



Westchester County Executive
ROBERT P. ASTORINO

**2013 STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS
TO THE PEOPLE OF WESTCHESTER**

Tuesday, April 23 • 7:00 p.m.



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*Westchester County Courthouse
Central Jury Room
111 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., White Plains*

Good evening and welcome to the Westchester County Courthouse.

This is our second year having the State of the County address in the Central Jury room.

It is good to have all of you with us tonight.

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

My 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.

I also want to welcome everyone at home watching us on News 12.

Thanks to everyone for being here, especially my family.

Before we start, I would like to acknowledge that our hearts and thoughts are with the victims and families of the Boston terror attacks and the West Texas plant explosion. Please keep them all in your prayers. [PAUSE]

In Westchester, the news of the state of the county begins on an equally serious but more positive note.

Last year, not one man or woman serving from Westchester in our armed forces lost their life on the battlefield.

That is not to say great sacrifice, courage and dedication have been absent.

One example is retired Lance Corporal Nancy Schiliro, who is with us tonight.

A self-proclaimed tomboy growing up in Eastchester, Nancy nonetheless surprised her family when she enlisted in the Marine Corps.

In September of 2004, she was deployed to Al Asad, Iraq, where she served as one of only two embarkation specialists in her unit.

Life was pretty much non-stop, 16- hour days until **close** to the end of her tour.

It was February and she was chatting near one of the base's large diesel fuel tanks when a mortar round struck.

Black smoke billowed and Nancy blacked out.

When she woke, her face was cut but she remembers saying to her partner. "I feel fine."

But she wasn't.

Four surgeries followed. To save her left eye, doctors had to remove her right eye.

She will tell you the emotional pain of having a prosthetic eye was the worst part. Depression and isolation followed.

Then a friend encouraged her to attend a meeting of Project Odyssey, which is part of the Wounded Warrior program.

By bonding and sharing similar experiences with other female soldiers, her recovery began and her confidence returned.

But the story doesn't end there.

Today Nancy's life is dedicated to helping returning soldiers readjust to life at home working for Wounded Warriors full time as a benefits liaison.

Nancy, thank you for your heroism and continuing service to our country.

It is particularly fitting that we honor Nancy tonight as 2013 has been declared the Year of the Woman Warrior.

And for any veterans out there, who need any kind of help – whether for housing, counseling, benefits, or advocacy on your behalf – please contact our Veterans Service Agency.

It is there to help, and nobody is better at getting you help than our director Vito Pinto and his team.

Contact information is on our website at westchestergov.com.

Visit our website for more information on any issue addressed tonight and also feel free to follow and contact me on Facebook and Twitter.

And of course, Westchester residents can always call my office at: 914-995-2900 or email me at ce@westchestergov.com

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There is another veteran – not with us tonight – whose service to our county and nation cannot go unmentioned.

As a young man, and throughout his life, he had the distinction of serving three branches of our military: the Army, Air Force and Navy. He also served in all three branches of government.

- He was a Yonkers City Councilman and chairman of the County Board of Legislators.
- He was Westchester County Executive from 1983 to 1997.
- And he finished his public service as a judge on the state Supreme Court.

Of course we are talking about Andrew O'Rourke, who died in January.

Andy O'Rourke touched many with his wisdom and wit, including myself.

He accomplished what we all aspire to do – he made lasting contributions that left us better than before.

He led by example.
He moved us forward.

And he brought out the best in Westchester.

Tonight, as I stand before you, as he did so many times to give the State of the County Address, I want to use this occasion to say, “Thank You” and lead a round of applause for one of Westchester’s great leaders.

Thank you, Andy.

....

It’s hard to believe that this is my fourth State of the County Address.

The time has passed like the snap of a finger.

I’ve learned a lot. I am grayer for sure, maybe even losing some.

Para mis amigos hispano hablantes...

es difícil creer que este es ya mi cuarto Discurso del Estado del Condado.

He aprendido mucho, y les puedo asegurar una cosa – mi español ha mejorado muchísimo.

Por favor visiten la página web: [westchestergov punto com](http://westchestergov.punto.com) – guion Accion para ver y leer mi discurso en español.

From day one, our goal has been to deliver results; which the public wants and deserves.

Government without results is wasted effort.

But results don’t come easy.

Priorities must be set.

Hard choices must be made.

Partisanship must give way to partnership.

Rhetoric must yield to leadership.

To help us deliver results, we have a compass we call “The Three P’s”:

- Protect taxpayers
- Preserve essential services
- Promote economic growth

The Three P’s” remind us every day why we are here.

Protecting taxpayers is all about fairness.

For our social contract to survive, we need to strike the right balance between what the government takes and what the people can afford to give, and we work on that balance every day.

Preserving essential services goes to the fundamental reason government exists – to provide society with the things that individuals sometimes cannot:

- A social safety net for our residents in need.
- Roads, bridges, airports.
- Public safety, health and education.
- Parks. Open space. Environmental safeguards to protect our air and water.

Preserving these essential services requires smart government.

Smart government begins with challenging the status quo; prioritizing, not simply perpetuating.

- **Improving** what is working;
- **Fixing** what’s not; and
- **Focusing** beyond the symptoms of problems to their underlying causes.

So our department heads are charged every day with using their experience and expertise to find smart ways to preserve our essential services and to protect taxpayers.

Promoting economic growth is the engine behind the first two P's.

Jobs keep taxes low and help pay the bills for essential services.

Westchester has many advantages: smart people, great schools, open space, convenient transportation, outstanding restaurants, shopping and the arts.

But it is also expensive with multiple layers of government and regulations to navigate.

If we can maximize the positives and minimize the negatives, people will want to live and do business here.

That's our formula for economic growth.

....

To borrow a line from the late, great Ed Koch: How are we doing?

For starters, the tax levy is down 2 percent over the past three years.

Cynics will say a 2 percent cut isn't much.

But contrast it to the 17 percent tax increase over the previous five years.

The direction has reversed and the progress is real.

That progress is so important because Westchester residents need relief.

Whether it's seniors struggling to stay in their homes.

Or young couples trying to buy their first.

Entrepreneurs with dreams.

Or, families with college tuitions to pay.

Every resident in Westchester deserves tax fairness.

In all there are ***more than 350 taxing districts*** in Westchester.

The number is staggering and the combined result is the highest property taxes in the United States.

County government can't stop the tax madness on its own.

But it can lead the way. And it has.

A 2 percent cut in the tax levy in 2011.

No increase in 2012, no increase in 2013.

The promise not to raise taxes has been kept....

And the pledge continues.

For the fourth straight year, I will submit a balanced budget to the Board of Legislators **with no tax increase.**

....

In managing the county budget, our goal is smart government. Smart is when you work together with your unions to forge fair contracts that protect jobs and taxpayers at the same time.

When I came into office, taxpayers had to pick up the entire \$120 million cost of employee health care. I led the charge to change that.

Year one, we passed legislation so that management and elected officials – myself included – started paying a portion of their health care costs.

Today, four of our eight government unions are now contributing to their health care.

To our Teamsters, Correction, Superior Corrections Officers and Nurses unions, **thank you for your partnership.**

And to our four other government unions, please...the time to start contributing to your health benefits is now – **just like everyone else.**

This year's budget, like last year's, was a bi-partisan effort.

We negotiated between two goal posts.

We did **not** raise the tax levy and we also safeguarded the county's three triple A credit ratings, which was critically important because any downgrade by the ratings agencies – Moody's, Standard & Poor's and Fitch – would make it more expensive to run government operations.

For counties, Westchester has the highest credit rating in New York State and a higher rating than the United States of America. To keep it that way, we took a stand: No more raiding of the reserves to pay for day-to-day operating expenses.

That left \$1.7 billion to build a budget.

We built a coalition of Republicans and Democrats and split our differences down the middle.

The compromise turned out to be a balanced and responsible budget that

- **protected taxpayers...**
- **safeguarded our triple A credit ratings,**
- **provided for the neediest among us and**
- **enhanced our quality of life in Westchester.**

It was a major accomplishment and I want to thank the bi-partisan coalition of Republicans and Democrats that came together to forge a consensus around what's best for Westchester.

Memo to Washington: Bi-partisan government can work and we've shown how to do it.

It needs to be stressed that this year's budget preserved essential services.

In times of need, Westchester County is there.

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Our biggest test came from Hurricane Sandy.

It was a gigantic mess for all of us.

Tragically, the storm claimed three lives.

More than 200,000 homes and businesses lost power, including mine.

It took more than two weeks to restore the last home.

Throughout the storm, I witnessed the damage first hand; visiting every municipality in Westchester and touring the region with Governor Cuomo, Senator Schumer and other officials.

I literally spoke with thousands of residents during the storm – at warming shelters, community centers, and through email, Facebook and Twitter.

They were cold, tired and frustrated but they were making the best of it and helping others.

We put communication, prioritization and partnership to work day and night until we got our residents through the storm.

Our Emergency Operations Center in Hawthorne mobilized immediately. It was intense.

New Castle was typical of many of our municipalities.

Trees down. Power lines exposed. Roads impassable.

I called Supervisor Susan Carpenter from the car and asked: “Can we help you?”

A couple of minutes later, she greeted me at the door to town hall. Her face was a picture of frustration.

Inside she pointed to maps. Big parts of town were literally cut off. Emergency vehicles could not reach people. She needed roads cleared. Immediately.

But to do that she needed more help from Con Ed.

A short time later we got her that help.

Throughout the storm – from the car, the office and the command center, I was on the phone and meeting in person with Kevin Burke, the CEO of Con Edison, and Mark Lynch, the president of New York State Electric and Gas.

Believe me, you didn't want to be in the room for some of those conversations.

But they were constructive and produced results. We made our points.

Con ED and NYSEG needed to do a much better job working with our municipalities and communicating with their customers.

Our residents are a patient and resilient bunch, but when they are told they will have power back in one week, and find themselves two weeks later still sitting in the cold and dark... that's a problem. They deserve better.

Since the storm, we've met with our municipal officials and the utilities to incorporate lessons learned, share best practices and work to improve before the next big storm hits.

I personally met with Kevin Burke in his office to outline a set of post-storm proposals and recommendations. These specific steps and other improvements will be outlined at a press conference with Con Edison in the coming weeks.

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Nowhere is our commitment to essential services more important than when it comes to safety.

We had not even caught our breath from Hurricane Sandy, when the notion of what it means to be safe in America was shattered.

On Friday, Dec. 14, disbelief turned to shock and sorrow when we learned of the murders of 20 children – ages 6 and 7 – at their school in Newtown Connecticut, along with six adults.

In a kitchen table conversation at my house that night, my son Sean said if a shooter were in his school, he would try to escape. Kiley said she would hide in the building or play dead.

They asked me who was right?

I honestly didn't know. But I needed to find out.

I needed to know what I should be doing as a parent and what I should be doing as county executive.

That following Monday, I put the question to our commissioners. What can we do? What should we do?

I gave them three parameters:

- Number one: Be comprehensive.

I told them to look at the full spectrum of factors that can cause and prevent violence.

- Number two: Be practical.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Don't tell me the answer is more money and don't build more bureaucracy. Mobilize existing resources and get them to people in ways they can use quickly, easily and effectively.

- And number three: Put something together that can serve us not just now but in the future.

The initial reaction to tragedies like Newtown is just - do something. We wanted to do it right.

The result is our Safer Communities initiative.

In February, we brought more than 300 law enforcement and school officials together at SUNY Purchase for a Schools Safety Symposium. It's said to be the largest gathering of school and law enforcement officials in the same room ever in Westchester.

The day began with a keynote address by Bill Bratton, the former top cop in New York, Boston and Los Angeles.

The biggest takeaway was that collaboration is critical.

Two weeks ago, we held a Community Violence Prevention Forum at the County Center. It drew 400 people.

This time, school and law enforcement officials were joined by community leaders, judges, doctors, mental health experts, clergy, elected officials and non-profit leaders.

Here the focus was on treating violence as a public health issue.

Our keynote speaker, Doctor Howard Spivak, the director of the Division of Violence Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, emphasized that just as with illness, violence is preventable. Probably never 100 percent. But progress can be made, depending on how you treat it.

The day's participants formed "action teams" around:

- Improving Community Partnerships
- Treating Violence as a Public Health Issue
- Building Safer Learning Environments in Schools and
- Strengthening Family Safety Nets.

The findings are being compiled into a report. When it's done, this blueprint will provide concrete steps every community in Westchester can take to prevent violence and make our communities safer.

Going forward you have my commitment that Westchester County will continue to lead a ceaseless effort to keep our kids, our schools and our communities ***as safe as they can be....***

What has been so encouraging about this is that it speaks volumes about the character of Westchester's residents.

We asked "what can we do" and more than 700 people showed up to be part of the answer.

So to everyone who participated – and a number of you are here tonight – let me say thank you.

Special thanks to:

- Dr. Sherlita Amler, our commissioner of Health.
- Dr. Grant Mitchell, our commissioner of Community Mental Health.
- George Longworth, our commissioner of Public Safety.

....

Westchester residents should also know that the county's social safety net remains strong.

Since coming into office in 2010, we have increased spending in the Department of Social Services by \$17 million to \$559 million, while at the same time, the feds and the state were cutting aid to our neediest residents.

Money in the 2013 budget also goes to expand services of others. For example, \$50,000 went to Legal Services of the Hudson Valley to help them open an office in Peekskill to serve seniors, immigrants and victims of domestic violence.

Everyone should also know that we are managing the most value out of every dollar at DSS.

Day care is one example.

Yes, it is true that in a bi-partisan compromise we asked parents receiving taxpayer-subsidized day care to pay a little more.

But what you don't always hear is that we were able to increase the number of slots by 18 percent or almost 600, so that many more low income families can now get help.

And even with the parental share increase, Westchester families in the program are still paying much less than those in New York City and most other counties.....

Perhaps our biggest success has been foster care.

Adoptions are up 41 percent over the past three years **and** foster care caseloads are at an all time low.

This means we are getting kids out of institutions – many of them far from Westchester – and into permanent homes near family and friends.

Better service at a lower cost. Another example of smarter government.

But there is more to the story than charts and numbers. Our success is a very human one – the result of families who are willing to embrace society's least fortunate children as their own.

Brenda and Anthony Gears have been foster parents since 2009.

They live in Mount Vernon and both have worked for the City for more than 20 years. With their two daughters now grown, they have opened their home to four foster children in the last four years.

Marisol and Eduardo Gonzalez live in Scarsdale. Married for more than 20 years, they were unable to have children of their own. In 2011, they welcomed two year old Danielle into their home as a foster child. Last year, they adopted her.

A death in the family prevented Brenda and Anthony from joining us tonight.

Marisol and Eduardo are here.

Marisol and Eduardo – and to Brenda and Anthony – thank you for making it part of your lives to give hope and love to kids, desperate for both.

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From healthy families to a healthy economy.

If you want to understand economic growth in Westchester, there is no better place to start than with beer and cookies.

What do beer and cookies have to do with economic growth?

They tell the story of two companies that are great at what they do, could locate anywhere, but have chosen Westchester as home.

They are The Captain Lawrence Brewing Company in Elmsford and Bake-Me-A-Wish in Peekskill.

In some ways, the stories of Captain Lawrence and Bake-Me-A-Wish could not be more different.

Scott Vaccaro, the owner, head brewer and **Captain** of Captain Lawrence, grew up in Lewisboro on Captain Lawrence Drive.

For Maria and Pablo Morales, the owners of Bake-Me-A-Wish, home was Mexico.

Scott's toughest early decision was to convince his parents that he should leave Villanova University, where he was studying accounting, to become a beer brewer. *We can only imagine how well that conversation went.*

Maria and Pablo's toughest decision was to leave family and friends behind to start a new life in the United States.

Today, Westchester is the beneficiary of their hard work.

I challenge anyone to come up with a tastier beer or chocolate chip cookie.

Maria, Pablo and Scott we couldn't be more proud that you saw Westchester as a place of opportunity for your companies and dreams.

You've heard me say it many times: Government doesn't create jobs. But we can be helpful.

We do that by fostering an environment that allows businesses to prosper.

We can't make or sell their product, but we can hold their taxes in check, provide incentives to help them grow and maintain the quality of life that attracted them to Westchester in the first place.

I make it a point to give this message wherever I am.

Last week, I was with the CEO and senior team of Regeneron, which just upped its investment in Westchester – with plans to add 400 new jobs.

The week before, I paid a visit to Perstine Wesley, the legendary owner of Harry's Shoe Repair in Getty Square in Yonkers.

Large or small, old or new, we want business to know we are here to help.

Our record of accomplishment is strong.

Last summer, we launched our "Meet Me In Westchester" marketing campaign to support and strengthen the county's \$1.7 billion tourism industry.

And since January 2010, the Westchester Industrial Development Agency, our main outreach organization to businesses, has provided various financial incentives to 29 companies of every size.

This has led to more than \$500 million of additional capital investment in the county, the retention of 4,800 existing jobs and the creation of 4,600 **new** jobs.

The biggest project to date – in fact in the history of the IDA – involves Pepsi's decision to stay in Westchester and completely modernize its global corporate headquarters in Purchase.

But we are also helping start ups like Tommie Copper and Candela Systems.

And just last week, the Board of Legislators ratified our creation of a Westchester Local Development Corporation.

This will give non-profit companies access to low-cost financing at no risk to taxpayers. Last week, \$128 million in tax exempt financing was made available to not-for-profit organizations.

Northern Westchester Hospital and Kendal on Hudson, a continuing care retirement community, are among the first to take advantage of the LDC.

So, if you have a business in Westchester, thinking of starting one, or a not-for-profit looking for low-cost financing our team is here to help. The people you need to talk to are Eileen Mildenberger and Jim Coleman.

I want them to stand so people in the room and watching on television know who they are talking to:

- **Eileen** is the director of economic development.
- **Jim** is the executive director of the IDA and LDC. Jim also leads our Minority and Women-owned Business program, which can help these companies learn how to better compete for government contracts through seminars and training.

Please don't hesitate to reach out to them. They can help your business and that's good for all of us.

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

We currently have \$58 million in capital projects awaiting approval by the Board of Legislators. Over the course of the year, I will be sending down an additional \$75 million for the board's approval.

These projects will improve our parks, roads, buildings and bridges, as well as aid our flood mitigation efforts and put men and women in our trade unions back to work.

To my colleagues on the board, let's work together to get it done.

....

Westchester prides itself on being home to a well educated workforce.

If Westchester were a city, it would be the second smartest in the country. Of the people 25 and older living in the county, 45 percent of them have a bachelor's degree.

It is for this reason, we have branded Westchester as "New York's Intellectual Capital."

It is not surprising that Westchester is so smart when you look at the jobs our schools do – all the way from kindergarten through college.

The Intel Science Talent Search is one measure of just how smart some our kids are.

Last year, Westchester had one Intel finalist. This year we had three.

They are with us tonight.

- Jiayi Peng of Horace Greeley High School
- Chris Traver of Croton-Harmon High School
- Daniel McQuaid of Ossining High School

Jiayi created a computer model to study how the brain optimizes information.

Chris tapped a group of volunteers to track noise levels in the community by using smart phones.

Apparently, yes, there is an app for this.

Daniel studied KLF6, a protein that induces cell death.

The level and depth of their research is phenomenal.

Can the three of you please stand up?

They have set up booths outside and you are encouraged to ask them lots of questions. You may not understand the answers, but I guarantee you will be impressed.

It's not all science in our schools. Westchester has long been home to outstanding athletes.

This year we have two, whose accomplishments and records are so extraordinary, that we wanted to recognize them.

Mary Cain of Bronxville and Saniya Chong of Ossining may be the two best women in Westchester ever to compete in their sports.

Mary, a middle distance runner, has won numerous state titles and two national titles. Last year, she broke the American high school girl's outdoor record in the 1500 meters at the World Junior Championships. She's currently a junior at Bronxville High School.

Saniya and her Ossining High School teammates brought home a state basketball championship this year. The senior guard **averaged** 35 points a game and was named the 2012-13 Gatorade New York Girls Basketball Player of the Year. She will attend the University of Connecticut in the fall, which just won this year's National Championship.

Mary and Saniya, congratulations on your remarkable high school careers and continued success in college and beyond.

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Please hold your applause: it's time to talk about Albany and Washington.

Unfunded mandates from the state ... which we are forced to pay ...for programs over which we have no say ... are the biggest threat to the county's economic and fiscal well-being.

Just nine unfunded mandates from Albany will cost county government \$464 million this year.

That means 85 cents out of every dollar of our county tax levy – your money – is consumed **uncontrollably** by Albany.

The system is horribly broken.

Look at pensions, which is just one of the nine unfunded state mandates.

Last year, for every dollar workers contributed to the state pension system, taxpayers put in \$17.

More than anything else that imbalance explains why the pension bill for Westchester county government has skyrocketed from \$3.3 million in 2001 to \$91 million this year.

For those of you who didn't bring a calculator, that's almost a 3,000 percent increase in just 13 years. It's unsustainable.

Without reform, the system will collapse of its own weight.

To advocate for relief, my administration has been working with our schools and businesses – through the Westchester-Putnam School Boards

Association, the Business Council and the Westchester County Association
– to bring a unified message to Albany:

Stop governing like ostriches and start working with us on real structural reform that will bring real relief to local taxpayers.

....

If you think Albany is bad, wait until I tell you about Washington and the housing settlement.

A quick history.

The county was sued in 2006 under the False Claims Act of 1863. The charge was that the county accepted federal dollars from the department of Housing and Urban Development but failed to study whether race is a factor in housing opportunities. In 2009, former County Executive Andrew Spano and the Board of Legislators settled the case.

Critically important: There was never a finding of fact of wrongdoing on the part of the county or an admission of guilt in the settlement.

Instead of going to court the county and the federal government **both** agreed to settle under the following terms.

The county would spend at least \$51 million to build 750 units of housing for lower income people in 31 so-called eligible, or mostly white, communities by the end of 2016.

Progress is measured by annual benchmarks and significant penalties for failing to meet them.

So let's look at our progress.

The county is well ahead of schedule.

By the end of 2013, the county must have 300 units with financing in place.
We surpassed that benchmark in March.

Everyone in the county should be proud of that record. I know I am.

Not just because we are meeting our obligations.

But because of the way we are doing it: By working cooperatively with our towns and villages. And I'm proud of how, through the decades, our communities have been building affordable housing to meet not just their own needs, but also the needs of our region.

We have more than 50 awards to show for it, even some from HUD.

For the record, I am proud that Westchester is the fourth most diverse county in New York State in terms of African Americans and Hispanics.

We are tied with Manhattan.

Westchester's diversity is one of our greatest strengths, and as County Executive, I will defend with every tool at my disposal the right of people to live in any neighborhood in Westchester, in any home they can afford.

Let me say this loud and clear: there is absolutely no place for discrimination in our county.

The biggest and really the only issue going forward is zoning.

The federal government has a very different agenda and vision for Westchester. In fact, HUD calls us its – quote – “grand experiment.”

Washington bureaucrats, who you will never see or meet, want the power to determine who will live where and how each neighborhood will look. What's at stake is the fundamental right of our cities, towns, and villages to plan and zone for themselves. This home rule is guaranteed by the New York State Constitution.

HUD thinks it can trample on Westchester because it has the misguided notion that zoning and discrimination **are** the same thing. They are not.

Zoning restricts what can be built, **not who lives there.**

Zoning exists to keep traffic from endangering kids on their way to school, to prevent factory noise and smoke from invading residential neighborhoods, and to stop raw sewage from polluting our drinking water.

Zoning exists to protect quality of life ... **for everyone**. Take away the zoning that protects Westchester's reservoirs and watershed and you put the drinking water of eight million New York City residents at risk.

Listen carefully. I know what I'm about to tell you sounds exaggerated and unbelievable. But it's not. I urge you to go to westchestergov.com and read for yourself the letters I'm about to reference.

In its letter of May 13, 2011, HUD insists the county must go – quote - “beyond the four corners of the settlement.” In other words, they admitted that what they are demanding is not in the agreement. And their demands are outrageous. HUD wants NO restrictions - in any neighborhood - on height, size, acreage, density, number of bedrooms, and lack of water or sewers.

In fact, in a letter on March 13th this year, HUD goes so far as to attack even single-family, quarter-acre lots as – quote -“restrictive zoning practices” that, in their view, could be discriminatory.

Really? Like many in this county, I live in a modest house on a quarter-acre piece of land and my home is my biggest investment. I thought working hard, paying your taxes, and one day paying off your mortgage was the American dream?

Think about what's at stake.

The federal government is trying to force me as county executive to sue each municipality to abolish even basic zoning protections. What does that mean for you if that happens?

It means the neighborhood you live in today could change over time – and there is nothing you can do to stop it. A five-story building – or higher – could be put on your street. Not only by HUD, but by any developer. Because if you take away the zoning rules for HUD, you take away the rules for everyone.

And that's not all. New demands by HUD just keep on coming...each one more overreaching than the last. In that same March 13th letter,

HUD contends that the settlement's requirement to build 750 units of affordable housing was just a starting point. The county's target is really 10,768, based on an old 2004 Rutgers University study that was never even accepted by the county.

Let me say the number again – **10,768** housing units.

That's almost 15 times the settlement's requirement. And that study allocates a number to each community:

- Harrison – 756 units. That's more than the entire settlement.
- North Castle – 712 units.
- Bedford – 396 units.
- Scarsdale – 160 units.

The list goes on and on until you reach 10,768 housing units.

Put a dollar figure on building 10,768 units and the cost is between 700 million **and \$1 billion**.

To come up with **\$1 billion....** we would have to raise county property taxes **200 percent; 200 percent at a time when the state tax cap is 2 percent**. How is that going to work?

And that's just county taxes. School and local taxes would certainly increase too, along with crowded classrooms and a strain on services.

Here is what is so frustrating. We have tried to work with HUD. They ask for something and our staff spends hours and hours to provide them with volumes and volumes of data.

For HUD zoning has become a "civil rights concern" and they told us to review their list of "six restrictive zoning practices."

So we did. We studied and analyzed them across all 853 zoning districts throughout Westchester. Then we applied more than 30 additional criteria on our own. In all, we looked at more than 26,000 data points.

Conclusion: Westchester's zoning is ***not*** exclusionary based on race. The major impediment is economics. People live where they choose and where they can afford.

HUD wasn't satisfied. Now they wanted a legal analysis.

So we asked Professor John Nolon of the Pace University Land Use Law Center, a leading expert on affordable housing, to conduct a separate legal analysis. Guess what? His conclusion supported ours.

Each time we've asked the federal government to provide proof of exclusionary zoning, they come up with no answer.

And they certainly have no answer for this:

How could the zoning in the settlement's 31 eligible communities be exclusionary, ***if the county is ahead of schedule building affordable housing in those communities?***

It's pretty obvious; the federal government will not be satisfied until we give them the answer that THEY want, no matter what the facts are.

Now comes the insidious part. To intimidate the county into changing our conclusions on zoning, HUD has been withholding money that was promised to our local communities for the last two years.

The amount is now up to \$12 million. This money not only goes toward building affordable housing; it also goes to communities that have nothing to do with the settlement and to some of Westchester's neediest residents for programs like homeless prevention.

I appealed to HUD Secretary Shawn Donovan for an explanation and reconsideration. We were denied.

I want to thank the members of the Board of Legislators who joined me this week on a fully bi-partisan basis to have this arbitrary decision by HUD reversed...even if that means going to court.

So we have been at this for more than three years, and frankly, it is very tiring and disheartening.
Going up against Goliath is never easy.

Some people want me to just give in.
They accuse me of being stubborn...or worse.

Believe me, the easiest thing for me personally would be to cave in, blame it on the past administration, and not worry about the future.

But how do you give in when you were taught as a kid that you have to be willing to stand up for what you believe in ... and when you know as an adult that the thing you treasure most – freedom – is rarely regained if lost.

When you hear me warn about HUD overreaching...this is it:

- 31 communities becomes the entire county;
- 750 units becomes 10,768; and
- \$51 million becomes \$1 billion dollars and a 200 percent tax hike to pay for it.

I have said from day one that Westchester will comply with what's in the agreement. But we won't be bullied or threatened by HUD to do things that are not in the settlement.

It all comes down to this:

HUD thinks that Westchester is some kind of “grand experiment.”

That it can strip away our constitutionally protected rights.

And that it can dismantle local zoning.

I say Westchester is our home – not a test tube.

I say Westchester residents didn't stop becoming American citizens the day the deal was signed in 2009.

I say nothing gives HUD the right to turn the American Dream upside down....

And I will continue to stand up for Westchester ... our communities ... and all the people who live here.

The challenge ahead is to move forward.

....

Whether it's HUD or another issue, Westchester will not look back.

To the three P's on our compass, we have added a fourth: Position Westchester for the future.

That means moving past the naysayers and imagining the future as it can be and should be for our children and generations to come.

But it's not just imagining the future.

My job isn't County Philosopher. It's County Executive.

The job description requires producing results for people ... right now, and we have.

Thanks to the efforts of Governor Cuomo, we are moving forward on the new Tappan Zee Bridge, which will put thousands of people to work and strengthen the economy of our county.

But the bridge we build must be one for the 21st Century.

It can't be the bridge to ... traffic congestion on the other side.

I am proud to be on the Governor's task force and co-chair of the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council and I am using my positions to ensure that the new Tappan Zee has mass transit the day it opens.

We are also working on protecting the environment by positioning Westchester for a greener future. Whether it's through our "Cleaner Today, Greener Tomorrow" reusable water bottle initiative developed with Friends of Parks...

...Open space preservation...volunteer-driven efforts like "Pitch in for Parks" and "River Rescue"... we are constantly looking for ways to conserve and preserve our county's natural resources. We are making a difference.

Consider the Household Material Recovery facility at the Grasslands Reservation in Valhalla, which is also known as the H-MRF.

It's been one year since we opened it, and more than 325,000 pounds of hazardous and toxic household materials have been collected, properly disposed, or recycled.

So if you have household chemicals, automotive fluids, tires, computers, cell phones or other similar waste that needs to be disposed of, the H-MRF is waiting for you.

We're proud of the more than a dozen alternative and renewable energy companies based in Westchester.

We have made permanent our sales tax exemption to homeowners who install solar energy systems.

And while we continue to look to renewable energy as a clean way to power our homes and our economy, we also turn to natural gas.

Abundant and cheap, the carbon footprint for natural gas is also 30 percent less than gasoline or diesel, and 45 percent less than coal.

With that in mind, I have directed my Commissioner of Public Works and Transportation, Jay Pisco, to begin the process of connecting the natural gas pipeline at the County Airport to the Con Ed service supply line on Lincoln Avenue in Purchase.

Once completed in November, cleaner and cheaper natural gas will be available on the airport property for tenants.

I am also authorizing the Department of Environmental Facilities to arrange for the extension of a natural gas pipeline to the county's Material Recovery Facility in Yonkers – site of a potential Compressed Natural Gas filling station.

Thirteen municipalities have already expressed interest in purchasing at least one CNG truck to take advantage of a fuel that is over a dollar per gallon cheaper than gasoline or diesel – and much cleaner for our environment.

....

While it is critical to think about our future, we can never lose sight of those who have made Westchester what it is today.

Our commitment to seniors has earned Westchester the distinction of being named one of the country's first seven "Age Friendly" communities by AARP.

The present also deserves our attention – especially when it comes to our less fortunate neighbors who sometimes struggle for even the most essential things – like enough to eat.

No one in this county should ever go hungry.

Our food rescue initiative is designed to reduce hunger in Westchester by recovering leftover food from local schools, hospitals, hotels and restaurants.

Untouched fresh and packaged food will be collected by two non-profit groups – the Food Bank of Westchester and "Rock and Wrap It Up" – and redistributed to local houses of worship, pantries and soup kitchens to feed the hungry. The program is set to launch April 30.

Then in late May the second part of this initiative will kick in when a food waste composter will be installed at the H-MRF in Valhalla.

Composted food waste from the H-MRF will then be used to fertilize five local gardens run by the Food Bank of Westchester.

This is smart government working in partnership with our not-for-profit community to help those in need.

....

Civic partnership is also at the heart of our plans to reinvent Playland for the 21st Century.

We all love Playland... I grew up going to Playland and I love taking my kids there. In fact, we'll be there opening day on May 11 and hope to see you there, too.

But Playland has been in decline for some time.

Attendance has steadily dropped from just under 1 million in 2005... to 433,000 in 2012.

The annual losses – the operating expenses and debt service to taxpayers to run the park – have averaged about \$3 - \$5 million annually.

The status quo is not an option, so upon taking office, I was determined to re-invent Playland.

And after a thorough, multi-year process, which included input from the Board of Legislators and a 19-member citizen's advisory board, we selected Sustainable Playland, a community-based not-for-profit, to operate the park.

Last Thursday marked the latest significant step forward when the county's Board of Acquisition & Contract approved a 10-year asset management agreement with them.

Sustainable Playland has put together a team of world-class operators, which is being managed by Chappaqua's Dan Biederman – internationally renowned for his work in transforming public parks, including Bryant Park in Manhattan.

Sustainable Playland will invest \$34 million into making Playland a year-round destination and not only a summer attraction.

The park will be divided into five zones (**SLIDE of 5 zones**).

- The Field Zone with lacrosse and soccer fields and a field house for indoor sports.
- The Great Lawn with open space for listening to concerts or just relaxing and enjoying the sweeping views of the Long Island Sound.
- The Fountain Plaza Zone with exciting new restaurants and cafés, and a refurbished Ice Casino.
- The Aqua/Beach Zone with a mini-water park and a cleaner beach.

- And of course the Amusement Zone, where all the historic rides like the Dragon Coaster and Kiddyland will live forever alongside new thrill rides.

This place is going to be amazing.

And instead of taxpayers losing \$3-\$5 million annually, Sustainable Playland will be paying the county more than \$1 million a year once the group is fully operational. The money will help taxpayers by paying down the county's existing debt on the park.

Going forward, it will be up to the Board of Legislators to approve the improvement plan Sustainable Playland puts together for the future of the park.

I urge the Board to do their due diligence in a timely manner and continue to work together with me and Sustainable Playland so that we can have all of the necessary approvals in place by October and the reinvention of Playland can begin.

Let's act together to save Playland.

....

So we move forward; carefully and steadily.

The challenges can seem overwhelming at times.

But you get up every day and you do your best.

My days are filled trying to find the right balance.

When to say "yes" and when to say "no."

Getting the balance right is where leadership begins – and you spend many sleepless nights trying to get there.

But that's just the beginning, because, in the end, you have to deliver results.

So you put your team together.

You build partnerships.

You get the best advice you can, wherever it may be.

And you drive toward your goals – making adjustments along the way – but always staying true to your principles.

In the words of Winston Churchill: “You see opportunity in every difficulty,” and most important, “you never, never, **never** give up.”

In this year of 2013, Westchester County continues to move forward and the progress is real.

We pledged to protect taxpayers, and ***we did just that.***

We pledged to preserve essential services, and ***we did just that.***

We pledged to promote economic growth, and ***we did just that.***

And tonight, we pledge to position Westchester for the future, and ***we will do just that.***

We have the confidence, we have the people, and working together, we will make Westchester County – the place we love today – even better tomorrow.

Thank you. God bless. And good night.

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Robert P. Astorino, Westchester County Executive