



State of the County

John M. Becker, Chairman

January 6, 2022

Good Morning. As I wrote this year's State of the County, I pondered all that happened in the past year in Madison County, N.Y.

For the time being, our County is in excellent shape financially. However, as a collective Board, we need to contemplate where the County, our respective Towns, and districts will be by the end of this decade. What does 2030 look like, what changes are coming our way? By 2030, many, many things will change. Are there areas where we can consolidate and improve?

As I said in my very first state of the County address, if you do not like change, then go home and hide under the bed. But, more on that later, first I want to focus on some of our great accomplishments over the past year.

COVID-19 has been a game changer for all of us, not only in our political careers, but personally as well. Yes our positive cases are up but thankfully, Madison County has the lowest positivity rate in Central New York and in comparison to those Counties that took a hard line approach to enforcing the mask mandate. We continue to encourage our residents to be smart, stay safe and healthy. There are a myriad of brain boggling statements coming from the Federal Government, as well as New York State. We as a County have to control our own future. The State and Federal Government cannot because they do not

understand Local Government. We were the first in NYS to recognize that COVID-19 has played a significant role in our constituent's everyday lives and their mental health. That is why I asked the Board to fund a Mental Health assessment for our County and its residents.

Over the past year, a Mental Health Task Force was assembled to take a look at what the main issues are in our constituent's lives and what can be addressed to help mitigate the damage caused by COVID-19. The Task Force spent several months engaging in a range of activities to understand the mental health needs of our residents. This included interviewing County leaders, Community leaders and local experts, as well as reviewing a range of recent reports and data sources. The Task Force also sent out a range of surveys to members of the community including teachers, the senior population, as well as the general population. After gathering and reviewing all of the data, the Mental Health Task Force recognized that there are a number of priorities, needs and corresponding strategies that have emerged that will contribute to the wellness and wellbeing of Madison County residents. The Task Force has compiled the results of this assessment and the outcome will be presented at the February board meeting. This study is important in so many ways to our community and it will help us see what we can do to resolve the issues at hand. I am looking forward to hearing the results of the

study that was performed this past year so we can begin to take action and help our constituents get through this.

While here at Madison County we are looking out for the mental health of our community, a bigger question needs to be raised and dealt with on a higher level, that is what do we do to get people away from their TV's and the 24 hour news cycle, or the misinformation being spread by social media. Both of these institutions should be held at a higher standard by the State and Federal Governments. The hearing recently done by the senate about the effects of social media on the mental health of our children is a start, but more needs to be done. Historically in our society, we promote the importance of physical wellbeing more than mental wellbeing. You hear about getting your yearly physical, mammogram or colonoscopy. We don't always hear "have you checked in with yourself today?" or "it's ok to have a bad day". Things are improving but focusing on mental wellbeing is still considered taboo. Mental Health is as important or even more important as a society and wellbeing of a community.

In 2021, we moved forward with several big infrastructure projects. The New Highway facility in Eaton was completed. This state of the art facility will better serve the southern part of our community. It is not only functional and

looks great, but it incorporates green energy and is a safer and better working environment for our employees.

In 2021, we also completed the Clockville Water District No. 1 project to provide municipal water and fire protection to Town of Lincoln and Town of Lenox residents that currently experience excessive water hardness, odorous water, and water quality/quantity issues in their existing private wells. The \$2.68M project installed 24,000 linear feet (LF) of 8-inch ductile iron water main, 176 residential water services, 44 hydrant assemblies, and two (2) connections to existing Onondaga County Water Authority (OCWA) infrastructure. Municipal water is supplied by OCWA who also operate and maintain the system via lease agreement. The project was deemed substantially complete in November 2021.

Madison County was one of two New York State Counties to receive the USDA ReConnect Grant. This \$10.1 million award will bring high-speed internet to some of our most rural areas, while at the same time set up infrastructure for a major competitor to better serve residents. In 2022, we will hit the ground running on this project and expect to see significant progress. Broadband access will only make Madison County stronger, more accessible, and help us move toward the future.

Not only were we facing the pandemic in 2021, but also seeing and dealing with the results of Bail Reform. As said by former President Ronald Reagan, “We must reject the idea that every time a law is broken that society is guilty rather than the lawbreaker. It is time to restore the American precept that each individual is accountable for their own actions”

District Attorney William Gabor’s Office successfully prosecuted several drug and alcohol related fatalities, as well as the only murder case in 2021, which were all met with a guilty verdict. This was all done while battling discovery reform, and the very poorly crafted Bail Reform created by our State Legislature. My hope for our District Attorney’s Office, Probation Office and the Sheriff’s Office, as well as our community, is that in 2022 the New York State Legislature takes another look at that legislation and how poorly it was crafted.

In our Sheriff’s Office, consolidation has already begun with the implementation of centralized arraignment and consolidating the southern resources at the Brown Road Site “Highway Garage”. In 2021, the Sheriff’s Office added 4 more School Resource Officers. In total, Madison County has 9 officers covering 6 of our school districts. The Sheriff’s Office Civil Division for the first time received accreditation from the New York State’s Sheriff’s Association. Now

the Corrections, Criminal and Civil Divisions all are accredited. Body cameras were approved at the end of 2021 and are set to be implemented in first half of 2022. I would like to thank Sheriff Todd Hood and his staff for working to shorten the Pistol Permit Process turnaround time to just a matter of three months from start to finish. Thank you to all of our Sheriff staff for what you do day in and day out to keep our community safe. I know it has not been easy with legislation like Bail Reform and other social issues. Please know that we appreciate all you do for us here at Madison County.

Madison County Clerk, Michael Keville and his staff worked hard over the past few years to improve electronic submissions of land and court documents, allowing us to do more in less time. The total number of documents recorded in the Clerk's Office in 2021 increased 22% over 2019 totals. As a result, recording fee revenues increased 31% from \$471,000 to \$620,000. Also, the new Records Management Coordinator assisted several departments with the disposition of more than 500 banker's boxes of records that were ready for disposal based on the NYS Records Retention Schedule. This year he will work to improve our records system even more with digitization and a new centralized filing system. In the DMV, the year started with rain, snow or shine curb-side pick-up service in an effort to increase the amount of auto-dealership transactions in the

Wampsville Office. As dozens of new dealerships from Onondaga County began to utilize our office, the bottom line to the County increased by over 20% beyond the 2019 figures. This netted the County \$1,650,000, the highest total to date. The higher revenue figures, combined with more than \$700,000 in mortgage tax collection, helped Madison County offer its tax payers a year with no increase in the property tax levy. The DMV also recently extended their hours to better serve the community.

Also in 2021, with the monies we received from the American Rescue Plan Act, we funded two rounds of a restaurant gift card program called Madison Local Eats. We pumped over \$345,000 of County monies, with matching funds for a total of \$690,000 into our local restaurants, which were severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This was a wildly successful program, administered by our Public Information Officer, Samantha Field, Planning Director Scott Ingmire, and our Finance department. Hats off to all of them for their hard work.

Madison Local Eats was part of our successful Buy Madison County program that we had put into effect a while ago by my good friend and former Supervisor of Cazenovia, Ralph Monforte. We must continue to remind people to Buy Local and Buy Madison County. I recently read an article on record beef prices across

the United States, but farmers are not cashing in. The U.S. is consuming more beef than ever, but the farm gate price is not reflecting that. Beef prices have climbed over 1/5 over 2020 but not at the farm. A recent White House analysis found that the top four meatpacker companies Cargill, Tyson Foods Inc., JBS SA, and National Beef Packing Co. control 86% of the market. This same analysis found a 120% jump in the gross profits of these companies since the pandemic began. In response to this, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said “the Department of Agriculture (USDA) will spend the \$1 billion of ARPA funds to expand the independent meat processing sector, including funds for financing grants, guaranteed loans, and worker training”. This issue is not only being seen in our beef industry but also with the dairy industry and all the rest of our food stocks. Ask yourselves, what will happen when the wealthy own all of the land and your food is controlled by three or four big corporations? The Federal Government needs to act now, and break up these large multi-billion dollar corporations and billionaires. As in 1900, again the federal government needs to do something. It is time to support our small farmers and food producers again. “Capitalism without competition isn’t capitalism. It’s exploitation.”

That is why I am asking for the Board to approve 1 million dollars of ARPA monies for our Buy Local campaign. This will be used to create a grant for local

producers and retailers to be able to apply for funds for advertising and promotion of their products.

Promoting our local farmers and local food producers is only one way to protect our County. We also need to protect the farmland. In Upstate NY, we are taking good farm land and covering it with solar panels. We have a growing population that needs to be fed. Where will our food come from when our land is covered with panels for the sole purpose of generating electricity to power New York City? We need to find a solution that includes protecting our valuable farm land and providing green energy that stays here.

Another challenge we face this year is our landfill. Economics of scale is in effect here also. We run one of the smallest landfills in New York State. Our recycling program costs the county taxpayers about 1 million dollars last year, recouping only about 40% of that. Markets have changed, recyclables are not as lucrative as they once were and equipment costs more and more. Recently, we purchased a bulldozer for half a million dollars only to be worn out in 10 years. We have initiated a study to look at the feasibility of our landfill and expect that to come back in late 2022 for a decision to be made in 2023.

Our challenges at the landfill bring me back to consolidation. By 2030, to be efficient while staying a cutting edge county, we will have to look at and implement county wide assessment, tax collection, codes, and animal control. The big three will be Ambulance consolidation, as well as Fire Department consolidation into County wide districts, the final consolidation will have to be Townships. I know some people are flipping out by my statements. But these things need to happen. They are inevitable, so we should start the process now. It is very understandable that the individual identity of our Towns, of our Fire Departments, are engrained in the very fiber of who we are. It will not be easy to let go. However, economics dictate that it is just not sustainable. As NYS and their infinite wisdom pushes more and more regulations down to the localities and costs rise, volunteerism wanes and it is just unsustainable. Ten years ago, a fire truck would cost about \$400,000. Now, the same truck costs over \$600,000 and the same goes for Highway trucks, ambulances, etc. I am also asking the Board to fund a study of the costs and efficiency of consolidations. Some cynics will call this an attempted takeover, but it's not. It is good business practices, and along with what NYS is doing to our localities, we better be ready.

In closing, for 2023, we should be more actively engaged in policy coming from Albany and Washington. We are the people, we represent here on the ground floor.

So to recap what needs to be done:

1) Bail Reform needs to be addressed and changed, criminals need to be in jail and not on the streets. When a criminal breaks into your house or steals a car, they should not be let out that same day only to steal another car that afternoon.

2) Advocating for local issues, such as the degradation of precious farmland for solar panels, promoting buy local and the mental health of our community.

3) Again, Bail Reform, Reform

4) Landfill

5) Looking to how we can consolidate resources for a stronger, better and self-efficient Madison County.

This is an ambitious schedule, but it is needed to stay on the cutting edge as we do here in Madison County. With this, I look forward to a very successful 2022.