



County Executive  
ROBERT P. ASTORINO

# STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

Address to the People of westchester

Thursday, April 20, 2017

Good evening.

Once again it is my pleasure to report on the progress of our great county.

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Welcome to everyone here with us in White Plains in the County Courthouse. Thank you to Justice Alan Sheinkman, the administrative judge for the Ninth Judicial District, for hosting us tonight.

Justice Bruce Tolbert is representing the judicial branch.

Our County Clerk Tim Idoni and District Attorney Anthony Scarpino are here.

Elected officials from around the county have also joined us.

My family is here.

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The house is full.

So full that we're actually overbooked, and we're looking for volunteers to give up their seats to **four members** of my staff who need to **sit down**. ...

Representatives from United Airlines will be coming down the aisles to offer assistance.

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To those watching on News 12 and Fios 1, listening on Westchester Talk Radio, or following live on my Facebook page AT Rob Astorino, thank you for joining us.

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To our Spanish speaking residents....

A mis amigos de la comunidad hispana, gracias por sintonizar en westchestergov.com. Se puede encontrar una versión del discurso de esta noche que grabé en video en español.

También, quería añadir un mensaje especialmente para nuestras familias inmigrantes... porque el tono nacional es alterado y emotivo. Pero yo quiero decirles... ustedes son bienvenidos aquí. Sus contribuciones se valoran aquí.

...

Yo apoyo tanto a la reforma migratoria, como las fronteras seguras, pero también apoyo la dignidad humana, la justicia y el respeto. Siempre se los demostraré, como lo han hecho ustedes conmigo.

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In Spanish, I told our immigrant community that they are welcomed and valued here and that extends not just to Latinos but to everyone.

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For better or worse, in Westchester, we don't live in a land of make believe and game shows. We live in the real world, and today that world is divided.

People are angry. Voices are loud. And, the media provides fuel hyping every disagreement as the partisan cage match of the century.

But two World Wars and our deadliest conflict as a nation, the Civil War, should put life in 2017 into perspective.

It was Abraham Lincoln who warned that a "house divided against itself cannot stand." And today, all Americans, whatever our disagreements, know that to be true.

So how do we cut through the noise? It's called governing. It is not easy. But in my years on the job, I have learned there are three keys to success.

The first is **balance**. Democracy is a system of competing ideas. Finding the right balance requires listening to all sides. That's why I have been holding Ask Astorino town halls throughout the county – more than two dozen since 2012.

The concept is simple. Take county government on the road. Go to the cities, towns and villages where people live ... talk to them about the issues they care about, listen to their concerns, and try to answer their questions.

The Cortlandt town hall was standing room only in January. White Plains City Hall required two overflow rooms in February. And last month in Port Chester, we moved to the neighborhood school auditorium to accommodate the crowds. Ask Astorino has never been more popular. *Or more fun.*

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At times, it was boisterous and raucous. People were split. Many still debating the November Presidential election and raising questions on everything from Obama care to Russia, as well as local issues.

More than anything else, the lesson of these forums is that on the passionate issues that divide us, there are honest people and principled arguments on all sides.

As the County Executive for close to one million people, it's my job to find middle ground – *balance what divides us* – and that's why I have been committed to bringing county government to the people of Westchester and listening to what is on their minds.

The second key to governing is **perseverance**. Good government doesn't come quickly. Our system of checks and balances invites setbacks.

Tonight, you are going to hear about our progress in saving Playland; bringing a billion-dollar science and technology center to the county's North 60 property in Mount Pleasant; and unlocking at least \$140 million in revenues at Westchester County Airport to help pay for our parks, roads, public safety, day care and other needs.

Each one of these initiatives has died multiple deaths. But to quote the late, great Yogi Berra: "It ain't over, til it's over." When you have perseverance – the toughness and patience to stick with things that you believe in – good government can happen.

And the third key is **bi-partisanship**. No single individual, group or party has a monopoly on the best ideas and the right way to run things. Westchester works best when we work together.

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And that leads me to my introductions of our Board of Legislators.

I didn't forget them.

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I want to thank Board Chairman Mike Kaplowitz. With his leadership and the support of other Democrats like Legislator Virginia Perez, we have put together governing coalitions on issues of critical importance.

On the Republican side, I want to thank Vice Chairman Jim Maisano and minority leader John Testa, and all the legislators on both sides of the aisle.

Whatever our disagreements, they have not kept us from moving Westchester forward.

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On this, the twentieth day in April, 2017, I am proud to report that the State of our County is **STRONG**.

Let's look at that strength.

Westchester is growing. Unlike much of the state, our population has increased since 2010.

Westchester is healthy. Once again, our county placed in the top four for the best health factors and outcomes.

Westchester is safe. Overall crime is down 25 percent for the latest five-year reporting period.

Westchester is working. Unemployment for 2016 was 4.2 percent – one of the state's lowest rates – and 44,000 private sector jobs have been created since 2010.

Westchester is connected. We are ranked as one of the top 10 digital counties in the United States. Our website, [westchestergov.com](http://westchestergov.com), attracts more than two million page views a month, an increase of 300 percent since 2010.

Westchester is smart. We have the best-educated workforce in all 50 states – just about half of our residents over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher.

Westchester is green.

- More than 90 percent of our residential garbage is converted into energy;
- More than 71,000 tons of papers, bottles and plastics are recycled and turned into cash;
- More than 1.8 million pounds of hard-to-get-rid-of household waste – chemicals, pesticides, electronics, tires, and medicines have been safely disposed, without harm to soil or water, since we opened our Household Material Recovery Facility in Valhalla, in 2012.

And Westchester is getting greener all the time. Four county office buildings will be converted to LED lighting by this fall. The 78 new articulated buses that we are ordering for the Beeline system this year will be hybrids, as will all the new vehicles in our motor-pool fleet.

Building a smart, healthy and safe Westchester where people have jobs today and the prospect of even better ones in the future is at the core of county government's mission. **The record is strong and getting stronger every day.**

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None of this is an accident. Focus and hard work are required. Nowhere have we focused more and worked harder than to make Westchester more **affordable** for our residents.

When I came into office, the county portion of your property tax bill was about 20 percent; it's now about **15 percent**.

The reason: we have **cut** or held the county tax levy **flat** for seven years in a row.

The result: **\$400 million** has stayed in the pockets of our residents and businesses.

That \$400 million is the amount your county taxes would have increased had we **just** raised the property tax levy by two percent allowed under the state's misleading tax cap. But we didn't. We actually cut it two percent.

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I was elected to stop the tax madness, and we did just that by stopping the out-of-control spending.

The size of the county budget today is the same as it was when we took office in 2010, which is unheard of.

Taxes are still too high, but citizens and businesses know they can count on me to manage their tax dollars smartly and responsibly.

And by the way, county government is running just fine on our **\$1.8 billion** annual budget. Essential services are preserved and strengthened, our economy is growing, our credit rating is the highest for any county in the state, and our reserve funds remain steady.

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Since no good deed goes unpunished, some people say it's now time to raise taxes.

**I say no.**

So long as Westchester remains one of the highest taxed counties in America, and so long as I remain County Executive, I will not raise the County tax levy.

So once again, come November, I am pledging to send the Board of Legislators a balanced budget **that for the 8<sup>th</sup> straight year will not raise the county tax levy.**

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A strong county means being able to confront our vulnerabilities.

The opioid epidemic has us locked in a deadly battle, and the enemy grows deadlier every day.

The harm comes from abroad, with heroin flooding our streets from China, Mexico and Canada. And the heroin isn't just heroin anymore. It's now laced with Fentanyl, which is 50 to 100 times more powerful than morphine.

The scourge can also be found in our homes – in our own medicine cabinets where prescription painkillers are a fast way to addiction.

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The suffering has no walls or boundaries. Funerals are inescapable.

I recently shared hugs and tears with friends as we looked at the casket of their 22-year old daughter.

Pictures of her young life were on display – as a baby; making her First Communion; celebrating birthdays, holidays and graduation.

It at once broke my heart and chilled my spine thinking of my own children. As parents, we want to protect our kids from every harm and danger out there. But we know we can't. The best we can do is to love our children unconditionally, teach them right from wrong and always be there for them, be their emotional support system, and hope and pray they make the right decisions.

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The cause is not lost.

Church and community leaders, not for profits, health-care providers, elected officials, and parent groups have all joined the battle to beat the opioid epidemic.

Police efforts have intensified.

Since its formation in 2014, our Westchester County Northern Narcotics Initiative has worked closely with the DEA and FBI. Last year, the result was 200 arrests for possession or sale of narcotics – many of them street-level dealers and their suppliers.

The County has also made NARCAN training available for local cops, firefighters, first responders and community members. This life-saving, heroin-overdose antidote came to the rescue 133 times in the last two years.

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Tonight, Westchester opens a **new** front in the battle with the creation of Project WORTHY – Westchester Opioid Response Teams Helping Youth.

It is the latest advance from our Safer Communities initiative, which has tackled some of our most intractable problems from developing safety protocols for attacks against our schools, to ending gang violence, reversing school absenteeism, and preventing youth suicide.

In each case, Safer Communities focuses on **root causes**, not just symptoms; gets all the key players **working together**; and delivers help that's **practical**.

Project WORTHY will follow this approach: building response teams made up of law enforcement, health and mental health experts, parents, teachers, coaches, clergy, youth and anyone else willing to join.

Project WORTHY will teach how to:

- Spot the warning signs of heroin and opioid abuse;
- Understand the mental health causes of addiction, such as depression, anxiety or pain management; and
- Develop response strategies to pre-empt addiction.

Instruction is being modeled after our successful Youth Mental Health First Aid program. Classes will be taught in central locations like the County Center, and we also expect to take them on the road to schools and community centers throughout the county.

There is no illusion that this program will be a panacea. The work ahead will be tough, because the enemy is strong. But we go forward, confident we can and will make a difference. Because in the words of Teddy Roosevelt the worst thing you can do is nothing.

That won't happen in Westchester. We will continue to fight. Opioid addiction can be stopped, if we are all willing to take action against it, and we are.

**Join us as Project WORTHY rolls out across Westchester.**

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Dr. Mark Herceg our commissioner of Community Mental Health, will lead the effort. Mark, please stand up. Thank you and your team for putting this together.

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There is another issue where doing nothing – sitting by idly and letting others dictate our fate – is not acceptable. The issue is Indian Point.

On Friday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, without any warning, news broke that Governor Cuomo, Entergy and Riverkeeper had hatched a secret plan to close Indian Point.

At stake is:

- the loss of billions of dollars in economic activity;
- the loss of 25 percent of the electricity for nine million people in Westchester and New York City; and
- the loss of tens of millions of dollars in local revenues to Westchester County, the Town of Cortlandt, and, in particular, the Village of Buchanan and the 2,500 kids in the Hendrick Hudson School District where the consequences are devastating.

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The critical and potentially catastrophic flaw in the Governor's plan is that it completely ignores the state's environmental laws. That's flat out wrong and why the courts must get involved.

Westchester's proposed lawsuit has **nothing to do** with the debate over nuclear energy, or even whether or not to keep the plant open.

It has **one, singular purpose**: to ensure that any decision to close Indian Point fully protects the rights and safety of our residents and our environment **by following the law**.

If, eventually, the plant has to be shut, so be it.

But it must be **shut in accordance with the law**, not the whims and dictates of three men in a room.

The case is that simple.

The State Environmental Quality Review Act, or SEQRA, has two key requirements: An Environmental Impact Statement, a study, must be conducted "at the earliest possible time" **before** governmental action is taken, **and** the impact statement must include details of the **economic and social consequences** of the proposed action, as well as offer alternatives.

In the case of Indian Point, neither of those things happened.

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Here's what's so strange and dangerous.

The State Environmental Quality Review Act – or SEQRA for short – is triggered for almost everything.

Pools, roads, playgrounds, buying a computer, you name it.

We had to do a SEQRA when Westchester Community College wanted to purchase **fresh food** for its culinary arts program.

We had to do one when we gave **four horses** to Rockland County after disbanding our mounted police unit. On that one, the Board of Legislators sent me a letter demanding it.

We had to do a SEQRA when we **changed the name of Muscoot Farm** to the Alfred B. DelBello Muscoot Farm. The environmental impact amounted to the addition of 15 letters to the signs.

I should have ordered an environmental review after I took our Shih Tzu Bella out for a walk this morning. I wish I was kidding.

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So how is it that nuclear reactors at Indian Point can close and leave behind their spent fuel rods in a radioactive waste cemetery for a period of somewhere between 60 years and forever without requiring an environmental review?

That's the question our lawsuit **demands be answered.**

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The time to act is now. The deadline to file our complaint in court is May 9<sup>th</sup>. After that, the statute of limitations runs out. There is no second chance.

Again, all we are asking for is that our people, businesses, families and children be protected under the law. Protected against electric rates going higher, taxes

skyrocketing, radioactive waste being left behind, and local communities and schools collapsing – all hitting low and middle-income families the hardest.

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Tonight, I'm asking the Democrats on the Board of Legislators to join the Republicans in supporting our lawsuit to protect our citizens and the environment.

**There is no cost to it.** The papers have already been drawn up by the County's Law Department.

**There is no leverage without it.** The county's best outcome will be in court when arguments can be put before a judge, rather than in front of a political, non-binding state task force that hasn't even met since its creation in February.

**There is no excuse not to support it.** This isn't about whether Indian Point closes; it's about how it closes. All we are asking is for our environmental laws **to be followed and enforced.**

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With us tonight are Buchanan Mayor Theresa Knickerbocker and Hendrick Hudson School Superintendent, Joseph Hochreiter.

I just want to tell you that our environmental laws are there **to serve everyone; not just the powerful and special interests.** For those laws not to protect your village and students would be a travesty.

It doesn't matter whether you are for or against Indian Point, enforcement of our environmental laws **is an issue that should unite all of us.**

I'm fighting for you, and I am asking the Board of Legislators to fight for you too.

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Our custom at the State of the County is to always acknowledge those *without whom* there would be no speech tonight. Our county and nation stand tall because of the selfless sacrifices of our veterans.

This year we are blessed because not one man or woman from Westchester serving in our military was lost in the line of duty in 2016. For that we are truly thankful. And to the families who have lost loved ones protecting the rights and liberties we cherish, we are forever in your debt.

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There is one among us tonight whose service to our country is extraordinary. He will tell you he couldn't be more ordinary. But that's what makes his story such an example for the rest of us.

His name is Armando Galella. He lives in Sleepy Hollow and his friends like me call him "Chick."

Seventy-five years ago, he was just finishing breakfast. It was 7:30 in the morning. He heard sirens. Then, in his words: "All of a sudden there was black smoke and I saw we were under attack. We saw wave after wave of planes, and we thought it would never end."

The date was Dec. 7, 1941. The place was Pearl Harbor. His valor that day and his contributions to family and community over the next seven decades have set him apart as a member of the "Greatest Generation."

If you meet him, he'll tell you: "I am not a hero. I am a survivor of World War II."

In fact he was awarded the Bronze Star for his Meritorious Service during the invasion of Okinawa. Today, Chick is one of the few living veterans in our nation to have fought at Pearl Harbor.

His modesty is part of who he is. But it can't mask the truth that he is a hero and an example to all of us. And for that reason I could not be prouder to award Armando "Chick" Galella Westchester's highest honor – the Distinguished Service Award.

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Another custom at our State of the County, at least since I've been County Executive, has been to provide an update on the affordable housing settlement reached between the federal government and my predecessor.

The news tonight is good.

On December 27th, Westchester not only met, it **exceeded its goal**.

The settlement called for developing 750 units of fair and affordable housing in 31 communities around the county in seven years.

**We delivered 790 units; with another 100 in the pipeline.**

Many doubted us. Others openly rooted against us. Some labeled us with false and despicable terms.

But the record shows we fulfilled our obligations, and we did it **while preserving the Constitutional home rule rights of our communities**.

**This is a tremendous accomplishment.**

To all who contributed, **well done.**

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Our success surprised a lot of people. None more than the bureaucrats in their far-away desks in Washington.

They saw our communities as the problem, when in fact they were the solution.

HUD wanted confrontation and litigation. We got the desired results with cooperation and collaboration.

HUD was wrong about our zoning. It's not exclusionary and the 790 units of fair and affordable housing are proof. Even an independent consulting firm – approved by the monitor – agreed with the county, writing just this week that: "It is not reasonable for HUD to insist on its own universal conclusion regardless of all the data."

Westchester needs affordable housing; has supported it for decades; and will continue to push for more of it.

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Our resistance was never to affordable housing, but to an overreaching federal government that wanted to take control of local zoning. To that we said no. We delivered on our commitments, did it on time, and are proud of our efforts.

...

Seven years in office has shown we can keep taxes down and still deliver the services our residents need. Our safety net for the neediest among us remains strong. There's no magic to protecting taxpayers and preserving essential services at the same time. But, it does require smart government working hard every day to ensure every tax dollar is producing the maximum benefit.

Homelessness is one of the best examples. Shelters are expensive, and they are no substitute for homes. By putting our focus on placing people in permanent housing rather than shelters, we not only keep costs down, but we put lives back together with a new optimism for the future. Our approach is called Housing First – find people permanent homes and then bring the services to them and eventually employment to the able-bodied.

Last year, our department of Social Services moved 430 families and 196 singles out of shelters into homes of their own.

And since its inception in August of 2013, our Patriot Housing initiative has helped secure permanent housing for over 500 previously homeless veterans.

Westchester today is one of only a handful of large cities or counties in the country that have eliminated Veterans street homelessness. That's something we can all take great pride in.

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Helping people is at the heart of what all of our departments, commissions and boards do.

I'd like to introduce a few of our residents and let them tell you their stories.

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Some of the people behind those stories are here with us tonight.

Alvin Cook, known to his friends as Sarge.

Megan O'Rourke and her mom Elizabeth.

Jigar Jadiv, who teaches at Mamaroneck High School and Sam Brause have broken away from their work developing mobile apps for our seniors. The winning applications will be announced next Friday at Pace University for our Mobile App Bowl.

And Marquise Ham.

I just want to thank you for sharing your stories. We live in cynical times. But we can get things right. Put determination and resources together and lives are lifted. Thank you.

Could you all stand up?

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One more thing on the video.

I met Marquise Ham a couple of months ago at one of the REAL Parenting classes in Yonkers.

The program we created throws a life preserver to non-custodial fathers drowning in child support arrears, many of whom are struggling with issues like unemployment, substance abuse and criminal records.

The REAL Parenting program is a second chance program but it's a two-way street. The county helps with arrears on child support and the participants commit to job, parenting and life-skills training, staying employed for a year and staying current on child support.

Everybody is helped. The dads, the moms, the kids, and society in general from the strengthening of families.

Because of the success of Marquis and others, we are looking to expand this valuable program.

Three of the people behind the success are:

- Social Services Commissioner Kevin McGuire,
- Deputy Commissioner Joe Kenner, and

- Alphonso Simmons from Family Services of Westchester who runs the training.

Gentlemen could you stand. Your work shows government at its best. Thank you.

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Here's the hard part that follows the video.

County government doesn't come cheap and the bills don't go down. So you have to adapt to the realities you are given. You fix what's not working and try to do what is working faster, better, and cheaper.

We have been remarkably successful. Our \$1.8 billion budget today is the same as it was in 2010. But efficiency only gets you so far. You also need to grow revenues – and if it's not going to be taxes, **and it's not**, you have to look somewhere else.

That takes imagination.

Our latest efforts have been aimed at unlocking the value of county assets.

Playland, the North 60 and the Westchester County Airport are the prime examples. We are unlocking all three for the benefit of our residents, not just today but for decades to come.

Government is limited in the amount of capital and expertise it has on hand. So we have looked to entrepreneurs to join us in public-private partnerships, and there is significant progress to report.

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Playland is moving forward on a major renovation. In March, Westchester won a decisive victory in state Supreme Court that allows the county and its partner, Standard Amusements, to invest \$60 million into our world-famous park.

Next year you will see new rides – like the whirling, twirling futuristic Revolution 32 – alongside historic favorites – like the Dragon Coaster. Couple this with refurbished grounds, upgraded facilities and new restaurants and Playland's fantastic formula for family fun will be better than ever.

The kids get more exciting rides and taxpayers get a break. Smiles all around.

Shovels are in the ground, and while the work is going on, Playland will be up and running on May 13th for its 89th season.

Nick Singer of Standard Amusements is here. Nick thank you for your partnership. Look forward to seeing you on opening day.

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There may be no greater example of how government can deliver more by breaking the status quo than the Westchester County Airport.

Since World War II, HPN, as the flying public knows it, has been run for the county by a private company. The current operator, Avports, does a good job.

So what's not to like?

The problem is that under federal law all the money made at the airport – and it is considerable – **has to stay at the airport**. But by breaking the status quo, the county now has an opportunity to channel revenues from the airport – money left over after expenses – to help pay for other services like police, parks, roads and day care.

The vehicle to do this is an FAA program that allows small and medium-sized airports to be run as public-private partnerships. San Juan, Puerto Rico, was the first airport to successfully take advantage of this opportunity. St. Louis recently applied.

HPN qualified last year, and earlier this month the county issued Requests for Proposals to companies to submit their plans for operating the airport. The county will judge the bids on three main criteria:

- The best financial deal for the county.
- The most improvements to the traveling experience for passengers.
- The ability to operate the airport within its existing footprint and guarantee environmental protections. That means the passenger cap stays in place and the number of gates will stay at four, which ensures Westchester Airport cannot be and will not become LaGuardia North.

The FAA program, with our own safeguards in place, will allow us to create a new operating model at the airport, all while the county retains ownership.

The financial gain to the county will be at least \$140 million. The idea is to create a long-term revenue stream so that money is coming into the county's budget for decades to come. This will provide important relief to the ever-increasing cost of government.

The bids are due back in about 90 days. The selection will take about a month and the final contracts would go to the Board of Legislators for their approval in the fall. The program has bi-partisan support.

That's exciting and we are working hard to make it a reality.

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That brings us to the North 60. Right now it's a vacant piece of county land in Mount Pleasant. But it's also poised to be Westchester's most significant investment in its future.

Earlier this month, the Board of Legislators unanimously approved the lease that will turn the property into the home of the \$1.2 billion Westchester Bio-Science and Technology Center.

As they say in real estate, it is all about location, location, location and the North 60 couldn't be more ideally situated.

It's adjacent to highways, close to mass transit, has access to the most educated workforce in the nation and is a neighbor to world-class medical and pharmaceutical institutions like Westchester Medical Center, New York Medical College and Regeneron.

The benefits are enormous.

- \$9 million in estimated new real estate taxes;
- \$7 million in estimated new annual rent to Westchester County;
- 12,000 jobs.

This is a once-in-a-generation, game changing initiative. It's a catalyst to position Westchester as one of the **world's** great innovation hubs – right along side Cambridge Massachusetts, the Research Triangle in North Carolina, and Silicon Valley.

**It doesn't get any bigger or better than that.**

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John Fareri, the developer is here with us tonight. I want to thank him for his vision and partnership. With the lease, we are going to be together for another 99 years. That's some marriage.

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We end tonight reminding ourselves that our job in county government every day is to **protect taxpayers, preserve essential services and promote economic growth.**

From those efforts, we have built a ladder of opportunity – for everyone. Young, old, healthy, sick, straight, gay, black, white, Asian, Hispanic, Muslim, Jew, Christian, jobless and job creators. This ladder belongs to everyone.

It's there for first steps: A baby's vaccination. Learning to swim at a county pool.

Middle steps: A job training certificate. English lessons for immigrants. A license to start a new business.

And later steps: A home health check for an elderly person living alone.

For some, the ladder is a survival lifeline. For others, rungs to success. Our job in county government is to make sure no one falls off. The ladder is for everyone to climb higher.

It's not easy. But it's what we have promised to do. To provide our great county with the government it needs and deserves.

The ladder is in place.

The resources are there.

The programs are working.

The attitude is positive.

The effort is bi-partisan.

The balance is far reaching.

And, the perseverance never dies.

**Westchester County is strong tonight and will be even stronger as we move forward together.**

Thank you for the opportunity to serve.

Good night. God bless you and our County.

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