State of the County Address to the People of Westchester

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April 7, 2011

**"GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE,
BY THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE,
SHALL NOT PERISH FROM THE EARTH."**

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

I begin my second State of County Address with the words of Abraham Lincoln.

Government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

These words, the last line of the Gettysburg Address, have long stood as our nation's unshakeable reminder that the solution to our problems and the path to a better future rests within each of us.

Our nation and county are much changed since our 16th president passed through Westchester and stopped in Peekskill on his whistle stop trip from his home in Illinois to his first inauguration in Washington 150 years ago.

But the fundamentals remain the same.

Few men understood better than Lincoln that if problems are left unaccepted and unattended, they can and will overwhelm us.

But if problems are confronted with the people's interests in mind and their collective strength in hand, progress will prevail.

Tonight's state of the county will focus on three things:

- Our people,
- Our problems
- And our path forward.

So what is our state of the county?

At this moment – April 7, 2011 – the state of Westchester County is **both fortunate and fragile.**

We have weathered the current economic turmoil better than most. Westchester's unemployment rate is 7.6 percent. While still too high, it is lower than the national rate of 8.8 percent and lower than most of our neighbors in the region.

Wall Street continues to express confidence in the way Westchester County government is being run. Last week, Fitch - the ratings agency - reaffirmed our triple A status. That's the highest level.

To spur growth, we are fighting hard to keep jobs in and attract businesses to Westchester.

I came out early and strongly against the sugar tax, which was a direct hit against Pepsi.

Our advocacy paid off. The tax died.

Most important, Pepsi is **still** here – in Purchase.

and in Somers, where our work with the state resulted just two weeks ago in Pepsi Beverages signing a new lease that will expand its headquarters by almost 40 percent and keep 900 jobs in Westchester.

The best news is that Pepsi is not an isolated case.

- Sabra Dipping, the hummus maker, is moving to Westchester.
- Amkai Solutions just moved here from Connecticut, which is a nice switch and bringing high-paying IT jobs.
- Contra-Fect, a biotech firm, is moving here from New York City as part of the NY BioHud Valley's expansion.
- Dannon is expanding.
- So are colleges like Pace, Manhattanville, Fordham and Iona.
- White Plains Hospital and Northern Westchester Hospital have opened new emergency rooms.
- Hudson Valley Hospital has broken ground on a new cancer center.

- Guggenheim Global Trading, a new $500 million investment fund, is locating its headquarters in Purchase.

- And just last month, Westchester Medical Center took a giant step in securing its financial future by retiring obligations to the county and selling its own bonds to investors.

The direction is positive.

The momentum is strong.

The confidence is returning.

More than any one thing, our progress is the result of our greatest strength – our people. People are what make Westchester work.

Our people have a combination of smarts and heart that's second to none. And it's not bragging when it is true.

In Westchester, 45 percent of our residents, who are 25 and older, hold bachelor's degrees or higher. The national average is 27 percent.

And we are getting smarter.

Of the 300 high school students from around the country named semi-finalists in this year's Intel Science Talent Search, an astonishing 6 percent of them are from Westchester.

And here they are.

I was thrilled to meet them in January.

All of these students humble and inspire, as they unlock better futures for all of us.

Behind all of the students, there were great teachers, who deserve congratulations as well.

Special recognition goes out to the teachers and administration of Ossining High School, which produced 8 of the 19 semi-finalists.

And with us tonight are Grace Phillips, a senior at Mamaroneck High School, who was named one of the nation's 40 finalists, and her teacher Guido Garbarino.

For most people, mention eggplant and the first thing that comes to mind is parmesan. For Grace, this ordinary vegetable became the heart of her award-winning research into the correlations between taste and the medicinal properties of plants.

Congratulations to Grace and Guido.

For government, the question is how do we provide all of our students with the opportunities that will keep their talents right here in Westchester.

The answer is to build a community where the learning never stops. This is the essence behind our campaign to promote Westchester as New York's Intellectual Capital, if not the nation's and the world's.

Our Intellectual Capital can be found in every corner of the county, but perhaps nowhere more famously than in Yorktown, where there's a resident who goes by the name of Watson.

Watson is the true blue, IBM computer that is taking artificial intelligence to new levels, as witnessed by its stunning success on *Jeopardy* in February.

Having mastered the television game show, Watson's next frontiers are healthcare, finance, and government.

Believe me, any help Watson can give Westchester in the category of budget deficits will be greatly appreciated.

The current and future success of this super computer is the product of an incredibly gifted team of men and women at IBM's Thomas J. Watson Research Center.

IBM has long been one of Westchester's hallmark corporations. It is hard to believe but this year marks the 100th anniversary of this iconic company that has long defined business excellence, resilience and innovation.

With us tonight is White Plains resident David McQueeney. David is the IBM Vice President of Software Research who oversees the Watson project.

David, on behalf of Westchester County and all of its residents, we'd like to extend our congratulations to you and your Watson team and wish all the men, women ***and computers*** of IBM continued success for a second 100 years.

What the researchers at IBM will be the first to tell you is that all the factoids contained in Watson's microprocessors – the equivalent of one million books – are not enough to improve the human condition.

Drive, curiosity, perseverance, discipline, passion, and a host of other distinctly human qualities are needed as well.

Strength, stamina and dedication come to mind when describing this next group of men and women.

This year was, for lack of a better word, a winter from hell.

For those keeping score, Mother Nature sent 12 major storms our way between October and February, dumping, depending on where you live, a total of between 41 and 90 inches of snow.

If anyone needs a hand with the math, 90 inches is 7 and a half feet, which even for my small driveway translated into about 50 Advils.

Fortunately, Westchester County was up to the challenge.

Clearing streets, parking lots, and walkways is tough demanding work. It requires mechanical expertise, plain old muscle power and in the case of last year, 2,000 tons of rock salt. Too often these efforts go unnoticed.

Tonight, I would like to personally thank every member of our Department of Public Works and Parks Department who played a role in safely getting our residents through all the storms of this past winter.

I would also like to thank the municipal and state plow crews who worked in tandem with the county.

In particular, several people deserve special mention.

From the Division of Road Maintenance:

- James Statini
- Todd Palmer
- Nick Di Modugno

James, Todd and Nick are assigned to emergency and safety tasks during storms. This ranges from driving the plows in snow storms to keeping the public safe when roads flood.

From Westchester County Airport Operations:

- Cassandra Slater
- Laura Guercio
- Jessica Pfau

Cassandra, Laura and Jessica are the backbone of the snow removal team that kept the airport open and our runways safe.

From the Division of Fleet Management:

- Ralph Hanson

Ralph gets a special MVP. Our crews are only as good and reliable as the equipment they use. Ralph's job is to maintain and repair our heavy and light duty snow removal equipment and public safety vehicles.

Thank you all – and let's hope summer is a bit easier on all of us.

Another human trait is compassion.

One measure of the success of government must always be what it does to bring forward the less fortunate among us.

At a time when our economic recovery remains fragile across the income scale, a strong government safety net for citizens in need is critical.

Maintaining and in fact strengthening Westchester's safety net is one of the accomplishments of my first year in office of which I am most proud.

Nowhere has the stress of recession been felt greater than at the Department of Social Services.

Money is down and demand for services is up.

This year's DSS budget had to absorb a $27 million loss in federal Medicaid aid and a $9 million increase in service and program costs.

Yet despite these financial body blows, our commitment to the needy did not falter. At $578 million, the DSS budget this year is $3 million more than it was last year.

Not only was the DSS budget <u>not</u> cut this year – but through better management – the department will be able to make an additional $6 million in direct aid available to residents.

One thing critics of my budget cannot say is that tax cuts were made at the expense of the poor and needy.

It didn't happen with smoke and mirrors. It was a combination of putting more money where it was needed, managing existing funds better, and eliminating wasteful practices.

Where the status quo was no longer acceptable, we weren't afraid to change it.

DSS realigned, reorganized, and innovated with the following results.

- The tedious, labor-intensive process of recertifying residents for benefits eligibility was automated and put on-line through a technology initiative called REACH.

- Better care and lower costs were achieved by keeping foster children closer to their original homes and neighborhoods; instead of sending kids to costly out-of-county and out-of-state institutions. Wherever possible we kept them right here in Westchester.

- Expensive shelters with empty beds – which the county must pay for whether they are filled or not – are being closed. In the case of the WestHelp shelter in Greenburgh, it was operating with nearly half of the beds empty. That simply can't be justified. And even with its closing in September, DSS will have more than ample capacity across its remaining 11 shelters to meet the needs of the homeless.

The reason shelters can be closed is a good news story.

It's because our DSS teams have dramatically cut the time it takes to move the homeless into permanent housing.

That's a major win.

Our goal for the homeless is permanent housing, not shelter housing.

Behind all these innovations and initiatives are people. Special recognition tonight goes out to the Child Welfare team.

This year, the Child Welfare Division became the first public agency in **New York State** to be certified by the prestigious Council on Accreditation. This means that the agency responsible for protecting the youngest and most vulnerable of our residents meets or exceeds national best practice standards. It means families in distress are being treated with dignity and respect. It means others can now look to Westchester for the example we set.

Members of the team with us tonight are:

- Anthony Christie
- Robert Kuhn
- Linda Sala
- Kerron Norman
- Daphne Swinton

Our Deputy Commissioners John Befus and Phil Gille.

And our new DSS Commissioner Kevin McGuire

Congratulations on outstanding work.

None of us would be here tonight if it were not for the courage and selfless acceptance to the call to duty by the men and women of our armed forces. Sadly, the price of our freedom was the loss of a loved one here at home this year.

Army Specialist David R. Fahey, Jr., a former Yorktown resident, was killed in February by an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan. He was an aspiring police officer and just 23.

He died when the IED exploded beneath the Humvee he was driving in Kandahar province. Two of his fellow soldiers, who were in the vehicle with him, were critically injured.

After their own father died, David and his younger sister, Phyllis, and brother, Nicholas, were raised by their aunt and uncle, Thomas and Fran Fahey. The couple also has four children of their own: Tyler, Blake, Brianna and Samantha.

With us tonight are Tom and Fran Fahey and David's brothers and sisters. Sitting with the family is our Director of Veterans Affairs, Vito Pinto.

To the Fahey family, please accept our deepest sympathy. Your family's sacrifice is the ultimate one.

Your loss can never be repaid.

But we stand here tonight to honor the memory of David, a man you all loved who served his family and country so that we can live our lives blessed with freedom.

As a tribute to David's life and service during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, a bronze plaque and tree will be dedicated in his honor at Westchester's Fallen Memorial Walkway at the Kensico Dam Plaza.

The dedication is scheduled for Gold Star Mother's Day on Sunday, September 25.

To the Fahey family once again, please accept our thanks and sympathy for your loss.

Our people are strong and resilient. In that, we are fortunate. But our county is not without problems. Our prospects for prosperity rest on a fragile economy that continues to struggle ***at every level***, with spending that outstrips our ability to pay.

Westchester County is no exception. In fact, we are the poster child.

Broken down in terms of kitchen table economics, the problem is this:

Money is going out a lot faster than it's coming in.

That's it in a nutshell.

It is an economic concept that anyone who has ever paid a bill understands and knows ends poorly if not corrected.

Past bills eventually overwhelm your ability to pay for future needs. Westchester County is perilously close to the breaking point.

The problem and its solution have two sides: revenues and spending.

Let's look at revenues first – the money we have to pay the bills.

Looking at revenues first is a statement in itself. That's how families must look at their finances. They see how much money they have before they start spending, and then they budget accordingly.

Unfortunately, past practice for Westchester County government has been just the opposite.

Spend first and raise taxes later to cover the bill, ***without*** regard to the amount.

It is exactly this behavior that has given Westchester the highest property taxes in the United States for three years in a row – 2007, 2008, and 2009.

The time has come to get off the medal podium and give someone else a chance at gold.

Last year, I came into office on a pledge to provide tax relief.

This year for the first time in a decade, the Westchester County property tax levy actually **went down**.

The amount is relatively small – but it is a powerful statement that **enough is enough**….

Let some other county take home the Number 1 Trophy.

And let Westchester concentrate on becoming a place that's affordable to young families; senior citizens on fixed incomes; and the broad middle class that's the bedrock of our county.

Finally, we are saying "**no**." Not "no" to service, but "**no**" to endless tax hikes to pay for wasteful spending.

Finally, we are starting to change the mindset … and that's another of the first-year accomplishments in which I take particular pride.

We have moved the conversation away from how much can we take from taxpayers ***to how much do we really need.***

To maintain this momentum, I am renewing my pledge to provide our citizens and businesses with tax relief.

This fall, I will submit a 2012 budget that once again will call for <u>no</u> hike in the county property tax levy.

That's the good news.

The tough news is that holding the line on taxes will require us to live within our means. Unlike the federal government, we can't print money.

Our problem is twofold. Shrinking revenues and growing bills.

There are no silver bullets.

Our revenues amount to about $1.8 billion and by law we must balance our budget.

Let's take a closer look.

Holding the property tax levy flat next year means there will be $548 million coming in, the same amount as this year.

There are other revenues - such as sales and mortgage taxes and fees paid to the county - but we don't expect much help there.

Mortgage taxes continue to be depressed by the sluggish housing market.

And sales tax receipts are currently running behind projections.

The state and federal aid picture is even bleaker. Combined state and federal aid will be down at least $11 million next year.

News that Albany is broke comes as no surprise.

But in what is finally a good sign, Governor Cuomo is prodding the Legislature to confront financial reality. Moves by the governor **to lower <u>spending</u> and <u>not raise taxes</u>** are to be applauded.

What needs to be watched is whether Albany is actually cutting spending or just shifting the costs to Westchester and other localities.

We are watching ***carefully*** and will vigorously fight any unfair cost shifts by Albany or Washington.

The new reality on the revenue side of the equation is that less money will be coming in to the county from Albany and Washington than in the past.

This is in sharp contrast to expenses, which are rising steeply and automatically.

Pensions and health care are two of the most significant costs.

Westchester's pension costs for 2011 are $51 million and projected to rise to $84 million in 2015. (That assumes the county enters the state's amortization program. If we don't, the number increases to $97 million.)

Westchester's health care costs for 2011 are $141 million and expected to rise to $181 million in 2015.

Together, these costs go a long way to explain why Westchester is fast approaching the point of having a work force it can no longer afford.

Let me stress, this is in no way intended as criticism of the men and women employed by Westchester County. They work hard and earn their salaries.

Our problem is not managerial. It's purely mathematical.

We have a pay structure that can no longer be sustained.

This year, the average cost of a Westchester County employee is $117,000.

That's salary and fringe.

The fringe, mostly health care and pension costs, amount to 55 percent of salary, which is significantly higher than the state average for both private and public sector employees.

With county government at 55 percent and going higher, it is just not plausible to think that taxpayers can continue to absorb these costs. And that's not all the bad news.

When you see this number, you will understand why the warning is necessary. This year in Westchester, nine state mandates will consume three quarters of our tax levy.

That's right. Nine state mandates consume 75 cents of every property tax dollar.

We start with a property tax levy of $548 million. And each of the mandates gobbles up a portion of it.

- Youth Detention ($2.9 million)
- Child Welfare ($7.4 million)

- Probation ($15.2 million)
- Indigent Defense ($17 million)
- Early Intervention ($17.5 million)
- Preschool Special Education ($42.6 million)
- Pension Costs ($51 million)
- Public Assistance ($51.9 million)
- And Medicaid, the mother of all mandates at ($211 million or 38 percent of the tax levy).

There you have it.

State mandates have just gobbled up $416 million of our property tax dollars.

Add in rising healthcare and other costs to the state mandates, and the projected deficit for 2012 – the difference between our revenues and expenses – is $103 million.

Let me say it again.

Add up the mandates, healthcare, and salaries and our projected deficit for next year is $103 million.

This is not a scare number.

It is the sober estimate of our budget and finance teams.

People may say, 'Well you had a $166 million deficit last year and you wound up cutting the tax levy, why can't you just do it again?

We plan to.

But to do what we did last year is going to be even harder this year.

We cut the workforce by 10 percent and actually reduced year-over-year spending by $30 million.

Whatever low hanging fruit was around last year is gone.

So what's the plan for 2011 and beyond?

After a few novenas, we'll tackle our problems head on.

The options are few.

Raise taxes? No.

Ask Albany and Washington for money? Wishful thinking. At best that only kicks the can down the street for another year. Besides, we are still paying for all the previous rescues and handouts.

Cut essential services? The absolute last resort.

So what **can** we do?

We start by rejecting the notion that less money has to mean less service and we replace old thinking with new actions.

The path forward begins by building a new operating model for county government.

The answer is not another government program.

A big part of our problem is that we can't afford the overhead of all of our existing programs, especially now when the state and federal government are pulling back on their contributions.

Future focus needs to be on self reliance and existing resources. That requires a new operating model based on:

- Efficiency
- Common Interests
- New Ideas
- And Partnership.

Efficiency centers on having services delivered by those best equipped to deliver them.

Every department has a directive from me to relentlessly ask three questions:

Is the service essential?

Can the service be delivered better?

Who best can provide the service?

And that doesn't necessarily mean government.

For example, by having Correct Care Solutions, one of the largest companies in its field, take over the contract to provide medical care to the inmates at our jail, the county expects to save at least $3 million in operating costs over the course of the three-year deal. That's real money.

Even more important, the county was able to eliminate its liability exposure, a potential savings of tens of millions of dollars.

All this without a reduction in service.

Another example is our initiative to have the county's four mental health clinics taken over by non-profits. The logic here was just as compelling.

First, it ended the conflict the county had being both the provider of services at the clinics, as well as the regulator of those services.

And second, it ensured **the continuation of quality care** at a time of declining state aid. How? Lower overhead means the non-profits can deliver equal or better service to patients for less money. The arrangement also provides the non-profits with a very welcome source of revenue. The result is a winning partnership.

Dr. Grant Mitchell, our Mental Health Commissioner, and his team are the force behind this successful new approach.

Our nonprofit partners deserve your applause as well.

Focusing on common interests is how we lower the barriers that too easily divide us. At a time when revenues are contracting, the natural instinct is to revert to an “us vs. them” mentality. This urge needs to be resisted. More than ever before, our thinking needs to revolve around “we” not “me.”

This is an especially important message for our labor unions.

Since coming into office, my plea to the unions is to work with me to preserve jobs in return for savings. It is in the common interest of our county and our unions to keep our employees working.

In reducing the workforce by 10 percent last year, we were able to minimize layoffs because of retirement incentives offered by the state and county.

This year, there are no incentives.

So having outlined our labor costs, it is impossible to see how we can avoid layoffs if concessions are not forthcoming from our unions.

Once again, I am extending the offer to save jobs in return for savings.

Last year, at my insistence, non-union employees, myself included, began paying for their health care benefits.

Union workers make no contribution. This at a time, when across the nation, the average contribution for state and local government workers for family health care coverage is 27 percent.

It is time for our union employees to start contributing to their health care costs.

Doing so would save the county $10 million, preserve jobs and relieve taxpayers of an unfair burden.

New circumstances require new ideas. This applies to everything we do in county government.

Nowhere is this more true than Playland, which offers a universal example of the importance of breaking through the status quo.

Playland is home to 200 acres on Long Island Sound. No property in Westchester is more iconic or beautiful. At its center is an amusement park – tired and weary after 83 years – that loses more money and patrons with every passing season.

Playland will be open this season starting on Saturday May 14.

But, for a government struggling to make ends meet, Playland is the ultimate enigma wrapped in a puzzle.

It loses $5 million a year open. But would still cost more than $3 million a year, if it were closed, because of debt service.

Over the decades, there have been endless studies on how to correct what ails Playland…..all of them unsuccessful.

The reason: the focus was always too narrow. The studies only asked: How do you fix the amusement park?

That's the wrong question.

The right one is: How do you reinvent the entire property?

Not only that, we turned the Request For Proposals process completely around.

Instead of telling people what **we** wanted, we asked them what ***they*** thought should go there.

We said: Start with a blank piece of paper. Throw out the preconceived notions. ***Imagine*** the possibilities.

Some found the approach unorthodox. But there was method to the madness. Put the emphasis on breakthroughs, ***rather than constraints***, and you give new thinking a chance.

The result was 12 proposals from a wide range of groups, which are now being evaluated by our 19-member citizens committee.

The committee held its first meeting yesterday. The plan is for the committee to have its feasibility report on the 11 proposals done by the Fourth of July. But if they need more time that's fine. This is a once in a generation opportunity that we are not going to rush.

My hope is that a future direction for the park will emerge by fall and that the business of building a new Playland will start as early as 2012.

A long road waits. But we are optimistic, engaged, and energetic. New thinking will do that to people.

New thinking isn't limited to our own ideas. It also comes into play by applying the new ideas of others. Communications is a perfect example.

Each week, more than 75,000 people, or in tech speak, "unique visitors," click onto our Web site, Westchestergov.com. This is double the number since the start of my administration. The reason is that we have been working hard to make the Web site more relevant and useful to residents.

For instance, I've discussed important issues, such as the budget and Playland, and then posted the video online.

Trust me, they're not as fun to watch as Charlie Sheen on YouTube, but they are more informative and less rambling. Winning.

And next Tuesday, we will be reaching out to Westchester residents with our second "tele-town hall."

It's called "Ask Astorino," and it's a giant telephone conference call open to anyone across the county. So call in and ask me any questions you may have.

The phone number, along with the text and video of tonight's speech – in English y en español - all will be available at WestchesterGov.com

It is important to note our county is more diverse than ever before.

The new 2010 census shows more Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics are now calling Westchester home, making our county the most diverse in the state outside New York City.

We welcome our new arrivals and we're using Facebook, Twitter and other new social media tools to connect with all our residents. So friend me on Facebook and check out my latest tweets on Twitter.

In fact, fans and friends of WestchesterGov.com know that we have been keeping them continually updated on the Web site about how events in Japan could potentially impact Indian Point.

On this subject of Indian Point, let me emphasize that safety is the county's number one priority.

Our Emergency Services team and I have been in constant communication with federal and state officials, the county executives in Putnam, Rockland and Orange, Mayor Bloomberg and representatives of Entergy.

Early on, I personally sent a letter to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission inquiring about the safety of the plant.

They have assured us the plant is safe, but we continue to monitor the situation, updating all of our past assumptions with new information as it becomes available.

We are committed to keeping our residents informed every step of the way and encourage them to follow new developments on our

Web site.

Partnership is government's best antidote to inefficiency.

That sounds nice. But let's look at why it is true.

The current structure of government runs on a command and control model. People have tightly defined jobs and report vertically up a chain of command. Work gets done in silos and there is very little interaction between the silos.

Up until now, there wasn't much need to change the model.

There was enough money for each silo to operate independently and the past state of technology limited sharing among silos.

But neither situation exists today. Money is short and collaborative opportunities are numerous.

The time has come to break down bureaucratic barriers, and partnership is the best tool we have to do just that.

Partnership is how we create frameworks for sharing, and sharing holds the key to operating more efficiently.

Last year, we brought the Department of Transportation and Public Works together under a single commissioner.

Squeezing out overhead, we were able to absorb a $3 million cut in state aid without cutting any of the routes used by our 110,000 daily Bee Line bus riders every day. That's how you maintain services with less money. It's also important to note our Bee-Line bus service had record ridership last year with more than 32 million passengers.

This year, we are proposing to combine the Youth Bureau and the Office for Women. This is a partnership of both necessity and smart public policy. State aid to our Youth Bureau is expected to be cut

dramatically, therefore, this is the ideal time to merge two offices that provide preventive human service programs to children and families.

A key focus of the Office for Women is domestic violence, whose perpetrators are often troubled youth, who, when they become adults, may bring their troubles to adult relationships.

Merging the Youth Bureau with the Office for Women will help us to preserve and improve services of both departments by lowering administrative overhead, improving coordination and treating families more holistically; intervening to stop patterns of abuse before they begin while continuing to provide positive youth development.

Public Safety and Emergency Services are departments where future partnership is essential. The opportunities for both departments to share training, technology, equipment, personnel and real estate are substantial. More important, greater consolidation and coordination will improve operational efficiencies and response. This in fact was one of the key lessons that came out of 9/11.

Last year, my proposal to bring the two departments together stalled in the Board of Legislators.

This partnership is too important to ignore, so I will continue to find savings and efficiencies by working administratively to streamline the two departments.

Efficiency, common interests, new ideas, and partnership must also extend beyond the walls of county offices and departments.

Last month, the county signed a contract to provide police services for the Town of Ossining.

Let me stress, Ossining is paying the full cost of all services, so there is no charge to county taxpayers.

But by being able to tap into the manpower, technology, communications, equipment and training of the county police, the

town now stands to see its public safety services to residents improve, while saving $600,000 the first year of the contract and even more going forward.

Partnership delivers results.

The path forward is clear – use efficiency, common interests, new ideas and partnership to guide future decisions.

But is that enough?

The answer is no.

Just because we know the way, doesn't mean we have the will.

There is a famous cartoon by Walt Kelly.

His punch line – "We have met the enemy and he is us" – may be the best answer there is to the quandary of why our political problems never seem to get resolved.

At the federal, state, county and local level, there is enormous and genuine good will for doing the right thing. But somehow special interests – which broadly defined is all of us – get in the way.

Ironically, prosperity seems to increase the power of our special interests. The more we have, the more we can give away without careful consideration of the costs or consequences.

Unfortunately, special interests don't contract in times of less. They get louder.

It is all understandable and none of it is new.

But when looking at the common needs of almost one million people, you see how silly and counterproductive so much of the "my needs" posturing is.

A recurring question people often ask me – and if truth be told one I ask myself not infrequently – is why even bother to try and change the status quo.

Why not just go along and get along?

Who cares about government spending?

It is all other people's money. Let the taxes run wild. Give the special interests what they want. Leave the tough decisions to someone else. Future generations can clean up the mess.

On a lot of days, it certainly feels like no good deed can go unpunished.

Much of last year was spent working very hard on coming up with a tax cut.

In response to our efforts, I received this email.

"Hi...just wanted to thank you. Got my county tax bill. Saved a whopping NINETY ONE (91) CENTS last year."

(Ninety one cents is all in caps and then repeated in numerical form….in case I missed it.)

Just another satisfied constituent. Except that email was from my father. (He is here tonight. I am not making this up.)

But he did add a PS. "You have my vote."

(That's good, because I think my Mom is still undecided. Just kidding, Mom.)

The reason why we make the decisions we do – even if they are unpopular, or not fully satisfactory – is that we owe it to those who follow us to leave things at least a little bit better than the way we found them.

This is not a political calculation. It is a human capability.

Unlike other creatures on earth, we have the ability to act in the interest of others as well as ourselves.

We don't always get it right. One might argue, we rarely get it right. But it is always worth the fight to try and get it right.

I am reminded of this every night, when before I go to sleep, Sheila and I walk down the hall and peek into the room of our three kids.

First we stare at them with amazement, give them a kiss and pray that God protects them.

Sean, our seven-year old, is usually asleep with my old Miami Dolphins blanket.

Kiley Rose, our six-year-old, is in her princess bed.

And Ashlin Grace, our one year old, clutching her bottle, rests like an angel in her crib.

Budgets and politics mean nothing to them.

But the decisions made by the adults around them, and around all the other kids in Westchester, do affect them.

The hard decisions we make today, or choose not to make, may very well be the difference between whether or not they can afford to live in Westchester when their time comes to start a career and have a family.

So that's why the fight to put the needs of our ***common good above those of the special-interests*** must and will go on.

And that's where I will leave it tonight.

I conclude my second state of the county where it began.

We are a county that is both fortunate and fragile. Since coming into office, my goals have remained the same:

- Provide tax relief
- Promote economic growth
- Preserve essential services

We have made important strides on all three.

Taxes are down. Economic activity is up. And, services are strong.

But much more remains to be done … and will be done.

Our fight to make our county more affordable for every resident goes on.

No one is saying it will be easy.

But, as long as ***of, by, and for*** the people guide our actions, success will be ours. We have the people to get the job done.

We the people, acting as partners, will grow stronger.

We the people, focusing on common interests, will overcome the naysayers.

We the people, sharing new ideas, will build a proud and better future; for ourselves and for the generations that follow us.

We are on the right path. We just need to stay on it…together.

Thank you…and may God bless you all.