

2018 State of the County Speech
by Sullivan County Legislature Chairman Luis Alvarez

Delivered on April 26, 2018 at the Sullivan County International Airport

Thank you to the Gerrys and the Villa Roma for their help in making the evening special with the refreshments they have provided and the support they give to all of this County in various ways and programs.....

Tonight we talk about not where we are but where we are going. Tonight we lay out a plan for action.

Once again, Sullivan County is a leader.

Right here, right now, we're first in all of New York for job growth and creation. thanks not only to Resorts World casino and an improved national economy but downtown entrepreneurs, local small businesses, active chambers including the Sullivan County Chamber of Commerce, the Sullivan County Partnership for Economic Development, and residents who always support their hometown merchants.

We have more jobs for more people than we've had in the past half-century, and they range from entry-level to executive-level.

We are open for business, home to manufacturers like Nonni's in Ferndale, Metcar in Glen Wild, the Roscoe Beer Company, Catskill Brewery in Livingston Manor and Kohl's in Wurtsboro.

We welcome the billion-dollar Resorts World complex which includes the Kartrite Water Park now under construction, plus the \$90 million dollar YO1 Wellness Center and a host of other attractions that will make us the top rural destination in New York State

Party differences and disputes may be tearing apart our Federal, State and other county governments, but we have a Legislature which puts party aside and works together for the people we serve.

We are leading by example.

We've become a statewide model for sustainability. We're reducing paper in our offices. We're placing electric vehicle charging stations across the County.

We have the first community distributed generation solar array ready to go in New York, promising to be both cost-effective and environmentally friendly, with many more to come.

Thanks to our Office of Sustainable Energy, we are very proud that today Sullivan County is both Clean Energy and Climate Smart certified. In fact, we are one of 15 Bronze-level municipalities in all of NY.

We are close to reaching our goal of supplying 100% of our electricity by renewable, sustainable means.

Our Office of Sustainable Energy and our Division of Planning have become highly trusted, credible sources of information.

We remain one of the only counties in the region who do a countywide litterpluck. We must keep our county clean and free of litter.

I am asking all of you to do what you can to take a closer look at our roadsides, our properties, our buildings. Let's clean up together. It's not just about image – it is about being proud of where we live.

We're modernizing our facilities.

We are beginning to invest in our government buildings, respecting the taxpayers' investment so these facilities no longer look out of date, dirty or uncared for.

We have invested 2.9 million dollars in energy-efficiency and safety improvements to the Government Center, and soon we will install a new roof. We will then turn our attention to our Liberty campus.

We've installed new sidewalks and lighting at the Government Center. We are now moving on to the Courthouse, to be fully finished by August of this year.

Thanks to a grant secured for us by Senator John Bonacic, we'll be installing a much-needed generator at the Government Center. The storms this year proved that our buildings need to be more storm-ready, and we cannot help the people of Sullivan if we are not up and running. Thank you, Senator.

Our Adult Care Center is being renamed the Care Center at Sunset Lake to rebrand its institutional image and attract more usage, with a new logo, new signs, repaved parking lots, and upgrades to the showers and fire system.

We will make our Care Center the best in the region.

As you all know, we're well along in the construction of the new jail, which will fully open in 2019. We are hoping to begin our transition of the Sheriff's road patrol into their new facilities by the end of this year.

I thank this Legislature for doing what no other has had the will to do: replace our 100-year-old jail. Only you had the courage to recognize it and do whatever it took to fix it -- thank you.

This year we will begin \$100,000 of improvement to the Emergency Training Facility, which will upgrade the computer system, new showers and office space.

These facilities get used a lot, and when tested, our emergency service team is ready for the challenge, as they displayed during the snowstorm of 2018. We have a great team.

With the purchase of 518 Broadway in Monticello, we will finally have the space for the Board of Elections and their electronic voting systems.

There is no better partner to share this space with than our Veterans Service Agency.

One group who fought and gave life to preserve democracy will now be across the hall from the board who ensures democracy continues. We will finally be able to give our Veterans Service Agency the space they need to be more accessible so that there will be dignity in helping veterans deal with the private issues they face.

As a veteran, I fully understand the challenges of this agency's work, and a new space is long overdue.

We are upgrading our infrastructure. And we will no longer turn our back on the true cost to maintain it.

This year we will be paving and resurfacing 68 miles of County roadways.

With a historic 10 million dollar bond approved by our Legislature this year, nearly a dozen bridges will see significant work or replacement. I thank my fellow legislators for having the foresight to continue to invest in our bridges.

For too long we have neglected our image. That ends today.

To start this process, you will begin to see new signs installed throughout the county. From our transfer stations to our parking lots, you will see a change.

We've refaced our once-cherished Adopt-an-Exit signs, made and installed by our Division of Public Works' Sign Shop and with the support of New York State DOT. Once fully replaced, they will give us a sharp, fresh and clean new look to travelers.

Our website is getting a complete overhaul and will be easy to navigate and beautiful to view.

We are investing in our people.

We are no longer balancing our budget on the backs of understaffed departments.

Our County employees are hard-working, dedicated, and professional, and this Legislature truly appreciates what you do for the people of Sullivan.

The County Manager and I agree that some of your pay is less than we want it to be. We recognize the hardships you endure while still delivering great service to our people.

Even though the state-mandated increase in minimum wage did not require us to do so. We have already taken steps to raise our own minimum full-time wage to \$15 an hour.

This Legislature will work to ensure that a fair agreement for all sides is reached in salary negotiations. However, there is no greater threat to job security than the financial stability of the institution one works for. We must improve the compensation of our staff but do it sustainably.

We haven't shied away from hiring people and filling our vacancies. This is evident by all of the new faces we have in many departments helping us do a better job to serve the people.

These and various other positions are a slow walk back from the horrible cuts of the recession.

Having a government that is understaffed is like having a race car with no one to drive it. **Now we are on the track and can see the checkered flags.**

As a large employer in Sullivan County, we offer unparalleled health benefits, training and opportunities for advancement. We will continue to do so.

Now for the first time and unlike many of our government counterparts, we have begun attracting new talent through using our website, where we advertise for positions and take applications digitally.

You cannot expect to get something out of people when you don't put something into them.

We are investing in training again. We have started first with leadership and management training and will continue to make sure our staff can better serve you by increasing their abilities and knowhow.

Today we will do - and expect - more.

In 2017, our Plans & Progress Grant Program supported local small businesses, municipalities and initiatives. The average grant totaled over \$5,000 dollars:

- Supporting and completing a veterans home in Liberty

- a handicapped ramp added to a museum in Livingston Manor
- a floating dock installed at a park in Hurleyville
- and a range of arts and culture projects Countywide

In the past year, we've played a role in a pedestrian improvement plan in Kauneonga Lake, new sidewalks in Hurleyville, the restoration of the historic Antrim Lodge in Roscoe, the coming Riverwalk in Livingston Manor, a cidery in Callicoon, a reuse of the old Cochection firehouse, solar initiatives in Mamakating, historic preservation in Neversink, a signage grant in Barryville, and much more

Sullivan County is taking off. Here at the County Airport, we will be attracting investors who will lease hangar and office space, buy fuel, and expand facilities without extra cost to taxpayers.

Currently the county has a Request for Proposals for the Airport, which is available on our website and which allows for wide open business proposals.

Unlike most counties, our proposal would allow for a true business frame of thinking. A government should not be running a business. The airport is a business.

Much of a county's responsibilities are in community service.

The monies you entrust to us are to be used wisely. And we are doing just that.

Our newly formed Sullivan County Welfare Fraud Task Force raked back thousands of dollars from people trying to obtain public assistance benefits to which they were not entitled. Thank you, Sheriff, DA and our Department of Family Services.

We collected more than 8 million dollars in child support in 2017, a testament to our Health & Family Services staff.

We transitioned more than 200 homeless men, women and children out of motels and into permanent housing. This benefits the taxpayers and the previously homeless folks, who now have safe and stable shelter.

We are developing a Homeless Intake Center at our Liberty campus to serve as a single point-of-entry for individuals and families facing homelessness. Thank you to our Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther for securing \$250,000 toward that goal!

Our Office for the Aging, whose wonderful Director Debi Allen is retiring this summer, helped hundreds of seniors remain in their own homes and communities with a high quality of life.

The Meals on Wheels program alone delivered 40,000 hot meals and 6,000 frozen meals to 244 homebound recipients in 2017.

Our Youth Bureau funneled thousands of dollars to dozens of youth programs Countywide, keeping our kids off the streets, and involved in fun, productive and educational pursuits.

Our Home Energy Assistance Program kept hundreds of people warm during a very cold, very long winter.

We're now seeking to mount a Housing Summit, led by our Division of Planning, to address the need for affordable single-family homes

For the first time in a long time, Child Protective Services is well on its way to a full staff and additional space so that we can be a better safety net for those who can't protect themselves.....our children.

We are paying attention to our urban cores.

As our largest population centers, Monticello and Liberty are focal points for government, commerce and community. We want and need them to be places that attract residents, visitors and, perhaps most importantly, customers. So we've taken a multi-pronged approach to invest in and revitalize these villages.

Our Division of Planning has just completed the "Grow the Gateways" Program for the Village of Monticello and surrounding Town of Thompson.

Working with consultants, Cornell Cooperative Extension, the Sullivan County Visitors Association, Sullivan Renaissance and the Monticello Central School District. we've collected comments, identified issues and created goals to remake the area's image in a way that encourages positive growth.

We stand ready to assist the village and town, who must now adopt the Grow the Gateways Plan and make it their own.

We've been working with the Village and Town of Liberty to restore business growth along the Route 17 corridor, dedicating \$100,000 to a study of development opportunities.

Our efforts and assistance played a key role in landing two Restore NY grants for projects that promise to do so much for Liberty:

- 1 million dollars for the Liberty Theater
- And \$500,000 for various commercial properties in Parksville

All government needs to consider shared services and consolidation.

Our villages cannot be vibrant, attractive destinations for work, play and life if they are unaffordable.

Despite the fact that our villages have lost population due to the high cost of living, consolidation efforts have failed, largely because of personal politics and unfounded fears, which we desperately need to put aside for the future of these communities.

I live in Liberty. I can say firsthand how all of us struggle under the enormous burden of village taxes - on top of all the other taxes we pay.

Fears over the potential loss of police coverage stopped Liberty's last attempt at consolidating, but with the County's and State's help, Liberty does not need to lose any of its police officers. Nor should they.

The State offers a lot of money to aid municipalities considering consolidation, starting with the funds to mount a study, which wouldn't cost local taxpayers a dime.

As the process becomes clearer, the County can help with funding, assistance, even personnel. In fact, we're seeking out those opportunities through our Shared Services Panel.

Rejecting the idea of consolidation without taking a good, hard look is turning a blind eye to what's just around the corner: a decline in services and funding, ultimately leading to bankruptcy.

I call upon the leaders of the villages of Liberty and Monticello to access the State funding to take a look at these ideas once again – they owe it to their people and their communities.

We have hundreds of thousands of new visitors coming through our County now -- with more to come. So we must be prepared.

We will continue to partner with ALL our municipalities on mutually beneficial initiatives. We will make sure we put our best foot forward for **our new day**.

Two new grant programs in 2018 focus on renewing main streets by helping to pay for signs, street banners and repainting historic markers.

Once approved, we plan to set aside no less than \$75,000 dollars to assist municipalities in demolishing unsafe structures. It will be called our Municipal Blight Program, and I ask our towns and villages to apply when it is launched.

Under the direction of its board, the Sullivan County Land Bank will this year take steps to bring down 9 unsafe buildings in the Villages of Liberty and Monticello. They will also work to clean up and remodel homes. Through deed restrictions they will develop and maintain them in ways that are compatible and beneficial to the surrounding community.

Their work is the beginning of what will be a rebirth. And I thank them for their efforts.

To take full advantage of all the new traffic and investment in Sullivan County, we are offering a new grant program to encourage municipalities, especially their zoning/planning boards and building departments, to streamline laws and regulations in commercial zones to make it easier for businesses to move into vacant buildings and gain the necessary approvals in a timely manner. This program will pay municipalities to cut their own red tape.

We continue to work with Sullivan Renaissance wherever and whenever we can, as it has become an international model for community beautification efforts.

This airport itself is a reflection of the help this program offers, and within the next few weeks a total makeover of our wayfinding signs will begin here. Thank you, Renaissance!

We are working to keep you safe.

We've added five new Sheriff's deputies and two Assistant District Attorneys. In addition to relocating the Sheriff's patrol and administrative offices to the new jail, the county is currently seeking out solutions for space-related issues in our court system and the DA office. The county is hoping to soon publicly announce the specifics of these plans, which will help keep moving the county in the right direction.

Our Probation Office has been recognized most recently by the State Director of Probation as operating far above state averages.

Our children's safety is our highest priority. This is why we have asked the State and the Governor to increase their support of our already excellent School Resource Officer program.

Led by Public Safety Commissioner Rick Sauer and his team, the incredible response during March's devastating blizzard brought together every corner of County government, ensuring roads were opened, power was restored, and aid was rendered wherever necessary.

Yesterday the County asked the Public Service Commission to require our utility companies to treat the people of Sullivan County with more respect and dignity. The utilities' efforts in the last storm were poor, at best.

While not everything went perfectly, our response was overall an amazingly successful effort when you consider that no one was seriously injured or killed, despite the mess left by this historic storm.

I'd like to thank all the County employees, emergency personnel, town and village workers, school leaders, State officials, National Guard troops, law enforcement, and everyone else who helped us get back on our feet. We needed each and every one of you.

This county is now ONE team responding to crises. We have seen the positive benefits of doing this during the last event. **No more is it every town and village for themselves.**

We will improve our health ranking.

For a County known worldwide for its beautiful natural resources and fresh air, we still have a lot of work to do to lift our overall health rankings. However, we're on our way up, I assure you.

Our Health & Family Services Division is the largest of any division in the County, and we literally have hundreds of County employees daily working to improve factors affecting our health.

The opening of the new urgent care by Catskill Regional Medical Center last year will be coupled with the opening of another urgent care in the county by Middletown Medical this year. With more options for health comes a brighter future.

Last fall our County leaders brought together our EMS teams for the first time. Over 100 EMS representatives from this county reflected on 911 data. They have since made a decision to move forward with a county-funded study of EMS.

Our goal? Reduce response times to save lives. Putting aside our differences to act together as one county is the only way to improve our functions.

Elsewhere, our Public Health Services office responds to public health concerns like rabies and measles, administers vaccines, and educates thousands on how to remain healthy

Our Parks, Recreation & Beautification Office is right now at work on opening and improving our gorgeous parks, along with trails that don't just take you past our best scenery but help you get fit in the process

Challenged by the new nonprofit Sullivan 180, we instituted an Employee Wellness Program that has reached out to all eleven hundred of our workers.

Led by Champions like Darrin Raynor, our Deputy Commissioner of Management and Budget, who serve as role models and active promoters of a healthy work culture, I'm proud to say that our efforts led to special recognition just a few months ago.

Working with partners like Sullivan 180, Sullivan Renaissance, the American Red Cross, the United Way, the YMCA, the Boys & Girls Clubs, Cornell Cooperative Extension,

Catholic Charities and others, we aim to increase our health rankings at the State and national level.

Smoking kills. This year, the County government made a commitment to stop smoking on our properties. And we passed and now enforce a law preventing people under 21 from buying cigarettes in this County. These actions will help us be healthier.

We have a future worth looking forward to.

Sullivan County once again is a rising star.

For us to fully realize the benefits that come with that renewed purpose and prosperity, County government must be nimble, innovative and effective. I have complete confidence in our management team that is very much focused on these goals, led by County Manager Josh Potosek and Deputy County Manager Dan Depew and all of the staff, many of whom are here tonight.

The Legislature on which I have the privilege of serving is also constantly looking forward. Even now, we are preparing to implement staggered terms so that not all nine legislators are up for re-election at the same time

We are working together not just for 2018 but for 2019 and beyond. Indeed, next year you will see even more monumental changes to the County and this region. The water park will open. LEGOLAND will be fully under construction. And we'll welcome possibly millions more visitors coming to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the 1969 Woodstock Festival, for which we are now planning.

The world will be watching us. Thanks to the efforts of the Sullivan County Visitors Association, led by Roberta Byron-Lockwood, it already is. We have hosted journalists and an increasing amount of visitors from Europe, Africa, Asia, South America and Australia.

We are “on the map” once again, and we will be known around the world. not just as “the place where it happened” but as “the place where it IS happening” – every day.

This is our time to lead, and I am proud to be your leader.

But I can't do it alone, so I ask the same as I asked last year: Let's Walk Together!

One Sullivan, one focus, one team, one family.