



March 10, 2016

2016 State of the County Address

**Kevin Gardner, Chairman
Oswego County Legislature**

Good afternoon and welcome! As we celebrate our 200th anniversary today and throughout this year we should keep in mind all of our predecessors who dedicated their time and talents to the ongoing mission to make this a better place for all. I would especially like to thank Legislator Shawn Doyle for the effort that he has put forth to make our 200th anniversary a great success.

To our first-term Legislators, Tom Drumm (Dist. 16), Heather DelConte (Dist. 18) and Tim Stahl (Dist. 20) a renewed message of welcome that comes with my encouragement to accept and approach your new-found responsibilities in a patient and thoughtful manner.

It has been nearly 3 years now since I first accepted the responsibility as your Chairman and over a dozen since I took my first oath of office accepting the privilege to serve as a County Legislator. As I look around the room today only one other legislator, Jack Proud, was here with me in 2004. Legislator Proud, I am honored to serve with you. You have been the “voice of reason” since I began. But while many of the faces have changed, many of our goals and objectives have not. Much remains to be done, but I am certain that if we continue to grow our spirit of cooperation, both internally and externally with our constituent communities and beyond, the future of Oswego County will get brighter with each new agreement and partner that we embrace.

Like many of you, from the very first day that I decided to run for public office, one of my guiding principles has been to always be a careful steward of the taxpayers’ dollars. With respect to that as an overarching goal, I would say that we, as a team, have succeeded. Not only have we managed to hold the County tax rate down but we have actually reduced the rate from \$9.60/1000 in 2004 to \$7.70/1000 in 2016, a 20% decrease over that period.

This has been and will continue to be a very difficult task. One that needs careful and thoughtful deliberation as we attempt to strike a balance between keeping the County tax rate down and providing the types and levels of services that our constituents believe are essential to maintaining the quality of life that we all enjoy here in Oswego County. If we are going to be successful in our goal of keeping property tax stabilization as one of our top priorities in 2016 and if we want to do that in a way that minimizes our reliance on reserve funds, we need to find ways to increase our tax base and add jobs in our communities. Working with our Regional, State and Federal partners I feel certain that there are opportunities in front of us and we also recognize that in some cases we may need to make strategic investments to bring those to fruition. I look forward to working with all of you as we analyze and pursue every initiative that can make Oswego County a better place for all of us.

As we have clearly seen over this last decade, the challenges before us can only be overcome through a bipartisan and coordinated effort, one that reaches beyond the 25 of us deliberating here today.

The year 2015 was truly an eventful year and 2016 will see us continue to make even greater progress on many of the items that we began together last year.

Let's start with the Community Health and Poverty Reduction Taskforce, an initiative that has been widely heralded as an outstanding example of a public/private partnership and one that has the potential to significantly alter the way we look at community health, educational systems and services, workforce and business development, and the overall quality of life for our residents. Legislator Roy Reehil has done a fantastic job getting this off the ground but he will need help and support from our various communities to achieve real and lasting results. If you are not already part of this initiative, I encourage you to learn more about how you can lend your support, knowledge and expertise.

Last year also brought the announcement of a four county effort to have a portion of Lake Ontario designated as a National Marine Sanctuary. This is a multi-year process that if approved can have a tremendous economic impact on our region while helping to further protect our vast underwater historic resources. We plan to finalize our application to the federal government this year which is the first step in a federal analysis of our eligibility. Tourism, as you know, supports a major part of our small business community and this request, if approved, could result in thousands more visitors to the Lake Ontario region.

Another 2015 tourism effort that focuses on our historic resources is an effort underway to have the Fort Ontario Military Reservation designated as a national historic site or even perhaps a national park. This effort has great local support and is currently being advanced through a joint federal effort by Congressmen Katko and Hanna and most recently by Senator Gilibrand.

The year 2015 also brought some renewed interest in the County's housing stock which resulted in an effort led by legislator Shane Broadwell to establish a land bank here in Oswego County. I am happy to report that New York State granted us the authority to do so on January 11th of this year. While the official board has only recently begun the long process of developing policies and procedures that will govern the activities of the land bank, the basic concept is to establish an inventory of problematic properties and then through various methods, convert these neighborhood liabilities into assets that advance community-based goals. This is yet another example of a public/private initiative that will help to enhance the quality of life in Oswego County.

In yet another public/private arrangement, we have successfully established a 60-plus mile loop of fiber optic cable through the center of the County. Half of the capacity of this network will be used by our various facilities to modernize our communications systems while saving us a significant amount of money in our annual operating budget. The other half, the privately owned portion of the project, can now be used to provide high-speed broadband service to residents and businesses alike, further enhancing the business climate here and the overall quality of life.

Also, working together as a bi-partisan group that understands the complex and diverse needs associated with running an effective and efficient county government, we were able to continue our trend of using less of our savings, reserves and fund balance combined, to keep your county taxes down. But more remains to be done.....

In 2016, we will continue our support for the Upstate Inland Port project with hopes that it might be located here in Oswego County; a challenging effort but one well worth the effort. Strategic relocation of the 911 center and a potential merger with other counties is another effort worth consideration. A project long in the making but finally near approval is the badly needed updates to our financial software package; a \$1.3 million dollar investment for the future. Our current system is old and no longer adequate to do even the simplest tasks. No county tax dollars will be used for this initiative. Finally, the Bonadao group will be starting its efficiency study with the department of Social Services. This Legislature looks forward to their recommendations and appreciates the cooperation of our very dedicated staff in that process. To be successful Oswego County must become more streamlined and take the bureaucracy out of doing business in Oswego County!

Part of our responsibility, as the highest level of local government in our jurisdiction, is to work with all of our constituent partners, public and private, to help make our area a better place to live, work and raise a family. Sometimes this can be accomplished through policy initiatives, like setting goals and objectives for how we would like to see our communities grow; sometimes our role is to lead by example, demonstrating to others that there are better and more efficient ways to do things.

One area that is ripe for consideration is the consolidation and sharing of services. Oswego County has been at this for years, long before it became fashionable to do so, consolidating a group of separate and independent town dumps into a county wide state-of-the-art solid waste system, merging local health offices into a county health system, centralizing the provision of weights and measures services and the list goes on, but in every case, services that used to be provided by local governments are now provided in a more cost effective manner by a centralized county department or office. Other counties have seen police and fire departments merge and even here in Oswego County we have witnessed the great efforts of the residents of the Village of Altmar, who recognized that it was not cost effective to continue to have multiple layers of government providing duplication of services over small areas and now, while the Village still has its identity as a place, the cost of local government in that area has been reduced. I believe that there are opportunities for us to all work together to help make it less expensive to live and do business in Oswego County; and, if we share that as a common goal without as much focus on geographic boundaries and territories, we will be successful. I want to offer the County's support to any municipality that wants to consolidate services.

In an effort to take a proactive and bi-partisan approach to the various issues that we are faced with, we will continue the practice of using special committees to explore specific issues and consider productive solutions. It is my intent that these committees will work with and through the Legislature's standing committees as they investigate opportunities that could lead to more efficient ways to utilize the taxpayer's dollar both internally and in partnership with our constituent communities. I am open and will remain open to suggestions from Legislators regarding any issue they feel should be addressed. Again, all I ask is that the objective makes good operational sense and has a positive benefit to the taxpayer.

The closure of the James A Fitzpatrick Nuclear Plant by Entergy will have a dramatic impact on how we do future business in Oswego County. The 600 plus employees of that facility are our family. We owe it to them to continue to fight to keep it operating. However, if the closure does occur Oswego County will be ready to offer support to our family and friends. The people of Oswego County are resilient. We have faced challenges like this before and as long as we stay together as a community we will get through it.

I would like to thank our County Employees and Department Heads for a job well-done. I assure you, we know how hard you work and appreciate your dedication to your job and the people of this County. I would like to thank you on behalf of the Legislature for your efforts and cooperation during these difficult economic times.

In closing, I would like to re-emphasize that I am confident in the ability of this Legislature, the County's Employees, and our Department Heads. I am confident that together we can accomplish our task of providing the people of Oswego County with an efficient, friendly and effective government.

I thank you all for the opportunity and the honor to serve as your chairman and I look forward to a positive and productive 2016.