

2014
Message to the Legislature
Ed Day
Rockland County Executive

Good evening Chairman Wolfe and ladies and gentlemen of the Rockland County Legislature. Congratulations, Legislator Wolfe, on being selected to serve as Chairman. I look forward to working together for the people of Rockland County.

Good evening also to our distinguished guests, family, friends and fellow Rockland County residents, many of whom are watching from home tonight.

It's an honor and a privilege to serve as your County Executive. I thank God, each and every day, for the opportunity that has been provided to me to serve you and all the people of Rockland County.

I stand before you tonight to report on the condition of our county and to outline a focused agenda for the months to come.

So, you ask, "What is the state of Rockland County?" I've used the word "crisis." Others have used "damaged," "bankrupt" and "dysfunctional" to sum-up our government. Each of these terms is spot-on... 100-percent accurate.

We all know you can't solve a problem if you refuse to acknowledge it. In our case, Rockland County's problems are impossible to ignore. We face serious challenges.

And, it's important to note... we didn't get here overnight. Our bad finances and poor financial decisions of the past will take time to clean up. As I said in my inaugural message on New Year's Day, "This is a journey, not a quick trip."

I want to reassure you... and, each resident of Rockland County that we are focused every day on putting the county's fiscal house back in order. We will blaze our own path to a healthy future by making hard choices. We must never return to the irresponsible budgeting practices of the past... and, we won't. This I promise.

Tonight, I bring to you a bold plan of action focusing specifically on three goals:

- First... stop the bleeding. By restoring proper budgeting practices and insisting on strict fiscal discipline, we can - and, WE WILL - stabilize our finances.
- Second... job creation and economic growth. We must expand opportunity for Rockland's families and Rockland's businesses, large and small.
- Third... we must 'preserve' Rockland County. For our families today and for those who come later. Let us work together for the common good of our people. Let us return a sense of 'community' to our neighborhoods, from Suffern to Sparkill, from Tomkins Cove to Tappan.

Any honest assessment would suggest we have a lot of work to do when it comes to money. In particular, I reference our on-going efforts to chip-away at a projected, unaudited budget deficit of 145-million dollars - and growing.

Most recent attention has focused on the sale of the Summit Park complex in Pomona and the 96-million dollar deficit bond, secured just last week, with the approval and welcomed oversight of the state Comptroller's Office.

About 15-percent of every homeowner's average County property tax bill has traditionally gone to the hospital and nursing home. The successful sale of Summit Park and the transfer of the Mental Health Unit to Nyack Hospital will save us millions, while continuing to provide improved services to our residents.

As for the bond, the 96-million provides the cash necessary to pay our bills and also pay down a portion of the deficit.

Both of these moves are critical in our fundamental economic realignment for Rockland County. But, "silver bullets," they are not

The sale of Summit Park provides one-time revenue. And, the bond? We need to pay back 96-million dollars. That money is not a gift!

While these efforts are a 'good beginning,' they do not solve our problem of spending too much money.

Simply put, the sale of the hospital and the bond will buy us extremely limited time to implement a series of aggressive changes that will make us more efficient.

In order to make up the kinds of savings we need over several years, we're looking at a "total makeover" of Rockland County government, including the restructuring of departments, agencies and salaries.

In the County Executive's Office, my administration was the first to face the paring knife. On day one, I abolished six positions and transferred one to another department, saving taxpayers tens of thousands of dollars. These personnel changes amount to a 10-percent reduction in my payroll. I expect the same due diligence from each department.

With these savings in mind, I created five new posts - complete with updated job descriptions - each reflecting their true responsibilities to maximize management and direction.

I've surrounded myself with highly skilled professionals without political baggage. They live here. They want to STAY living here. They want a better tomorrow. These are talented and dedicated people who give a damn... just like me. It's just unfortunate I couldn't pay them their professional value. Each member of my team is doing more with less.

This transformation will continue in each county department. I've put a stop to routine hirings and unnecessary overtime. We're reviewing all contracts. Over the next several months, we will radically redesign our governmental structures and operations, right-size our salaries, restore integrity and increase performance in this organization. We will empower department heads. We will give employees a voice. We will restore the pride in working for this county. We will change the culture.

It's simply unacceptable for me to hear time and again as I travel throughout Rockland's five towns that we've had a government of dysfunction. The old way of doing things wasn't working. We get paid to deliver services to the people. We must... and, we WILL deliver.

As I mentioned before, the first step to a fiscally-healthy county is a sound diagnosis of our condition.

When I took office last month, I knew it was bad. After just a day or two on the job, it quickly became obvious that our money problems are far more complex - and more dire - than we'd imagined.

So, tonight, I'm pleased to announce that Rockland's former Commissioner of Budget and Finance, Robert Bergman, has agreed to join my team as 'acting' County Auditor.

This "watchdog" position is part of the county charter, but has been vacant for several years.

Bob's vast experience with budgets and cash management will help us realize the true extent of the crisis and rapidly respond to it. His stellar record with the county means there's no learning curve.

Bob is here to "look under the hood." He's already started to assess the finances of all county departments, agencies, boards and commissions. His review will focus on expenditures, debt, short-term and long-term liabilities, the condition of the tax base, financial policies and practices and transparency.

If Bob finds evidence of financial wrongdoing, it will be reported.

He comes to us in a less-than-full-time capacity. Bob Bergman is a tremendous value to the taxpayers, and I am thrilled to have him on my team.

I promise that we will get to the bottom of our financial ills. No matter how bleak the picture is, I'll be honest. Anyone who knows me... knows I don't wear 'rose-colored glasses.' Our new 'acting' County Auditor is a major step toward finding the truth and building long-term solutions to our money problems.

By now, most of you know that Novartis will close operations in Rockland County. We've been assured that the decision to pull-out of Suffern is a direct result of 'patent expiration' of one of the company's key medications. The move to leave Ramapo is in no way reflective of local tax rates, quality of life issues or any other matter.

The departure of Novartis is reality. I believe it may also be an opportunity. As we work with Novartis, the Rockland Economic Development Corporation and others to market the site, we're being pushed to consider strategies for stimulating our economy to encourage job creation.

We're also close to hiring a Director of Economic Development, at NO additional cost to the taxpayers. This key position in my

administration will be charged with making sure the world knows Rockland County is "open for business." Along with coordinating all economic growth efforts, this skilled professional will craft job development plans and act as our "ambassador" as we compete in the global real estate marketplace against the other regions and states.

But, if we fail to hold the line on taxes now and reduce the cost of living in the future, businesses will not come.

We already know taxes are too high, and a high cost of living is detrimental to economic growth. It's time for a straightforward conversation about property tax relief.

My team is already looking at ways to partner with our state and federal leaders and school districts to stem the tide of rising taxes. We'll partner with the Legislature to help slow the rate of growth in county spending in order to achieve real property tax relief.

At the state level, I will do everything in my power as County Executive to keep-up the fight against the onslaught of state-mandated programs using county tax dollars. Again, the Governor's "State of the State" message last month included little mention of mandate relief, which is the most urgent problem facing county leaders and schools across the state.

Over the next few months, you'll hear more about a new coalition of Lower Hudson Valley county executives. I'm sure you've heard the saying, "There's power in numbers." In this case, we're looking to establish a "united front" behind the most pressing issues facing our region, from jobs and taxes to the new Tappan Zee Bridge.

Join me in the fight for responsible and meaningful tax relief for Rockland County. Continue to tell our state representatives that unfunded state mandates are counterproductive and UNFAIR!

Perhaps the heaviest lift for my Administration will be the restoration of proper budgeting practices and insisting on strict fiscal discipline within our own organization. Going forward, we must measure all tax and spending decisions through the lens of a struggling county government.

The people of Rockland County deserve a balanced budget that works, a budget that focuses on the essentials, a budget that reflects the ideals of the county's hard-working taxpayers, and together we will deliver it.

All too often, the mention of Rockland County is followed with news articles and social media postings focusing on government corruption. Many of our neighbors have lost trust. Companies considering locating here are looking elsewhere. Government in Rockland County has had a credibility issue. This culture will NOT continue.

I will clean-up this government. Malfeasance and wrongdoing will be rooted out.

The headlines are already starting to change. Rockland County Government is moving to a place of integrity and performance... a place where our dedicated managers and workers want to be. There is hope, I promise.

One way we're increasing transparency is a major expansion of our social media outreach. Since taking office on January first, we've launched official Rockland County Government "Facebook" and "Twitter" sites. We're using the latest technology to bring residents and visitors better and faster information about county services and events, while also providing a valuable forum for people to express their needs and concerns.

We're also using social media to "open the windows" of county government. Now, more than ever before, we must communicate with our public. We need to show-off the 'good things' our hard-working, dedicated people are doing. If you work here, you will be valued.

Our growth in social media is part of a larger marketing effort. It's time for our residents to know this organization is delivering the services they're paying for. In the next few weeks, look for a re-designed Rockland County website, incorporating more photos, more graphics and direct links to our social media. Let's celebrate all that we do... because we do A LOT of great things!

It'd like to share a few other high points from our first month in office.

- The Transportation Department had a successful rollout of high-tech, electronic fareboxes on all Transport of Rockland and TAPPAN ZEE Express buses. The technology enables the county to more efficiently collect fares and generate data on ridership.
- The Department of Social Services, the District Attorney and the Office of Fire and Emergency Services continue to partner in the battle against fraud and abuse of our public benefits systems. Since the start of the year, our investigators have uncovered thousands in stolen funds, designed to help the neediest in our

communities. Let me be clear: anyone accused of "gaming" the system will be aggressively pursued and vigorously prosecuted. Watch for news of additional fraud crackdowns by DSS and the D.A. Their relentless efforts will continue with my 'unqualified support.'

- Our dedicated Highway Department staff deserves high praise. Most of us have spent the winter shoveling our driveways and scraping the ice from our windshields. The Highway Department team has spent the past five weeks pre-treating, scraping, plowing and salting more than 160 miles of blacktop through each and every snowstorm, ice storm and "Polar Vortex." These hard-working crews have kept our county moving safely... round-the-clock... in all weather conditions and temperatures. Now, it's time to fill the potholes. Thank you for all you do!

The people of Rockland County demand a good government and expect the men and women serving in this organization to put aside their differences and come together to make good public policy.

To make certain we remain true to our mission, I've requested that members of my transition team review our progress later this year. This key group of trusted advisors has volunteered to assess our operations, goals and accomplishments and make recommendations on an "as needed" basis.

We will continue to work cooperatively with our legislators here in Rockland, and our lawmakers at the state and federal level. Assembly members Zebrowski, Skoufis and Jaffee ... Senators Carlucci and Larkin... please help us get the funding and the laws we need to make Rockland County a better place.

While financing will be a challenge, I will foster positive relationships with the non-profits and contract agencies, all of which educate and deliver vital services to so many in our communities.

Of course, the single most important partnership is with the people of Rockland County. To that end, we will have our new Director of Community Relations in place within a few days, with the charge of outreach to each and every corner of this great county. Know that I will personally be there each and every step of the way, and that I have not forgotten the immediate need to find a solution to East Ramapo School District crisis.

As I drove north on 9-W over Hook Mountain last week, I marveled at the snow-covered beauty of our county. The flora and fauna of the place we call home is unrivaled. This is why I will continue the fight to 'preserve' the character of our communities, from Jones Point in the north, to Sloatsburg in the West and Tappan in the South.

As I pledged during the campaign, my Administration will push back against overdevelopment and downzoning. Accordingly, our County Attorney and Planning Board are reviewing previous applications submitted under the GML, including the Patrick Farm development and the proposed poultry slaughterhouse. When it comes to appropriate land use and preservation, I will not waver in any way. Here's the bottom line: responsible land use and smart growth is a major driving force for economic success. Going forward, let's work together to keep Rockland County "a gem" in the region for a better tomorrow.

And while we are thinking of a better tomorrow, I want to recognize a few special guests tonight:

It's been two years since West Haverstraw Volunteer Firefighter Jerry Knapp was seriously injured in a natural gas explosion. Knapp and his partner Ken Patterson were at the front door of 52 Zarriello Lane when the blast blew them 35 feet and turned the condominium into a pile of rubble.

The firefighters were knocking on doors in the complex as part of a precautionary evacuation. Their heroic actions saved countless lives that day.

Since then, Jerry has been on a crusade to make sure the same type of incident doesn't happen again. He's spent countless hours researching utility company and first responder protocols. He's pored over operational plans, legal documents and communications transcripts. What he found is disturbing: substantial weaknesses in the response plans and training procedures used by utility companies and fire departments.

Through his dogged research, Jerry has drafted a series of positive recommendations to address serious issues. He's urging the state Public Service Commission and the state Office of Fire Prevention and Control to use his work as a starting point to improve training on a statewide level.

Here in Rockland County, Jerry designed and teaches a course for first responders focused on natural gas emergencies.

Last year, fire departments in Rockland County responded to 500 gas emergencies. Jerry's dedication to protecting the lives of his brother and sister firefighters and fellow citizens will prevent future tragedies. Tonight, we salute your efforts.

Skye Maisel of New City spent part of her December school break helping the less fortunate in California. The ninth-grader at Clarkstown North High School joined fellow teens from all across New York to volunteer in distressed areas of Los Angeles, as part of 'Young Judaea's' weeklong "Alternative Winter Break."

Skye put-in long hours at a homeless shelter in Hollywood, even planning a holiday party for many of the families living there. She also joined in organizing and restocking food donations at the Los Angeles Regional Food Bank.

Teenagers often grab headlines for the wrong reasons. In Skye's case, she made news for the RIGHT reasons. This young woman represents the majority of our local youth and the future of this county.

We want teens to be responsible, caring, productive citizens. We need to make sure they have experience today with civic engagement and character building.

Skye returned from the West Coast more committed and better equipped to offer service where it is most needed. By committing to personal growth and developing a sense of building community, she is a role model to young men and women. Skye is most deserving of special recognition and I know she will continue to inspire others who also want to serve our nation and our community.

I am both heartened and strengthened by the ever-rising sense of hope and belief I've heard from so many of you during these past few weeks. Believe in that growing sense of hope because we are a community with a shared vision and direction. Together, we will soar to new heights.

So tonight, I ask you to join me as we restore confidence, predictability and stability to our finances, set the stage for unprecedented economic growth and keep Rockland County's landscape free from abuse.

Let us 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.

Let us recognize our military personnel and our veterans who work to preserve our freedom and our liberty each day. No matter where are you stationed tonight, you are in our thoughts and prayers.

Let's continue our hard work to make Rockland County an even better place to live, to work and to raise a family.

Thank you and good night.

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