

Ulster County Executive Mike Hein's

Address to the Ulster County Chamber of Commerce: June 30, 2009

Thank you and good morning. Before I get started I want to thank the members of this Chamber. Whether it's insurance programs for your members, "mixers" to promote networking or even the now famous "wing fling", that I've only recently recovered from, you are constantly working to help local business thrive. Actions that are near and dear to my heart, since I come from the private sector where making payroll isn't guaranteed and running an efficient operation means everything.

So regardless of the behavior you've seen recently with the New York State Senate, I hope your seeing something very different here in Ulster County. It's my great hope what you're seeing is, after six months, this new form of government is working. The ultimate evaluation won't come for sometime but we are making great strides already.

I also know none of this would have happened without the support of this Chamber. The Ulster County Chamber of Commerce should be incredibly proud of its successful fight to turn the dream of a more accountable county government into a reality.

You see, I take very seriously my responsibility to you; to you and the 181,000 people of Ulster County. I wish we weren't forced to build a new government, deliver reform and fight for economic development in the middle of a huge recession, but the fact is we are and I will not shy away from this responsibility.

As the County Executive, I'm committed to addressing the immediate needs of the people of Ulster County while building a strong foundation for the future. And, as we face tough decisions, I believe bi-partisanship will be essential to our County's long-term success.

That being said, I'm proud to be a Democrat, but I was elected to serve ALL the people of Ulster County equally. My focus is on what's right and what's effective and not what's politically popular. That's why I created a bi-partisan economic taskforce and also appointed a well respected Republican, Bob Sudlow, to the highest level of my administration. Simply put, he was the most qualified person for that job - and isn't that what's supposed to be all about?

In addition, I believe that all levels of governments must remember one thing - and that is, we all serve the same taxpayer. That's why I meet regularly with Town supervisors to improve cooperation and look for ways to cut costs.

I hope that you're seeing I'm passionate about what we're doing and I'm a big believer in leading by example. So when I looked to cut costs, the first thing I did was freeze my own salary and that of 142 non-union managers. On top of that, we've instituted an aggressive attrition program; a program already yielding results. To date, we saved over \$1.5 million dollars and anticipate saving over \$3.3 million in 2009 alone.

We're working to bring professional analysis to County real estate.

1. Re-Evaluating all County leases
2. Renegotiating existing ones (the first one just save taxpayers over \$112,000)
3. Moving to sell surplus County property and putting it back on the tax rolls where it belongs. We're starting with an unused highway substation in the Town of Lloyd.

We've also saved by refinancing outstanding debt and finding innovative ways to buy energy. By joining a consortium, we've cut our annual energy costs by over \$200,000 dollars. In addition to that, we're currently conducting a comprehensive energy audit of County owned facilities.

And, in times like these, when working smart has never been more important, we're investing in technology to help control costs and increase accountability. We're replacing the county's antiquated time and attendance system and installing GPS locators in all County vehicles. This is a first step towards reducing the size of the fleet and increasing overall accountability.

Unfortunately, in the middle of our efforts, I'm sometimes forced to address politically motivated nonsense. I know you find that hard to believe, but it's true. This comes with the job too!

A recent example involved the required construction project at the County office building. There was an attempt by a few to intentionally mislead the public; characterizing it as some desire for palatial offices. Not only was that ridiculous, it's counter productive when people play politics during this critical time in our county's history.

Just to set the record straight, a bi-partisan Legislative committee was formed to provide space for the new government, including the County Comptroller's offices, the Executive branch and the new Legislative offices. Everyone agreed upon the need. That committee was formed over 15 months ago. Unfortunately, they were unable to start the project and the lowest estimate they had was over \$600,000.

Now I didn't want to inherit this project, but I did. And, from that point we completed the project in less than 5 months, used in-house labor and finished it for a fraction of their lowest estimate - 70% less to be exact. We also did it without borrowing a single penny. Now, I'm not being critical of the Legislature. I have great respect for them and look forward to partnering with them in the future. In fact, without their courageous vote on the Charter, this new, more accountable form of government would never even exist. However, this issue does provide a great example of why the committee system is not the best way to run the day to day operations of a County.

Building the foundation of this government in the middle of a national recession is providing very unique challenges. So does implementing the federal stimulus package.

Whatever you may think of the Federal Stimulus, in its purest form it's designed to put people to work and improve our Country's infrastructure. In Ulster County we've been fortunate to have over \$27 million dollars worth of much needed projects, funded by the stimulus.

If you'd like to see a list of these projects please go to the county website at: ulstercounty.ny.gov/planning. However, it's important to note, that this funding came with major limitations. Road, bridge and public transportation projects that weren't already in the pipeline, with legal and engineering work complete, were highly unlikely to qualify.

In addition to these projects, Ulster County was one of only 12 New York counties to qualify for energy efficiency money; \$750,000 dollars that will be used to implement many of the cost saving recommendations in the energy audit I spoke of earlier.

The Federal Stimulus package also includes: over a million dollars for employment training, \$12.5 million dollars, over three years, to offset local Medicaid costs and employment training to retrain displaced workers, as well as a great program where local businesses can hire certain employees and have their costs paid for with stimulus money. I encourage you to contact Nancy Schaefer at OET, the Office of Employment and Training, for more information.

Across our nation there are many perspectives on the stimulus package, but one thing is clear, all of this is temporary and the long term financial health of Ulster County depends on improvements to the national, State and county economies. Though a great deal of this is out of our control, I believe we have a responsibility to take every action that is in our control.

So before I took office I convened a bi-partisan economic development taskforce. I gave this diverse, well respected group of labor, environmental and business representatives a 30 day deadline to provide input. I was impressed by both their effort and their final work product. In fact, some of the participants are members of this very chamber. And some of the issues they identified were:

1. Access to capital for businesses
2. Streamlining the permit & development process
3. Importance of passing the Ulster Tomorrow Plan.

As you well know, access to capital is essential for business and though addressing this issue isn't typical for county governments, we reached out to local banks and the New York State Business Development Corporation to begin building a banking consortium. By reducing lending risk, we can provide capital for businesses that fall just below traditional lending guidelines; businesses that employ real people, with real families, right here in Ulster County. We expect this up and running by September.

As far as the need to streamline the permitting process, I couldn't agree more. As I've said many times, if we're going to compete in a global environment, it can't take 5 years to get to a yes or no decision on a development project. That doesn't mean we compromise environmental review or insert the County into local land use issues. What it does mean is all governments must take responsibility for this.

From the County's perspective, I issued an Executive Order requiring all County Departments, like Planning, Highway and the Health Departments to coordinate their review efforts to eliminate unnecessary delays. That coordination has already begun.

In this process I also have great respect for the Towns. To assist the Town governments we are now moving to provide much needed GIS capacity as well as other services to help them control costs. We also convened a first time ever meeting with Town Supervisors, Planning and Zoning Chairs and private sector Architects and Engineers, to discuss ways of streamlining the process and instituting best practices.

The other item the Taskforce identified was the Ulster Tomorrow Plan. Many Chamber members worked tirelessly on this initiative. And as you may know, this has now been adopted by the County Legislature as part of Ulster County's Comprehensive Plan. It's an action that everyone involved should be commended for. In addition to that I'm pleased to say we've already begun implementing many of the key components and look forward to discussing this with the Ulster Tomorrow Committee.

Recently, you've also had a representative from the Solar Energy Consortium here to speak. Personally, I truly believe alternative energy has the potential to dramatically enhance our economy- and someday transform it. I'm glad to be involved in this and see the efforts of so many people beginning to pay off. Prism Solar has purchased the Panasonic building in the Town of Lloyd and will begin hiring soon. Elna Magnetic's is moving from Woodstock to a larger facility in Saugerties; adding 30 jobs and Earthkind is moving to Tech City creating another 15. We've also had numerous businesses interested in TSEC and we are looking forward to additional results throughout this year.

As far as some simple actions we've taken to help local business; we're now having people on probation, people with community service obligations, meet those obligations by picking up roadside trash. Because, as we all know, keeping Ulster County clean is good for business.

And to help relieve some of the parking pressures on uptown Kingston, I've now made the courthouse parking lot, free of charge. Not only did that provide a small measure of relief for uptown Kingston, it also saved money for the County in the process.

Another one of the rolls envisioned for the Executive in this charter involves bringing people together. In January, we hosted a meeting with Belleayre, Hunter and Windham Ski resorts; tough competitors that have had long standing differences. But they also recognize the mutual benefit of more skier visits to the Catskill region - and as a result of our meetings, these resorts, both public and private, worked together on a successful promotions campaign this spring. They, along with the Ulster and Greene County Tourism departments and especially UCDC should be congratulated for this effort and I'm optimistic about more cooperation in the future.

We all know how important Tourism is to Ulster County. We are in the process of overhauling the County's Tourism website to better serve this industry. We've made great progress and we're looking for your input. A demonstration of the website and re-branding effort will take place July 8th, at 7pm, in the County Office Building. I hope you'll attend.

In a County the size of Rhode Island, we're working to make it easier for people to visit and get around, with buses from the Poughkeepsie Train station and routes to historical, natural and other points of interest. We're committed to providing a user friendly, "no car required", Ulster County vacation. Bringing outside dollars into Ulster County is what it's all about.

And, as I said earlier, I believe we must lead by example. I will continually advocate for our community to "buy local" and now I've issued a directive for the County government to do the same.

This is an area where the Legislature and my office are in complete agreement. Though we must follow specific legal guidelines, if all things are equal we will buy from local vendors.

The County must also eliminate the perception that we're a complex bureaucracy to do business with. Those days are over. We've launched a campaign to help local companies do business with Ulster County. Materials about this are on your table. This includes items in the brochure plus professional services like architects, engineers and legal services as well. You can find additional information on the county website.

Now everything I've talked about, and there's much more, has taken place in just 6 months. I'm confident in saying Ulster County government is much better. It's more transparent and more accountable. We've cut over \$4.1 million dollars already and we're taking innovative steps to help business. We've made a sea change in the speed of decision making and we're fixing departments that have been broken for far too long. As County Executive, I will not hesitate to take any action I believe is in the best interest of the people of Ulster County.

Now before I end I want to acknowledge my talented and hardworking staff. They all come to public service with one goal: and that's to make Ulster County the best County in all of New York State.

I am honored to serve as your County Executive and I will fight tooth and nail for the people of this County. As someone born and raised here, you are my friends, you're my neighbors and you're the heartbeat of the Ulster County economy. You're also the people I stand shoulder to shoulder with as we face these serious financial challenges and we should never forget what we as Americans do best. During times of crisis, we come together. We come together and we innovate. Because, in spite of everything, the United States of America is still the greatest country on the face of this earth and I believe that working together we can, we will and we must, make Ulster County the finest place anywhere to live work and raise a family. Thank you.