

2019 State of the County Address
by Sullivan County Legislature Chairman Luis Alvarez

Delivered on Thursday, January 24, 2019 at the Sullivan County International Airport

It's fitting to hold this address in the Airport, because Sullivan County has truly taken off. For nearly a full year, we have led the entire State in job growth and creation. We are now basically at FULL employment – in the dead of winter, when we historically have always seen a dip.

We have welcomed the Resorts World Catskills Casino and YO1 Wellness Center. This year we will welcome the Kartrite Resort and Indoor Waterpark and its 500 jobs, followed by the Eldred Preserve (including the relocated Bradstan and the reborn Old Homestead Restaurant). In 2020, the Chatwal Lodge in Bethel will join this impressive list with the most luxurious accommodations yet seen in Sullivan County.

We are working on attracting more such destination resorts, and coupled with Legoland's opening in Orange County in 2020, our region will certainly remain the fastest-growing tourism spot in the Northeast.

As a result of all this activity, we've got at least 3 name-brand mid-range hotels and 3 large housing projects (over 1,000 living units) beginning construction this year.

Giving people a place to go and have fun remains our specialty, and the numbers are amazing. From local newspapers like the Sullivan County Democrat and the River Reporter, to global publications like Lonely Planet and the New York Times, Sullivan County has been featured in articles that have been viewed more than 200 MILLION times – just in 2018!

Four million people – 4 million! – visited Sullivan County this past year, and our tourism marketing agency, the Sullivan Catskills Visitors Association, is working hard to double that number this year.

2019 will feature the 50th anniversary of Woodstock. Bethel Woods (the actual festival site) and Yasgur Road Productions (former home of farmer Max Yasgur) have been planning major events for months. Partnering with those organizations and with our towns and villages, Sullivan County has been planning for the anniversary too, in traffic, in transportation, in security, so that both visitors and residents will have positive, safe and memorable experiences

We got the State and Governor Cuomo to name Route 17B as “The Woodstock Way” permanently, giving Sullivan County lasting recognition as the home of the famous festival. The SCVA acquired three dozen doves, which we're storing right here at the Airport. You'll soon see them pop up all over the County, painted by local artists and serving as destinations themselves – all the better to get people to visit not just Bethel but all of Sullivan County.

And our natural beauty remains a top draw: more than 15,000 people visited County parks and our Museum last year, and hundreds of thousands more came to see the Delaware River, the Catskill Mountains, the Bashakill, the Neversink River, the Beaverkill and Willowemoc, and so on.

All this has resulted in some of the best figures we've ever seen.

Thanks to \$200 million dollars of investment throughout Sullivan County, our unemployment rate is hovering around 3%.

Our inventory of single-family homes has doubled, with sales up 5%.

We've collected \$800,000 dollars in mortgage taxes in 2018, \$100,000 dollars more than in 2017.

We've received \$1.2 million dollars in room taxes, \$300,000 dollars more than in 2017.

And how's this! \$45 million dollars in sales taxes, representing an incredible growth of \$150 MILLION dollars in taxable sales versus 2017.

And we still have more to collect from 2018!

To welcome 4 million people, you have to make sure they can get here. As we all know tonight, our DPW has kept our roads clear during the worst winter storms, no matter the time, no matter the place. In 2018, we repaved nearly 28 miles of County roads and rehabbed close to 36 miles, plus rebuilt 4 bridges. Our engineers and planners finished designing the reconstruction of East Broadway in Monticello; work crews will start as soon as the weather warms up.

We continue to invest in this Airport, soon to build a new 9,000-square-foot hangar able to house up to 4 business jets; using federal funding to finish a complete rehab of the runway; and thanks to Sullivan Renaissance and its founder, Sandra Gerry, beautiful new signage (some of which is still being finished) now points the way to the Airport, and as a result, business is up 10%!

We support the efforts of the Partnership for Economic Development to get that third lane of Route 17 finished all the way to Liberty; thank you, Marc Baez, for leading the team!

This spring, I'm proud to say that Sullivan County will debut a new public bus route, linking our towns and running more often than current services.

Our economy, however, depends on much more than tourism. The Center for Discovery has invested millions of dollars and created hundreds of jobs over the past few years, and I was thrilled to be a part of the announcement that they will convert the former Frontier Insurance Building in Rock Hill into a state-of-the-art research center and children's specialty hospital.

The Center for Discovery's vision extends beyond Rock Hill and into Hurleyville, where their Arts Center and THINC Lab anchor a revitalized downtown Main Street corridor – thank you for always believing Sullivan County is the BEST place to live, work and raise a family!

We remain home to the Kohl's Distribution Center in Wurtsboro, where hundreds of local folks sort, package and ship inventory for one of the nation's top retailers – Kohl's, which continues to make amazing gains when stores like Sears and JCPenney are struggling.

Our downtowns are seeing new development, with people creating new restaurants and shops in Livingston Manor, Callicoon, Jeffersonville, Cocheton, Narrowsburg, Liberty, Monticello,

Hurleyville, White Lake, Barryville, Wurtsboro and more. Thanks to local people who care, Liberty will see the return of its longtime theater, while Monticello may create a skating rink right in front of the County Courthouse.

We're particularly fortunate to have people who want to invest here, like Sims and Kirsten Foster, who are buying historic properties around the County and turning them into destinations for both visitors and residents – thank you for creating your vision here, and for inspiring others to do the same!

We're also blessed with a new Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jaime Schmeiser, who brings a fresh perspective and approach to a place she knows and loves

Sullivan County has been investing in its communities as well. We just purchased a building on Broadway and another in Monticello so we can relocate our Board of Elections and our District Attorney's Offices to better, larger quarters.

We are nearly finished building the new Jail, which will use Monticello water and sewer, giving the Village a large and permanent customer.

After months of work by our Grants, Planning, DPW, County Manager, the Legislature and staff, I'm proud to say we will be getting close to \$1 million from the State to finally address the damaging floods that keep hitting Kohlertown, just outside Jeffersonville.

Our Planning Division has helped every municipality in the County this past year, from reviewing specific projects to aiding in developing new planning and zoning rules – in fact, they doubled the amount of training opportunities for local planning and zoning board members, holding classes around the County to make it more convenient.

In Monticello, our dedicated Planning team has fostered the Grow the Gateways program, helped Sullivan180 in its healthy vision toward a new downtown YMCA, and organized a spectacularly successful Sprinkler Beach Party at the parking lot behind the Ted Stroebele Center.

Our Industrial Development Agency has been hard at work, keeping us a standout amidst the extreme competition to attract new business – and they just earned a clean audit from the State.

We care about our children, and it shows. Our Youth Bureau provided critical funding to nearly 30 kids' programs Countywide, and we've just added \$15,000 dollars more to that effort. The Youth Bureau also coordinated our own Halloween trunk-or-treat, bringing in one of the largest crowds we've ever seen at the Government Center – over 2,000 people! And they all went home not just with candy but information on services provided by the County and other groups.

This Legislature provided the funding to hire 3 more School Resource Officers, with plans to add 3 more after that, ensuring the safety of our children – and also creating positive relationships with them and the police.

We're starting a County government internship program for local high-schoolers.

Our shining jewel, SUNY Sullivan, continues to be an important part of life and learning in Sullivan County, and under the leadership of President Jay Quaintance, it is becoming more and more a crucial resource in training both our young people and our adult workforce.

Our Public Health team developed an Opioid Response Network to improve the delivery of healthcare to young people and adults dealing with addiction.

We bumped up the salaries of our seasonal Parks & Recreation workers, so that our teens will choose to spend their summers working at our parks.

And we're investing millions of dollars more to provide foster care services – but we could really use more foster and adoptive parents. We want our children's futures to be full of possibilities, and we want to leave this County a better place for them.

Our Office of Sustainable Energy is leading the way toward a brighter, greener future. We're an officially recognized Climate Smart Community, with energy efficiencies being built in to every facility the County runs – we even have an all-electric car in the County's fleet.

Our Department of Solid Waste & Recycling continues to coordinate and improve the annual Countywide Litterpluck, plus hold several Household Hazardous Waste dropoff days and Municipal Cleanup events, and they added a paper shredding day in 2018. They also started a Friday “teach-in” covering all sorts of recycling topics, began reaching out to businesses, improved signs, distributed seedlings for Earth Day, created an educational flyer, and developed a new Facebook page. Thanks to their efforts, Sullivan County residents and businesses recycled 5,300 tons of trash in 2018!

We're doing our part too, with more and more County offices going paperless – and plenty of recycling bins available for our workers and office visitors.

Our Planning Division is leading the successful effort to get rid of old, eyesore properties, with close to a dozen already demolished through both our RUSSt Program (Remove Unsafe Structures) and three dozen more under review by our new Sullivan County Land Bank – which has been so successful that many other upstate municipalities want to create something similar.

This year we'll begin the hard work of updating our Comprehensive Plan, and I ask all of you to weigh in when the time comes for public comment and involvement.

Indeed, it takes this whole County to get things done. That's why the Legislature and administration are committed to spreading County resources to every corner of Sullivan County.

Last year we gave \$250,000 dollars to all sorts of worthy local groups, including the Delaware Valley Arts Alliance and the Sportsmen's Federation of Sullivan County. This year we're upping that amount to \$300,000 dollars. Our Plans & Progress competitive grant program handed out \$100,000 dollars last year – this year we'll do it again.

We've allocated funding to better promote our farmers' markets, and we've sustained our commitment to Cornell Cooperative Extension of Sullivan County and all the good work they do. The County loudly and successfully asked the federal government to restore funding to the Upper Delaware Council, which was in danger of closing.

Working with the Towns of Liberty and Thompson, the IDA and the Partnership for Economic Development, we're aiming to develop multiple business parks along Old Route 17 between Harris and Ferndale – this is the smart way of ensuring an economy that is not just dependent on tourism but other businesses. We're also developing a shovel-ready light industry park where we once planned to expand the County Landfill in Monticello – definitely a better use of that property!

Our Information Technology Services and Parks departments are sharing resources, including staff, with the Town of Liberty, saving them money. Our DPW shares personnel and equipment with our towns and villages whenever and wherever needed. We've got a host of folks working on enhancing rail trails in Mamakating, Fallsburg, Liberty, Forestburgh and Rockland.

But we can do more, and here's how:

A truly transformative plan is under way by our ITS department: wireless broadband. We'll begin tests this summer in Monticello, and if successful, we'll mount transmitters on every County tower we have, finally bringing high-speed Internet service – at low cost – to places that never thought they'd see it.

We always jump at a chance to work with the amazing team at Sullivan Renaissance, and our Land Bank this spring will launch a Tool Lending Library with them, where neighborhood groups can do community cleanups and beautification without having to buy the tools themselves.

Our 911 Center, Coroners and Public Health have partnered on a revolutionary way of mapping opioid overdoses throughout the County, allowing us to better understand and respond to this pressing issue. 911 Coordinator Alex Rau will now serve as our EMS Coordinator as well, and under his leadership, I expect our emergency medical responders will find more support and more collaboration when they need it; we're also dedicating \$50,000 dollars to study ways to improve ambulance services Countywide.

We'll open our new Jail and Patrol Headquarters this year, giving our patrol and corrections officers the quarters and equipment they need and deserve, and providing a more humane existence for our inmates.

Our crackdown on waste and abuse will continue with our Welfare Fraud Task Force, which under the leadership of DA Jim Farrell, Sheriff Mike Schiff and Health & Family Services Commissioner Joe Todora, has already racked up 100 arrests of people scamming the system at taxpayers' expense.

We've set aside \$75,000 to improve and add historical and welcome signs all over the County.

We've increased contract salaries to attract more nurses, raised our minimum wage for EVERY position to \$15 an hour (far ahead of the State's own timetable), and our Care Center at Sunset Lake is exploring a partnership with SUNY Sullivan to bring in more needed LPNs.

Close to my heart, we'll hopefully finally ratify contracts with our union employees, who deserve raises for the hard work they do every day – but in a way that doesn't impact our taxpayers, who can't afford any more increase in taxes.

And just as importantly, we're going to work very hard this year to find cost savings for our towns, through sharing services and providing resources when and where they need them. Their taxpayers are also our taxpayers, and we owe it to our 15 townships to work together.

This is a lot, but it doesn't have to cost a lot. Thanks to all the investment and development in Sullivan County, our taxable assessed value has increased nearly 5%. That means your tax bill has likely gone down this year, by more than a percent and a half.

Thanks to the Division of Management & Budget and the County Manager's Office, this Legislature is proud to say that we've also dropped the Solid Waste Access Fee by a third – and I promise we'll be reducing that even more in the future.

We remain free of significant fiscal stress, and our bond rating is high, meaning we can borrow at low interest rates. Special thanks to the staffs of the Treasurer's Office, Management & Budget, and Audit for keeping us fiscally sound!

Indeed, it is this government's staff who keeps us moving forward, and I want to thank each one of them.

First off, my gratitude to my fellow legislators and the one who keeps us all in line: Clerk of the Legislature Annie Martin. You all are a joy to work with – and I mean that! Secondly, my deep appreciation to County Manager Josh Potossek and his team, who have led this County out of a recession and into prosperity.

Most of you have interacted with our County Clerk and his team, whether by going to the DMV or filing paperwork like deeds and pistol permits – they are top-notch, and I'm proud to say we've added another worker to help them do their important work. Under the leadership of County Clerk Dan Briggs, they've also instituted fully electronic recording of land documents, which no longer requires an actual trip to the office – they nevertheless handled around 70,000 transactions in 2018.

Most of you have NEVER interacted with our County Attorney's Office, and that's a good thing! They steadfastly protect the County's legal interests. Also protecting us are the Sheriff's Office and District Attorney's Office, who together with our court system ensure justice for all of us. Felony prosecutions in County Court were up 32% from 2017, and the DA's Office handled in excess of 3,000 new criminal prosecutions. Even more impressive – their offices' tough stance on crime has led to a 70% DROP in burglaries!

Our Veterans Service Agency gives more in services to our veterans than many upstate counties, and we're soon going to give them more room, moving them into the Board of Elections when that Board moves to our new Broadway building.

Speaking of the Board of Elections, they handled more primaries, more petitions and more problems this year than ever before, and we are all grateful to that small staff for the very big job they do.

Our DPW, led by Commissioner Ed McAndrew, is the backbone of this County, not just in roads and bridges but in buildings and grounds, transportation and trash disposal. This past year, they handled all of that, plus the repaving of parking lots and the replacement of sidewalks at the Government Center, County Courthouse and the Care Center.

Our Division of Public Safety, led by Commissioner Rick Sauer, gives us all peace of mind through our 911 Center, our Bureau of Fire, our Bureau of EMS, and our Probation Department.

Health & Family Services, overseen by Commissioner Joe Todora, is our largest Division, and I couldn't imagine this County without it. Our departments of Family Services and Community Services provide vital assistance to so many, from children to senior citizens, the very poor to the very sick.

Public Health Services is vital to our vitality, and their work has literally saved lives. I'm very proud to say that thanks to Public Health staff and the new nonprofit Sullivan180, we're in the running for a \$25,000 Culture of Health Award from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, part of our very serious effort to raise our health rankings.

The Office for the Aging never forgets the humanity (and the hunger) of the folks they serve, ensuring full lives as well as full bellies through Meals on Wheels and our Nutrition Program.

For those who need more than family and friends to take care of them, we have our outstanding, five-star, high-performance Care Center at Sunset Lake. I speak from personal experience when I tell you that you will NOT find a better, more caring place for both short-term and long-term stays.

Our Employee Wellness Committee, led by Management and Budget Deputy Commissioner Darrin Raynor, has made great strides in encouraging our employees to model the health they bring to the community – we know for a fact that 600 employees have been involved in our Wellness Events. We've become a community model, and we've invited the community to join us on monthly Wellness Walks.

Our Division of Planning and Community Development, led by Commissioner Freda Eisenberg, is hard at work all around us, from assisting towns with expert planning knowledge, to helping assessors and tax collectors do their work via Real Property Tax Services, and matching employees with employers in our Center for Workforce Development.

And then there's our ITS Department, without which no other office could get anything done. They provide the computers, the servers, the digital workspace, and the technical know-how for all of us to do our jobs. And thanks to them, we've got a brand new, growing County website, sullivanny.us.

These people all work for you, and what a job they do. Let's give them the ovation they deserve!

I have one more thanks to give – to all of you, not just for being here tonight, but for caring for, supporting and believing in Sullivan County even when it wasn't popular or logical to do so. As you can see from all that I've just outlined, we're not only going places, we are leading the way.

We also have new representation in Albany and Washington: State Senator Jen Metzger and Congressman Antonio Delgado. Together with our longtime advocate, Assemblywoman Aileen Gunther, they will help Sullivan County achieve even greater goals – and I look forward to working with them.

2019 will be unlike any year we've ever experienced, and I mean that in a very, very good way. We have an entire year to look forward to, and a bright future beyond that. I am privileged to be your Legislative Chairman during such an incredible time. All I ask of you is, Let's Walk Together.

Thank you, and good night!