

2004
STATE OF THE COUNTY MESSAGE
ONEIDA COUNTY EXECUTIVE
JOSEPH A. GRIFFO

Good afternoon. It is a great pleasure to be here today, because in the difficult times that face Oneida County, this college is a living lesson in overcoming adversity. For more than 50 years, MVCC has been the place where men and women seeking opportunity in a changing economy have made a new start. MVCC is the Mohawk Valley's leading place for turning around the future through hard work and persistence.

Last year, this college proved in a dramatic way that success comes through teamwork and a commitment to a vision no matter how far out of reach it may seem. MVCC's women's soccer team was the national junior college champion – a great achievement. That's not the whole story. The team started its year with a loss. Nobody gave up. The team did not spend the next few weeks pointing fingers and getting mad at one another. They learned from what went wrong, worked harder, and roared back stronger.

That's what champions do. They come back. They never quit. They focus on a goal that's always out of sight. That's the spirit we need in Oneida County. As we fight for economic security, community preservation, tax stability and tax relief, and work to create a long-term economy that will provide opportunity for generations to come, we need to set aside the differences that divide us in favor of the goals that unite us. We must dare to be bold, to have a vision and to stick with that vision even in the face of disappointment and discouragement.

The great American whose birth we celebrate today defined government as “of the people, by the people and for the people.” We need reforms to reach Abraham Lincoln's ideal. Too often, government has fallen short of its goal. Instead of Lincoln's vision, we see government that has lost both its trust and its connection to the young people of America; government that grows layers of red tape and government that seems to mock Lincoln by being of the insiders, by the insiders and for the insiders.

To attack this cynicism, jaded indifference and apathy, I will be pursuing a series of government reforms. Before government can fix problems, it must have the trust and confidence of the people.

I will be proposing a major step forward in ethics legislation to put a one-year barrier between elected county officials leaving office and any appointment to a paid county position. I am proposing that this new ethics law take effect with the 2005 elections, so that all those who seek office then can do so with full understanding of this law. This is in no way a reflection on any current or former department heads who have previously served as elected officials. They have and continue to serve this county well. Restoring trust in government transcends job performance and friendships.

Every public official takes an oath to serve the people who elected us. That solemn oath is the bond of trust between the people and their public servants. But conflicts are almost impossible to avoid when a high-level policy-making official of one government is also an elected politician in another government. I know that first-hand from the days when I was a county legislator and a city of Rome employee. I will propose a new county law to eliminate such potential conflicts of interest. No one can serve two masters. This law will not penalize current officeholders and appointees, but it will impose a standard of conduct that makes it clear to the voters and taxpayers that the bonds of loyalty between elected officials and the people who voted for them will not be subject to conflicting influences.

I also will be calling a meeting with major party leaders to clean up our local campaigns. Weeks of sign pollution are a blight on our landscape, a potential hazard to drivers, and often a tremendous waste of resources. This is just one visible example of campaigns that have gone out of control. We can't legislate cleaner campaigning, but to revive civic spirit in Oneida County, our parties must upgrade the tone of our elections. We will work with our Board of Elections and Central Services Department to insure accurate, complete and prompt results are delivered to the public on Election Night.

Oneida County government has evolved to meet the needs of its times. The world is changing. Our structure must change with it. There is a phrase I hear at too many meetings – the phrase that goes “We’ve always done it this way.” What the county, this region, and this nation need are more people to join me in asking back this question: “Well isn’t it time we did it better?”

We cannot grow jobs and also grow layers of government. Although we must ensure that our seniors and vulnerable families continue to receive the services they need, we need to fully tap the expertise and resources of our region’s vast network of service providers who may be able to do what government does – and do it cheaper. If the value we provide does not justify the cost to the taxpayer, then Oneida County needs to get out of that business and let the not-for-profit community or private sector take over.

My goal is to identify the core missions of our departments – the areas only government can fill– and focus our energy and attention on them. If internal realignments are needed to increase efficiency, we will pursue them. Where transitions will take place, they will be orderly and smooth to avoid negative impacts on staff who do their jobs so well and on county residents who need the services that are provided.

The road map for this transition will be Job One for the private sector oversight panel that I created last fall, which is chaired by Rocco Arcuri of Utica and Charles Schoff of Rome. We will incorporate any needed changes into our 2005 budget. The mission of that panel is to shape the structure of government for the future. Every program we keep will undergo a new level of scrutiny for performance and costs as we build upon initiatives I started last fall to improve our operational accountability.

As we increase use of e-government, we need to take a long-range look at our office space. Leases are an inefficient way to spend money. My intent is to keep county operations in county-owned buildings, support our urban core areas, and consolidate any leases into as few as possible – and only where there is a demonstrated need to serve the public by leasing space.

A year ago, there were fears of a 26 percent county property tax increase this year. After my administration took office last June, we made cuts throughout the budget, building on state and federal actions that reduced the anticipated tax increase, and finally securing special assistance from Gov. Pataki to operate our airfields. We cut 56 positions and left 100 others vacant. All that brought the 2004 county tax levy increase down to 2.9 percent – one of the lowest in the state. I know that last year was an election year, but in 8 of my 11 budgets in Rome, I cut or froze taxes. I hate the boom and bust cycle of tax increases and cuts as much, if not more, than anyone else. Professional management can get spending down where it belongs and keep it there.

It won't be easy. I'm in touch with Gov. Pataki and our state representatives on the need for serious Medicaid reform. I am optimistic action will emerge from this state legislative session. The bottom line is simple: We can't afford everything everyone wants.

Reducing the cost of Medicaid is a vital step for the people of Oneida County and New York State. Oneida County's 2004 budget projects Medicaid will rise from \$48.5 million in 2003 to \$53.2 million in 2004, a 10 percent increase. As of October 1st, Oneida County had 38,377 people on Medicaid (including Family Health Plus customers), a 30 percent increase from October 1st 2001.

Numbers from the New York State Association for Counties (NYSAC) show that Oneida County's net local share of Medicaid – the amount paid for by local property taxes – rose 105.8% between 1992 and 2002.

Cost control is everyone's problem. We all must do our share. Here in Oneida County we created the MARC (Medicaid Action and Recovery Control) team to review every possible way of reducing Medicaid costs. Our Social Services Department is exploring ways that technology can help reduce paperwork, seeking new ways to recover money due Oneida County, and working with state leaders to revise laws or regulations that contribute to operational expenses.

Tax stability is critical at a time when the costs of everything from heating a home to feeding a family, to providing health insurance for employees are rising rapidly. I don't want to just settle for taxation that floats along at the level of inflation. We need tax relief. We also must – and will -- explore all forms of creative options for financing government to investigate alternatives that reduce the pressure on the property tax. We also need to consider the wishes of key populations such as employers and senior citizens, some of whom have asked if we can adopt an installment plan for county taxes to avoid one payment due at a very cash-starved time of the year. We'll take a look. We'll also look at taking tax payments by credit card. We will work with taxpayers just as a business would work with its customers. But we will not make changes unless they make solid fiscal sense.

The best form of tax relief is economic development to create new jobs, attract new people and increase our tax base. Job growth is the cornerstone of our existence. We need to do it better. If our region does not get a handle on economic development and capitalize on our opportunities, we face a long, slow decline. Although Oneida County did increase its private sector job count in 2003, numbers don't put food on the table. Good wages do.

President Bush said it perfectly last month when he noted, “The role of government is not to create wealth, it is to create an environment in which people ... feel free and comfortable about taking risk.... we can't make (anyone) have good ideas, we can't make him develop a good business plan, we can't make people be good business people; but we can say, if you're willing to invest, here's some more money, here's some incentive to do so.”

My economic development plan is shaped by four elements:

- The Right Approach
- Defending and Building Upon Our Assets
- Aggressively Seeking New Employers
- Growing Our Local Small Businesses

Our economic development effort must revive our spirit as well as grow high-paying jobs. Mohawk Valley EDGE pioneered the concept of bringing public and private partners together. Despite progress, too many people in Oneida County still need better-paying jobs.

We must evaluate every phase of our economic development approach and make changes based on what works and what does not. The people of Oneida County don't care about structure or staffing. They just want results. So do I.

Successful communities adapt and overcome. Those that refuse to change with the times lose the competition for survival.

The money we invest needs to show results. County Government will be developing standards by which to hold EDGE accountable for the money we spend with it.

I will be calling together the key stakeholders in economic development to define the roles of EDGE, County Government and private sector partners as we build a knowledge economy in Oneida County while still helping manufacturers who have been battered by the global economy. We have common goals, but cannot reach them without teamwork. There is work for every person and every group that wants to help. We must all do more than ever before because the stakes are higher than ever before.

There are economic success stories in Oneida County. Empire Aero is repairing planes as a symbol of the growth we have ahead of us, and high tech employers such as Dolphin, Black River Systems and Fiber Instrument Sales are growing. The Griffiss Institute will move into a new building this year. Utica National will be bringing new life and new jobs to downtown Utica.

Last month's Senate action on the federal budget cleared one major hurdle in our effort to secure millions in federal Military Airfield Program funds that can be used for capital projects needed to convert the Griffiss Park airfield into the mixed use air facility we need as a linchpin of the new Griffiss. When the federal funding arrives, Oneida County will shift airport operations to Griffiss, and work with the private sector, pilots and Whitestown officials to develop the best re-use for the current Oneida County Airport. Because of special assistance from Governor Pataki, we can make this transition

without a major impact on our local property taxes this year. With more than 3,000 jobs near the current airport, I can assure you our actions will be designed to work with every employer at the airport site, which as an Empire Zone has some extremely attractive property for development.

We need to look at the future. Griffiss Institute has connections with more than 40 employers and colleges. That's a great vehicle for attracting technology. Nanotechnology – technology at the molecular level – is projected to add \$1 trillion to our nation's economy. Congressman Boehlert is one of its leading proponents. With our tremendous educational institutions here, we need to grab our share of the billions in research now under way and get on board, before it is too late.

President Bush rightly realized the tremendous impact of community colleges in his proposal to use colleges like MVCC as the place to help employers and workers gear up for the future. The power of education lies not just in the talents of students but also in the expertise of professors. The faculty of our local colleges have tremendous knowledge in a wide range of areas. As we look at the future of economic development, community planning, workforce development, human services delivery, government reform and environmental preservation, the talents of our professors can provide research and leadership. Last year, my predecessor, former County Executive Ralph Eannace, worked with a number of our colleges to create a partnership designed to bring them closer together. It's time to broaden that agreement and make higher education an economic development engine as well as a resource. In a knowledge economy, the brainpower at our colleges and universities can be a catalyst in creating a better and stronger region.

One of our greatest assets is facing its greatest test. We've already been warned – BRACC 2005 is going to be tough. Last summer, I created a task force to keep this area ahead of the curve to protect the Air Force Research Lab in Rome during the next round in the base closing process. We know we can make the case that the lab is mission-effective and cost-effective. We know we can make the case that the Northeast Air Defense Sector is vital to homeland security. We have learned that having right on your side means nothing unless we work constantly to get the facts to the right people. It will not be easy, but with the new Rome Lab facility ready to open this year, and an unprecedented level of teamwork among local, state and federal officials to fight any attempt to steal the lab, we are ready to give anyone who wants to touch that lab the fight of their lives.

We need to put our region on the map. If we sit back and wait for jobs to land here, they won't. If all our efforts are focused on defending existing jobs, we're not in the hunt for new ones. And if we keep worrying about the one that got away, we're looking in the wrong direction – backward.

We need to look at our assets and market this region to employers around the state, nation and globe who need those assets. Marketing is not warm-and-fuzzy PR. It's the way we open the door to build a vibrant new economy. A business without a sales force is a business doomed to die. I have approached Assemblywoman RoAnn Destito and Senator Ray Meier to help us develop this idea. They recognize the importance of this mission and will help us establish a framework to make this idea a reality.

Lowering costs of government so that we can keep down taxes is a central part of retaining jobs and attracting employers to help create them. Most new jobs in America are created by small business owners; 70 percent of the new jobs. We must recognize the work of the small businesses, provide support for small businesses, celebrate their successes, and help today's small employers grow into the success stories that will provide jobs for our region's young people. Small business owners are busy. They need us to reach out and provide one-stop convenience with no red tape, whether they are looking at new facilities, training or any other issue. Small businesses that grow one or two jobs at a time are the core customers of our economic development agencies, and we must treat them as such, or lose them. I will be working with our small businesses to hear directly from them about their needs, and then adapt our structure to suit them – not the other way around.

We've been down the road of over-reliance on one economic sector, and we're not going to do that again. Higher Education, Tourism, Agribusiness, High Tech, Manufacturing, Health Care, Retail, and Financial Services are all a part of the mix of our new economy.

We will be working to help our agribusinesses grow. These are tough times for our dairy farmers. Gov. Pataki's proposed Agribusiness Empire Zones can be a tremendous catalyst to help family farms continue for another generation. I will be working with the Governor and our state representatives to create one of these zones in Oneida County.

Fort Stanwix is on the verge of a \$6 million Visitor Center that will increase heritage tourism – the hottest segment of the tourism market. Tourism includes efforts to ensure the right ownership for Vernon Downs, to maximize this local tourism asset, as well as increasing cooperation among our heritage and family attractions to develop our region as a vacation destination.

Developing the economy means developing our workforce. I am working with the Workforce Investment Board's Mohawk Valley Challenge to develop the strategies we need to train the workers employers will need 5 and 10 years down the road. Our workforce must have the skills to compete in the high tech world, and also the community spirit to remain and grow here. Gov. Pataki's proposal to help manufacturers access training dollars to increase efficiency is a major help to our local companies. We will continue to work with the state and federal government to ensure workers affected by economic transitions have the assistance they need develop new careers.

Government works best when people are involved in the process. But in the day and age of e-government and almost instant access to county government, we need to focus participation on the areas of greatest need.

I will seek to eliminate a number of "advisory" committees that have grown up and taken on the trappings of being part of the bureaucracy themselves. I will also limit the tenure of those appointed to no more than two terms so that we can keep getting new ideas.

Communication and meetings are not the same thing. I'd much rather hear from the people of Oneida County directly about issues of concern than I would create a board

to tell me what the people want. We can meet to death and accomplish nothing. But I invite every citizen with an issue, suggestion or concern to visit our website at WWW.OCGOV.NET

As both an environmental and a beautification issue, I plan to extend a tree-planting project I began in Rome throughout Oneida County. Planting and planning for greater attractiveness can help our area become a showcase for upstate living. This concept, supported by Gov. Pataki in his State of the State message this year, enhances the green spaces of Oneida County, improves the quality of our environment and provides a tremendous public service opportunity for our youth. Oneida County will be working to create an Oneida County Youth Corps so that under the direction of our expert forestry staff who will provide the leadership, direction and planning to make this project a success, our Oneida County youth will be planting trees that will grow as tall as their hopes and dreams for a brighter future, and learning the tremendous rewards that come with public service.

The enthusiasm and idealism of youth must be part of government. Brian Adey, the assistant to the county executive, will be coordinating efforts to help high school students and college students learn how government works, what government can do and how to grab hold of issues and make a difference in the lives of the people of Oneida County. You here at MVCC have a role to play. All of you are old enough to vote, and energetic enough to make a difference in the political process. Activism creates ripples of change that impact a community.

To help keep everyone in the county in touch, we will be taking County Government on the road at schools, community centers, wherever people can come out and talk to us about what they need, and how we can work together to make things better.

The hallmark of my administration is action – from the small things that are very large in the lives of those who deal with government, to the issues that loom over our entire region.

We need consensus and closure to long-term issues that have been around for years without a successful conclusion. There's a time for talk. But there is also a time for action.

Local governments need to sit down to create a workable, long-term, flexible homeland security plan that respects every community, and creates the necessary coordination.

Public transportation remains a patchwork of systems that all need resources. The answer is not a blank check, but a long-term plan to set public transit on a sound fiscal footing. I will draw upon the expertise of our planning department and state Department of Transportation to bring right people together to evaluate the best options so we can provide the needed services at a reasonable cost with appropriate levels of public support.

Our region's oldest, and thorniest, issue is the resolution of the land claim of the Oneida Indian Nation, and a settlement of all the tax issues regarding the Nation. I call for all of the parties in the process to meet together in one room to hammer out a fair deal that can settle all of the issues. The longer this drags on, the longer we live with an

economic, social and political Berlin Wall between our region and its largest employer. The framework for a settlement is clear: to protect our landowners, develop the right policy of collecting taxes on sales to non-Indians, achieve price parity for our retailers, establish guidelines for the ultimate size of the Oneidas' land holdings to avoid a patchwork pattern of ownership, and ensure that the federal government lives up to its obligation to both be a major player in bringing about a settlement and paying for the settlement.

Public safety is the most essential element in the quality of life for any community. For many communities, preserving quality of life means cleaning up properties that spread decay and are places of suspicious and perhaps illegal activity. As Rome Mayor, I led the way in fighting crack houses and hazards with a Public Nuisance Law that has successfully been enforced. I will seek to have this law adopted county-wide, so communities that want a tested, proven weapon in their fight to preserve the character of a neighborhood can use it.

Public safety, like every other part of county operations, must increase its focus on cost-effective actions. I will seek to aggressively to implement a system of video arraignments in cooperation with representatives of local law enforcement agencies and the courts. There is a tremendous cost associated with taking inmates from the Oneida County Correctional Facility to and from local courts for their arraignments. Although I understand that we need to keep in mind the rights of individuals accused of crimes, I am focusing on the rights of law-abiding taxpayers to keep more of their hard-earned money.

Taxpayers also deserve protection from costs when our deputies leave the county after going through training to find other law enforcement positions. The Oneida County Sheriff's Department does a great job of training Road Patrol Deputies and funding their training through the Academy, but it takes a lot of time and a lot of money. We want to increase the numbers of deputies who stay on the job long enough for the County to recoup its investment in their training. We will be preparing legislation to require incoming deputies whose training is being paid for by taxpayers to remain with the county for a set length of time, to offset that investment, or repay some of the cost if they leave before that time expires.

The cities of Utica and Rome are two vital parts of Oneida County's future. To make the most of these two communities, we need an innovative link that will enhance economic development, address issues of urban sprawl and enhance our region's environment. I propose the Utica-Rome Link – a high-speed rail connection between historic Union Station in Utica and Rome's redeveloped train station. High-speed mass transit could make the commute a matter of minutes, making it easier for residents at one end of our region to work in the other without the inconvenience of driving and reducing the number one source of pollution in our area – exhaust fumes from our cars. Utica-Rome Link can also help residents of each city take better advantage of the unique cultural attractions each city has to offer. Innovations in transportation have been the hallmark of this region since the days of the Erie Canal. This innovative proposal can set the stage for even greater growth in our urban cores, augment the Utica-Rome Expressway and make our region a trend-setter in multi-modal transportation options.

Walking is a lot slower than high-speed rail. But walking, running and all forms of exercise are vitally important in an era when at any given moment, more than 30 percent of men and 45 percent of women are trying to lose weight, and the number of obese children is rising astronomically. Wellness is becoming a critical public health issue. In two weeks, thousands of people from around our region will participate in America's Greatest Heart Run and Walk. But health and wellness are not just once-a-year events. In cooperation with our health care providers, I want to make the Healthy Communities effort we began in Rome last year a part of every community in the county. The Oneida County Health Department has been a leader in working with local partners to reach out to county residents. We will build on these efforts and extend wellness initiatives to improve the well being of our residents, enhance recreational opportunities, and conduct a health expo that can bring screenings to the people.

I define the role of Oneida County Government as a catalyst to help communities make changes that are broader than any one set of boundaries, and as a safety net for problems that transcend borders. I believe that the lowest level of government that can provide a service should do so to maintain accountability to the taxpayers. Oneida County's role is to bring potential partners together, to develop relationships among communities and – when necessary --- take action when localities want and need the help. We will be doing that through the group of mayors and town supervisors created by Annette Foley of Kirkland and Dan Yeardon of Camden and former Vernon Supervisor Roman Wilczak. Quarterly meetings to communicate can help keep all of us working together.

The agenda I have laid out is designed to accomplish the most vital tasks that await us – increase trust in government, reduce the cost of government to improve efficiency and achieve tax stability, and grow high paying jobs in the emerging sectors of the economy while enhancing the ability of our manufacturers and agribusinesses to compete against the world and win. It is going to be hard work. It is going to be a wonderful challenge – and the opportunity of a lifetime. We are at a crossroads in the history of Oneida County. This time, this generation, and this administration will shape the 21st Century for all the generations that follow.

We will not achieve all these goals this week, this month, or even perhaps this year. We will move forward step by step without ever stopping. The ancient Chinese proverb says, “The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” The better tomorrow we all hope for and dream of will remain a tomorrow just over the horizon unless we all take a step forward today.

There will be obstacles we have not yet imagined, and challenges that emerge to threaten our plans, but we have the tools to build a stronger future in our spirit and our souls. If we unleash the greatness within us, reach for the full potential of our possibilities, and refuse to quit, we can become the county where dreams, action and unity create a new economy that brings to Oneida County a new era of hope, prosperity and pride.