



State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

Office of the County Executive
Jason T. Garnar, Executive

2023 Broome County State of the County Address Delivered by County Executive Jason Garnar, February 22, 2023 O.L. Davis Fire Company, Endwell

Good evening. Thank you to Chairman Reynolds, Majority Leader Pasquale, Minority Leader Weslar, members of the Broome County Legislature, other elected officials, and business leaders for joining us tonight.

And thank you to our hosts, the O.L. Davis Fire Company for allowing me to deliver my 2023 State of the County Address here.

The men and women of this company volunteer their time to keep Town of Union residents safe. On top of putting their lives on the line, they also educate the public, they open their doors for special events, they host charity drives, and so much more.

They, like the 30 other volunteer first responder agencies in Broome County, sacrifice time with their families to protect and give back to ours.

And we owe them a debt of gratitude.

The residents of Broome County appreciate what our 1,000-plus volunteer firefighters and ambulance workers do.

And just last week, as a way to SHOW them how much we value their efforts, the Broome County Legislature passed a new resolution that will provide these selfless men and women with a property tax exemption.

Thank you again to ALL the men and women who volunteer to keep Broome County safe. Ask them WHY they do what they do.

It's not about being a hero, although that title is fitting. It's not about the accolades, although they deserve many. It's not about them at all. It's about us.

It's about providing their neighbors with peace of mind when they go to bed each night. It's about having each other's backs. It's about community.

If you look up the definition of "community" in the dictionary, here's what it will say: a unified body of individuals, such as people with common interests, living in a particular area.

Volunteer first responders are our neighbors, sharing our interest in making our neighborhoods safer and a better place to live.

The same can be said for your place of worship, school, social club, or job. We gather at these places with other people because they share the same goals we do and can help us achieve them.

Whether it's a fire station in Endwell, a school in Whitney Point, a baseball field in Binghamton, or a church in Windsor, we are a collection of dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of individual communities.

And all these individual communities, when added together, equals one strong Broome County.

And in order to maintain a strong County, we need to continue to ensure our residents and visitors feel safe. The resolution passed last week is just the latest example of our ongoing commitment to the safety of our community.

This past year, we finished replacing our old public safety communications network, a piece-meal system with parts more than 50 years old. Our new network will make emergency response faster than ever. When you call 911, every second matters and this new system will help us save lives.

In November, Endicott Police became the first agency to go online; to date 33 other agencies have joined them and next week another ten will make the transition to the new system.

I'd like to thank our Director of the Office of Emergency Services, Patrick Dewing, along with Chuck Rogers from Emergency Services, for shepherding this project to the finish line.

This department is also leading the way in making our roads safer, especially for our children. Broome County was one of the first counties in New York State to introduce a school bus stop arm camera program which automatically records and fines drivers who illegally pass stopped school buses.

To date, this program has recorded more than 4,000 violations; an unacceptable number of times drivers have chosen to break the law and put our children in danger. However, thanks to the Stop Arm Camera Program, those who pass buses illegally are being caught and fined and drivers are starting to get the message. We are averaging 70 fewer violations per month than we did during the first year of the program.

I'd also like to recognize the efforts of Broome Security, led by Director Brian Norris, who is also assisting with this program.

Along with our Security Division and OES, our community would not be safe without the dedicated efforts of our Sheriff's Office.

Since I took office, we have added additional deputies to protect every corner of Broome County. The men and women of the Sheriff's Office go to work every day, putting themselves in between us and any dangers we may encounter and we are grateful for their selfless service. As a result of the dedication of all of our local police agencies and first responders, crime in Broome County is down 17% since 2017.

But our work is not done. We will continue supporting law enforcement and I'm looking forward to building on our efforts to create a safer community with our new Sheriff, Fred Akshar. He's hit the ground running, adding new positions, implementing new efforts to recruit new employees, and examining how the jail operates. Thank you Sheriff for committing to our shared goal of improving safety.

Creating a safer community is not just about protecting residents against crime. Just as important is providing critical services to those in need.

During my first three years in office, we made significant strides by helping individuals access life-saving treatment, educating the public, and ultimately cutting overdoses in half. However, since the COVID pandemic we've sadly seen these numbers spike once again with overdoses doubling since 2020.

In 2023, we are renewing our efforts to eliminate overdoses and new resources are becoming available to help us. This year, Broome County will start receiving millions of dollars as the result of a settlement with the big pharmaceutical companies that contributed to the substance use disorders too many of our neighbors have battled; a battle that FAR too many have tragically lost.

Broome County was one of the first to sign on to this lawsuit and we are committed to using settlement money to directly combat the epidemic, investing in programs that target prevention and harm reduction. The first allocation of funding is arriving and a request for proposals will be issued on March 1st allowing service providers to get to work.

Thank you to our County Attorney Bob Behnke, whose office has worked on this lawsuit, as well as Director of Public Health, Mary McFadden, and Commissioner of Social Services & Mental Health, Nancy Williams, who are leading our efforts to invest funds in community programming and services.

In addition to making the community safer, our ability to strengthen the state of our county over the last year has been made possible by a strong economy, the strongest economy we've seen in years in Broome County.

Some of the biggest projects in our history are taking place right now. The transformation of the Oakdale Mall into the Oakdale Commons, where the largest Dick's Sporting Goods store in the world will open this year.

Eyesores that no one ever thought would be demolished are coming down, like the former IBM Country Club that will make way for new housing, or the buildings on the old IBM campus in Endicott that will be torn down this spring.

Also in Endicott, the former K-Mart Plaza which has sat vacant for years is about to be redeveloped into space for a local business.

Victory Lofts in Johnson City is set to open to hundreds of tenants in the next few weeks.

FedEx & Amazon have opened huge new warehouses to service customers throughout the region.

Imperium 3 in Endicott is now manufacturing the first lithium-ion batteries made in America.

And Johnson City just received more GREAT news today when the Governor came to town to announce \$10 million for the Village as the latest Downtown Revitalization Initiative award winner.

JC becomes the second Broome County municipality to receive this major funding award, joining 2021 winner - the Village of Endicott. The DRI, along with our investments using American Rescue Plan and Greater Binghamton Fund money, are transforming these villages back into the community hubs they once were.

All of the projects I just mentioned have generated hundreds of millions of dollars for our economy while creating more than 1,000 jobs.

And it's not just businesses that are building here, people buying here too. Our sales tax revenue, which is a major resource to our annual budget, continues to produce some of the highest receipts we've seen in years. And I am proud to say that Broome County's unemployment rate is the lowest in more than 30 years.

While more job seekers are finding work, many employers are still desperately seeking people to fill open jobs due to one of the smallest labor pools the nation has ever experienced.

To address this issue, we are working directly with businesses to help find and train the people they need.

Led by Bob Murphy, the Broome County Office of Employment & Training offers programs like the Opportunity Impact Training Program, CREST, SkillUP, and Career Bound - all of which are designed to give potential workers the exact skills they need to be job-ready.

As an employer ourselves, Broome County is also modernizing its approach to recruitment and retention. Since 2017, we've upgraded hundreds of positions in our highest-need departments; We have renegotiated union contracts with larger increases than the previous administration. We've transitioned to permanent summer hours, we now offer a work-from-home option, added a new paid-holiday, and just awarded the first bonus in nearly 30 years to every full- and part-time employee.

All this while continuing to offer some of the best benefits of any employer in the region...thank you to Personnel Officer Christine Segrue for your commitment to working with us to make Broome County a great place to work.

But the work isn't done. We recognize that we need to continue addressing compensation of certain positions and developing new ways to reward our employees' hard work...

I appreciate the dedication of each and every member of our workforce. Broome County does not run without you, plain and simple. Thank you for what you do.

But our ability to invest in our County is at risk. The recently proposed State Budget includes a huge shift in Medicaid costs to counties across New York State; if this proposal makes it into the final State Budget, Broome County will see an immediate \$5 million hit.

Another proposal caps how much revenue the County can generate through real property sales, and additional unfunded mandates included in the State's proposal could result in a more than \$10 million hole in our County Budget.

My administration has worked hard to make living in Broome County more affordable. We've cut taxes five years in a row. When gas prices skyrocketed last year, we capped sales tax at the gas pump.

Working with our Budget Director, Jerome Knebel, the County Legislature, and Department Heads we've created responsible budgets that have allowed us to make investments in our workforce, improve our infrastructure, and rebuild our fund balance. This work led to the State Comptroller giving us our best financial rating ever this past fall.

And with nationally high inflation, it's more important than ever that we continue to make Broome County more affordable for everyone.

But all of this work, along with our ongoing efforts to invest more in the people who work for us and in the services people who live here rely on, are in jeopardy with the proposed State Budget. We will do everything we can to fight these harmful proposals, and I have spoken with our local State representatives who have pledged their support for Broome County.

As we face this challenge from Albany, we are also working to address a very real challenge back at home. While our growing economy has created exciting opportunities for our community, it has led to a shortage of places to live.

At the beginning of 2020, more than 800 homes were for sale in Broome County, today there are just around 300. The demand for our housing stock is rapidly exceeding the supply and we are moving as quickly as we can to address this shortage and create housing for every income level.

Victory Lofts in the former EJ factory on Lester Avenue is ready to open, providing 165 new units; and next door to Victory, 19 Avenue B will be transformed into additional units. The saddest eyesore in Broome County no longer exists, instead 75 new units of affordable housing will soon be constructed on the site of the former IBM Country Club. And on Grand Avenue we'll continue to address the need with another 100 affordable units.

Working with the Broome County Land Bank and Director Jessica Haas, we've removed blighted properties and transformed others into new units and opportunities for homeownership for first-time buyers. We've also worked with the Southern Door Community Land Trust to rehabilitate a foreclosed property to turn into affordable housing and also supported agencies like First Ward Action Council and SEPP to create homes for people of all ages and incomes. I'm extremely proud of this work and everyone that played a role in it should be extremely proud too.

In addition to these housing projects, there is another that will break ground in the near future that stands apart from the others. The men and women who served our nation and sacrificed so much on our behalf will always have a special place in the heart of Broome County. Too often, our veterans find themselves faced with a number of challenges as they transition back to civilian life. Broome County is committed to ensuring that veterans not only have the resources they need, but a roof over their heads.

The Broome County Veterans Resource Center will include tiny homes specifically for men and women who served in the armed forces. This long-awaited center is set for construction and will be built at 530 State Street in Binghamton, making it accessible for all veterans. This one-stop shop will include access to virtually every resource, program, and service our veterans need.

But our commitment to our veterans doesn't stop there. We are one of only a few counties in New York State that have a dedicated Veterans Fund to find new ways to give back to those who have served. This fund has supported missions of the Twin Tiers Honor Flight, sponsored veterans canteens at American Legions across the County, funded cooking classes at Cornell Cooperative Extension and we have even partnered with Broome County's professional sports teams to provide free tickets to games. Thank you to the Black Bears, Rumble Ponies, and Bulldogs who have all partnered with us. And thank you to our Office of Veterans Services and Director Brian Vojtisek for all the work you do on behalf of Broome County veterans.

From the men and women who have served to the men and women who have helped build our great community. Our seniors built businesses, homes, and now should be able to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Under the leadership of Mary Whitcombe, the Office for Aging works every day to help our older residents access services they need. Our efforts together have led to Broome County being designated as an Age-Friendly Community by AARP, a designation we are proud of and take seriously.

Broome County's senior centers are popular social gathering places that offer a variety of activities, classes, meals and more. For years we've had a senior center in almost every community in Broome County, and as of 2023, we can now say we have one in EVERY community in the County.

Last fall I met with a group of seniors who had been gathering at the Chenango Town Hall. When I asked them what they'd like to see in Broome County, they said a space they could call their own. We got to work immediately with OFA and our partners in the Legislature...now this group has its own senior center operated by the County at the First United Methodist Church in Chenango Bridge.

Our nine centers are key to keeping seniors active and involved and are one of our best public assets for our community. Behind the scenes, OFA's dedicated staff helps connect seniors with important benefit information, access to caregivers, financial assistance, legal aid, and much more.

And throughout the County, seniors are giving back to the community more than ever before. They participate in Foster Grandparents, volunteer at events like the Dick's Sporting Goods

Open, and lead numerous civic groups. For all that they have given us, we must continue to make sure we have everything they need to age in place and do so comfortably.

Regardless of age, there is one thing all our residents have in common when asked what they want in their community. Their response? Things to do. We have more to do in Broome County than ever before.

Manager of the Arena & Forum, Chris Marion is working every day to bring more entertainment to these facilities. The Black Bears have the best attendance in the Federal Prospects Hockey League, averaging larger crowds than some ECHL and AHL teams. Additionally, the Binghamton Philharmonic, Tri Cities Opera, Broadway in Binghamton, and numerous concerts, comedy acts, and other shows are featured each year at our Arena & Forum.

At En-Joie Golf Course, we host a world-class PGA Champions Tour event and when the pros aren't in town, we've had higher attendance at our golf course than we've seen in years.

Along with hockey, the Bulldogs and Rumble Ponies offer a professional sports experience for local fans and Binghamton University features Division 1 Athletics during every season.

Broome County supports numerous contract agencies that are also attracting visitors to our community. The Ross Park Zoo, Discovery Center, Cornell Cooperative Extension, Broome County Arts Council, GiGi's Playhouse, Broome County Historical Society, and the Four County Library System all provide events and programming that draw people to the community. And to help promote these wonderful organizations and all tourist attractions in Broome County is Visit Binghamton. We appreciate all of these organizations and their ongoing commitment to making Broome County a place people want to live and visit.

But perhaps our greatest recreational asset locally is our amazing parks system. Over the past three years, more people have visited Broome County parks than ever. Our parks are home to festivals, beaches, water recreation, sports fields, walking trails, and picnic facilities.

Given the renewed interest in outdoor recreation, it is time for the first major parks investment in a generation. Over the next few years, you will see things in our parks that you've never seen before. A new building at Grippen Park will return this facility to the community; this will be a multi-use building that will accommodate everything from recreational sports to craft fairs and concerts. Our parks are for everyone and the amenities in them should reflect that. The entire community can use this building and they will be able to early next year when it is completed.

And ice will return to Grippen Park for public skating, something neighbors in western Broome have longed for since the closure of the old rink years ago. Additionally, a new wiffle ball stadium will allow everyone to feel like a kid again, imitating their favorite Big League player in the backyard.

The BAGSAI softball complex brings thousands of players, coaches, and fans to Broome County each summer. While here, teams and their families stay in our hotels, eat in our restaurants, and shop in our stores. Work has begun to completely renovate this facility with brand new turf and

lights to allow for longer seasons and more tournaments, which means more visitors to our county, providing a major boost to the economy in the process. When completed, this will be the only complex of its kind in New York State and teams will choose to come here to play. We look forward to the first pitch being thrown this summer.

At Otsiningo North, a brand-new dog park will be built to give our four-legged friends an off-leash park of their own...another project slated for completion this summer.

New camping accommodations, restrooms, water fountains, pavilions, grills, and picnic tables, are all in the works as well, meaning that there will be something new at every single Broome County park. Thank you to Parks Director Liz Woidt for her vision to modernize our recreation experience and keep Broome County's parks among the best in New York State.

We're also making investments in other local municipalities to improve the quality of life in their communities. Working with the Legislature, the Small Community Grant program was introduced in 2018 with the idea that small investments could have major impacts. To date, more than \$1.5 million has been allocated to local governments and nonprofits for projects they otherwise would not have had the resources to fund themselves.

We helped Eastern Broome EMS purchase a new ambulance and automated CPR machine. Improvements to Union-Endicott's Little League facilities were made and they were able to showcase them when they hosted the 10-U New York State Tournament over the summer. Renovations at the Mary Wilcox Memorial Library in Whitney Point will make it accessible to more visitors than ever before. We helped the community food pantry at Salvation Temple Church in Binghamton increase its capacity so they can serve more food insecure residents. And a new generator for the United Way will ensure that this important community resource can continue operating and service Broome County residents, even during disasters.

These are just a few of the dozens of projects the Small Community Grant program has funded and every single one is making a huge difference for the people in those communities. We've funded this program at \$1 million this year so we can fund a record amount of projects, because we know it's small governments and organizations like the ones we've worked with that help make our community strong.

Take a drive around Broome County and you'll see some of the most beautiful landscape in Upstate New York. The serenity of our rural communities is the envy of many big city residents, places where neighbors still know each other's names, where people still shop at mom and pop stores.

It's a way of life many want to maintain, but we have to make sure that they can stay connected to services, their friends, and families just like those living in our urban core. It may be hard to believe in 2023, but there are still areas of Broome County where high-speed internet service isn't available. The remote world we all lived in during the pandemic exacerbated this problem as workers and students often had to find the nearest fast food restaurant just so they could connect for meetings or school.

Led by our Department of Planning and Director Beth Lucas, Broome County is mapping broadband service in every inch of the county to determine where gaps in connection exist. Following this important process, we will then be able to work with our partners at all levels of government to make sure that every single one of Broome County's 200 thousand residents is connected to the internet, so they can stay connected with family, get important news and weather information at a moment's notice, order life-saving prescriptions, or just surf the web like anyone else. It is my goal that within the next five years every single county resident will be connected to high-speed internet.

As you drive across Broome County you'll see beautiful landscape, rolling hills, the river valley, and everything in between. Unfortunately, that drive may not always have been the smoothest in the past. But thanks to the leadership of our Department of Public Works, we are rebuilding our infrastructure that has been neglected for far too long.

Since I took office, we've repaired more than 200 miles of roads, fixed dozens of bridges, replaced numerous culverts, and addressed countless other important parts of our county infrastructure. We have made record investments in roads over the past two years and we are committed to building on that progress during this coming construction season and in the years ahead. Thank you to Public Works Commissioner Leslie Boulton, Deputy Commissioner for Highways Chet Kupiec, and Deputy Commissioner for Engineering Roger Brown for your shared commitment in these efforts.

If anyone in Broome County Government knows how important well-maintained roads are, it's Commissioner of Public Transportation Greg Kilmer. His fleet of 64 buses travels two million miles throughout the County every year; helping hundreds of people get to work, transports students to class on time, and brings many more to and from appointments, shopping, and other errands each day. This critical service is one that we're extremely proud of; it's among the best public transit systems in the state and is about to get even better. Six state-of-the-art all electric buses will soon join our fleet made with technology developed locally at BAE Systems in Endicott. These buses will make Broome County a leader in clean-energy transportation, while also supporting a local manufacturing business. Thank you to Commissioner Kilmer for shepherding this project to fruition; I'm looking forward to being on the first ride on one of these buses.

While BC Transit is helping move our residents across our roadways, the Greater Binghamton Airport is making major improvements to move more passengers across our skies. We enhanced connections by adding two daily trips to New York City, allowing access to more destinations than ever before. In November Avelo Airlines made its inaugural flight out of BGM marking the first NEW service at our airport in 20 years. Avelo added service at 16 airports across the United States in 2022 and of those 16 Broome County is the among the highest performing new Avelo locations. The aviation industry has changed greatly over the last 10 years; we've certainly experienced the difficulties of those changes, but Avelo has shown that tailoring service to the community can have tremendous results.

I encourage everyone to fly out of BGM soon because before long you won't recognize the place. In addition to securing new service with Avelo, Governor Hochul announced in September that BGM was awarded \$32 million in funding to completely transform the airport. The convenience BGM has always been known for will now be complemented by a modern flying experience that travelers seek out. This will undoubtedly be a valuable selling point as we continue our efforts to attract more airlines to fly BGM. Hats off to Commissioner of Aviation Mark Heefner and his team for securing this new service and this major construction award, we know that this is only the beginning of exciting things happening at our airport.

Next time you're on that Avelo flight as it descends into Broome County, look down. You'll see a place where amazing things are happening. You'll see huge cranes and bulldozers building the major projects that are generating hundreds of millions of dollars of investments and putting thousands of people to work. You'll see beautiful rolling hills and a scenic river valley that's home to a first class university, a health care system that saves lives every day, and small businesses that are the backbone of our economy. You'll see neighbors who volunteer their time as first responders to protect our families. You'll see better bridges and roads and safer ones too because of the work of our law enforcement agencies and emergency services. You'll see the men and women who sacrificed so much to serve our country. You'll see countless opportunities for entertainment, education, and recreation. You'll see new places to shop, new places to live, and a place where you know you can raise your family. You'll see a government that works together because they know that's how we get more done on behalf of our residents. You'll see home, a place that was built by the hard work of generations before us and is being made stronger by our friends and neighbors every single day.

Broome County may be 24 individual municipalities, but we are stronger when we work together and I've never felt better about the state of Broome County. We should all be proud of the role we've played to help get us here. This is our community! Thank you and God bless.