STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

Robert P. Astorino, County Executive
April 22, 2010

Westchester gov.com

State of the County

Let me start by welcoming everyone here in the chamber.

To Chairman Jenkins,

To Majority Leader Abinanti and Minority Leader Maisano,

And to all the members of the Westchester County Board of Legislators, thank you for inviting me to your chamber to deliver my first State of the County address.

I would like to acknowledge some people here with us tonight.

- The Honorable Alan Scheinkman, the Administrative Judge for the 9th Judicial District.
- District Attorney Janet DiFiore.
- County Clerk Tim Idoni
- And all the other elected officials and county employees here tonight.

I would also like to acknowledge my family:

My wife, Sheila, my mom, and my dad.

Missing tonight are my three kids: Sean, Kiley Rose and Ashlin Grace.

You may remember them from the inauguration.

Because this is an evening event and the kids are so young, Sheila and I decided that it would be best for the kids – ***and the county*** – if they sat this one out from home.

As I stand here as your County Executive, I want to thank the residents of Westchester for the opportunity to serve you.

Tonight, my assessment of Westchester County in 2010 will cover three broad areas: its ***people***, its ***problems*** and our ***plans*** for how we work together to put the county on a firm footing for the future.

Underlying my remarks will be a single theme:

Coming together for a common good.

Our path forward must be to shift our thinking from ***"me" to "we,"*** because that's the best blueprint for governing wisely in these tough economic times.

People

In preparing my first State of the County message, I researched the remarks of former County Executives.

Regardless of the conditions at the time, the state of the county was always strong.

How could that be?

And how could I make that statement today given the financial challenges that we face in our school districts, villages, towns, county, state and country?

The answer is this: **Our people.**

The strength of our county comes from the extraordinary spirit and talents of our people.

One of the best parts of my job is that a day doesn't go by when I don't see and feel the talent and spirit of our residents and county employees on display.

Let me give you three examples, from just the past three months.

Gina Maher has a career that's legendary in basketball circles.

As the coach of the Irvington Lady Bulldogs, she has won more than 500 games, captured two state championships, been inducted into the hall of fame, and even had a gym named after her.
But what makes her so special and what lies at the heart of her success is that she is an educator. She coaches the game of life.

Along with offense and defense, come lessons on how to stretch individual ability and still work as a team -- not just on the court but after the game is over.

The guiding light of her leadership deserves our thanks and recognition.

Moving from education to public safety, I would like to acknowledge Westchester County Police Officer **Gerard Cole** and Yonkers Police Officer **Kevin MacDonald**.

On March 30, a day when torrential rains had flooded the Bronx River Parkway, they came to the life-saving rescue of a 77-year-old man who had driven on to the closed parkway and found himself trapped in his pickup truck as freezing water rose up to the roof.

Acting quickly and decisively, Officers Cole and MacDonald, who were the first on the scene, were able to deploy a rescue rope and assist the man onto the roof of his truck.

In a true team effort, the man was brought from the roof of his car to dry land by Officers Cole and MacDonald, along with other officers from their departments, and members of the Yonkers Fire Department.

Suffering from severe hypothermia, he was rushed to the hospital.

The good news: He was treated and later sent home alive and well.

Officers Cole and MacDonald and all the other first responders who worked together as a team that day to save a life deserve our thanks.

Mount Vernon is the city of homes and houses of worship.

The Rev. Franklyn Richardson is a pillar of that community.

For 35 years he has served as pastor of Grace Baptist Church.
His mission is not only to bring his flock closer to God, but to also fix what’s wrong, right here on earth.

Last year, fed up with the culture of “thuggery” that had invaded Mount Vernon’s streets, he convened a “stop the violence” summit at Grace Baptist Church that brought together religious, law enforcement and civic leaders with the goal of making our communities safer.

And just last week, thanks to Rev. Richardson’s tireless efforts, the ribbon was officially cut to open Randy Daniels Towers, a new housing complex in Mount Vernon, which will provide affordable homes for 133 families and help spark the revitalization of the surrounding neighborhoods.

Rev. Richardson, for all your work to promote social justice, equality, and economic opportunity for all, Westchester County thanks you.

I also want to mention three people from Westchester who died recently in the service of our country.

- **John J. Malone,** US Marine Corps, from Yonkers, who died on September 24 serving his country in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

- **Eric Jones,** US Marine Corps, from Pound Ridge, who died on October 26, serving his country in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom.

- **Gifford Hurt,** US Army, from Yonkers, who died on January 20, serving his country as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

To honor the sacrifices and memories of John Malone, Eric Jones, and Gifford Hurt, plaques for each of them will be placed at the Kensico Dam Plaza.

To the families of these brave and selfless soldiers, we offer our deepest sympathy and gratitude as well.

You have all given more than can ever be repaid to protect our freedom.

As all these examples vividly illustrate, the strength of Westchester is its people.

Problems

Let me shift from our strengths and talk about our **problems**.

Talking about problems is never easy.

Talking about problems in a State of the County Address is particularly difficult because problems don't give the audience anything to cheer about.

But as County Executive, it is my job to confront our problems head on, explain the facts – for better and for worse – and lay out solutions.

In the next few minutes, that's exactly what I plan to do.

As a government, the biggest problem that Westchester County faces is that it is going broke.

In 2011, we are looking at a deficit of $166 million.

If nothing is done, the red ink will grow even worse.

The deficit projected for 2012 is $266 million.

For 2013, it's $355 million.

These numbers were put together by our budget and finance departments and reviewed by our outside auditors.

In March, I went public with them.

Some challenged their accuracy.

Others questioned the timing, calling it premature to worry about deficits eight months before the budget is due.

Still others just called it fear mongering.

The reason I went public when I did was very simple.

Financial problems don't age well.

Serious problems require serious responses.

Serious responses require time, thought and collaboration.

And that's why I started early.

As County Executive, I know that it takes time to engage all of our stakeholders in serious discussions about realistic solutions to difficult problems.

To understand the county's finances, just imagine you are doing your own bills at the kitchen table at home.

On your right side, you have the deposit slips from your paycheck, your spouse's paycheck, and any other income you receive.

On the left side, you have all your bills.

And when you add it all up, you hope ***and pray*** your income can cover your bills.

When your income doesn't cover the bills, you know you've got trouble.

In the case of Westchester County, our bills for next year are running 10 percent higher than our income.

Expenses for 2011 are projected at about $1.9 billion.

Revenues are projected at about $1.7 billion.

That leaves a hole of $166 million.

In the real world, that's called "going broke."

But what about governments? Do they operate in the real world?

For too long, we all know that the answer has been **no**.

For too long, governments have used their power – the people's power – to delay, mask and just plain avoid the financial realities before them.

The time has come for Westchester County to face its finances the same way every Westchester family must face them:

Buy what you can afford, and pay the bills when they come due.

Yes, it is true that governments are different than individuals.

Governments can raise taxes.

In the past, that's been the County's standard response – just keep raising taxes.

But that's just not an option any more.

Closing a $166 million budget deficit would require a 30 percent tax hike – **let me repeat that – a 30 percent tax hike.**

That's beyond unacceptable.

I was elected to stop spiraling tax hikes.

I am committed to doing just that.

In the fall, I will submit a budget to the Board of Legislators that is balanced and has a **zero percent** increase in the county tax levy.

I want to thank my colleagues on the Board of Legislators – Republican and Democrat – who are also committed to not raising taxes.

To those not yet committed, I urge you to get on board.

It won't be easy. It will require broad sacrifice.

But it must be done.

So how did we get in this mess?

The cause is straight forward.

For the past decade, when times were good, Westchester County lost control of its ability to say NO to spending.

In recent years, spending by Westchester County has far outpaced inflation.

While inflation as measured by the CPI rose 29 percent between 2001 and 2010, county spending rose 46 percent.

At the time, these yearly increases didn't seem particularly alarming.

Housing was booming.

Wall Street was humming.

Unemployment was low.

It was a golden decade of "Just Say Yes" to virtually any program or project that came our way.

And not only did Westchester say "yes," it said "yes" and "more."

To its five golf courses, it added a sixth – this one more upscale than the rest.

To its employees, it continued to give free health care – one of only four counties in the state to do so.

To its social services programs, it provided extra money – benefits that went beyond the required state and federal mandates.

In each case, the spending was well intentioned and understandable.

Constituents and special interests asked and elected officials eagerly complied. That's what politicians do.

And why not?

Times were good. No one was complaining.

And one more thing:

To a large degree, it was **other people's money.**

Washington and Albany were offering free money in the form of grants and aid.

How could we refuse?

The grants and aid came in all different sizes, for all sorts of different things.

The common thread was that in each case the money allowed the county to do something it otherwise could not afford.

In economic terms that's called leverage.

When times are good, leverage is viewed as a seeming miracle.

However, when times turn bad, the darker, too-good-to-be-true side of leverage rears its ugly head.

And that's where we are now, because no party lasts forever.

By the end of 2008, housing, Wall Street and the economy had all crashed.

Enter the "great" recession that busted government and family budgets with a vengeance many had never seen before.

That vengeance was in large measure due to excess leverage.

And in one of the great ironies of the recession, much of the vengeance being visited on county government right now was fueled by leverage supplied by Albany and Washington.

The Bee-Line bus service provides a perfect example.

Westchester's Bee-Line could never serve 32 million riders a year if it were not for the leverage, provided in the form of grants and aid, from the state and federal government.

The formulas are complicated.

But in simple terms, Washington subsidizes capital costs like buying new buses and Albany subsidizes operating expenses.

When times were good, the aid increased and the Bee-Line expanded.

But since the recession has hit, money for the Bee-Line has shrunk.

Over the past two years the state has reduced operating assistance by $4.2 million and the Governor's proposed budget eliminates an additional $3.6 million.

In December, the Spano administration and Board of Legislators cut another $3.6 million as well.

That's a reduction of $11.4 million.

So if anyone wants to know why we have proposed eliminating the express bus to Manhattan and other routes, it is simply because we no longer have the money to pay for them.

If we did, we would continue the routes. But we don't.

Many of the riders on these routes have called and e-mailed my office.

I have personally spoken to many of them – they're angry.

Who can blame them?

But it doesn't change the facts.

The county can't provide service it can't pay for.

But I can and will work tirelessly to provide viable options for riders.

In the case of the BxM4C – there is some encouraging news.

This week, I met with MTA Chairman and President Jay Walder.

Together, we discussed the possibility of having New York City extend one of its Manhattan express routes to include stops in Yonkers as a way of largely replacing the BxM4C.

And as part of the plan, connections to Greenburgh bus stops would be available.

I don't want to give false hope.

There are still a number of details to work out.

But the talks are very promising at this point, and they demonstrate the importance of collaboration when it comes to finding ways to do more with less money.

The challenge isn't to save every bus route, program or project.

Given our financial problems, that's just not possible.
The challenge is to make the tough calls, understanding full well they may be painful in the short run, so that we can protect, preserve and strengthen the overall system for the future.

As County Executive, I am ready to make the decisions that will ensure that those who need our services the most will continue to receive them.

To do that we need to prioritize how we spend our limited resources.

I was recently asked:

How could the county even consider cutting a popular program for kids, if 75 cents of every dollar of its cost was being picked up by the state and federal government?

The question is completely understandable.

But it's the wrong question.

The right question is: Can the county afford its share – the 25 cents.

We need to be very realistic and here's the reality:

We don't have a healthy fund balance or "rainy day" fund to draw from.

As a best practice, a triple A-rated county the size of Westchester should have an undesignated fund balance of about $90 million.

Going into next year, we are looking at a fund balance that's so dangerously low that it will be of little help to us.

And for those waiting for the cavalry – in the form of Washington and Albany – to come to our rescue, it won't be happening this year… or in the foreseeable future.

Albany and Washington are going broke faster than we are.

Whatever money we receive from them won't be enough to close our deficit.

For example, we hope to receive $20 million in so-called FMAP money from Washington to help with our Medicaid payments.
At this point, there is no guarantee that we will receive this money.

But assuming we do get it, while the $20 million will be extremely welcome, it will only go a fraction of the way toward closing our deficit.

And like previous years, it won't address the structural problems in our Medicaid funding formulas.

It will be a one-shot fix and leave behind the same $20 million problem for the following year.

It must be strongly noted that substantial pain has been inflicted on the county by unfunded mandates imposed by the state and federal government.

Not all of our current financial hangover was self induced.

Year after year, we are asked – actually forced – by Washington and Albany to spend huge amounts of local tax dollars on projects and programs over which we have no control.

Pensions and Medicaid are two prime examples.

In the case of pensions, Westchester's costs will more than double from $55 million this year to a whopping $117 million in 2013.

The numbers on Medicaid tell the same story. The county's Medicaid costs will rise from $204 million this year to $222 million in 2013.

In both cases, we are working with our state and federal representatives to bring some sanity to unfunded mandates.

How successful we will be remains to be seen.

In detailing all of our financial problems, the point isn't to cast blame.

It is simply to acknowledge the problems and take action.

Our Plans

An honest appraisal and understanding of our predicament is the first step to recovery.

So where does that leave us?

We know the size, cause and consequences of our deficit.

Now, we must develop a plan.

The mission is the same as the one that I outlined at my inauguration.

- We must continue to deliver essential services.
- We must promote the economic growth of the county.
- And we must bring relief to taxpayers.

Let's look at all three.

Essential Services

Westchester County will continue to deliver essential services to our residents.

When the call went out to our commissioners and directors to supply their most important initiatives and accomplishments for this speech, the total filled 33 pages.

Not to worry, I am not going to read all 33 pages.

What follows is a very abbreviated list of highlights.

But it does show the breadth of great work performed every day by county employees, and the efforts they are making to deliver services faster, cheaper and better.

Emergency Services

During the two days of that crippling nor'easter in March, the county's Emergency Communications Center answered more than 3,000 calls and dispatched 1,600 emergency responses.

Since then the **Emergency Services** team has coordinated and compiled our application for federal disaster aid.

I am happy to say that President Obama has approved it and relief assistance for the county, local municipalities and schools is on the way.

Commissioner Anthony Sutton and his team deserve our thanks and praise for their round-the-clock efforts to address the storm and its aftermath.

Public Safety

The Department of Public Safety has undergone a significant reorganization in the past three months to streamline operations.

By reassigning one lieutenant and 18 police officers or detectives back to the Patrol Services Division, the department has been able to significantly reduce overtime.

Commissioner George Longworth believes the reorganization will save $1 million this year.

Community Mental Health

The health care system is complex.

It's difficult to navigate for any person in need of services, and even tougher for those confronting multiple issues.

One reason is that services for different needs are traditionally provided by separate systems, which, in addition to proving confusing, often result in high costs and poor health outcomes.

To address these problems, Commissioner Grant Mitchell and the Department of Community Mental Health have implemented the Westchester County Care Coordination Program.

By integrating services, this nationally recognized program has already reduced healthcare and related costs by over $1.2 million for its first group of 30 participants.

Environmental Facilities

The county-owned Material Recovery Facility, or “Murf” as it is known, is another example of how government can provide a valuable service – recycling waste – and do it cost efficiently.
In 2009, the “Murf” processed 80,000 tons of recyclables from 36 of the county’s 43 municipalities.

In terms of revenue, that has translated into $1.4 million in just the first three months of 2010.

Technology

The IT Department has installed an innovative new software program, called “NightWatchman,” that remotely turns off PCs at night, resulting in energy savings of more than $100,000 a year.

Social Services

The Department of Social Services is developing an automated application system to transform its current paper recertification process for temporary assistance.

Communications

The Communications Department has revamped the county’s website – westchestergov.com – to make it more accessible, useful, and informative. Residents can now follow the county, and me, on Facebook and Twitter as well.

Tonight’s speech will be available on the website accompanied by a version in Spanish.

Economic Growth

Let’s shift to economic growth.

Upon coming into office, my outreach as County Executive to business leaders started immediately.

From small family businesses to the county's largest corporations, our team made it a priority to tell them how crucial they were to the economic health and welfare of Westchester.

The message was simple: "How can we help you?"

We told them that Westchester is "open for business."

We told them we want to help set the stage for their growth,

And we told them we do not want to give them any reason for leaving. To address all three points, we have taken a number of actions.

- We have fused several agencies together under the Office of Economic Development, including Westchester's Industrial Development Agency, the Office of Tourism, and the Film Office, to streamline and strengthen our ability to promote growth.

- We have formed a high-level economic advisory group – made up of some of the brightest business minds in Westchester – to help steer economic policy. Members include representatives from:
    - the Westchester County Association,
    - the Business Council of Westchester,
    - the African American Chamber
    - the Hispanic Chamber.

- We are also investing county tax dollars to help our local economy and put people back to work. I have authorized more than $73 million in capital projects, which are now on their way to the Board of Legislators for approval. Key among them are:
    - A new student center at Westchester Community College.
    - Lighting and safety upgrades at the Kensico Dam Plaza
    - Improvements at the Peekskill Wastewater Treatment Plant

- A sewer system rehab at the Joint Wastewater Treatment Plant in Yonkers
- Road repairs and paving upgrades across the county.
- The final pieces of the South CountyTrailway in Yonkers and Greenburgh. Joggers, walkers, bikers and hikers will be happy to hear that this will nearly complete the 36-mile length of the North and South County Trailways that wind through Westchester from the Bronx to Putnam.

Most important, we are looking to lay the foundation for future growth.

Earlier this year, I gave a speech to business leaders.

In it I remarked that Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, grew up in Dobbs Ferry.
Local boy makes good – that's nice.

But that wasn't my point.

I wanted to know why Facebook was started in Silicon Valley and not in Westchester?

Where businesses decide to locate happens for a reason:

It happens because businesses find locations attractive.

Westchester's competition comes from as near as Connecticut and New Jersey, not to mention Rockland, Long Island, and New York City, and as far away as China, India and Brazil.

The exit of Starwood Hotels to Stamford is just one example.

In the fight, Westchester has many competitive advantages. They include:

- technology
- transportation
- a skilled and educated workforce, and
- proximity to New York City – still the world's leading capital.

But it also has well known disadvantages, such as:

- overbearing regulations,
- crippling taxes, and
- chronic governmental paralysis, to name a few.

To bring growth to the county, we need to build a platform for the future.

A platform that sharpens our advantages, corrects our disadvantages and – most important – sets strategies based on new possibilities. That effort has already begun.

Two weeks ago, Westchester County – in partnership with Rockland County and the Hudson Valley Economic Development Council – hosted on the grounds of New York Medical College the first in a series of roundtable discussions with leaders from the region's largest biotech firms and smallest start-ups.

I bet you didn’t know we have a bio-tech cluster here in Westchester.

Now we need to ensure it grows and prospers.

It is for that reason that we have reached out to the leadership of these firms and asked them how can we help, how can we partner with them to aid in their development and expansion.

And the outreach doesn’t stop with businesses.

Since January, I have met with almost all of the elected officials in Westchester – our Senators, Congressmen and women, supervisors, and mayors – and many of our school superintendents and college presidents and educators as well.

Earlier this week I met with Mayor Bloomberg and MTA Chairman and President Jay Walder as well to discuss regional solutions to our common problems.

The goal of all these meetings is to connect ideas, people and resources.

It is all about starting conversations on how we can work together.

It doesn't cost a dime.

But to borrow the famous line from one of our great Westchester corporations, MasterCard, the result can be ***priceless***.

Tax Relief

So we have talked about essential services and economic growth.

That brings us to tax relief.

Westchester County today is at a critical tipping point.
We are already the highest taxed county in the nation – two years in a row.

So unless we can find ways to stop the tax madness in Westchester, our ability to deliver essential services and provide an environment for economic growth will be put at risk.

Will it be tomorrow? No.

But will the day come? Absolutely. The erosion has already begun.

We see it throughout New York, as well as in New Jersey, California, and Michigan.

Residents and companies are voting with their feet.

And when that happens, those left behind find themselves with too few people paying for too many services.

Once the downward spiral begins, it is hard to reverse.

How do we correct it?

It begins with a change in mindset.

Everywhere I go in the County, the plea I hear from residents is always the same:

Please make Westchester more affordable.

The plea is universal and it spans all economic and demographic groups.

It is from seniors, who long ago paid off their mortgages but now fear they won't be able to stay in their homes.

It is from single people and young couples who wonder if they will ever be able to afford a home in Westchester.

And it is from families asking how will they ever pay college tuitions and property taxes.

We must find relief for all our taxpayers, because without them, we will no longer be able to provide services to the neediest among us.

So that brings us squarely and inescapably to the moment of truth.

How do we solve the dilemma of maintaining services while reducing the cost of government?

It is going to require:

- competence – so we are making the smartest choices,
- collaboration – so we have all our stakeholders involved, and
- cooperation – so we can unify our strengths.

Since January, all county commissioners and directors have been scrutinizing every line of their budgets with two goals in mind:

Find savings, while protecting the core mission of their departments.

In March, we announced the first wave of savings.

Collectively, the savings are expected to be more than $16 million.

Not surprisingly, not all of the ideas were popular.

But we remain on track to implement them, because we must realize these savings if we are to have any chance of eliminating our $166 million deficit.

The second phase of our savings plan begins today.

I am sending down legislation to the Board of Legislators to give incentive payments to employees who wish to voluntarily leave their jobs.

It is estimated that the incentive package will save between $6.8 and $19 million a year, depending on the number of employees who participate.
In addition, an analysis by our budget and finance departments is almost complete on whether the county should switch from its current self-insured, third-party health insurance plan administered by POMCO to the New York State Health Insurance Plan, commonly known as NYSHIP.

Such a shift could provide employees with similar benefits while saving taxpayers millions of dollars a year.

This is on top of the savings that would come from making employees contribute to health care.

I strongly believe taxpayers should no longer shoulder the entire burden of paying for the health benefits of county employees.

It's time for employees to contribute.

The Board of Legislators has my 15 percent contribution plan, and I respectfully ask that they reconsider and approve it.

In the coming weeks and months, we plan to bring forward a number of other proposals, which will include:

- A pay freeze, which could save $20.5 million, if salaries stay at 2010 levels,
- Salary cuts, which could save $23.8 million, if salaries are reduced by 5 percent; and $47.6 million, if salaries are reduced by 10 percent.

- Furloughs, which could save $1 million a day.

The freezes, salary cuts, and furloughs would all require changes to our current union contracts.

Five of our union contracts have expired and we have begun negotiations.

The contract for our largest union, CSEA, which represents about 4,000 workers, doesn't expire until the end of next year.

But my hope is that we can open negotiations with them this year as well.
In March, the day I announced the budget deficit, I met with 900 employees at the County Center to give them the news face to face.

I told them layoffs were likely, and I laid out a worst case scenario:

Closing the deficit could mean as many as 1,600 layoffs.

I also told them that I wanted to do everything I could possibly do to minimize that number, but that I would need their help.

If they could help me hold down costs, I would help them hold onto their jobs.

Jobs for savings: that's the offer.

But for that to happen, personnel costs have to be lowered substantially.

And let me bring it down to a more personal level.

I was elected to represent all the people of Westchester.

I hope to do right by them.

I understand what they are going through because I am one of them.

I make a good living but struggle with the bills every month.

I want to know why diapers and formula are so expensive and how I am going to pay for my three kids' college tuitions; not to mention our monthly car and house payments.

I know the decisions I make as County Executive will have enormous consequences for families across Westchester, especially for the families of county employees.

Cutting programs and cutting jobs will be the hardest thing I do for the next four years.

To the task I bring these guiding principles:
Listen before acting and don't ask others to do anything I am not willing to do.

Painful decisions lie ahead. But as County Executive, I will make them and make them with the overall good of the county in mind.

One more point before I conclude my remarks:

I have not yet mentioned the housing settlement – the agreement between the Federal government, the Spano Administration and the Board of Legislators to build 750 units of fair and affordable housing in 31 communities over the next seven years.

While my administration inherited this settlement, we are obligated to comply with it. It is the law.

We are at the very early stages of a long process and will continue to work with the housing monitor and our local governments in a constructive way.

We expect to hear from the monitor shortly on the progress of the implementation plan and will announce the next steps as soon as they become clear.

Conclusion

So I end my first State of the County, where it began, reflecting one more time on Westchester's greatest strength: Its people.

Our nearly one million residents are and have always been at the heart of what makes our county great.

They are the reason why Westchester County is the envy of the world as a place to live, raise families and do business.

No heads, hearts and hands work harder, and produce more with their labor and love than the proud people of Westchester.

The history of our county, which dates back to before the founding of our country, has always been full of tests for its citizens:
Revolutionary, civil and world wars;

Financial panics, recessions, and depressions;

Natural disasters and medical epidemics;

These crises of the past … put our current state of affairs in perspective.

And what was true then … is true today:

The residents of Westchester County have always seized their moment in history by attacking opportunities and problems with a spirit forged with:

- energy
- creativity
- courage
- perseverance
- good will
- and most of all, a commitment to make things better for the next generation.

The year ahead holds difficult challenges for us.

But none so tough that they cannot be overcome if we work together.

To my colleagues on the Board of Legislators,

To our representatives in Albany and Washington,

To all of our municipal and school officials,

To our business leaders

And most of all to our residents;

Please join with me in the effort that begins today to make Westchester more affordable.

Working together, we will find the common ground that unites us, the common purpose that connects us, and the common goals that bind us.

Working together, we can keep Westchester the place that we love to call home, not just today but every day, and not just for ourselves as individuals, but for all of us as a community.

Thank you.