

The State of the County Speech

Oneida County Executive

Anthony J. Picente Jr.

March 10, 2011

Before we begin, I want to ask all of you here today to take a moment of silence in the name of our military families and the men and women who are overseas in the service of our country.

This is the fifth time I have stood before you as your County Executive and I have been honored and proud to serve this county. I would like to thank the Mohawk Valley Chamber of Commerce for again hosting this event. I thank Chamber Chairman Sam Berardino, the Board of Directors and the entire chamber membership for their support. Thanks to Chamber President Frank Elias and his staff for their work in putting this together. The Chamber is the connector between business and the community and I appreciate all they do for this area.

I would also like to thank my partners in Government, first the Oneida County Board of Legislators led by Chairman Gerry Fiorini, and those members who are here with us this morning. My fellow elected officials on the County level, the District Attorney, Sheriff, Comptroller and County Clerk. Thanks to the Mayors of our cities, and our Town Supervisors and Village Mayors who are in attendance. Thanks also to my Executive Staff and the County Department Heads and employees who work tirelessly for this government throughout the year.

And a special thanks go to my family, my wife Eleanor and my sisters who are here today and throughout the year providing me the encouragement and support that helps me through difficult days.

Also joining us today are people who represent the ultimate in public service. First, I am proud to recognize a group of people who will soon be deployed to Afghanistan. These men and women from the 2nd Battalion 108th Infantry of the NY National Guard Unit in Utica are among the many that defend our freedom and protect our liberty. We welcome them here today and wish them Godspeed as they prepare for their duty abroad. Please join me in saluting Major Sean Flynn and Captain Rick Redmond and members of the combat team.

Those in public service wear many uniforms and for those who protect our cities and this county the work doesn't stop when the uniform comes off. On a sunny day last May one of our community's finest was on his day off when what was otherwise just a routine trip to an AT&T

store turned into a life saving event. When a disgruntled customer opened fire in a fit of rage, off duty Rome Police officer Donald Moore reacted quickly to defend the people in the store, stopping the shooter and in the process saving several lives.

His actions have been justifiably recognized locally and statewide. But now we have the opportunity to give him the national recognition he deserves as he has been nominated for America's Most Wanted All Star for 2011. Please go online and vote for him and please join me in thanking Officer Moore who joins us here today.

But we are blessed with many heroes.

Just two months later when armed men robbed the NBT bank in Rome and fled the scene, Deputy Sheriff Mike Burger was on duty. Deputy Burger pulled over the suspect vehicle, one man was apprehended on the spot and the other fled into the woods but not before firing upon Deputy Burger leaving him injured in the exchange. Fortunately, the suspect was later apprehended without further incident. No one knows for sure what would have happened but we know Deputy Burger's brave actions saved lives.

Mike could not be with us today but please join me in thanking him for his tremendous service and sacrifice in the line of duty.

I start with this today because these are the people of public service, real service and real sacrifice. Although not everyone who works in the public sector day in and day out experiences what these people have, the services provided by all keep a community moving. They are there to provide public safety for a nation and neighborhoods. They are there to provide the services needed for the health and welfare of those in need. And they are there to keep the roads clear and safe. I appreciate all of them and am proud to serve with them. And I recognize that they are not the cause of the financial straits that we have been put in. And while there has been much discourse across the nation regarding public employees, the service and dedication of our public employees is unequalled.

But, they can and must be part of the solution. And while I do not subscribe to the belief that their right to collective bargaining should be stripped, I know the current benefit levels are unsustainable for any level of government. That is why I tried to work with the unions to avoid the layoffs that occurred at the end of last year. I did so having a record of reducing costs without putting people out of work. In my four years as County Executive I reduced the county workforce by 214, saving \$9,586,666 for our taxpayers. The complement of employees in County Government is at the lowest in 30 years. I have reduced spending, something that everyone talked about but hadn't done. I have streamlined and consolidated and we continue to do so.

And that has been my message to the State of New York along with several other County Executives from across the state. You can cut spending. You can reduce your workforce. You can consolidate agencies and functions. You don't need committees or work groups to get it done. You simply need the willingness to make the tough decisions and move on them.

Let me tell you what we've been doing and how, because the whole story does not always get told in news clips or articles and people need to know what their government is doing and has done to make this a better place to live.

For years people have talked about 911 consolidation. In 2008 in this room at this address I called for action on this. Last year we completed phase one, the transfer of New Hartford and by the end of this year we will accomplish the second and final piece, the transfer of Utica. In 20 years of providing emergency services, we have learned how to maximize efficiency and help those who call us in crisis. All of this is being done at a dramatic cost savings to two of our largest municipalities. There has been a cost increase as a result of the necessary growth in the Emergency Services Department of County government and even with this increase the savings to our local governments has still remained dramatic. We have taken a path of finding the best role for County government and, in this area, it is without a doubt the best fit for everyone. Service always comes with a cost. I firmly believe that the cost of this service should be shared by the users. I have requested and continue to lobby for an increase in the money that we receive from those who use cell phones. Use of cell phones increases demand, but those users do not pay for the system. It's unfair. I say time and time again, we cannot continue to look at property taxes as the only way to pay for all of our services. We need the cell phone fee to be enacted and I will continue to fight for the necessary legislation. We consolidated. We saved money. Now we need cooperation.

When I took office in 2007, a sewer consent order was waiting for me over a problem that for years no one wanted to confront. I faced it head on. I brought our communities and the public together and we are developing a solution that will be good for the environment and good for our towns and villages by allowing positive community development. To date, we have met every deadline and complied with every single requirement. We have submitted our plan four days ahead of schedule and we are now working with the DEC engineers and waiting for their acceptance of the plan. We are also waiting for their acceptance of our requested extension of time. We need time to fix this problem. We need time to find the funding. We need the DEC to give us this time.

The investment in Griffiss International Airport continues because it is an asset that can stimulate economic growth while providing a service for general aviation and local businesses. When the economic downturn hit our main tenant, we didn't panic or give space away just for the sake of filling a building. We worked with Mohawk Valley EDGE to seek new opportunities. And one day I received an e-mail from a gentleman in Canada inquiring about our airport and our community. I called him and we talked for well over an hour. Today, his company, Premier Aviation has a new location in the United States right here in Rome, New York. Premier currently employs around 100 and is growing each day.

At the same time, a company that had a small presence at the airport previously, Mid Air USA expanded its operation and is now occupying a large hangar with close to 100 employees and they too are growing. With these two MRO tenants we have reached full occupancy of our large hangar space and we are fulfilling the planned mission of our airport in this area.

This past year we opened new County Offices in the City of Rome to complete a pledge I made in this address three years ago to improve conditions for our clients and our employees. The consolidated offices of 300 and 301 West Dominick St. place all the main functions of our Rome operations in a centralized location. This year the exterior renovations will be completed and, with input and direction from the City of Rome Planning Department, the exterior will fit in with the City's downtown landscape.

We know that 2010 was a difficult year for our local employers. This year's January announcement of McDonough Hardwoods rebuilding is a sign, I believe, that some of our local businesses will be able to grow. We will continue to offer every possible bit of assistance.

Agriculture is Oneida County's top industry and remains a major priority. Through our support for Cornell Cooperative Extension, we provide assistance to farmers and through our recent work assisting NY Custom Processing to secure a \$220,000 grant, 25 jobs and a resource for our beef and dairy farmers will be created.

I mention growth in a time of challenges because we need to be aggressive in looking for our growth opportunities. The opportunities that will come as the state and national economy revives throughout this decade are not preordained to go to any one place. Communities that have invested their time and effort in these difficult years; regions that have built new, vibrant partnerships; and people who have approached the problems of these times with a can-do spirit will be the ones who will connect with and earn these opportunities..

Opportunity only comes when the hard work is done, when the effort to move against the tide has been accomplished, and when a long-term vision replaces a short-term focus.

It comes down to attitude. I can tell you in great detail about all the obstacles in our way. I don't work that way. Barriers exist, and we overcome them by doing the hard, in-the-trenches work that gets us past the barriers. My goal today is the same as it was when I took this office: To lead the people of Oneida County by making county government a problem-solver and catalyst for positive change.

Let me take a quick run through some of our departments – there is a more comprehensive list included as an addendum to the address – because you need to know what your government is doing:

This year, I want to highlight an aspect of the Department of Social Services that gets very little attention – its efforts to help our county fiscally, and more.

For example, in 2010, Accounting intercepted and diverted \$210,282 in landlord rent checks for delinquent property taxes to the Finance Department.

Our DSS Administration eliminated and reduced a number of contracts which resulted in a savings of approximately \$529,143 through out the year.

Medicaid recoveries totaled over a million dollars for the eleventh year in a row.

The Resource Department recovered \$6,424,734.96 through the various programs administered through the Department of Social Services.

And a success story that has the most significance to those who are impacted the greatest by the “deadbeat dads”; our Oneida County Child Support Division increased collections in 2010 to \$18,323,137!

Yes, DSS works to help those in need, but we are ever mindful of the needs of that very vital group of people who participate in and support our programs.

The Office for the Aging Implemented a partnership with the Veterans Health Care Administration to provide consumer directed care to Oneida County Veterans at risk of nursing home placement, and provide them with home and community based services. It's about giving people a better life.

We brought government to the people in a new way by relocating the WIC office to 617 South Street in Utica. This new space is in a newly constructed building with ample parking, increased accessibility and expanded office space. We are able to provide better service for the many people who need this program, which operates with federal funds.

We found new ways to meet the needs of the youth in our County. In the Office of Workforce Development, funding for the Summer Youth Employment Program was cut in half, but Director David Mathis found a way to serve almost as many youth as the Department would have with normal funding levels. The Oneida County College Student Corps Internship Program now has developed such strong support from employers that every year, it becomes a greater and greater success story. The College Corps, thanks to support from the County Board of Legislators, is back for another summer and is accepting applications now.

Under the leadership of Jack Williams, a man we all remember with great fondness, our Department of Public Works became a leader in inter-municipal collaboration. Commissioner Dennis Davis has taken Jack's legacy and moved it forward with tremendous energy, Dennis now chairs the Shared Services Committee, which brings Town and Village Supervisors and Highway Superintendents along with Utica and Rome together to look at any possible realignment of services that saves money. This group has already achieved savings by increasing the contracting of ditching and mowing services conducted on behalf of the County. This effort proves the point that cooperation is not about creating bigger government, but smarter government and better services.

District Attorney Scott McNamara last year not only helped us find revenue, he helped collect some overdue fines. Under Operation Personal Accountability, the DA's office aggressively sought repayment of DWI fines that had never been paid. Of about \$750,000 in unpaid fines on the books, about \$145,000 was recovered in 2010 alone, with more on the way. This program not only provides needed revenue, it enhances the messages that justice will not be evaded in Oneida County.

There is a single thread that runs through all of these departmental items – County Government takes a results-oriented approach to solving problems. We get things done – we get them done right, and we keep moving forward.

We can no longer provide government services the way it has always been done. To that end, I plan to convene a summit-style meeting on libraries to discuss long-range support for these vital community facilities. Right now, we have funding coming from cities, towns, villages and the county. Some libraries, such as Utica, Rome and Whitesboro, have imposed taxes. As budgets get tighter and this discretionary money is cut, we need to develop a long-range strategy to create a sustainable way of funding libraries. They are important assets in every community, and their leaders need to know the level of public funding well in advance, not just at the last minute. Likewise, governments cannot all be offering general purpose aid without a clear picture of how

that aid is spent. There has to be a better way. There has to be a plan. My goal is to shape that plan for our libraries.

We have 3 cities, 26 towns and 19 villages in this county. We have 16 school districts and 48 volunteer fire departments. Until and unless consolidation actually occurs, we have options open to all of us to find other ways to achieve smarter, leaner, more efficient and less costly government. We want this to be the year we make inroads at all levels to reduce the costs of day to day administrative functions at every level. County Government is providing leadership. Anne Hartman, Oneida County's Director of Central Services who has squeezed savings out of her department in her very first year here, and Mello Testa our Purchasing Director who's selling of surplus property on e-bay is a heralded success, will meet with any community or school district to look at all of the business functions of government to see what can be done to save money, from purchasing to copying and printing or even handling the mail. I think this is an exciting way we can take the County's commitment to promoting efficient, effective government to a new level.

Many years ago, County Government moved offices into Union Station, a step that not only brought tremendous activity to this landmark, but helped spark new attention to the Bagg's Square area. There is a huge wing – known as the REA wing – that extends from Union station to the east along the tracks. We have been working internally for years now on the utilization of this part of the building. I believe this space can be the centerpiece of new development, including a seasonal home for the Farmers Market as well as some possible four season retail or office space. The plan requires some demolition of existing properties, and is by no means cast in stone. But as we have discussed this internally, I believe that it is the right direction in which we should move, and we will be stepping up our activity on this project with a goal of getting federal grants that can help support the transformation of a historic but neglected building into one more piece of what can be a truly vibrant downtown Utica if we dream a little – and work a lot.

I've always held that the investments made in our airport at Griffiss keeps us in a position to move on opportunities as they arise. Such a moment is here now and it involves using Griffiss Airfield as the home base for the long-term training of the first squadron of F-35 fighter jets – the newest fighter plane developed for our military. We learned that the Armed Forces are looking for a testing site that could house and support 18 planes and 150 to 200 people. All of this could be several years away as the plane is still in construction; but I have sent letters to our congressional delegation seeking their assistance in being designated as the home base for this project.

Maximizing the future of Griffiss is one of the centerpieces of my agenda for what we need from Washington. However we still need federal assistance with the funding of our sewer repairs and other local issues such as the Marcy Nano Center land development. Congressman Richard Hanna has been engaged and is working with us on these and other issues vital to this region.

Closer to home, in Albany, my agenda is to protect taxpayers. This year's state budget poses a unique opportunity for counties. The state is very close to enacting a law to cap local property taxes. That's a great concept, if done right. If Oneida County – and all counties – can be freed from the mandates imposed by state government and the annual cost increases or revenue

decreases that accompany these mandates, we can not only hold county property taxes within the levels proposed by the cap, we can even move them lower.

Here's the problem. Mandates must be eliminated as a first step to capping property taxes, not as an afterthought. Let's just take a simple fiscal example. Under the current system, my 2012 county budget will be required to add about \$2 million to cover annual 3% Medicaid cost increases. A 2% property tax increase raises \$1.3 million. If this mandate stays in place, but the state also tells me I can't raise taxes as much as they raised my mandate, then we will have fiscal chaos.

And let me go another step further. If the tax cap is passed and signed into law I will immediately call for discussion on the sales tax distribution formula for this county. Make no mistake; this county government cannot sustain itself should a cap be enacted without reform. At that time, unless bold steps are taken to fairly disperse revenue for essential services, County government will be reduced to nothing more than the functions of Public Assistance and operating a jail. It's that simple.

I am very concerned about this because so much of our work has been to make the fiscal state of Oneida County as strong as it now is. Oneida County last year had its bond rating increased in a fiscal environment when state and local governments are considered weak by many analysts. In 2010, our sales tax collections rose by \$1.2 million, and we are projecting yet another operating surplus that shows how well we live within our means.

It's too soon to say, but we believe that the change in tax collections at the Turning Stone is a factor in this, but there also a general trend of higher numbers in 2010. We can be optimistic, but also cautious.

One very clear and positive change as it relates to Turning Stone is the increase in bed tax revenue. The Oneida County Convention and Visitors Bureau will be setting up a fund for use as grants that support events that enrich the community life of our region – from Utica Monday Nite to the Remsen Barn Festival, to community events that have regional followings and make the small-town quality of life in Oneida County second to none.

And, in reference to the Oneida Indian Nation, I will continue to look for a solution between our government and the largest employer in Central New York, to create a future that is fair and equitable for all taxpayers.

The State of Oneida County is this: We took a hard punch from the economy, and we're still standing. Oneida County remains vibrant as we fight to attract new economic opportunity, as we question long-held assumptions in order to provide services that meet expanding needs at levels taxpayers can afford, and as we face challenges head-on, it really comes down to one essential strategy...never give up.

So in closing I present one challenge to you as you leave here today. When people tell you that it can't happen here, don't let them get away with it. Tell them it can happen here and tell that to those who you do business with wherever they are. You are the people that keep this county, this region running. We know that. As the saying goes, if we do not believe in ourselves, who will?

Whatever the challenges are, I can promise you one thing. I will confront them, give you the facts as they are, work with you to find solutions, bring partners and professionals together, and lead the way without ever surrendering the vision I have for Oneida County. That's not some new 2011 policy. That's what we have done in County Government every single day since the day I took this job, and what I will continue to do because that's my commitment to the people of this county.

The future calls us to go beyond our best. I'm up for that challenge; County Government is ready for that challenge. Join us, and let this year be the year we reach the full potential of this wonderful community of Oneida County.