



# State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

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Office of the Broome County Executive  
Jason T. Garnar, Executive

**EMBARGOED until 5 PM, September 10, 2020**

## **2021 Budget Address**

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

This year my budget address is different than years past. As you may know I like to take my budget addresses and states of the county on the road to different parts of Broome County. I do this to highlight the amazing things that are happening right here in our community.

The fact that tonight I'm talking to you this way, virtually, through zoom, in order to protect people's health instead of us all being together, shows you what's going on and where we are right now in Broome County. In 2020 we have faced a new challenge unlike any we have faced before, COVID-19.

Last year I stood before you and said since I had been County Executive, six State of Emergencies had been declared due to massive snow storms, flooding and other emergencies. Never could I have guessed that this year we would be in the county's longest ever state of emergency, 180 days and counting.

COVID-19 shut down our schools, our businesses and put people's lives at risk. The state ordered us to stay in our homes and everything was shut down except the most essential services. People were out of work and our unemployment rate shot up. We have never seen anything like it

Very quickly we realized it was County Government that had to step up and respond to this pandemic. We were uniquely situated to take this head on with our Broome County Health Department, Office of Emergency Service and other departments. This year our 40+ departments and 2,000 county employees had to mobilize and step up like never before to help our community face perhaps its greatest public health threat ever. They found new ways to provide services virtually and took on new responsibilities to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

We opened the Emergency Operations Center at our Office of Emergency Services. We knew we would have to handle this like a natural disaster. Broome County employees have been battle tested before in fighting 500-year floods and historic snowstorms, and we knew in order to fight COVID we would have to operationalize the same way.

Our health department transformed into a team of contact tracers. Where there were once only two or three now we have dozens who are working long hours every day to keep you safe. We needed to have 100 contact tracers ready to go. We couldn't hire anybody, people were moved

out of their regular positions, we had to shift our employees and people are doing multiple jobs at once. They have made thousands of phone calls to close contacts, placed thousands of people into quarantine and the hard work of this team played a major role in stopping the spread of this virus and in doing so saved countless lives.

We also assisted businesses in getting their doors back open. The state made decisions on reopening, but counties were tasked with providing all the support our local businesses needed to get them back open. We took thousands of phone calls, held meetings to answer their questions and communicated with the state daily to advocate for our local businesses to get the answers they needed. Our County Fire Investigators are now compliance officers making sure our businesses are meeting state requirements so that they can stay open.

When schools closed back in March, we needed to make sure they would still be able to feed the kids. We brought in all the necessary stakeholders, working with BOCES Food Services to come up with a plan. To date we have served over a million meals to the kids who need them. For the last several months we have been working with our local school districts to safely reopen. Eighteen full time county employees are currently working with our schools as they reopen and work to keep our children safe and I'm happy to say that as our first schools open up today county employees along with school staff have done everything in our power to make this reopening safe for our kids.

Our Office for Aging employees transformed our senior centers. They were still providing critical services to our most vulnerable population, while also running a free daycare for county employees and children of essential workers at a time where schools were shut down. Broome County Transit offered free rides for months, implementing many new safety measures Our Office of Employment and Training found new ways to get people back to work, hosting a drive through job fair. Our Security team acquired and distributed over a million pieces of personal protective equipment. With the help of our Department of Public Works they operated a donation drop off center, collecting supplies at a time when a shortage in our community was having a huge impact on our hospitals. These efforts allowed our hospitals and nursing homes to care for people with the personal protective equipment they needed, and we were also able to get thousands of masks to our county residents that desperately needed them.

Our County employees stepped up. No one else could have done this in Broome County. We were the ones ready to go and our team went above and beyond. This is testament to the fact that we have invested our resources in the right way, always able to respond, no matter what the emergency. We can't stop these things from happening, but we can quickly respond, and we have the necessary infrastructure in place to save lives.

All this in addition to the regular services the county provides all year round. Fixing, maintaining and plowing more than 300 miles of roads, taking half a million calls to the 911 dispatch center, disposing of the county's garbage, recycling and hazardous materials, 2 million people visiting our 9 county parks with over 4,000 acres, we serve the thousands of veterans in Broome County providing services and helping them apply for benefits, plus the many other essential services we provide for Broome County residents.

A huge thank you to our County Employees who have worked around the clock, putting off their vacations, working nights, weekends and sacrificing time with their families, all to protect the people of Broome County. We cannot thank our employees enough for everything they do, especially this year.

A budget is an investment in people. It's an investment in services. Once again, my 2021 budget shows how we are here to serve you, our taxpayers and how we are committed to serving you even when faced with tremendous obstacles. My team is committed to continuing to provide these services in a fiscally responsible manner.

When I took office, my top priority was to improve Broome County's finances. Our last three budgets have prepared us for this pandemic with my administration working with the legislature. We built up our fund balance, growing it from \$250,000 to \$15 million. That's a huge safety net to help us deal with the issues we now have before us.

We have been fiscally responsible, working across party lines with the legislature, building good budgets, building up our fund balance, maintaining our A+ plus bond rating and getting off the fiscally stressed list. Now we are faced with something unprecedented. Like every other county, every other local government, COVID-19 has devastated our finances.

Businesses shut down like they never have been before, throwing off our revenue including everything you can think of like loss of sales tax revenue, loss of casino revenue and people not staying in our hotels. That is a problem for 2020, one that we are working hand in hand with the legislature to fix as we face a multi-million-dollar shortfall because of COVID-19.

We took immediate action to address this shortfall, freezing all hiring, running bare bones. We have more than 200 positions currently open and 70 employees took our voluntary furlough offer. At one point we were running County Government with over 300 positions unfilled. We scrutinized every single purchase made and still we were able to provide the services residents needed and fight the pandemic.

For months we have been advocating for the federal government to help us, just like the federal government helps in any natural disaster. We are asking in the greatest time of need for help to the workers on the frontlines, for them to support the same people who have been in the trenches fighting COVID since day one.

We have waited long enough for relief from the federal government and we have come up with our own plan. We are increasing our short-term debt capacity to deal with our budget shortfall this year and have factored into our 2021 budget how we will pay it back over the coming years. In 2021 we will continue our hiring freeze and the cost cutting measures we have taken.

We asked our department heads to come up with a basic, no frills budget for 2021 and they exceeded our expectations and delivered. As a result, tonight for the third straight year I am proposing a tax cut in Broome County. This is the first time in nearly two decades that this has happened. My 2021 budget continues to provide the services you depend on and many initiatives that we have announced.

Soon we will be breaking ground on a Conklin Community Center that will provide a flood shelter for area residents and a day care to address a critical childcare need. Construction on our brand-new veteran's complex is underway, a one stop shop to take care of our veterans, and it will be completed in 2021. We are again investing money into fixing our roads next year. This year we did work on 25 miles of roadway and we will continue to address our critical infrastructure needs. Our new communications network will come online next spring, benefitting our first responders and making every single person in Broome County safer by increasing radio coverage and response time.

Investments in public safety have been critical this year, we have our renovated 911 center and brand-new emergency services facility, which has played a big role in distributing personal protective equipment in Broome County. Public safety is so important, now more than ever and what set us up as the leader in the response to this pandemic. That's why we are adding two new positions in our Office of Emergency Services. The new Emergency Management Assistance Coordinator will oversee the emergency management division and support our ongoing COVID response. They will support training exercises, emergency management planning and emergency response.

We are also adding a School Safety Program Coordinator to oversee our school bus stop arm camera program, a program that will save lives in Broome County. We are one of the first counties to launch this program in NY State and are committed to working with our districts to add cameras to the buses to catch anyone who passes illegally and threatens the lives of our students.

These are unprecedented times as we are leading the fight in the COVID-19 pandemic. The 200,000 residents in Broome County depend on us now more than ever and I am committed in my budget to continue to provide the support that you, our constituents need. We must protect lives and reopen the economy in a fiscally responsible way. None of this would be possible without the support of the County Legislature. Thank you for working with me and for helping us get through this challenging year.

I look forward to continuing to work with the Legislature as we go through the budget process and answering questions, being open and transparent and adopting this budget to protect our taxpayers. The budget plan I present to you tonight will move us in the right direction, keep the services that you depend on, fight COVID-19 and will get us back on track after an extremely difficult year. We are going to come out of this better, stronger, a united Broome County.

Thank you and God Bless.