

2016

STATE
OF THE
COUNTY

Address to the
People of Westchester

Thursday, April 21, 2016



Robert P. Astorino
Westchester County Executive

Good evening.

It is my great pleasure to be with you here tonight to present the 2016 State of County Address.

This is the seventh year I have been honored as County Executive to report to the residents of Westchester on the progress of our county.

For anyone wondering if there is any breather in the seventh year, the answer is no. Working for Westchester never stops, and tonight I'll be talking about how all the parts of county government come together to make Westchester the place we are so proud to call home.

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As a matter of fact, we're gonna make Westchester great again!

We're gonna build the biggest buildings you've ever seen, the most beautiful golf courses with palm trees and bunkers filled with gold.

Plus, we're going to have free healthcare, free college tuition, free waffles and your own personal Unicorn!

And we're gonna build a wall. And it's gonna be a YUGE beautiful wall...and here's the best part: we're gonna have Putnam County pay for it. Believe me.

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To get started, I would like to welcome everyone here with us in the courthouse, and those watching on News 12 and Fios 1.

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And to our Spanish speaking residents.

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Bienvenidos a mi séptimo Discurso del Estado del Condado. Yo me sigo esforzando y trabajando para todas las comunidades de Westchester. Quiero que resalte su talento, su seguridad y su fortaleza todos los días. Usted puede ver una

version de mi discurso en español en Westchestergov(punto)com. Para nuestros amigos Ecuatorianos que perdieron familiares en el temblor de tierra, nuestras oraciones están con ustedes.

Gracias por ser parte de nuestra familia de Westchester.

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In the courthouse, Team Astorino is with us. My wife Sheila, our son Sean, and our daughters Kiley and Ashlin.

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Special thanks goes to our host, the Honorable Alan Scheinkman, administrative judge for the Ninth Judicial District, who along with all of the courthouse staff warmly welcome us each year.

Acting District Attorney James McCarty and County Clerk Tim Idoni are here.

We also have a host of city, town, and village officials with us.

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My thanks also go out to the members of the County Board of Legislators and Chairman Michael Kaplowitz for their partnership. We don't always agree, but whatever artistic differences we may have from time to time, our shared goal is always to promote the best interests of Westchester County.

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Unfortunately, we start the state of the county this year with profound sadness, but unbounded pride.

The life of Harrison resident Joseph Lemm was one of service and sacrifice. He died a hero four days before Christmas, laying his life down for others.

A New York City Police Detective, Lemm was in Afghanistan for his second tour of duty, serving with his reserve unit from the Air National Guard. Staff Sergeant Lemm had also served a tour in Iraq.

He was on patrol near Bagram Air Base with Staff Sergeant Louis Bonacasa of Long Island and other members of their team.

Coming toward them was a suicide bomber on a motorcycle.

When the terrorist made a sudden stop, just 15 feet in front of them, an instant decision had to be made.

Lemm and Bonacasa reacted selflessly to shield other members of the team. They died, so others could live.

Lemm and Bonacasa were awarded the Bronze Star for their valor in combat.

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Those who knew Joe Lemm will tell you that **what** made him so special and **why** their loss is so deep is not how he died, but **how** he lived every day of his 45 years with them.

To his friends and family, he was their real-life “superman.”

Hailing from the small town of Beemer, Nebraska and growing up to be six-feet-five, clean-cut, and square-jawed, he could easily be mistaken for Clark Kent. His police career was filled with accomplishments, ranging from rescue and recovery work following the attacks on the World Trade Center to rising to the rank of detective and earning five commendations.

What set Joseph Lemm apart was that his dedication to truth, justice and the American Way ... was grounded in a spirit of **extraordinary** generosity.

The loss of Joseph Lemm is so painful because a piece of what makes us all better people has been taken from us.

To his wife – Christine – their children – Brooke and Ryan – his parents and entire family, you have our deepest sympathies.

But you have something much greater than that.

You have a dad ... husband ... and son, whose bravery and service to others will echo for eternity. Your loss is too big to put into words. But his memory is big enough to fill your hearts with pride, strength and comfort.

He was Superman to many. A beacon for us all.

But most of all, Joseph Lemm – who we all look up to with awe – was yours ... first ... and always.

To recognize his extraordinary life and legacy, it is my solemn privilege to award Staff Sergeant Joseph Lemm with Westchester County's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award.

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On June 6, our remembrance and thanks to Joseph Lemm will continue when a bronze plaque will be permanently placed and dedicated in his honor at the Westchester Fallen Heroes Memorial Walkway at Kensico Dam Plaza.

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Working to keep people safe is the fundamental role of government.

In Westchester it takes many forms.

On the traditional side, we have our Departments of Public Safety, Correction, Health, Consumer Protection, Environmental Facilities and others.

But first, let's talk about the non-traditional approaches that we've taken to keep people safe.

Our innovative Safer Communities initiative is now in its fourth year. Safer Communities responds to critical, often seemingly intractable, problems by:

- Tapping into all existing resources throughout Westchester – those controlled by the county, as well as programs and services delivered by municipalities, schools, non-profits, religious organizations and civic associations.

- Improving communication, coordination and participation among all these groups.
- And sharing timely and realistic solutions built from our collective knowledge.

In short, we see a problem and then we try to fix it.

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Safer Communities grew out of the tragic school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012. Our first effort was to bring educators and law enforcement officials together to discuss and implement the most effective protocols for saving lives when our schools come under attack.

Our vigilance has continued. Earlier this month, 60 police, fire and EMS officers from around the county were schooled at our Police Academy on the latest techniques for combating active shooters. Much of the training focused on coordinating a joint response among them.

What I am most proud of is that we did not stop with school safety.

Since 2013, our efforts have included:

- Teaming up with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta to understand and treat violence as a public health issue.
- Starting a Youth Mental Health First Aid program, which has been cited as a model for suicide prevention, particularly among young people.
- Offering Crisis Intervention Training to first responders to help them safely diffuse difficult domestic situations involving individuals who pose a threat to themselves or others.
- And our Narcan training program. Narcan is an antidote for heroin overdoses. It won't stop the heroin epidemic, and much more needs to be done, but it can prevent death.

The county's Narcan responders have saved 65 lives in the two years since we started the training. That's 65 funerals that didn't happen. So to all our trainers

from the Health Department and all the people now equipped to administer this life saving drug, thank you.

Your work has been the difference between life and death.

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Last year, Safer Communities expanded with the introduction of our “**Dad Be There**” Fatherhood campaign.

With three young children of my own, I know the most important job I have every day is being a dad.

This is nothing against moms. In fact, “Dad Be There” exists to strengthen families by ensuring moms get the support they need. We’ve been asking too much of our moms, and it is not right.

The idea behind Dad Be There is simply to help dads – all dads – be better dads.

Some of the help is just plain fun. Coming up with activities for fathers to spend time with their kids.

And some of it is serious, offering a full scope of services from job training to drug treatment, so that dads have **no excuses** for **not** being the man that their families need. Sadly, more than 40 percent of all children in the United States today are born to single mothers. And a kid that grows up without a father in his or her life is more likely to drop out of school and get into trouble with gangs, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse.

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Earlier this month, our second annual fatherhood conference drew more than 400 participants to the County Center.

Our keynote speaker was Chef Jeff Henderson of the Food Network. The first African-American executive chef at the Bellagio in Las Vegas, Henderson is best known for his reality show – The Chef Jeff Project – which puts disadvantaged young adults to work teaching them cooking and life skills.

Chef Jeff’s message was that fathers have to own up to their responsibilities and that “fathers strengthen families, and are the foundation of values.”

I couldn’t agree more.

In fact these sentiments were at the core of a new county initiative I announced at the conference – the first of its kind in New York State.

It’s called the R.E.A.L. Parenting Program.

It stands for Responsible, Employed, Active and Loving parenting.

What we’re doing is working with noncustodial parents – mostly dads – who are behind on their child support payments. The program offers gradual debt forgiveness in return for successful completion of job-training, life-coaching programs and milestones designed to strengthen families.

The goal is to get dads back into their children’s lives by removing barriers, so they can be there for their families and provide for their kids, which most dads desperately want to do.

This program is the result of the hard work of a lot of people in our Department of Social Services. Let me recognize two of them. Commissioner Kevin McGuire and Deputy Commissioner Joe Kenner.

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This year we extended our Safer Communities initiative to youth sports. Under the banner of Safer Sports, we focused on addressing, preventing and treating sports-related concussions.

The effort began by assembling a task force of top medical professionals, school administrators, athletic directors, coaches and trainers. Six months of collaboration produced “10 Best Practices” for improving the ways schools and youth groups deal with sports-related concussions, especially with respect to post-injury management.

This is groundbreaking work.

It is not about scaring parents or young athletes. We strongly encourage participation in sports. My kids all play sports, and I coach. We're only looking to improve safety.

Our efforts have been endorsed by both the Brain Injury Association of America and the Brain Injury Association of New York State.

Groups from as far away as Arizona, Alaska and Washington State have asked us how they can build on our work.

We've had conversations with the National Football League as to how we might work together, and our Commissioner of Community Mental Health, Dr. Mark Herceg, has met with Congressional leaders and members of the state Legislature. Right now we're working on plans for expanding our outreach to sports groups throughout the county and hope to have that ready by the end of the summer.

Tonight, I'd like to thank Dr. Herceg, Health Commissioner Dr. Sherlita Amler, and four members of the task force who are with us.

- Dr. Vicki Iannotti, from Children's & Women's Physicians of Westchester
- Dr. Barry Jordan, of Burke Rehabilitation Hospital
- Dr. Ron Jacobson, from the Maria Ferrari Children's Hospital
- And, Dave Byrnes, representing the Section One Athletic Trainers Society.

Great work!

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Let's pivot back to our more traditional approaches for delivering services.

Actually, one of the challenges faced by county government is that much of what we do is often not seen by the public. So let's give you a look at what takes place every day inside Westchester County government...

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To all the men and women who work for County Government, thank you for the services you deliver and the professionalism you bring to the job 365 days a year.

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Before I came into office, the approach was tax and spend. Pure and simple.

Work off a wish list from every department and special interest group and raise taxes to make up the shortfall each year.

The result was between 2005 and 2010 spending increased 23 percent and taxes increased 17 percent. People and businesses couldn't take it anymore.

I came into office in 2010 on a pledge to stop the madness. And guess what?

We've done that.

At \$1.8 billion, the 2016 budget is actually less than when I took office six years ago. Think about that for a minute.... That just doesn't happen by itself.

Mostly through attrition and voluntary separation incentives, we've been able to reduce the county's workforce by 15 percent, from 5,700 in 2010 to 4,800 this year, all without any loss of service to the public.

And we've cut the county tax levy. We cut it by 2 percent in 2011, and we have followed that up with **five** consecutive years without a tax hike.

The record is clear.

Spending is down...

Taxes are down ...

And, we've shown that government can work and live within its means – just like **you and me and everyone else.**

The promises have been kept.

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We have replaced tax and spend with **save and keep** and here's why that is so important.

Too many people are struggling to stay in their homes, keep their businesses afloat or deciding to move away, or not come here in the first place, because our taxes are **too damn high**.

The 3,143 other counties in America are getting the job done cheaper. So when some say we should raise taxes, remind them of that.

We have been guided by the fact that even small numbers can add up quickly when it comes to taxes.

I hear it all the time: what's the big deal if we increase taxes just 2%, which is what the state's fictional cap allows. If we had raised taxes just 2% over the last six years, it would've cost all of us \$317 million...or \$1,000 for the typical household in Westchester.

Politicians don't have a monopoly when it comes to deciding what services are essential to individuals and families.

Every extra dollar that stays in your checking account instead of the government treasury is a dollar that you can spend on what **you** think is important or needed in your life.

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So once again, for the 7th straight year I am pledging to submit a budget to the Board of Legislators in the fall that **will not raise the county tax levy**.

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The key to keeping county taxes stable is growth.

Fortunately, our vital signs are healthy.

The population is up 3 percent since the 2010 census – bringing us to just about one million people.

Unemployment is down to 4.4 percent from 5.2 a year ago and household median income is almost \$80,000, one of the highest in the nation.

Our credit rating is the best of any county in New York, and as a result of our good credit, Westchester will save \$5 million over the next two years from just one recent refinancing.

None of this happens by accident.

Just like proper diet and exercise keep our bodies fit, savings and investment keep our economy healthy.

Growth starts with promoting our strengths. Business and community leaders tell us Westchester's top three are Talent, Accessibility and Quality of Life.

Selling our strengths begins with attitude – letting every large, medium and small company know that Westchester wants their business. And we have plenty of entrepreneurs willing to take a chance here.

One of them is Priska Diaz of Eastchester, who came to the United States from Peru at age 17. She might best be described as a “Mom – preneur.”

While raising her family, she built a company literally on her kitchen table. Her idea was to design an air-free baby bottle. She did and today her award-winning baby bottles are sold in Babies R Us, and her company, Bittylab, is expected to sell more than 1 million of them.

Priska Diaz is an example that the American Dream is alive. Way to go, Priska!

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Whether your company is big or small, we have powerful tools to help you grow.

Our Industrial Development Agency works with private sector companies and our Local Development Corporation partners with non-profits. Through a variety of incentive programs, the IDA and LDC can help lower construction and financing costs at no risk to taxpayers and no cost to the county.

Recent IDA projects range from the transit-oriented LCOR development, a \$250 million, mixed-use, residential complex near the White Plains train station; and the \$190 million build out of Regeneron's headquarters, so the company can expand the workforce at its Mount Pleasant and Greenburgh campus to 2,500.

The biggest and most recent project is on the not-for-profit side. In March, the LDC made tax-exempt financing available – again at no risk to taxpayers – to the Westchester Medical Center, which will allow it to break ground this spring on a \$230-million Ambulatory Care Pavilion.

Every one of these projects is a vote of confidence in Westchester.

Equally important, every one of them creates jobs.

Think about this:

Since 2010, our IDA has helped spark private investments in projects totaling \$1.7 billion, which have retained or created 20,000 jobs.

The LDC projects totaled \$600 million and 1,400 jobs.

It all adds up to success: Billions of dollars in investment and thousands of jobs.

And there is more. The latest available data show that private sector companies in Westchester created almost 40,000 jobs since 2010.

Growth and employment are the key to our future.

We are working every day to deliver both.

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Smart growth requires creativity. As the world changes, as technology advances, you have to keep your eyes open to new opportunities. One thing we are constantly looking at is our county assets, specifically if there are ways to increase and unlock their value.

Our golf courses, airport, waste water treatment plants and real estate leases all have revenue streams attached to them. The question is whether the county can take steps to increase these revenue streams in ways that benefit taxpayers.

A prime example is county-owned property called the North 60.

When it comes to growth, we need to think big and we need to think smart.

Think Silicon Valley.

Think Research Triangle in North Carolina.

Think of the North 60 as one of the world's leading centers for the advancement of bio-technology and life sciences, right here on our Grasslands campus in Valhalla.

The future is now.

We already have a foothold with companies like Regeneron and Acorda Therapeutics, and the expansion into Westchester of leading hospitals like Sloan Kettering, Montefiore and New York-Presbyterian.

Anchoring the transformation of the North 60 will be the \$1.2 billion Westchester Bio-Science and Technology Center.

When finished, the new center will feature more than two million square feet of biotechnology and research facilities, alongside space for medical offices, shopping, a hotel and a Children's Living Science Center.

The benefits include:

- An estimated \$9 million in new real estate taxes annually
- \$7 million a year in rent to the county, and
- the creation of roughly 4,000 new construction jobs and 8,000 new permanent jobs for people of all skills.

Thinking big, playing to our strengths and building smart is how we grow.

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The lease is now before the Board of Legislators for their review. The administration stands ready to assist the board in any way to move this important project forward.

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Also before the Legislature is the future of Playland. Years in the making, this exciting plan calls for investing \$60 million into the park through a public-private partnership with Standard Amusements.

The Board of Legislators has set a vote for May 2. I want to thank all the members of the Board for their careful review, constructive criticism and moving the process forward in a timely manner. Once approved, it won't be long before you start to see great enhancements and new attractions.

Playland opens on May 7th for its 88th season. So please come - we need the money. Nothing would be better than knowing on opening day that the Playland so many of us have loved for so many generations will continue to be loved by our kids and their kids.

The time is now to save Playland for the future.

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No State of the County Address would be complete without an update on the affordable housing settlement reached in 2009 by my predecessor and the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Unfortunately, as I've been warning for the last several years, a combative federal government has continuously been harassing and threatening the county by taking away funding, unilaterally trying to change the rules in the middle of the game and maligning our communities with false assertions of segregation and discrimination.

The worst day was March 17 when the monitor assigned to the settlement issued a report that wrongly accused me, members of my administration, and the county of lying and being in breach of the agreement.

This was a smear by the monitor, who was hired by HUD and serves at its pleasure. The allegations are false ... and easily disproven.

For example, the monitor said that I "denied that housing discrimination existed." But then he quotes me – in his own report – saying the exact opposite on the Sean Hannity show.

I would never tolerate discrimination, and it is against the law. Anyone who wants to live in our county can do so in the community of their choice and in any home they can afford.

As I have said numerous times, and I'll say it again tonight loud and clear: **there is absolutely no place for discrimination in our county.**

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We have accomplished a lot over the past six consecutive years, meeting annual benchmarks for developing the settlement's 750 units of affordable housing in 31 mostly white communities by the end of this December.

In 2015, 649 housing units had financing in place; exceeding the requirement by 49.

In addition, 588 units had building permits or certificates of occupancy, 63 more units than required.

We also posted a significant legal victory.

In September, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit reaffirmed the county's longstanding contention when it said, quote, "there has been no finding, **at any point**, that Westchester actually engaged in housing discrimination." End quote.

So despite HUD's allegations, **our progress is clear evidence that Westchester's zoning is not exclusionary and that our county is one of welcoming communities.**

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On that point, we launched our "One Community" campaign in 2015, which reaffirms the county's commitment to promoting fair and affordable housing and celebrates the county's incredible diversity and the benefits it brings.

Ironically, the county's successes explain the bullying by the federal government. HUD's leverage over Westchester ends when the county fulfills its obligations under the settlement.

I really believe HUD **does not** want us to build the 750 units on time.

The latest report by the monitor seems to further the plan.

Make allegations. It doesn't matter if they are true or not.

The media will always presume the worst.

Then use the unlimited resources of the federal government to tie up the county with legal maneuvers.

Once in court, stay in court.

And that's HUD's end game: a settlement that never ends.

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The latest assault on the county could be the most serious to date because it calls into question our basic freedoms as Americans, starting with the First Amendment's right to free speech.

The central commitment of the First Amendment, and this according to no less an authority than the U.S. Supreme Court, is that "debate on public issues should be uninhibited, robust, and wide-open."

But tell that to the monitor and HUD.

Not only has the monitor made false accusations. He is also asserting that the county has no right to defend itself because he doesn't like our "**tone.**"

In other words, dissent will not be permitted.

Any disagreements with the monitor and HUD must be checked at the door.

Of course that's not how our government is supposed to work. And that's why I have pushed backed so strongly when the federal government has overreached.

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HUD would do well to revisit the wisdom of Alexander Hamilton.

“It's not tyranny we desire,” Hamilton said. “It's a just, limited, federal government.”

A just, limited federal government is all we are **asking for in Westchester.**

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It would be nice to send everyone at HUD to see Hamilton on Broadway. But that would probably cost more than the entire settlement.

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From the start, my approach to the Settlement has been to follow the law: fulfill the county's obligations ... and defend the constitutional rights of our municipalities to control their local zoning.

The two are not mutually exclusive, and I am proud to say our record proves it.

Our path has not been easy, but it has been right and worth defending every step of the way.

Westchester will always follow the law ...and as long as I am County Executive it will never give up its rights under the law.

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We end tonight by coming back to the navigational compass that we have used since Day One of my administration.

We call them the “three P's.”

- Protect taxpayers
- Preserve essential services
- Promote economic growth

By sticking to them, we have shown that government **can work for the people.**

So much of what you hear about government these days is just talk. Idle chatter.

Sound bites that sound good, may even make you feel good for a second or two, but do no real good.

Our focus has been on the work. Working for Westchester by making the tough decisions required to produce results. Grinding forward, but always moving ahead.

These efforts have paid off. We have shown that government can live within its means; deliver high quality services and stimulate economic growth.

Going forward we will reach higher and accomplish even more. There is nothing to stop us. Government can work for the people when it's on the right path ... and we **are on it.**

Every day we are putting the best of Westchester to work for everyone who calls our great county home.

County government is working, working hard and working for you.

Thank you for the chance to be part of it.

Good night and may God bless you each and every day.

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Robert P. Astorino
Westchester County Executive