



Onondaga County Legislature

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COUNTY EXECUTIVE'S 2021 BUDGET PRESENTATION TO THE ONONDAGA COUNTY LEGISLATURE NOVEMBER 4, 2020

MEMBERS PRESENT: Chairman Knapp, Mr. May, Mr. Rowley, Mr. Burtis, Mrs. Tassone, Ms. Cody, Mrs. Abbott-Kenan, Ms. Kuhn, Mr. Ryan, Dr. Chase, Mr. Holmquist, Mr. McBride, Mr. Bush, Mr. Jordan, Mr. Kinne, Mr. Williams, Mrs. Ervin

Chairman Knapp called the meeting to order at 11:08 a.m. Chairman Knapp said who could have predicted the 2020 budget with the February State of the County address, and where we are now. It is an unprecedented, catastrophic pandemic, and there is still quite a ways to go. Chairman Knapp is looking forward to a productive budget process, and he looks forward to everyone's participation and dedication. Chairman Knapp thanked everyone for their attendance and introduced County Executive J. Ryan McMahan, II.

County Executive J. Ryan McMahan, II:

Good Morning

Chairman Knapp, Leaders May and Ervin, Members of the Legislature and guests. Thank you for being here.

2020 has undoubtedly been a challenging year. Our community has been tested in many ways, mentally, physically and economically.

But we banded together to starve COVID-19, safely reopen our economy, send our kids back to school and ensured that the most vulnerable in our community continued to receive the services they needed, now more than ever.

And despite all of the challenges of 2020, I am proud to stand before you today to present a balanced budget for 2021.

Not only is our 2021 budget balanced, it makes strategic investments that ensures our County continues its economic recovery and dedicates additional resources to continue our fight against COVID-19.

Before I lay out our 2021 Budget, I think it is very important to remember where this year started and how far we have come.

2020 started with palpable momentum built off the undeniable progress we experienced together in 2019.

We ended 2019 with a 7 million dollar surplus and a general fund balance of 77 million dollars – that's 10.8 million dollars over the 10% goal set forth by this County Legislature.

The momentum and progress continued when, in January, New York State committed the necessary funds for the first ever county-wide STEAM school located at the former Central Tech.

This legislature also recognized the importance of this project to our community, even in the midst of the pandemic, and authorized the bonding to pay for the renovation. I want to thank the Legislature for their partnership in this effort.

This project is now more important than ever, as it will put hundreds of our neighbors to work, helping our overall economic recovery. It will also reignite the economic momentum in the southern end of downtown.

On February 10th we gathered together at OCC for the 2020 State of the County. We were able to share some of our many successes from 2019 and we laid out a bold, aggressive and inclusive vision for our community. It was at this presentation that we reminded the community, “We are all in this together” – a mantra that soon the entire country and world would come to appreciate.

Not only was our economy growing, but so was our zoo! On February 13th we welcomed two Black Welsh Mountain Lambs at the zoo.

It was February 26th that we announced the first of six winners in our Village Main Street Program – the Village of Baldwinsville. A nearly half a million dollar public-private investment into streetscapes and seven properties located within the village.

On March 1st, Deputy County Executive Ann Rooney and I had the opportunity to join our colleagues from across the country at the National Association of Counties Conference in Washington, D.C. where we were asked to share our story on the amazing success we have had with our Early Childhood Investments. An accomplishment by the way, that continues to pay dividends.

On March 5th we announced the next round of winners of the Village Main Street Program – the Villages of Manlius, Minoa and Fayetteville. A total of over six hundred and fifty thousand dollars would be invested in these three villages to improve facades, streetscapes, walkability and much more.

On March 7th, I joined Mayor Walsh and Comptroller Masterpole, along with thousands in our community, to kick off the 15th annual Shamrock Run.

And it was on March 9th that I joined Peter Coleman and his son Dennis on Bridge Street to discuss the upcoming St. Baldrick's fundraiser.

It was in March that work began on the construction of the Amazon warehouse in the Town of Clay. One of the largest in the world! This \$450 million investment is providing an incredible stimulus to our Local trades and economy.

That spring, JMA broke ground on their 5G campus at the old Coyne Factory. Showcasing a multi-million dollar commitment to our South Side, a neighborhood that has been underinvested in for far too long.

Our momentum was also reflected in our sales tax receipts. In the first quarter of 2020, our sales tax receipts were up 4.7 percent year over year.

While we were driving our PIE Agenda, behind the scenes the Health and Emergency Management Departments had been diligently working for months to prepare our community for any impacts related to COVID-19.

When it became clear that COVID-19 would not be contained to a single neighborhood, community, county or region in New York State, we started executing the very plan our team had spent months preparing.

That meant making difficult decisions I never imagined I would ever have too.

On March 12th we made the difficult but necessary decision to postpone the 2020 Saint Patrick's Day parade. This would be the first of many events postponed to stop the spread and save lives.

With the emergency operations center already activated, I declared a State of Emergency in Onondaga County on March 14th and cancelled all extra-curricular activities in our schools immediately. Two days later, on the 16th, we closed schools throughout the county.

We were officially at war with COVID-19 in Onondaga County.

Our primary goal from the onset was to preserve our medical infrastructure while keeping the community safe.

As schools closed, we knew childcare was going to be a major issue – especially for our frontline workers. At my direction, our team in the Department of Social Services quickly reached out to our reliable partners at Child Care Solutions and developed a plan.

Almost immediately, Onondaga County started providing free childcare to all essential workers regardless of income. In total, we assisted over 200 children of essential workers. This gave our frontline workers peace of mind knowing that they had reliable childcare, and our community peace of mind knowing our frontline heroes could come to work and help us defeat this virus.

I am proud to tell you that we were one of only two counties in New York State that provided this service.

We also waived the family share towards childcare which can equal hundreds of dollars per child per month. This ultimately helped over 3,600 children every month.

Another critical part of preserving our medical infrastructure was to ensure our hospitals did not become overwhelmed. So on March 14th, in partnership with Upstate Medical University, the COVID-19 triage hotline was established for members of our community to call ahead to determine if they should be tested. To date, they have fielded nearly twenty-five thousand calls. This simple step played a major role in preventing our hospitals from being overrun and preserving this critical infrastructure.

I want to thank Upstate Medical for their unwavering partnership during this pandemic. There is no doubt that our community was able to fight this virus as well, if not better, than any other region because of this partnership and commitment to Central New York.

Unfortunately, on March 16th, we had our first confirmed case of COVID-19 in Onondaga County. And sadly, just 8 days later we lost our first neighbor to this horrible virus.

We knew this disease could be deadly and it did not spare our community. As of today, our community has lost 212 neighbors. These are families who, in many cases, have still not been able to properly mourn their loved ones. Let us take a moment of silence to remember those we have lost and their families.

During these unprecedented times, our obligation to our seniors and most vulnerable in our community became even more important.

We began to see amazing leadership emerge from our County workforce. Maria Mahar and Isabelle Harris for example, organized and executed over 275,000 take out or home delivered meals to seniors, care givers and essential health care workers.

10,000 masks were distributed to senior community programs or agencies

8,000 gallons of milk were distributed during a give-away at Destiny USA

Over 3,000 senior nutrition hotline calls were answered and ultimately connected to nutrition programs.

1,500 boxes of groceries and essential cleaning supplies were provided to families in the community

*1,000 grocery boxes were provided by the Health Department to quarantined cases as well as Vera House clients
Dozens of gallons of sanitizer were distributed to nutrition agencies*

And this was all done on top of their normal responsibilities.

I want to take a minute to thank, from the bottom of my heart, all of the employees and community volunteers who stepped up to make sure that these efforts were successful. We proved, once again, that there is no challenge or obstacle that our community cannot overcome.

Thank you.

While our team in Adult and Long Term care was ensuring our seniors and other vulnerable populations were taken care of, our teams in the Health Department and Emergency Management were making sure our community, especially our front line workers, had access to the resources they needed to stay safe while protecting our community.

Our team in Emergency Management, under the leadership of Commissioner Dan Wears and Director of Emergency Management Services Jeff VanBeveren, essentially lived in our Emergency Operations Center.

*They worked with our hospitals, doctors' offices, schools, assisted care facilities and so many others to ensure they had the PPE, test kits, ventilators or whatever else they needed.
And got it to them quickly.*

Thanks to Emergency Management, over one million pieces of PPE were distributed to over 750 unique organizations.

It was our Health and Emergency Management teams that worked with the Syracuse Community Health Center to set-up a drive-thru testing site.

They developed mobile testing that we deployed throughout the county

They set up back to school testing for Faculty and Staff and then when schools opened, they quickly pivoted to offer symptomatic testing for students in K-12.

Emergency Management even developed a plan to open a field hospital at Manley Fieldhouse, a plan that thankfully never needed to be executed.

We also knew that many of our COVID-19 frontline healthcare workers would be nervous about going back home to their loved ones after working their shifts. So our teams quickly mobilized a plan to provide hotel rooms, free of charge. In total, we provided 429 room nights for our local heroes. I also want to thank Syracuse University who was an important partner in this effort as well.

Onondaga County is forever grateful to our entire Emergency Management Team for their countless hours and commitment to the safety and security of our community during this global health pandemic. Thank you.

Our entire community can be proud of the work their County government has done to beat back COVID-19, reopen our economy, send our kids back to school and work towards an inclusive economic recovery.

And while our colleagues in Erie, Monroe and other counties across the state received tens of millions of dollars in aid for their fight, Onondaga County did all of this with zero direct aid from the Federal government. A testament to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of our county workforce.

While the human toll on our community has been tragic, we also knew that COVID-19 would have devastating impacts to our local economy with businesses shuttered and people asked to stay home to stop the spread.

The reality is we knew that the 2020 budget was going to be dramatically altered in a way that our County has never dealt with. Ever.

The second quarter of this year, our sales tax plummeted over twenty percent year over year. Our economic growth didn't just slow down, it was the largest contraction on record for our County.

But before any of these harsh fiscal realities hit us, CFO Steve Morgan and his team quickly found ways to stem the losses while minimizing disruptions to our own workforce.

On March 18th we implemented an immediate hiring freeze and the first of three rounds of austerity measures.

The additional rounds of austerity measures were implemented on April second and May nineteenth.

On April 7th, with unanimous support from the County Legislature, we offered a voluntary retirement incentive. 163 members of our workforce took advantage of this offer.

These actions were tough, but critical, to ensuring that our community could continue to receive the services they had come to rely on more than ever while trying to keep as much of our workforce intact as possible.

Finally, after the tremendous response from our community - including staying home, getting tested, wearing masks and more, we were able to enter phase 1 of our reopening on May 15th.

The reopening of our economy would prove to be yet another test of our community. Conventional wisdom would have suggested that our infection rate would go up as we began to interact again.

Instead, we proved the opposite.

Our infection rate continued to drop. The community continued to get tested. And we were able to enter the additional phases of reopening.

On May 29th we entered phase 2.

Phase 3 on June 12th

And phase four on June 26th.

Recognizing that the success of our local businesses was critical to our overall recovery, the OCIDA board agreed to allocate up to \$500,000 for individual grants for small businesses and non-profits to assist with expenses related to COVID-19 health and safety requirements.

An additional \$200,000 in bridge loans and \$250,000 for our restaurants, for infrastructure to extend outdoor dining to make up for lost capacity inside their establishments was also approved.

As we entered the fall, it became clear that more would need to be done to shore up our budget. So on September 9th we decided to reopen the retirement incentive in an effort to further reduce overhead and minimize layoffs. Another 37 employees chose to take advantage of the offer bringing the total number of retirees to 200. On September 18th we established both a voluntary and involuntary furlough program. 23 employees were approved for the voluntary program while another 19 employees were placed on involuntary furlough. Unfortunately we were still in a fiscal position where we needed to lay off 7 employees.

In total, we are down over five hundred positions compared to the 2019 budget and we now have fewer than 2,900 people working for Onondaga County.

As a result of all of these decisions, we were able to save nearly thirty-four million dollars.

As our community has adapted to living in the new normal, we have seen some encouraging news on the economic front. In the third quarter we saw 2 percent growth year over year. While this was certainly welcomed news, as it helped prevent further draconian cuts, our 2020 sales tax collections to date are still down over twenty-two million dollars or eight percent.

And all of this has laid the groundwork for my proposed 2021 Executive Budget. It is a budget that reflects the realities of our new normal. While it is undoubtedly challenging on many levels, it is our hope that this “new normal” is ultimately a temporary one.

As I mentioned previously, my 2021 budget is balanced. And our workforce will be challenged like no time in our County's history to meet the challenge of the 100 year pandemic.

This budget, all funds, is one point two five billion dollars. Which is \$84 million less than the 2020 adopted budget. That marks a six point three percent decrease.

The proposed 2021 budget also continues to incorporate the austerity measures and hiring freeze implemented in 2020.

To address these unprecedented times, each executive department was also given a predetermined dollar amount they were asked to use when planning their budgets.

I want to thank all of my department heads who worked closely with the team in Management and Budget to live within those numbers for 2021.

It will not be easy. It will require patience, innovation and ingenuity on the part of all of us. But it is our hope and belief that we will be able to continue providing the quality of services our community has come to expect.

It is also our ultimate goal to quickly, but responsibly, shore up our departments with the necessary resources, as funding permits.

When I was first elected to the Legislature in 2011, our tax rate was \$5.82 per thousand. In this budget before you today, I am proposing to lower the tax rate to \$4.99 per thousand – an historic low. Our property tax rate is down 14% since 2012.

When looking at how the 2020 fiscal year will end, we are anticipating a negative seven percent growth in sales tax. A dramatic change from a budget that had anticipated over 3% GROWTH in sales tax.

While our economy is undoubtedly rebounding, there is still volatility and uncertainty that we must account for.

That is why we are budgeting for 4 percent growth in sales tax in 2021 off the baseline of the negative seven percent decline in 2020. In dollars, that means we are still projecting a 22 million dollar reduction in sales tax compared to what was budgeted for in 2020.

We are also required to set aside three point one million dollars in sales tax for the distressed hospital fund – a new mandate placed on local counties by New York State.

Our budget also takes into account an anticipated twenty million dollar cut in aid from New York State.

The cost shifts and unfunded mandates from the State of New York are all over this budget and quite frankly they are ultimately a cost shift to the local taxpayer.

This budget also calls for keeping the sewer unit charge flat at \$452 per unit. We are able to do so while continuing our aggressive sewer consolidation effort. This past year, our team at WEP successfully executed 4 long term lease agreements in the Meadowbrook Limestone Service Area. These agreements cleared the way for WEP to kick off our \$9 million investment to mitigate inflow and infiltration into our sewer system. Phase 2 of our consolidation efforts will kick off next year in the Seneca Knolls Service Area.

Our team at WEP also played a critical role in our efforts to identify COVID-19 in our wastewater systems. We were one of the first in the state to undertake this effort and it is now being used throughout our county in a micro-targeted fashion so we can continue to box-in this virus.

But this budget isn't all about austerity and cuts.

I am also proposing an allocation of \$6.8 million dollars for pandemic response and recovery to COVID-19. We have proven we can fight the Virus in real time when we have the resources to Test, and Trace.

We need to make sure we have the money to buy the supplies and equipment necessary to keep our community safe.

This Budget also invests in our PIE strategy with continued funding for the Early Childhood Alliance, increased funding for our Hire Ground workday program and increased funding for Day Care.

I am also excited to share with you that the 2021 budget calls for the proposed consolidation of Information Technologies with the City of Syracuse and County of Onondaga. This consolidation, long overdue in the eyes of many, will create efficiencies and strengthen our Cybersecurity network while saving both the City and County money.

Presented to you is a Capital Plan that continues to maintain our existing infrastructure and invest in new infrastructure that is driving Economic development and jobs.

Lastly, I am proud to point out that despite all of the fiscal challenges that Onondaga County has faced in 2020, S&P, Moody's and Fitch all reaffirmed our credit ratings. They did this in the middle of the pandemic. There is no better 3rd party validation than these rating agencies on our Fiscal Health.

Before I leave you this morning, I want to take some time and highlight just some of the work that continued to get done by our county workforce despite the many challenges and obstacles they faced in the middle of the pandemic.

Working with our Health Department, our team at Emergency Communications, led by Commissioner Julie Corn protected nearly 100 police, fire and emergency medical service agencies by keeping a secure list of COVID-19 positive or quarantined addresses so our first responders had the situational awareness they needed before entering a scene to keep them safe.

Our Department of Transportation, under the leadership of Commissioner Voss, paved nearly 100 miles of county roads, replaced several bridges, completed major infrastructure projects on West Taft Road and Old Route 57, replaced over 3000 feet of storm drainage pipe and completed several capital projects at the Marcellus, North Area and Jamesville Maintenance facilities.

At parks, under the direction of Deputy Commissioner Brian Kelley, we received awards from the New York State Recreation and Parks Society as well as the Central New York Recreation and Parks Society. And we recently unveiled a completely renovated and expanded Chapel at our Veterans Memorial Cemetery. Our parks team also improved several ski and hiking trails at Highland Forest and Pratt's Fall's.

This year the Office of the Environment was able to secure the last privately owned piece of property on Onondaga Lake for the bargain price of one dollar! Not only did this ensure the lake and its shore would be accessible to everyone for generations to come, it allowed us to continue the extension of our popular Loop the Lake trail. And this summer we did just that. We added over another mile to our trail system on the west side of Onondaga Lake and we also were able to offer a preview of the brand new bridge being built across the CSX Railroad tracks and into the former Roth Steel Site. These efforts are now breathing a new life into a once blighted eye sore for our community.

And our friends at the Zoo remained as busy as ever. We were the first zoo in New York State to open up safely and responsibly with an online reservation system. We broke ground on a new Animal Health Center slated for completion in 2021 and of course welcomed several new animals to the Onondaga County family.

While we were not able to enjoy baseball in person this year, Facilities Commissioner Archie Wixson and his team were busy working on the \$25 million dollar renovation of NBT Bank Stadium. There are now new lights, new grass on the field, new paint, the seats have been replaced and construction is ongoing at the Hank Sauer Room. All of these new amenities we hope to enjoy soon, in a safe and responsible way.

Purchasing Director Dan Hammer and his team were also hard at work this past year. In addition to procuring masks, gloves, gowns, ventilators and other critical PPE, they also were working to continue to find ways to save our County, schools, towns and villages money through cooperative purchasing. In fact his team was able to save the taxpayers nearly 2.5 million dollars in salt costs. And when compared to the state contract, it was over seven million dollars in savings.

These are just a few examples of the fortitude demonstrated by our amazing workforce. We still made sure roads got paved, our parks were maintained and we didn't kick the can down the road on simple maintenance projects.

And it goes without saying that no other department has done more to protect this community during this global health pandemic while still carrying out their many other public health responsibilities than Dr. Gupta and her team in the Health Department. Dr. Gupta and her team have been a steady hand and reassuring voice for not only me, but for all of Onondaga County. She and her team are true warriors for the public health and Onondaga County is lucky to have her and her team looking out for us each and every day. Thank you to the entire health department team. Please know that the sacrifice you all have made, has served as an inspiration to many. Even Officer McMahon...

I've said it before and I will say it again – our county workforce is the best of the best. I want to thank all of them, in every department, for their unwavering commitment to providing high quality services to the citizens of Onondaga County.

To my partners on the legislature, this will be the most unusual budget you will ever have to vote on. No County budget in its history has been \$80 million dollars less than the previous year. No budget and no government in our history has faced such uncertainty of revenue on top of multi-million dollar state budget cuts while the services we provide our constituents mean more to them than ever before.

You are tasked to be good fiscal stewards while giving my administration the necessary resources to fight this Virus and lead our Community in an Economic recovery.

And make no mistake about it – we will recover and we will be stronger in 2021.

This takes leadership. And what an opportunity we all have in front of us. We can show Washington DC, Albany, all of our trolls, and naysayers that we can work together, we can put aside politics and we can fight this pandemic together.

We recognize the moment, the challenge in front of us, like so many in our community have already done - our nurses, doctors, day care providers, grocery store workers, teachers, and our very own County workforce. As a legislative body it is your turn to meet the moment, confront the challenges, and make the tough decisions of the 100 year pandemic.

I wish you well and thank you for your partnership.

God Bless and get to work.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:43 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



JAMIE McNAMARA, Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature