs, fuel costs and the ever increasing general operating expenses. But again we are optimistic.

I am also optimistic about Greater Binghamton's fiscal future because of local economic indicators which have not been this positive in more than a decade.

- o Our unemployment rate remains below the national and state averages.
- o From January 2005 to January 2006, the number of private sector jobs in the Greater Binghamton area increased by 1,000 jobs.
- o For the first time in four years, we are seeing substantial increases in manufacturing.
- o According to Gary Keith, a regional economist with M&T bank, the total manufacturing wages in the region rose by 5.4 percent in Greater Binghamton, versus 4.2 percent for the nation. These numbers point to a resurgence for a sector that has been in an extended period of retrenchment locally from 2001 to 2004.
- o Gary Keith also says that Greater Binghamton's economy is improving and is expected to continue a positive trend.
- o In addition, our consumer confidence is up nearly 8 points from the same period last year.
- o And our community which has not experienced much growth in the past decade is actually seeing not one but several housing developments either under construction or on the drawing board. This is very heartening and it is all excellent news but again we must remain focused because as we have all experienced, these trends can change in a moment's notice.

This administration's Shared Service and Consolidation initiatives are also moving forward. In 2006, through this administration's leadership and with the support of this legislative body, we finally consolidated the City of Binghamton's tax collection services with the County's Real Property Tax Department. This has been an overall smooth transition and it has been a positive for the city and the county. In 2006 this administration also unveiled a police consolidation proposal which we hope to be a starting point for further discussions on how local police department's can come together to work more efficiently and still provide the top level of safety and security for our residents. We are also involved in several conversations with municipalities about handling their labor relations and negotiations, similar to what we have done for the Village of Endicott these past two years. We educated the community about the role they can play in forcing their municipality to study the issue of dissolution. We were happy to see residents in Johnson City and Windsor get involved and get active in their communities' future. We are not looking to force any municipality to do anything. We are simply encouraging them to get serious about looking at the possibilities. Governor Spitzer and New York State are extremely supportive of communities taking these bold steps. We have been recognized on numerous occasions for leading the way in New York State on the issues of shared services and

consolidation. With the Governor's assistance through his "Commission on Local Government" and the Department of State's Shared Municipal Services Grant Program, we plan to continue pushing the dialogue on consolidation.

Right now I would like to talk about some major highlights from some of our more than 30 Broome County Departments and divisions. Not everything can be included unfortunately in this oral presentation but all of the departments accomplishments can be read about in the State of the County document. They are all printed at the back of the report.

- o At the Greater Binghamton Airport, we have entered the third and final phase of our reconstruction project. The parking lot improvements are expected to be completed later this year.

- o Delta Airlines in 2006 announced it was providing, for the first time ever, service between Binghamton and Atlanta.

- o And Delta has just made the extremely exciting announcement that starting this May, Delta will provide non-stop service between Greater Binghamton and J-F-K international airport.

- o Commissioner Carl Beardsley is continuing to work on airline options for Greater Binghamton customers and I want to thank him for all that he does.

- o This administration is working with our Office for Aging, Village of Deposit officials and our community partners on possibly building a senior and community center for the Village of Deposit. This is exciting and long overdue for the people of Eastern Broome.

- o Our BC Transit has improved its onboard technology and is now using cards and passes for all users. It is easier and more efficient. BC Transit has also initiated the purchase of six (6) new hybrid buses that will be made in New York State and powered with a battery source made by our local company, B-A-E. These purchases are being made with federal funds secured by Congressman Maurice Hinchey. We thank him for his support on this project, the Intermodal project and for all of his support for Broome County.

- o Our Information Technology Department undertook the redesign of our gobroomecounty website and the results are incredible. Jim Pery our webmaster and Chris Heide our Graphics Designer did the entire job in house. It was a cost effective way of accomplishing this tremendous task and the results are spectacular.

- o Kim McKinney's department is also about to undertake a major overhaul of our entire I-T system. Our systems, although in working order, are antiquated and can lead to inefficiencies. By overhauling our current systems we anticipate creating efficiencies that will allow employees to serve the public faster and better. This is a part of our administration's vision and is an exciting investment in our future.

- o Our Risk and Insurance Department spearheaded by Bob Murphy planned and implemented a consolidation of Third Party Administrators which handle our health claims and prescription drug claims. This single move resulted in an annual savings of at least \$250,000.

- o In the written report in the back of the State of the County document you will be able to see for yourself the extensive list of projects about to be undertaken by our Public Works Department. Besides the major projects we have already discussed, there are several other major capital projects getting underway in 2007:

- The Bevier Street Bridge project

- The Hooper Road Bridge project

- And after years of planning the Whitney Point Trail, through Henry Weissmann's leadership, will be started and hopefully completed this year.

- o We hope to have a very clear picture of the Grippen Park situation and the potential for another public ice rink somewhere in Broome County in the near future. There is still testing going on at Grippen Park but our hopes are to turn that former ice rink into a covered pavilion for all to use and possibly site a new ice rink somewhere else. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has given us nearly a million dollars to spend on this project and we already had almost a million dollars set aside in the capital program for improvements to the former Grippen Park Ice Rink. I feel strongly that this community still needs a public, affordable, ice rink for all children and adults. If we can find the right spot and partner with an interested municipality, I would still like to see this project become a reality.

I want to conclude by saying I am anxious to work with you our Broome County lawmakers. I want to congratulate Chairman Mark Whalen on his position and all of the positive changes he has brought to the office already. I look forward to working with all of our lawmakers and especially all of the new legislators. My office is here to help. My door is always open to all of you. Please do not be shy about stopping over. We have so many projects before us and we must work together to make them all happen and move Broome County and the entire Greater Binghamton region forward. I thank you all again for coming tonight. Broome County's future is bright and can be brighter if we all join forces and put the best interests of our community above all else.

A Motion was made by Mr. Shafer, seconded by Mr. Cleary, to adjourn the meeting. The meeting was adjourned at 6:45 p.m.