



ORLEANS COUNTY STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

March 2024

Lynne Johnson, Chairman

My fellow legislators...Chief Administrative Officer Welch, department heads & county employees....neighbors and taxpayers....

Tonight, I have the distinct pleasure to deliver the 2024 State of the County address. Orleans County – a county of 40,000 residents who are proud to call this great community our home. A community brimming with potential and tremendous resources -- from rolling farmland, to an awe-inspiring shoreline along Lake Ontario to a rich history along the Erie Canal.

I am pleased to say, without reservation, that the state of our County is strong and that we continue to provide responsible and responsive government to our taxpayers. I believe that opportunities for an even brighter tomorrow are all around us....but we must be prudent in meeting the many challenges we face.

Indeed, opportunity and challenge are really two sides of the same coin. For every opportunity we attempt to seize, there are challenges that must be conquered. Put another way, as we know, nothing is ever easy.

That is why tonight I want to start the conversation on how Orleans County can embrace a more forward-thinking, strategic approach to county government that makes us proactive in looking for ways to grow, and, as well as better-positioned to clear any hurdles that are in our way.

And I believe this can best be accomplished by looking for ways to modernize our government. Now, modernization is automatically assumed to mean technology and that is certainly part of it. But modernization is also a mindset. It's a way of breaking free from the

constraints of “we’ve just always done it this way” and asking “but is there a better way to do it.” It’s also about innovation, creative thinking, and planning. It's about collaboration and cooperation. And it means welcoming everyone into the discussion.

That begins with our county workforce. I firmly believe our county employees are second to none. The 400 women and men who are charged with delivering services to our residents have proven time and again that they will do what it takes to meet and exceed the expectations of taxpayers.

With that in mind, I am looking forward to productive conversations at the bargaining table with our employee unions. We need to reach a fair and reasonable deal that recognizes the important work of our employees while understanding the responsibility we have to

taxpayers. Retaining our current employees and being able to recruit new talent is of the utmost importance.

We invest in our people, but we also need to make wise investments in the places where they work. Indeed, meeting the demand for county space is a balancing act. We want to minimize short-term costs at a time when budgets are strained, but we do not want to be short-sighted by forgoing opportunities that better prepare us for the future.

We continue to invest in the maintenance of our existing facilities to extend the life cycle of each building. And we have do our best to try to upgrade our facilities without going to new construction.

For example, the twenty-five-year-old Public Safety Building houses the probation department, the district attorney's office, and the Sheriff's office. A study to look at replacing that facility estimated the cost to be approximately \$55 million. That just doesn't work.

So, we took a different path and acquired the former Genesee Community College property with the intent to relocate the probation department and most likely another department from the old County Office building to this space. This move will alleviate the lack of space for mandated services required by the State of New York for our residents. While we are in the early stages of planning for this move, we are confident this will save millions of dollars in construction costs.

That same line of thinking was behind our decision-making on the Treasurer's Office. We conducted a thorough review of Central Hall, which houses the Treasurer's office and is our most expensive building per square foot to maintain. This review made clear the option in acquiring the former Bank of America building was the right move.

By acquiring this building and relocating the Treasurer's Office there, we will not only save a considerable amount of taxpayer funds, but we will now have an ADA compliant facility and put this building back to productive use. All of these are important priorities and this building meet both immediate and long-term needs. We look forward to the new Treasurer's office opening this summer.

As we talk infrastructure, there is nothing more visible to our citizens every day than the quality of our roads. Our Department of Public Works has been investing in equipment and manpower to meet the demands of our county. And, quite honestly, I do not believe I have ever seen a department find more ways to stretch every single dollar to get a little more work done.

The county has always been committed to providing the resources necessary to maintain our roads and bridges. And we look to other sources of money to help fund these crucial needs.

That's why it was disheartening to see that Governor Hochul has proposed a \$100 million cut in road funding to counties and towns in her proposed budget. This – coupled with inflation in construction materials that has approached 60 percent – means less roadwork getting done and further deterioration.

I want to commend Commissioner Papponetti and all the local highway superintendents who are pushing back on this outrageous cut. This one fact says it all.....forty-eight percent of the vehicle miles traveled in New York are on local roads, yet less than 12 percent of the taxes and fees paid to the state by these drivers go back to maintaining these roads.

These are the roads that keep us connected as a community....that carry our kids on buses....that farmers rely on for transporting products....that our first-responders use to reach people in need. We need these roads.

What's worse, since it costs five times more to rebuild a bridge and sixteen times more to replace pavements that have become deficient, it is only common sense to make the smart choice to keep up with regular maintenance and repair.

I say to the Governor, Orleans County is holding up its end of the bargain when it comes to local infrastructure...now do your part and not only restore, but **increase**, CHIPS funding.

So, I say to all, focus tonight on proactive solutions and forward-thinking strategies, as Mark Twain once said, “To stand still is to fall behind” and that has never been truer than in today’s fast-paced world.

Several years ago, Chief Administrator Welch saw how the digital divide was becoming a widening gap between rural communities and more heavily populated areas. He knew the lack of connectivity to reliable internet was becoming an impediment for Orleans County progress on many fronts – education, economic development, healthcare – and we needed to do something about it.

So, we began working on the issue of rural broadband and soon realized identifying the problem was easy.... Finding a solution, however, was going to take some time. The pandemic really put a spotlight on this issue, getting attention at the highest levels of government, and opening the door for us to make significant progress.

Fast forward to 2024, I can say we are at the cusp of completing our broadband project that will bring affordable, wireless internet to every corner of Orleans County. This has been a \$4.9 million endeavor which includes a new radio tower in Carlton. We utilized \$1.8 million in Community Development Block Grant funds and are still working with the USDA to access additional funds from Congress.

I have already heard from many residents who are using the existing service and find it not only fast and reliable, but much more affordable. There may also be subsidies available for those who qualify. I encourage all residents to go to connectorleans.net and learn more.

Reliable internet is also one of the many factors that site selectors look at when considering locations for economic development projects. Is a site shovel-ready? Is there access to power, transportation, water? Is

the community business-friendly? Is the local economic development agency a good partner? These and other benchmarks become the measuring stick in determining where a project goes.

Orleans County can compete with anyone for jobs and investment. Too often, we undersell all that our community can offer, but thankfully, our Economic Development Agency is out there beating the drums.

One of our biggest assets is the Medina Business Park. If you listen to economic development officials across all Western New York, there is a lack of shovel-ready land for development that hinders their ability to compete for big projects.

Yet, as it turns out, the Medina Business Park is actually one of our region's largest certified shovel-ready business parks. The park has

robust infrastructure and low-cost power, affording us an opportunity to compete.

Another of our major assets is our access to viable rail lines. The EDA has been working to maintain and expand freight rail service here in Orleans County, as it is tremendously important for bringing materials into our businesses and shipping out their products.

That's why I commend our EDA team for securing a grant through the New York State DOT's Freight Rail Assistance Program. This program provides enhanced assistance for rail investments that preserve and enhance the State's major trade and passenger corridors. Rail can often be faster and cheaper than other transportation options, and as such, can be a great selling point for our community.

Of course, the most tried and true path forward in growing the local economy is to help businesses that are already here. We have been keenly focused on business retention and expansion and it has paid dividends.

I am especially pleased with the focus we have put on helping agribusinesses. Everyone knows how important agriculture is to Orleans County and how challenging it is to be successful in that sector, particularly with New York State continuing to place new burdens on farmers.

Our EDA team has worked with several farming operations to help them make the investments they need to stay competitive. To our agriculture community, I want to stress....we will always do what we can to assist you.

Along with economic development, we also continue our focus on community development through the Niagara Orleans Regional Land Improvement Corporation....NORLIC for short.

For those unfamiliar, NORLIC is our regional land bank, a joint effort of several local governments that is able to take title to vacant and/or tax delinquent properties and hopefully find a way to put them back into productive use.

The Land Bank is creative with the properties it chooses, often looking for opportunities to connect multiple contiguous properties together that are then attractive to potential developers. Our goal is to see these distressed properties turned into family homes that can begin the turnaround of blighted neighborhoods.

This year, I would like to see NORLIC work with our local leaders to identify some key properties and really kick our efforts to battle blight into high gear. I support continuing efforts to eliminate zombie properties.

As you may be able to tell, I am excited about all the progress we are making across numerous fronts and the opportunities that lie ahead of us. But my enthusiasm is tempered by some of the serious issues we are facing. Chief among these is the lack of shelter for the homeless.

Orleans County has seen a 273 percent increase in placement of homeless persons since July 2022, with out-of-county placement of emergency homeless persons up 900 percent over that same time period. The fact is temporary and permanent emergency housing facilities are very scarce in our county. This led us to declare a State of Emergency on this issue last year. Much effort has been made by our

generous not-for-profits, but, quite frankly, we have not been able to find a viable solution to this problem and there does not seem to be any good options on the horizon.

These numbers lay bare another important point. When Orleans County and other counties in similar positions pushed back on the idea of sending illegal immigrants and asylum-seekers to our communities, there were those who were highly critical, even as we made clear we did not have the resources to handle any sort of influx.... that we lacked accommodation for our current homeless population.

And now look. New York is spending billions on addressing the migrant issue – funds that could indeed be helping local governments solve our homeless problem. Instead, New York State taxpayers are taking on a burden that should not be their responsibility and, as is par for the course, the state will pass that burden onto local governments and

property taxpayers as well...like absconding with Medicaid funds meant for local government.

That was a little budget trick the state played last year that took away designated Medicaid funds from county government. When we complained, the state's unrealistic response was county budgets should absorb the loss.

But, across the state, policy analysts were raising a cautionary flag about tightening local budgets, the wind down of COVID funding and flattening of revenues. This includes our own Chief Administrative Officer, who made similar points during our budget deliberations last December. We are undoubtedly entering some challenging times with a cloudy horizon on the future.

But, as I said in the beginning, challenge and opportunity are two sides of the same coin. So, as a community, we must stand together to meet the challenge...and I believe the best way to do that is through the ability of local governments and the county to work together....to collaborate....to rethink who does what and why?

I think most people are aware that we are part of a shared services initiative to bring towns, villages, schools and fire departments to the table with the county to explore opportunities. Anything and everything needs to be viewed with an open mind and an honest conversation. I am hopeful that the towns and villages will really be in the driver's seat on this effort. They have a different vantage point than the county and can bring some fresh ideas to the table.

We are taking some steps in the right direction. Just last month, the County Legislature approved \$174,000 in grant funding to purchase

portable radios for law enforcement agencies in the villages of Albion, Holley & Medina. This actions completes Phase II of a multi-year project to upgrade aging portable radios, which have reached end of life.

I remind you that Phase I all eleven local fire departments at a cost of \$229,528 and was completed in 2022. As first responder radios are upgraded, the old radios will be utilized to replace older portable radios that are in use by town highway departments and school districts.

That's collaboration and cooperation. We need to keep going and from my perspective, that means embracing the concept of the District Court model. This is an issue that will be decided by voters via referendum this November so now is the time to start the conversation.

The Orleans County District Court Committee has just completed its report and it is now available for public viewing, via the county website. I encourage voters to take the time to read the excellent work done by the committee. I believe their conclusions leave no doubt this is the best path forward.

But, and this is always a big one, are we as a community willing to leave the familiar and the comfortable behind for a new and better way forward? Are significant costs savings, better use of resources, streamlined court management and making better use of law enforcement personnel's time enough to overcome the inertia of "things are fine the way they are?" We are certainly going to find out.

And regardless of how this issue turns out, the fact is we need to explore the big ideas to streamline our services and work jointly together because, honestly, we have no better choice.

I have mentioned collaboration and cooperation multiple times tonight because it is the best path forward to getting things done.

Collaboration and cooperation takes a willingness of all parties to be open, honest and transparent. When it comes to Oak Orchard Creek and our relationship with Genesee County, collaboration and cooperation has certainly been sorely lacking.

I will not say much about this issue as litigation continues other than these two points: The Legislature will use every tool available to us to protect Oak Orchard Creek and its importance to us as a resource for water, recreation and tourism. And second, it's never too late for Genesee County to revisit their position on this and to do so in a manner that sees us working together.

Let me close with these thoughts. When I am putting together my State of the County Address and looking across the broad scope of county government, I am reminded of all the different ways we touch people's lives. Yet, in the course of this 15 minute speech, I barely scratch the surface.

From Public Health and Safety.....to Emergency Services.....to Workforce Development and Training.....Services for our Seniors.....Programs for those with Mental Health or Substance Abuse needs.....Infrastructure work likes roads and bridges.....a wide array of Social services and safety net programs.....DMV services....Pistol Permits....Help for Veterans....Tourism promotion and more.....your county government is here to serve you.

I want to acknowledge the leadership of our Department Heads who are responsible for the way we deliver these services. I want to thank

our county employees who every day are working hard to meet the needs of our residents. And to the residents of Orleans County, thank you for the trust you put in me and my fellow legislators to oversee this government in a way that you can be assured is open, transparent and accountable.

Thank you and God Bless.