



State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

Office of the Broome County Executive
Jason T. Garnar, County Executive

2024 Broome County State of the County Address Delivered by Jason Garnar, February 28, 2024 Broome-Tioga BOCES, Binghamton

Good evening and thank you for joining me tonight. Thank you to Chairman Dan Reynolds, Majority Leader Matt Pasquale, Minority Leader Bob Weslar and all the members of the Broome County Legislature.

I'd also like to acknowledge our county-wide elected officials in the audience tonight: our County Clerk Joe Mihalko, our Sheriff Fred Akshar, and our new District Attorney Paul Battisti.

Thank you to our other elected officials and community leaders also joining us tonight.

I want to thank all of our Department Heads for all the work they do day in and day out. Your efforts are appreciated.

And thank you to all of our county employees who dedicate their time to serving the people of Broome County. It is because of your hard work that thousands of residents can rely on our services every single day of the year.

Thank you to Wendi Stetson and the incredibly talented MacArthur Elementary chorus for joining us tonight to sing the National Anthem. Great job kids!

And I want to thank the staff and students at Broome-Tioga BOCES for graciously hosting us tonight. Thank you to BOCES District Superintendent Rebecca Stone. Rebecca - your leadership is commendable, and the positive impact you and your team have made on our community is evident.

Tonight we have gathered in the Automotive Technology workshop at BOCES main campus, and I want to thank instructor Evan Thorson for getting the place cleaned up for us - Evan I never thought I'd see an auto shop so clean!

This workshop is a great example of what BOCES does for our community - they play a huge role in developing our students of today into our workers of tomorrow. Each day, students learn to operate state-of-the-art service and repair equipment, diagnose complex automotive systems, and gain valuable real-world experience by working alongside professionals at Gault-Toyota. With over 159,000 registered vehicles in Broome County alone, there is a demand for vehicle maintenance, inspection, and repair. The skills taught in this very room are essential for meeting that demand in our community.

And a theme that we will keep seeing here tonight is that BOCES gives back to the community. Students in the autobody shop program recently refurbished three police vehicles for the Owego Police Department and several speed trailers for the Broome County Sheriff's Department.

Not too far from this room, students work hard to master the skills of construction and welding in order for them to pass the American Welding Society and OSHA Construction Safety certification tests. The demand for skilled welders in our area is substantial, and programs like these are instrumental in meeting that demand.

Kaili Young was a 2023 graduate of the welding program and earned her certification. Kaili is here with us tonight - Kaili can you stand up and be recognized?

While Kaili was enrolled in the welding program, through a partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension and the Broome Health Department, she and other students used their skills to construct bike racks over at the Broome County Farmer's Market to help promote healthy transportation.

Kaili continues to live in Broome County and got hired as a welder at Raymond Corporation, helping to manufacture over 20,000 forklifts every year.

Kaili - thanks for choosing to live and work here and thank you for giving back to our community!

Another fantastic BOCES program is the highly popular, competitive, and extremely rigorous New Visions program.

Dozens of seniors from every school district in Broome County spend their mornings taking classes and working side-by-side with professionals in the fields of business, education, engineering, health, law, and government, observing and participating in real-life experiences.

Five years ago one of those students was Evan Maslin, a Whitney Point Senior.

Through the program, Evan was able to spend a few weeks in my office and we were so impressed, we hired him as a summer intern right after he graduated from high school. He left for college that fall to earn his bachelor's degree and master's degrees, but he decided to come back home to Broome County, and now works as Senator Schumer's Deputy Regional Director, playing a role in helping to create a strong economy in upstate NY. And in Evan's free time, he gives back to the community, coaching youth soccer.

This is exactly what we want happening in Broome County. We want our youth to get engaged with their community, to find what interests them, and we want them to have great opportunities to live, work, and play right here in Broome County.

So whether it's automotive repair, welding, connecting youth to careers, or any of the dozens of programs that BOCES offers to the more than 2,000 students per year they serve, BOCES is one of the most important leaders in our community that is preparing our youth for the future of tomorrow.

BOCES has become so popular that they have run out of classroom space, and over the next ten years, they project a healthy 17% enrollment growth. So this year, they will embark on one of

their largest building projects ever: a \$46 million capital improvement project to expand classroom space and upgrade critical infrastructure of their entire facility, which was built in 1972.

A lot of good things are happening at this campus. Really important things that benefit our community. And BOCES recognizes that in order to build on that success, they need to invest in their infrastructure.

And what's happening on this campus over the next year is something we have seen happening over the past few years all across our community and something that you'll really see a lot of this year: Broome is building!

I think a strong community is a community that builds. It means that businesses are expanding, that we have the resources to maintain our infrastructure, and that people have confidence in the economy to not just stay here, but to re-invest in it.

So tonight I stand before you to tell you that the state of Broome County is strong because we are building more than ever before.

Now people in all levels of government talk a lot about how strong their community is, but in Broome County it's more than just words someone says, or a feeling someone has.

Over \$500 million in construction projects will be underway this year - which means Broome County will see more construction in 2024 than it has in a generation.

Take a look across our community, and you'll see cranes and construction workers on job sites all across Broome County. They're building housing, parks, airports, hospitals, malls, roads, bridges and everything in between.

And Broome County government has played an important role in just about every one of those projects.

Make no mistake, we have our challenges like any other community, and I'll talk about some of those tonight because it's important to not just talk about our successes but also recognize the challenges we have in front of us.

But by almost every measurable statistic, we have made dramatic improvements to county government and have become one of the driving forces behind much of the historic growth that we are seeing in Broome County.

The financial condition of Broome County government is stronger than it has been in a very long time. We have passed 7 bi-partisan budgets that reduced the property tax rate over 20% and built up our rainy day savings, allowing us to eliminate short term debt and weather future economic downturns.

So while Americans were dealing with skyrocketing inflation which caused huge increases at the grocery store, the gas pump, and everywhere else, Broome County government was able to deliver much-needed property tax relief.

It's been less than a year since we lost our long-time budget director Jerome Knebel, but all his years of guidance and hard work on the budget process continue to pay off. I'm also excited to see new budget director Jane St. Amour's work in modernizing our budget office. Jane's work to invest in our reserves has resulted in our interest earnings increasing from about \$850,000 in 2022 to over \$5,000,000 in 2023. A reorganization of the entire department in 2024 and new budgeting software will mean increased transparency and better budget forecasting in the future.

The Broome County economy continues to grow. Sales tax growth is a sign of a healthy economy, and Broome County saw a 4% increase in sales tax collections in 2023. The county unemployment rate has fallen over 27% over the last 7 years. We've gone from jobs LEAVING the county, to where we have thousands of jobs available right now.

We've seen a number of big economic development projects take place and one of the largest is the redevelopment of the Oakdale Commons.

What was once basically an empty mall just a few years ago has now become the national blueprint of how to bring malls back from the dead. The first phase of this redevelopment brought a mix of restaurants including BeerTree Factory, Panera, and Chipotle. The county built a state-of-the-art workforce development center. The brand new Guthrie Lourdes Health and Fitness center has over 6,500 members. The largest Dicks Sporting Goods House of Sport in the world opened last year, and last month nationally renowned BJ's Wholesale Club opened up a 100,000 sq ft brand new store. This summer, Dave and Busters will open, and the developers are currently making plans for even more development.

The project has created hundreds of new jobs, more shopping options, and visitors from other states and hundreds of miles away are getting off the highway to shop here, which means a bigger boost to our local economy and sales tax revenue.

Just a few years ago, it looked like the mall would be dead and it would have joined hundreds of malls across the United States who closed completely, got foreclosed on, and ended up sitting dark for years, deteriorating more and more each year as governments tried to figure out a way to revive them.

But not in Broome County. This was a big team effort, and our community worked together to not just save the mall, but turn it into the most visible economic development project in the entire Southern Tier.

We also see other employers in Broome County making big time investments in their buildings.

After years of one year lease renewals, Boscov's Department Store, one of the last downtown department stores left in the country, recently announced a \$10 million renovation of their building along with a 10 year long-term lease extension. This was the result of yet another

private-public partnership of Boscov's, Mayor Kraham, Assemblywoman Donna Lupardo, and Broome County government.

A complete renovation of this downtown anchor store will no doubt attract more retail businesses, restaurants, and people to downtown Binghamton.

Over the last year, you couldn't help but notice UHS's brand new \$170 million Wilson Medical Center project appearing across the Johnson City skyline, significantly improving patient health when they open in May. And UHS continues to invest in Johnson City, recently opening up a new childcare and a pharmacy that will be open 24 hours a day, 365 days per year.

Johnson City continues to see growth from Binghamton University, and over the next year their \$10 million Downtown Revitalization award from New York State will soon be catalyzing infrastructure, housing, business development, and other economic development projects.

Endicott continues to make progress with big things happening in 2024. The village will begin its much anticipated reconstruction of Washington Ave. A number of housing and economic development projects will also break ground this year with funding from the Downtown Revitalization Initiative. Very soon the demolition of the old IBM building group will begin, funded in part by the county, making the rest of the Phoenix campus shovel-ready for development.

With the awarding of over \$250 million in federal and state grants to Binghamton University's New Energy New York program along with Binghamton being designated a federal tech hub, our community has a real opportunity to lead the world in the research, development, and manufacture of lithium-ion batteries and it can happen right here in Broome County.

From big projects to smaller projects, Broome County is also making sure we see growth in every part of the county, including our smaller towns and villages. In 2023 and 2024 we will direct almost \$2 million to help fund dozens of projects across the county. These projects help volunteer fire departments get the equipment they need, fund local park and playground projects, help nonprofits expand to help serve the needy, and so much more. Very soon Broome County, with the help of The Agency, will begin a new initiative to offer grant funding to small businesses to help them prosper and grow.

Just a few weeks ago, the Greater Binghamton Chamber of Commerce released the results of their annual survey of local county businesses and the results were very encouraging. 73% of businesses anticipate growth, while the rest expect their business to stay the same. 80% of local businesses project an increase in sales for 2024, marking a 37% increase from 2023. And over 60% of local businesses want to add to their workforce in 2024, presenting us with a challenge. Employers are seeking to expand their workforce while there are already thousands of open positions waiting to be filled. How can we fill all these jobs?

One way to do that is by encouraging more people to live in our community. But right now that's difficult for many places in the United States and it's also difficult here in Broome County because of the lack of housing. In early 2020, there were about 1300 homes listed for sale in the Greater Binghamton housing market. There are now 250. While our home values have greatly

increased, actual homes to buy are scarcer than ever before. A recent housing study Broome County just completed identified the need for an additional 6000 units of housing. This includes all types of housing, from single family homes, to market rate, to senior housing, and affordable housing, we need it all. That's a lot of housing, but if we want to grow as a community, we have our work cut out for us.

In 2024, we expect to break ground on over 500 units of housing, and most of these projects received American Rescue Plan Act funding from Broome County in order to get them across the finish line. These projects include:

75 units of affordable housing at the former IBM Country Club that we worked with the Town of Union to demolish in late 2022.

30 units of workforce housing at 19 Avenue B in Johnson City.

72 units of affordable housing along with a 100 slot on-site daycare at 333 Grand Ave. in Johnson City.

40 units of market-rate housing at the former St. Ambrose church on Washington Ave. in Endicott.

68 units of affordable housing at the YWCA in Binghamton.

108 units of affordable housing at the former sheltered workshop on Court Street in Binghamton, some of those being for local veterans.

Hundreds of apartments are on track to be renovated at Countrytowne Apartments.

And ten tiny homes for veterans over on the Northside of Binghamton, the first tiny homes ever constructed in Broome County!

The Broome County Land Bank also continues to do great work in the community rehabbing vacant eyesores into affordable housing as well.

With hundreds of more housing units in the early development stages for 2025, we've made a good start. However, there's still much more work ahead to ensure every resident has a safe and affordable place to live, and to meet the workforce needs of our expanding businesses.

As we focus on expanding our community through housing development, it's especially crucial to equip our current residents with the necessary job skills. Providing workforce development opportunities has never been more vital. I have talked about the great initiatives underway here at Broome-Tioga BOCES, but we have numerous other partners offering valuable training programs.

Broome-Tioga Workforce in their modern workforce center at Oakdale Commons helps residents to write resumes and learn new skills, connecting them with local job opportunities.

They host several job fairs annually and offer specialized programs catering to veterans, youth, seniors, and individuals with disabilities. One of my favorite programs offered is the Advanced Manufacturing Training class, which partners with local manufacturing companies to individuals for manufacturing roles, addressing the significant demand for such careers in Broome County, all without requiring an advanced college degree.

SUNY Broome Community College remains dedicated to providing educational opportunities and career training to thousands of Broome County residents each year. Besides offering a cost-effective pathway to a college degree, SUNY Broome provides several workforce development programs to the community. A recent addition is the Line Worker Training program, a collaboration between the college, NYSEG, and the IBEW union, enabling local students to gain certification and employment to become line workers within a year, right here in Broome County. Previously, students had to travel to southern states like Georgia for such training, but now they can begin their careers from home.

In 2024 the college's Decker School of Nursing and Health Sciences will undergo a \$4 million renovation, including upgrades to its nursing lab, as well as classroom and lab enhancements for the dental hygiene and radiology technology programs, providing a steady pipeline of local healthcare workers to our nursing homes and hospitals.

Broome County will continue to increase its funding support for SUNY Broome Community College in 2024, recognizing its importance to our community. And it's not just us saying it either. The college was recently ranked the second-best community college in the entire state, out of over 60 community colleges. Congratulations to the students, faculty, staff, board of trustees, and new president Dr. Tony Hawkins for their outstanding dedication and hard work.

In addition to the advancements at SUNY Broome Community College, 2024 will be a record year for infrastructure development in Broome County.

Under the leadership of our Commissioner of Public Works Roger Brown, and Director of Highways Chet Kupiec, this year the county is set to pave over 84 miles of roads and renovate 7 county bridges.

Earlier this year, our Airport renovation project broke ground. Thanks to substantial funding from State and Federal grants, this was an opportunity to undertake a much needed renovation project while minimizing costs for local taxpayers. And we established a project labor agreement with all of our local trades, ensuring that the work is carried out by local workers.

In 2022, led by Director Deb Smith, Solid Waste Management successfully completed an award-winning reclamation project. Recognized as the Environmental Project of the Year, this project freed up an additional 20 acres of land where we will build a new cell this year. This crucial project ensures the extended lifespan of our landfill for years to come, all without increasing landfill fees, which remain among the lowest in the state.

Under the leadership of our Parks Director, Brenda Gowe, we will continue our historic parks improvement program throughout 2024, with a focus on completing two major park projects.

In May, we will celebrate the grand opening of the Greenlight Networks Grand Slam Park, set to become the largest softball park in New York State.

With four new turf fields and cutting-edge lighting, it stands as the premier destination in the northeast for softball enthusiasts. Already, every weekend from May through July is fully booked with tournaments. Recently, the park was unanimously chosen as the host site for the New York State girls' softball championships for the next three years, benefitting hundreds of local softball players and driving significant economic growth as thousands of players and their families visit for tournaments, filling our hotel rooms and dining in our restaurants. Additionally, the Visions Veterans Memorial Arena has been selected as the next venue for the New York State Boys Basketball Championships.

Another significant park project is kicking off at Grippen Park and is set to be finished later this summer. The entire building will be renovated, with the addition of six new pickleball courts and a skating rink for the colder months. It will also include walking paths, a basketball court, an accessible playground, a wiffle ball stadium, and a regulation-size flag football field. We also plan on hosting more events here, creating a park that everyone can use and be proud of.

Just last week, we celebrated the groundbreaking of the much-anticipated Broome County Veterans Resource Center, which will serve as a one-stop-shop for all veterans' resources in our county. Additionally, we will build ten units of tiny homes, the first ever constructed in Broome County.

This project marks a significant milestone, being the first of its kind in New York State, and sets a model for how we honor and support our veterans for generations to come.

In late 2022, seniors from Chenango Bridge asked the county to open a senior center in their area. We listened, and in March of 2023, a senior center was opened in the First United Methodist Church of Chenango Bridge on River Road. The center originally opened two days per week, however, attendance and activities quickly grew. By October 2023, the center expanded its operation to three days per week, open on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 10 am to 2 pm.

As we approach the one-year anniversary of the Chenango Bridge senior center later this March, we're proud to report that nearly 300 individual seniors, ranging from age 60 to 97, have attended!

Broome County remains dedicated to offering family-friendly entertainment all year round. In 2024, our parks will be extremely busy, hosting a variety of music concerts, 5K runs, hiking, cross-country skiing, and other activities. En Joie will host yet another great PGA Championship golf tournament alongside the much anticipated Luke Bryan concert. Later this summer, Otsiningo Park will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Spiedie Fest, while in the fall, Broome County will sponsor the increasingly popular Luma Festival, drawing tens of thousands of visitors with its state-of-the-art light projection displays.

The Broome County Arena and Forum will continue to be a hub for entertainment, hosting numerous music concerts, Broadway acts, and other exciting events. The first-place Black Bears

continue to draw crowds to the Arena, and we look forward to another exciting season of minor league baseball as the Rumble Ponies kick off their season this April. Let's not forget about our very own Binghamton Bulldogs professional basketball team, ranked #9 in the American Basketball Association.

While we provide more things to do for our community, it's also just as important to make sure our community is safe. While overall crime has decreased over the past seven years, we did see an increase in 2022, so it's more important than ever to support initiatives to protect our residents.

Close to 70% of crimes in Broome County are larcenies, and many larcenies are fueled by the opioid epidemic. While overdose numbers started decreasing in 2017, we started to see an increase during Covid after 2020.

Last year, we began receiving millions of dollars in opioid settlement funds, and we quickly allocated this funding to local organizations to address the crisis, resulting in a 20% reduction in fatal overdoses in 2023. However, much more needs to be done and it will be, as we are allocating every cent of the settlement money to treatment, education, and harm reduction initiatives.

In 2024, we will also see an increase in treatment services at Helio Health and Family and Children's Services. Funding for a 24/7 supportive crisis stabilization center was also awarded by New York State to the Mental Health Association, which will be another crucial resource in combating the opioid epidemic.

While it's important to reduce poverty, facilitate addiction recovery, and focus on root causes of crime, we must continue our strong support of law enforcement so that they can continue to protect and serve our community.

And since 2017, with the support of the county legislature, we have added a significant number of sheriff deputy and patrol positions to the budget.

I want to commend the work of Sheriff Akshar and his team who have launched several initiatives which will keep our community safer. Working with a community advisory group, the sheriff worked to increase inmate visitation, improve food quality, added 30 hours per week of programming and services, and doubled Medically Assisted Treatment.

In 2024, the sheriff will partner with the Addiction Center of Broome County to enhance Substance Use Disorder (SUD) treatment at the Correctional Facility and expand their partnership with the Southern Tier AIDS Program, utilizing Opioid Settlement Funds to hire an additional Discharge Planner.

We repeatedly see the same group of people cycling through our jail system. These new programs offer support for individuals to better themselves, potentially lowering recidivism rates and, ultimately, reducing crime in our community.

Last year the sheriff hired the largest and most diverse class of corrections officers to address a major staffing shortage in corrections. And later this year, the sheriff will add new patrol positions, forming a unit dedicated to addressing crime hotspots across the county.

Reducing crime also means that we make sure that people who commit crimes are held accountable. It's essential to support the efforts of our newly elected District Attorney Paul Battisti, as he begins his term in office. We partnered with his office and the county legislature to make the necessary budget changes he needed for 2024, including a merit pay program designed to retain and attract qualified attorneys.

In our Office of Emergency Services, led by Director Patrick Dewing, the new public safety communications network will be 100% online this year. For the first time ever, our first responders will be on the same frequency, with greater coverage and clarity than ever before. This system has not only increased first responder safety, but also decreased response times for our residents.

And our school bus stop arm camera program enters its third year of service, holding accountable those who jeopardize our children's safety by passing stopped school buses. While the first two years revealed a concerning number of violations, we're hopeful that through increased information, education, and enforcement, we can gradually reduce these violations over time.

I'm really proud of all the great work carried out by our county departments. It would take all night to dive into every accomplishment, however, I do want to highlight a few departments.

Our long-time County Attorney Bob Behnke retired several months ago, and we lost an institution of knowledge when he left. I want to thank Bob for his many years of dedicated service to the county. I also want to thank our new county attorney, Cheryl Sullivan, for stepping up to lead the department during challenging times. Cheryl - thank you for your professionalism and commitment to both the office, and Broome County.

It's also important to mention the work the team at Willow Point is doing, led by administrator Kate Hawk. Like every nursing home, Willow Point faced significant challenges during the pandemic. Kate and her team worked tirelessly to stabilize the facility, and I'm proud to report that Willow Point's census has increased from around 160 residents just a few years ago, to 250 residents today, a huge improvement!

I want to thank Christine Segrue and our Personnel Department for all the work they do. Christine became Personnel Director right in the middle of the pandemic, and I don't think there has been a day she hasn't been busy from start to finish. She has been especially instrumental in helping us modernize and upgrade positions to attract and retain more employees, among many other tasks we've thrown at her. Thank you once again, Christine, Raquel, and everyone else in the department for your hard work each day.

And again I want to thank each and every one of our employees. Your dedication to your work during these challenging times is truly commendable, and we are incredibly fortunate to have all

of you, and we will continue our work in 2024 to make sure you have more resources to do your jobs.

And finally, I want to thank Chairman Dan Reynolds and the entire county legislature for their outstanding partnership. We've been through a lot in the last seven years...a global pandemic, historic snowstorms, a record amount of state of emergencies, the list goes on and on. In a time where cooperation among different levels of government is often lacking, it's refreshing to see people from diverse political backgrounds and communities come together so effectively here in Broome County. While we may have our differences, we have consistently worked through them, and I truly believe that our county has greatly benefited from our collaboration. Thank you.

As we look ahead to 2024, Broome County faces a busy year of growth and development. The progress we achieve this year will undoubtedly strengthen our community for generations to come.

Together, let's continue to build our community for today, tomorrow, and the future.

Thank you, and God Bless.