



**ROBERT P. ASTORINO, WESTCHESTER COUNTY EXECUTIVE**  
State of the County Address to the People of Westchester

Westchester County, New York

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Welcome to the Central Jury Room here in the Westchester County Courthouse. In a small bit of history, this is the first time the State of the County address is being delivered in this room.

There is no truth to the rumor that the jury room was chosen because I get so many invitations from HUD and the Board of Legislators to meet them in court.

It is in this room that citizens serve their government each day.

So it is a fitting setting for citizens to hear the annual report on just how well their county government is serving them.

Thanks to our host, the honorable Alan Scheinkman, administrative judge for the Ninth Judicial District, for making this room available to us.

My governmental responsibility tonight is to report on the state of Westchester County to the Board of Legislators.

Chairman Ken Jenkins, Majority Leader Peter Harckham, Minority Leader Jim Maisano and all of our legislators ... thank you for joining me.

Also with us are:

- District Attorney Janet DiFiore
- County Clerk Tim Idoni
- And a host of other elected officials from around the county
- My wife Sheila is here along with my Mom and Dad. A special hello to my children, Sean, Kiley and Ashlin who are watching from home.

We begin tonight with a moment of thanks for the men and women who serve our country in uniform. We can never forget the debt we owe them.

With many of our veterans now returning home from overseas, the county stands ready to serve them.

Our Veterans Service Agency works year-round to ensure that veterans and their dependents receive the maximum benefits from the federal Department of Veterans Affairs and other agencies at all levels of government.

And our new Veterans Coalition provides information and resources about jobs, health care, mental health services and more.

Sadly, as we all know, not all of our soldiers return home from their tours of duty.

This year, Westchester County lost Sergeant Edward J. Frank II, who grew up in Yonkers.

Sergeant Frank was one of five soldiers who died on August 11 when an improvised explosive device detonated near their vehicle in Afghanistan's Kandahar province.

Sergeant Frank was 26. He is survived by his wife, Selena, three children, his father and mother.

An infantryman, Sergeant Frank had previously served two tours in Iraq.

His awards and decorations include two Army Commendation Medals and two Army Achievement Medals.

Tonight we recognize his sacrifice by awarding him Westchester's highest award, the Certificate of Distinguished Service.

To the entire Frank family you have our deepest sympathy for your loss and our unending respect and thanks.

Accepting the award is Sergeant Frank's mother-in-law, Janie Oakman.

Ladies and gentlemen. Please rise and join the Harrison High School Marching Band in a tribute to the service, sacrifice and memory of Sergeant Frank with the singing of our National Anthem.

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Harrison Huskies band members thank you for that stirring tribute.

In December, the band, under the direction of Charles Briem, will be traveling to Hawaii to participate in the 2012 Pearl Harbor Memorial Parade, commemorating the 71st anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the 50th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor Memorial.

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It is my great pleasure to be here tonight with all of you in this room and those joining us on News 12 to give my third State of the County address.

Y saludos a nuestros residentes hispanos. La versión en español del Discurso del Estado del Condado estará disponible mañana en [Westchestergov.com](http://Westchestergov.com) (guión) en acción.

You might say my administration is now in its junior year. It sounds a little funny, but as we all know, the older we get, the more life feels like we just keep repeating high school.

The question I want to focus on tonight is one that was posed my freshman year as County Executive.

It was January 2010, unemployment was 10 percent, the stock market was sputtering, and one of the things people asked me was:

Why would anyone want to be county executive right now?

I now have enough experience – and *scar tissue* – to answer the question.

You take the job because you want to fix things, build things and leave things better than how you found them.

I feel lucky to have the job right now because serving the public is never more important than when the challenges are greatest. Three years in, I can tell you I love coming to work every day. It's exciting. It's energizing.

Part of my routine is that I like to get out of the office.

In the morning, I go to the deli and get coffee and a muffin. At lunch time, I walk around White Plains and pick up a sandwich. I like to eat, but it also gives me a chance to meet people in every day settings.

People are not shy. They come up to me. Often they ask for help. I don't have all the answers. I wish I did. But I listen, take their information *and see if I can help*, in big ways or small.

And that's what makes this job so special.

It's completely counterintuitive, but it's the problems ... ***the never ending*** problems that make you want to come back each day, so you can get another shot at trying to fix things and make them better.

Sounds strange, but it is true.

The problems never end, and they never get any easier and that's because the needs of our residents never diminish.

But within each challenge lies an opportunity to make things better.

**And, that's why we are here.**

To work hard, get results and repeat the whole process over again.

**Fix what's broken.**

**Find new solutions.**

**And turn change into progress.**

**This is what governing should look like, and this is what I am committed to delivering.**

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So what exactly is the job of county government?

Simply put it is to deliver a set of services that are ***required, desired and paid for*** by the public.

How do we get the job done?

From day one, our compass has been set to what we call the three P's.

- Protect taxpayers
- Preserve essential services, and
- Promote economic growth.

On all three fronts, we have made substantial progress and equally important, we have positioned ourselves to do even more going forward.

It is well known to everyone in this room and watching at home that Westchester County has the highest property taxes in the United States.

But a new fact is emerging.

**County taxes are down.**

After two years in office, **the county tax levy is down 2 percent.**

And my vow to keep taxes down has not changed.

Just as I did a year ago, I pledge to you once again tonight that come November, I will submit a balanced budget for the third year in a row **that will have no increase in the county property tax levy.**

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I will also vigorously fight any attempt to reinstate the commuter tax.

Some politicians want to bring back this tax **that for years** unfairly targeted more than 100,000 Westchester residents. We can't allow that to happen, especially at a time when our economy is so fragile and our taxes are already way too high. I am ready to lead the fight to make sure the commuter tax never returns from the dead.

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One constant battle is with Albany.

Good government demands accountability.

In the case of Albany, it is time for accountability.

Asking government to pay its bills in a responsible way is not Republican or Democratic, red or blue; it is simple fairness.

Our system of unfunded mandates is a disaster.

We have no control over the bills Albany sends us, and the state has **no self control** over the size of the bills it sends us.

The result is a cost explosion that threatens to bankrupt us.

This year, nine state mandates will consume 82 percent of Westchester County's tax levy.

Big bucks for state bureaucrats and pennies for our parks, our day care, our buses, our flood prevention, our public safety, our seniors and our veterans.

Help in a distant future is no help at all.

Every city, town, village, and school district is being ravaged right now.

Unfunded mandates are like a terminal disease.

And Dr. Albany's response is: Let's wait a few more years before starting treatment.

**Westchester to Albany: Code blue. The patient is dying.**

**We need mandate relief now.**

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Pensions are just one example.

This year, Westchester's pension bill is \$79 million.

Next year, it increases to \$91 million.

The year after that the cost jumps to \$105 million.

The \$12 million increase we have to pay Albany just for pensions this year will consume almost the entire amount allowable under the state's 2 percent tax cap.

To put that in perspective, consider this. That's one expense and there are a total of 2,300 line items in the budget that have to be funded.

***Where is the money going to come from?***

It is not going to come from raising property taxes under my watch.

So the only alternative is to reduce expenses.

This year the only help Albany could muster was Tier 6 pension reform.

It was a first step, but frankly not much of one.

It doesn't apply to current workers; only future employees.

The savings will take 30 years to fully kick in.

Maybe Albany can delude itself for a few more years.

But the day of reckoning has already arrived for our school districts, villages, cities, towns and the county.

You don't have to go to Greece.

The financial struggles of Nassau, Suffolk and Rockland counties and the City of Yonkers are all front page news.

**Local communities and school districts here at home need help and they need it right now.**

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For too long, Albany has been masterful when it comes to the shell game of pitting Westchester's interests against those of New York City, upstate counties, and our own municipalities and school districts.

Albany marginalizes us by dividing our voices and dismissing our needs.

Every conversation in the state capital about unfunded mandates can be summed up like this:

***"Can't help you.***

***Timing is not right.***

***But let's discuss this next year.***

***Drive safely."***

*That's not exactly what they say up there. I made up the drive safely part.*

This attitude won't change on its own.

So we have to change it.

In January, I met with the 16 other county executives in the state to build a united agenda on Medicaid reforms.

In February, I went to Albany with Mayor Bloomberg to push for pension reform.

I was back in Albany in March and since last year I have been working with school districts and businesses to find ways to speak with one voice.

Financial necessity is bringing us all together.

**My number one state legislative priority is** to build a united front to show Albany its days of running from accountability; hiding from economic reality; and dividing constituents against one another must come to an end.

**Standing united with our cities, villages, towns and schools is our best bet for:**

- **working with Governor Cuomo to break the status quo**
- **reforming state government, and**
- **achieving mandate relief.**

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At the county government level, we have also been working hard to get our own house in order.

Westchester County's three triple A credit ratings remain secure thanks to careful management of our finances. In addition, our Budget and Finance departments have put strong policies in place to protect our triple A ratings going forward.

But the economic forecast is more bearish than bullish.

Our revenues will be flat at best for the foreseeable future.

This year, the tax levy – the amount of property taxes we collect – remains unchanged at \$548 million.

Sales tax revenue is up in the first quarter but mortgage tax revenue is down.

The one thing there is no uncertainty about is our skyrocketing expenses.

To give you a sense of the velocity, consider this: just three items –, Medicaid, salaries, pensions – went up by \$27 million the moment we turned on the lights on January 1.

That's equivalent to a 5 percent tax hike.

So if tax increases are off the table and other revenues are flat, how do we address the shortfall?

We do it by scrutinizing every area of government.

Since the day I arrived on the job, I have challenged my commissioners to justify every penny they spend.

And they've been doing an excellent job.

From 2005 to 2010, county spending increased by 23 percent, twice the rate of inflation.

Since coming into office, we have cut spending 7 percent.

Those are real, actual cuts, not government head fakes of decreasing increases.

The reason we have been successful is that we have changed the mindset. We stopped accepting automatic cost increases and started asking: *Why do things cost so much and do we really need them?*

We have made tremendous progress because we're asking the right questions and treating tax dollars like our own.

But just cutting won't get the job done.

The old saying “***close enough for government work***” is no longer acceptable. There is no room anymore for inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Our new management mindset starts with replacing opinion with objectivity. We deal with the facts as they are, not as we would like them to be.

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Here’s an example. The decision to cancel a contract with a bus company at the start of the year provides a window into how I approach difficult decisions.

The company provided service for a single bus route in Rye.

Its contract was costing the county \$240,000 a year to service 30 passengers.

That’s \$8,000 a year per passenger or \$665 a month.

To put that subsidy in context, just go online or look in any newspaper to see what a monthly lease on a luxury car costs these days.

An Infiniti, Lincoln, and Audi; these are all luxury cars.

Leather, wood trim, heated seats, Bluetooth.

Power everything; the works.

Even when you look at the fine print and factor in title, taxes and all costs due at signing, you come in well under \$665 a month.

The inescapable point is this:

**When it is cheaper to give your bus riders their own luxury car, it is time start to looking at alternatives.**

To suggest otherwise is governmental malpractice and a complete waste of taxpayer dollars simply to keep the status quo.

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There is no intent to be flip here. There is no pleasure in cancelling a bus contract and inconveniencing even one person.

But when the costs and alternatives were looked at objectively, it was obvious that substituting a new route was reasonable, necessary and beneficial.

For example, the new route – **for the first time** – allows riders to travel between Rye and White Plains, in fact all the way to Tarrytown, without transferring buses.

And the \$240,000 in contract savings can be put to work stabilizing the finances of the overall Bee-Line system.

Even with 100,000 riders a day and more than 30 million passengers a year, every Bee-Line route loses money. There are no profitable routes to subsidize unprofitable ones.

So savings are critical in order to keep fares down, maintain the fleet, and meet growing ridership demands.

The long-term viability of our Bee-Line bus system depends on our ability to stretch every dollar as far as possible.

To do that requires tough decisions, and I am not afraid to make them so we can serve as many people as possible at the most affordable price.

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On the future of the Bee-Line, we have some very good news.

Last month Liberty Lines, the private company that runs the vast majority of the Bee-Line system, reached a new four-year contract with its unionized drivers and mechanics.

During the negotiations, I was actively engaged. The actual contract was between Liberty Lines and its workers. But the county was a vital third party because it ultimately ends up paying the bill.

Weighing heavily on my mind was the memory of 2005, when talks broke down and a bus strike stranded riders for seven agonizing weeks, crippling our local economy in the process. I wasn't about to let that happen.

This year, the negotiations were tough, but fair. In the end, all sides made compromises they could live with. That's the way it is supposed to be.

I said it when the contract was settled, but it is worth saying again, both sides – Liberty and the Transport Workers Union – are to be applauded for their good faith bargaining efforts.

**Most important, this new contract means thousands of Bee-Line riders can look forward to uninterrupted service for the next four years.**

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Tonight, I have important contract news to report with respect to our county workers.

Our Teamsters' union has overwhelmingly approved a new contract, which I hope will stand as a model for our seven other unions.

The seven-year agreement provides the union and county with long-term financial certainty.

It couples a series of modest wage increases and freezes together in a way that is fair to both workers and taxpayers.

In addition, the Teamsters have agreed to start contributing 10 percent of their health care premiums.

In 2015, the contribution increases to 12.5 percent.

And all future members of the Teamsters union will contribute 20 percent to their health care *from the day they are hired*.

**This is a major breakthrough.**

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Since coming into office, I have been pleading with our unions to start contributing to the cost of their health care.

Free health care is a terrific benefit.

But in the real world nothing is free.

Free union health care costs taxpayers about \$140 million a year; taxpayers who simply don't have the money.

There is virtually no group today that still receives free health care.

Non-union managers at the county – myself included – have been paying for health care since I instituted that reform shortly after coming into office.

Truth be told, not all my commissioners, or the other elected officials here in the room tonight, welcomed the change. I'll put myself in that category too.

Frankly, it was money out of all of our pockets.

But we all realized that not paying a nickel for health care was simply not fair.

How could we continue to ask Westchester's private sector employees, who pay for their own health care on salaries that average about \$63,000 a year, to also pay for the health care of county workers, whose average salary is about \$71,000 a year?

Throw in fringe benefits and average compensation for a county worker jumps to almost \$110,000.

All we are asking our county unions to do is pay for health care like everyone else.

This is not anti union. I am a union member. I still belong to AFTRA – the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, and my dues are up to date.

The issue isn't our workers. They do a terrific job. The issue is that we can't continue to pay for benefits at a level taxpayers can no longer afford.

And, what's often missed in the debate is that free health care also carries a price for our unions.

It prevents salary increases and threatens future layoffs.

The realization that nothing is free was at the heart of our settlement with the Teamsters.

Both sides gave and both sides benefited.

My thanks to Teamsters' president Eddie Doyle Jr., his negotiating team and his union's rank and file. Your leadership has produced a model for all of our other unions to embrace.

**To our other unions and their leaders, please work with me to find savings to preserve jobs.**

**Let's work together to save as many jobs as possible.**

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Let's shift gears and talk about how the county is solving problems – thanks to the great people who work here and with whom we partner.

This year, like last year, the county's commitment to its neediest residents has remained firm.

At more than a half a billion dollars, the Department of Social Services' budget is the county's largest. And while Albany and

Washington cut aid, **my support to the county's safety net has not wavered since I took office.**

This year, county tax dollars going into the DSS budget are virtually unchanged in real dollars, and up in percentage terms.

But the department is more than dollars. Its greatest strength is its people. It is the dedication of the 1,100 men and women in our Department of Social Services that keep our county's safety net stitched together.

Sometimes the challenges seem insurmountable. And success is often invisible. Many victories are measured by what didn't happen. Others can't be told to the public because privacy must be protected.

But make no mistake, because of our people, the Department of Social Services is making real and recognizable progress.

This year the department's work with foster children received national recognition for its ability to improve care, while lowering costs.

The strategy: keep kids closer to home, and, when it is safe to do so, keep them at home, supported by intensive preventive services. The results have been impressive.

Out-of-state placements are down 70 percent.

Total placements are down 27 percent.

Today, 257 fewer children are in foster care than just four years ago.

Getting these results took a team effort. And that's exactly what the national Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration applauded in its national recognition of Westchester's child welfare programs.

Honored for the effort were not only the county's Department of Social Services, but the departments of Probation and Community Mental Health as well.

I would like to ask John Befus, our deputy commissioner of Child Welfare, and Kerron Norman, the director of our Yonkers district office of Child Welfare, to stand and be recognized for their efforts and those of the entire team.

Thanks to all of you for making Westchester County a national leader when it comes to helping kids.

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Elder care is another area where Westchester County is a national leader.

There are almost 200,000 seniors currently living in Westchester.

That's about 20 percent of the county's population, and the number is growing.

My commitment to seniors begins with my commitment to all residents to keep their taxes from rising.

With their mortgages typically paid off, property taxes are often their number one living expense. I hear it when I visit senior centers.

On recent visits with seniors in Scarsdale, Rye Brook, Mount Kisco, Yonkers, Larchmont, and Harrison, I repeatedly heard the same story.

*"I can't afford to live in my home anymore, Mister Astorino. My property taxes are higher than my mortgage ever was."*

The complaint is not just anecdotal. Surveys by our Department of Senior Programs and Services tell the same story.

I bring this up because some times tax relief gets skewed as help for the rich. Tax relief helps every property owner and none more than seniors living on fixed incomes. I am committed to helping seniors stay in the homes that they love and that they have worked their whole lives to own.

And keeping seniors in their homes goes beyond finances. As they age, they need help with the chores of day to day living, cooking, going grocery shopping, managing medications and even picking up the mail.

That's where the county's award-winning Livable Communities initiatives come in.

Here again, the idea is simple: neighbors helping neighbors.

The county provides guidance and oversight, but the real heart of the program comes from the volunteers who give of their time to help our seniors remain in their homes and continue to lead productive and independent lives.

Tonight, it is my great pleasure to recognize a team of our volunteers. They are sitting with our Commissioner of Senior Programs and Services, Mae Carpenter. Mae would you and the volunteers all please stand.

Thank you all for the important work you are doing for our seniors.

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Teamwork is our best tool for solving tough challenges with less money.

Our teamwork extends to many different forms of public private partnerships. One great example is the help we received from Friends of Parks and Con Edison in funding Bicycle Sundays this year on the Bronx River Parkway.

In these tough economic times, government funding is stretched to the breaking point. It is through public-private partnerships that we can keep great traditions like Bicycle Sundays alive.

Some of our partnerships are well known, others less so. But in all cases, individuals are stepping forward to bring much needed passion, expertise and commitment to solving complex problems on behalf of the people of Westchester.

In some cases, the partnerships aren't immediately obvious.

For example, one thing we want for all the children of Westchester is that they have access to all the positive experiences and opportunities that define growing up.

One of those moments is getting decked out in an evening gown or tuxedo to go to the high school prom.

As parents of teenagers know, the prom is expensive. For kids from low-income families, the price tag can often be out of reach.

The hard part should be getting a date ...not paying for a dress or tuxedo. USA Today reports this year's average prom date will cost over \$1,000.

Enter Noel D'Allacco, the founder of Operation Prom.

She came up with the simple idea to ask students to donate their old prom dresses to be used by kids who can't afford to buy their own.

The county participates in two ways: the Department of Finance provides storage space for the gowns and the Communications Department provides marketing help to get the word out to students.

The program has been a smashing success. Last year, Operation Prom collected 3,200 dresses. For the boys, it arranged discounts on tuxedo rentals. Many merchants are now providing discounts and vouchers for hair and make up as well. This year, contestants in the Miss USA and Teen USA pageants also got involved.

Noel, thank you for helping to create lifelong memories for so many kids.

Anyone wishing to donate a prom dress can do so on our website: [westchestergov.com](http://westchestergov.com).

The website is full of information on everything from daily news that affects county residents to background and updates on all the services we offer. I encourage people to visit the website regularly.

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Our partnerships extend outdoors as well.

Flooding is a chronic problem across Westchester.

Even Noah would be sympathetic. Forget about 40 days and 40 nights. In Westchester it feels like even partly cloudy is enough to flood our parkways.

The causes are well known. Part of it is geography. The county is spread across a valley dissected by four rivers – the Hutchinson, Bronx, Sprain, and Saw Mill. Part of it is development. Years of growth have seen many natural catch basins replaced by concrete.

The solutions are well known too, but they are expensive.

The price tag for river rechanneling runs into the tens of millions of dollars.

Dredging is also expensive, and its benefits are undone by Mother Nature over time.

The county is pursuing both options.

But we are also acting on our own.

In February, I announced that the county has designated \$9 million to address chronic flooding along the Bronx River and Sound Shore.

The projects target relief for:

- Bronxville
- Eastchester
- Greenburgh
- Larchmont

- Mamaroneck
- Mount Vernon
- New Rochelle
- Scarsdale
- White Plains
- Yonkers

Shovels are already in the ground.

Going forward, we will continue to work with the Board of Legislators and our local communities to identify and prioritize additional projects.

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We will also continue to team up with local residents.

After Hurricane Irene, people were constantly coming up to me and asking: What can I do to help?

Working with our Departments of Public Works, Planning and Parks, we came up with River Rescue – a public private partnership to help prevent and reduce flooding.

Once again a simple idea: Enlist volunteers to clean up the debris that clogs rivers and their banks.

We started in November on the Bronx River because it's on county property, which meant we didn't need permission from the state or federal government.

More than a hundred volunteers came out to help.

First among equals was Larry Wilson who brought with him fellow volunteers from the Turf and Landscape Association, who brought chain saws, chippers, backhoes and trucks to give "industrial strength" to our efforts.

Larry, please stand up. Thank you for mobilizing the Turf and Landscape Association and others on behalf of the county.

As River Rescue continues this year, I look forward to continuing to work with you and all the volunteers on this important effort to prevent flooding and protect the natural beauty surrounding us.

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The county's environmental stewardship is extensive.

This past Sunday (April 22) was Earth Day.

But we needed a whole month to take care of all of our April environmental initiatives.

**On April 12, we christened our new state-of the art Household Materials Recovery Facility, or as it's affectionately being called the H-MRF.**

There is nothing more annoying than cleaning up your house and garage and then having to wait weeks or months to dispose of the hard-to-get-rid-of waste and junk.

Run by the Department of Environmental Facilities, the H-MRF at the Grasslands Reservation in Valhalla is now the place to bring cleaning products, pesticides, electronic equipment, tires, batteries, propane tanks and even over-the-counter medications. It's open year round and all you have to do is make an appointment by phone or on line at [westchestergov.com](http://westchestergov.com).

**On April 15 we held our annual Pitch in for Parks. This year about 1,000** volunteers teamed up with the Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation to clean up and spruce up their favorite spots within the county's 18,000 acres of parks and trails.

My assignment was to clean the barn at Muscoot Farm. I brought the kids and they loved it.

**Next Monday, on April 30, we will cut the ribbon; opening the last major segment of the 45-mile North and South County Trailway.** Thanks to work that began in the 1980s, Westchester is now home to one of the region's premier bicycle and pedestrian paths.

Running the length of the county between Yonkers and Somers, the trailway is maintained by the Department of Parks, Recreation and Conservation. Believe me, it's a great place to take your kids for fun, exercise and family time.

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By conserving our natural resources and protecting our environment, we show how much we appreciate the gifts that we have been given and that we cherish them enough to preserve them for our kids, grandchildren and future generations.

One of those gifts is Teatown Reservation, an 875-acre private nature preserve and education center spread over Ossining, Yorktown, New Castle and Cortlandt.

In a unique public-private partnership, the county teamed up earlier this year with the board of Teatown and the Open Space Institute to acquire an additional 59 acres, known as the Gilbert property, to be preserved as open space.

As an extension of this partnership, Teatown has agreed to maintain a number of county owned trails.

This model shows how creative partnerships can be put together to protect the natural beauty around us.

**Good government and good stewardship of the environment go hand in hand, and I am committed to both.**

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Good government and environmental stewardship certainly apply to the Tappan Zee Bridge.

My position is very straight forward. The new bridge needs to be built as soon as possible ... and, we need to do it right.

Governor Cuomo has my thanks for moving the project beyond the inertia stage, where it had lingered for a decade.

**Members of our trade unions need to be put to work as soon as possible, and building the bridge will be a major boost for our economy.**

But with so much at stake, a bridge built in 2012 can't be designed for the 1950's.

Does that mean the bridge needs to be something out of the Jetsons?

No.

But we shouldn't stay stuck in the past either.

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Common sense, financial sense, environmental sense all tell us that some kind of mass transit must be part of the new bridge **from the start, not some future fantasy date.**

My view is that Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT, is the best answer because it provides immediate and future value.

BRT makes sense because it can be done at a modest cost.

BRT will also create additional commuter capacity. The last thing we need is for the state to spend \$5 billion to build a parking lot over the Hudson River, which is what we will have from day one if the bridge does not include a mass transit component.

Also critically important is the fact that BRT can get started without having to slow down bridge construction.

My fundamental point is that there are enough smart people working on this:

- to move forward on construction,
- to make a commitment to BRT from the start, and
- to build a bridge that will position our county, region and nation for strong economic growth today and into the future.

The state owes it to the public to give them its best effort from the outset.

**The goal isn't to simply start the bridge quickly; it is to finish the project on time, on budget and with a design that meets present and future needs.**

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Preserving the environment and growing our economy are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin called smart growth.

Call it evolution, or call it reinvention, smart growth comes down to building on the past, adapting to the present, and innovating for the future. Smart growth holds the key to Westchester's economic development.

Smart growth begins with putting our intellectual capital to work.

Westchester's greatest strength is its access to the brainpower that generates new ideas, new products and new industries.

Forty five percent of our residents – 25 years and older – hold college degrees. That's why we are proud to call Westchester "New York's Intellectual Capital."

Our highly skilled and trained workforce didn't happen by accident. In Westchester, the learning starts early in our terrific schools.

Just this week, Ossining High School was named a national finalist of the Intel Schools of Distinction Award, and this year, Westchester students once again showed off their intellectual capital in the Intel Science Talent Search in areas like biology, physics, and genetics.

This prestigious competition – it's the equivalent of American Idol for kids who are into science – involves almost 2,000 high school students from around the country.

Westchester placed 14 students in the semi-finals (that was 5 percent of the national total) and one in the finals.

The finalist, Ben Van Doren from White Plains High School, is here tonight with his teacher Tim Selig. His thesis had to do with tracking the migratory patterns of more than 40,000 birds.

His research was titled: "Meteorological, Topographical and Behavioral Correlates of Diurnal Autumn Morning Flight Migration in the Northeastern United States."

There is more science in there than I learned in four years of college. But I can tell you the results of Ben's research can be used, for among other things, to improve aviation safety and the site selection of communication towers and wind turbines.

Ben your selection as an Intel finalist is an extraordinary accomplishment. Ben is the first student in the history of White Plains high school to win the award. And if that was not enough, everyone should know Ben is also a captain of the school's track team, plays piano in the jazz band and is part of the school's academic challenge team, which will compete in New Orleans on Memorial Day weekend.

Westchester County is very proud of you and we wish you great success in your very promising future.

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Next year, Ben will take his talents to Cornell. My hope for Ben and all our other students is that they will find career opportunities here in Westchester when they finish their studies.

To generate new ideas, products, and markets, our businesses need intellectual capital. On the other hand, those businesses can offer great opportunities to their employees. Economists call it a “virtuous circle” and we need to keep it going in Westchester.

Intellectual capital is what made Verizon, Mastercard, IBM and Morgan Stanley household names. Access to it is why they are in Westchester.

Intellectual capital is what will power emerging companies, like Captain Lawrence Brewing, Sharc Creative, Elevation Burger, Business of Your Business, and Regeneron, to become household names and that’s why we are proud to have them starting and growing their businesses in Westchester.

Intellectual capital is what has kept our unemployment rate one of the lowest in the state and our growth prospects high.

Our economic development team is working every day to link our intellectual capital to new opportunities.

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One way the county can unlock our intellectual capital is to invest in the future.

That’s the idea behind developing the county’s North 60 property.

In March, I announced a major economic initiative to turn the North 60 into a world-class, high-tech research and development complex.

The 60-acre property on the Grasslands Reservation and adjacent to the Westchester Medical Center is ideally suited for such a development because there already are more than 30 bio-tech companies clustered around it.

Economic clusters grow stronger as more and more companies join them.

Because it is a large tract of undeveloped land in such an ideal location, the North 60 has the potential to be the catalyst that takes the county's growing bio-tech cluster to the next level.

There is no reason why the North 60 can't be the start of the next Silicon Valley or Research Triangle and the home of medical cures and technological breakthroughs.

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Another thing we can do is streamline our bureaucracy.

Doing business with Westchester County should not have to feel like ***cruel and unusual punishment***.

Unfortunately, some times it does.

Right now if you want to do business with the county, chances are this is what you will be up against.

And this is just the county portion.

There are the state and federal forms as well.

And if you deal with more than one county department, guess what, separate contracts are required for each one of them. How business friendly is that?

The paperwork is a particular killer for non-profits because they typically deal with multiple county departments.

Good news. Help is on the way.

Since last year, Dr. Grant Mitchell, who in addition to being the county's commissioner of Community Mental Health, is my outreach

coordinator to the non-profit sector. He has been leading an effort to streamline our contract and payment process.

We are keeping accountability, but adding some common sense, and we are replacing mountains of paper with web-based technology.

The bottom line is that streamlining our contract process will save time and money and that's a plus for everyone.

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Another way the county can help promote economic growth is by investing in infrastructure.

There are currently \$80 million in capital projects awaiting approval by the Board of Legislators.

These projects, initiated by my office, will create 550 construction jobs, as well as boost the economies of the communities where they are located, and they are spread throughout the county.

When they are done, these projects will make our roads and bridges safer, modernize our buildings, improve our technology capabilities, preserve the environment and protect public safety.

But for that to happen, the Legislators here tonight must approve them, many of which have been sitting on their desks for as long as nine months.

With all due respect, I am asking my colleagues in the Legislature to either approve or reject these projects.

**These vital projects will put people to work and we need to make that happen now. No more delays. The time for action is now.**

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A quick update on the affordable housing settlement.

It is well known that I was opposed to the settlement, which was entered into with the federal government in 2009 by my predecessor and the Board of Legislators.

But whatever people think of the settlement, I want to make three things clear.

**One: Westchester is committed to affordable housing.** The county understands the need and has won more than 50 local and national awards for its housing and community development programs; some of them even from the federal government. And it needs to be stressed that Westchester is a welcoming community; we are the fourth most diverse county in New York State.

**Two: Westchester is committed to complying with the terms of what is “in” the settlement.**

I could not be more proud of Westchester County and the progress we have made to date.

By working cooperatively with our communities, we are far beyond anyone’s expectations in meeting the settlement’s benchmarks.

With 196 units with financing already in place, we are only four short of satisfying the full goal for 2012.

**And three: Westchester, while I am county executive, will not be afraid to defend principles of law and liberty.**

On a personal level, I can tell you it is no fun challenging the federal government.

In engaging the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the county has moved forward with caution and respect. The issues before us are extremely serious. Each step we’ve taken has been carefully reviewed by our Planning and Law departments.

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We are a nation of laws. When a contract is signed, the parties must live up to what's actually **in** the agreement – not what they would like to be in it.

That means no one side – even if it is the federal government – can dictate new terms.

Westchester County, as I mentioned, will live up to all of its obligations. But it will not be bullied by the federal government to accept demands, which in HUD's own words go "beyond the four corners" of the settlement.

We took our claims of HUD's overreaching to the US magistrate, and he agreed with us.

HUD for its part has decided to appeal the magistrate's ruling. No surprise.

What is surprising is that HUD has decided to double down on withholding community development block grants from the county.

After the magistrate's favorable ruling that the county was in compliance with the settlement, we asked HUD to release the \$7 million it has been withholding since last May.

HUD responded last week. Not only did it say no to last year's block grant. It also said no to this year's money.

How ironic is it that HUD, which claims its mission is "is to create **strong, sustainable, inclusive** communities," won't release millions of dollars designated to do just that.

HUD's action forced us to layoff five workers assigned to the affordable housing settlement.

Withholding the money has also hurt non-profit housing organizations, as well as communities not involved in the settlement and some of our neediest residents.

To call HUD's behavior counter productive is an understatement to say the least. But this is how our federal government apparently believes housing gets built – through intimidation and outrageous demands.

Without any justification, HUD wants me to sue our villages and towns to dismantle local zoning.

This just doesn't make sense.

Our response is to build on our record of success.

We will continue to build affordable housing by working cooperatively with our communities; not through litigation.

**And, we will continue to defend the principles of law and liberty when it comes to protecting the rights of all Westchester residents.**

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Let me conclude with this thought.

It is fashionable these days to say government is broken. But talk is easy. Solving problems is the hard part.

Government's greatest weakness right now is not partisan debate; it is a bi-partisan lack of will to fix what's broken. Too many problems are simply ignored and put off for another day.

Government has become the equivalent of soccer and T-ball games for second graders. Politicians won't tell people the score but give themselves trophies anyway.

Last year, I quoted Abraham Lincoln in the State of the County address.

In 2012, there is much we can learn from George Washington.

One wonders how Washington would fare today. He was aloof, had a huge temper and not much of a sense of humor, ***if any at all.***

Washington's great strength and genius was in finding ways to get results, usually against long odds, by stretching resources beyond what anyone thought possible. Think Valley Forge.

He did it by having what biographer Ron Chernow calls a "clarity of vision" and the resolve to see the vision to completion.

At a time when accountability is so hard to come by, George Washington's resolute focus, courage to act and commitment to achieve results stand as examples to be admired and followed.

For county government in 2012, our biggest accomplishment may be ***having the will*** to try to fix what's broken.

Has every decision I've made been popular? No.

Has every action succeeded? No.

But in **no case** have we been afraid to confront the problems before us.

I wish we could all feel good about every choice we have had to make.

But the harsh truth is that some decisions are painful.

Saying "no" is never easy.

But you make the tough decisions as investments in the future.

You dedicate yourself to protecting taxpayers, preserving essential services and promoting economic growth.

**This is what governing should look like, and when it does you have government that is financially strong, operationally effective and passionately on the side of the people.**

**That's the kind of government I am committed to and that the residents of Westchester deserve.**

Working together is how we get it done.

Please join me.

We have the vision.

We have the guts.

We have the people.

**We have everything it takes to make Westchester better today and even stronger tomorrow.**

Thank you.