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Ulster County Executive

## 2017 State of the County Address

Good evening. As I begin tonight, I would like to share with everyone just a small piece of wisdom that my late grandmother once shared with me. Now as I do, I will need to edit a few words because in her later years she became well-known for weaving her words of wisdom through what we used to politely refer to as a “tapestry of profanity.” She used to say to me, “Michael, there are amazing people everywhere you look, special human beings who dedicate their lives to building things up and making things better. Do you know why they are so special? Because they do it all knowing full well, there will always be some who will come along and try to tear things down.”

She told me, “You would have a much better life if you simply chose to be and surround yourself with those very special people dedicated to building things up and making things better; and she was right. She also said, “While you’re at it, you better have a plan.”

So as the County Executive, I try to follow my grandmother’s advice, and every day my administration focuses on delivering real solutions that build things up and make things better for the great people of Ulster County. Now in today's day and age that kind of advice might not always be fashionable, but if we are not careful in America, petty politics and polarizing rhetoric can undermine our democracy and end up replacing important things like honest debate, respectful discussion and most of all actual results.

What is also at risk are: basic human dignity, appreciation for diversity and our collective focus on what really matters; the fact that in the end, we are all in this together. That is why I believe our residents have a right to expect a government that puts their interests first. One that doesn’t tax them out of their homes or forget who fought to provide all the freedoms that we as Americans all enjoy. A government that helps businesses create jobs while also fighting to ensure clean air and clean water for generations to come. They have every right to expect their leaders to compromise such as the difficult agreement the Legislature and I forged between rail-trail and railroad enthusiasts. And with all the taxes New Yorkers pay they have every right to expect high quality services and roads and bridges that are safe for cars, safe for trucks and safe for pedestrians too.

They are justifiably scared about the nightmare of heroin that’s killing far too many people; and every step of the way the good people of Ulster County remain deeply compassionate, so they want a government that tries to help those among us most in need while also never allowing that generosity to be taken advantage of.

And through it all our citizens want and deserve a government that is dedicated to public safety, education and real access to the American Dream for everyone. That is the kind of government they want, that is the kind of government they deserve, and working together that is exactly the kind of government we strive to deliver every single day.

It has been said that there are only two constants in this world: death and taxes. Although I think there may be a few more, the fact remains: New York property taxes are still some of the highest in our nation. If you're wondering what's causing New York's problem, the answer is pretty clear, but it may be difficult to hear:

1. Thousands of taxing jurisdictions some of which duplicate services and expenses;
2. A state government that for decades has loved to say yes to spending in order to garner political favor and then simply handed the bill to local governments in the form of unfunded mandates to avoid the blame; and lastly,
3. A long list of municipalities across our state -that have habitually spent more than inflation, more than the cost of living and more than any other reasonable cost driver.

That is it. Those are the reasons. And for decades, Ulster County government was no better. While taxpayers suffered, most politicians in New York acted as if they only had three choices:

1. Provide less service to avoid big tax increases;
2. Jack up taxes- just to support the status quo; or
3. Kick the can down the road until ultimately it became someone else's problem.

And as we all know, with any of these choices it was the taxpayers always left holding the bag.

As a reformer I knew there had to be a better way, and so did the great people of Ulster County, and with their support we set about trying to rethink absolutely everything. It would mean serious and sometimes frightening change and it would spur political controversy, but in the end I believed that if we were bold enough we could actually create something special. A government that functions very differently than the ones we have come to expect, and I am thrilled to say – it is working. We have reinvented County government and the real winners are the people.

However, we did not do it alone; so I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and sincerely commend the Ulster County Legislature because without them none of this would have been possible. This legislature and its leadership on both sides of the aisle have proven that for the betterment of the people, they can and will set aside politics and instead focus on cooperation and results.

What I am about to say is so rare that we can not find a similar combination in any other government, at any other level, anywhere in the State of New York:

1. Our spending is down across the board by over \$30 million dollars;
2. Departments controlled by the executive branch are over 40% smaller; and
3. The Property Tax levy for this year in Ulster County is actually less than it was all the way back in 2010.

Think about it - in a State notorious for high taxes, we have collectively lowered Ulster County property taxes to below 2010 levels, while at the same time providing millions to help our towns and the City of Kingston, all while improving access to services for our citizens. That is truly extraordinary and shows what is possible when we all work together.

Our biggest danger now locally, is apathy. We run the risk of creating an unrealistic expectation that County property tax cuts are somehow easy or automatic, and that is simply not true. These kinds of historic accomplishments are hard fought and only possible when we all work together.

Last year we had a number of other exciting things happen, not the least of which was having Ulster County and some of our environmental initiatives featured in National Geographic Magazine. It is hard to imagine 6.7

million readers in 40 different languages got an opportunity to learn more about Ulster County. That is the kind of advertising you just can't buy and it should provide a significant boost to our already booming \$533 million dollar tourism industry.

But for me personally, it was the reason why they chose us that may be the most special of all - out of 3,144 different counties in the United States of America they chose Ulster County because collectively, we had accomplished something so unique. We had proven that a government could actually deliver on the promise of leading edge environmental progress without skyrocketing property taxes or undermining our local economy. We had created a government that truly balanced fiscal responsibility with social responsibility and that is exactly what they wanted to promote. They wanted to show what was possible.

The substance of what they were highlighting is something that everyone in Ulster County can be proud of:

1. Yes, we are the only net carbon neutral County in the State;
2. Yes, 100% of our energy does come from renewable resources. and nobody else is even close; and
3. Yes, our upcoming solar project will allow us to actually generate 20% of our entire electrical needs.

Even more important than all this and the wonderful recognitions we have received from places like: the National Association of Counties, the Federal EPA and the State DEC for our move to more alternative fuel vehicles and our very own charging stations.

For us it is "What's next?" that is always the most important. So I am pleased to report that in 2017 we are expanding our investment in areas like farmland protection with partners such as Scenic Hudson as well as the great folks at the Burroughs Association to expand and protect this historic national treasure.

As a result of becoming the first New York municipality at any level, to earn the "Clean Energy Community" designation we have been selected to receive an additional NYSERDA grant worth a quarter of a million dollars. We are investing that money to complete a massive lighting upgrade plus more efficient solar hot water heaters and an innovative ozone-based laundry system at the Ulster County Law Enforcement Center...

I know upgrading our Law Enforcement Center is not very flashy, but these are the same types of creative solutions that are not only great for our environment but, like much of what we focus on, ultimately their performance will save our taxpayers millions. And saving millions is exactly how we have paid for countless improvements including better roads and better bridges for everyone.

Infrastructure problems in our country have been well documented. Decades of underfunding have led to crumbling roads and bridges and this pattern of underfunding ultimately resulted in major gaps between what was needed and what most governments could realistically afford; and for years Ulster County was no different. In order to begin addressing this seemingly insurmountable problem we chose to make a massive, multi-year investment. We were one of the rare communities that actually had the ability to do so as our collective fiscal discipline and the strategic reform of County government had allowed us to save the necessary resources to begin turning things around.

I am pleased to report that by investing an unprecedented \$46 million dollars over a three year period, our "Building a Better Ulster County" Initiative will improve 15 bridges and over 50% of all County roads. To put that into context: that is three times the traditional pace of construction and a real testament to the hard work, dedication and professionalism of our amazing DPW.

In this process we also recognized some universal truths that we all complain about: in America most of us had just come to expect that government construction projects always mean roads closed for months, local businesses turned upside down and enormous inconvenience for everyone.

However, we believed that if you were willing to embrace change and rethink everything, then maybe just maybe, it did not have to be that way.

The first project we chose may have been the most difficult one of all. It was the highly traveled Carmine Liberta Bridge in the Village of New Paltz used by 12 thousands vehicles every single day. Replacing this critical connection had been avoided for years since it would inevitably cause crippling gridlock, cost our economy \$10's of millions and ultimately result in nightmarish 15 mile detours for everyone. But the facts remained: this bridge was outdated with major structural concerns, no bike lanes, massive overgrowth and overhead steel that blocked any view in or out of this important community gateway. I believed it would be the perfect test.

We began by scheduling community outreach meetings and asked the great people of New Paltz and many local businesses a very straight-forward question: "What was most important- to them?" and we set aside the traditional idea of what was convenient for the government. In the end, working with our engineers the community helped select a completely different kind of bridge that provided safety for pedestrians with multiple bike lanes and a wide, well-lit sidewalk. It is a bridge that directly connects to the amazing "River to Ridge" trail as well as wider shoulders that we have installed for miles; a lower profile bridge that now opened the iconic view of Mohonk to everyone while also creating a structure that is more resilient to severe weather events and will last for generations.

In order to avoid the millions in negative economic impact and those massive detours and delays, before any construction ever began we installed a temporary bridge right next to the old one. As a result the total time delays and detours were cut down to virtually nothing. Not only were there no negative economic impacts, but our local businesses began telling us that we were actually spurring additional economic activity with our process. It is important to note that we were not trying to create a cookie cutter model to simply repeat everywhere else; but instead, we were looking to engrain an entirely new way of thinking on the government, one that is flexible, respectful and ultimately more responsive to the will of the people.

In the end this type of creative thinking also spurred something very special - instead of doing what was typical and removing the temporary bridge abutment from the village side, we instead repurposed it to build an entirely new public space; a breathtaking overlook that now functions as a true community gateway. Also in the process we have helped create a real waterfront in the Village of New Paltz for the first time since the 1600's and we did it all on budget and ahead of schedule.

Ladies and gentleman, this one project perfectly exemplifies the kind of inclusive and innovative government that we are committed to building; a game changing project that never would have happened without an amazing workforce, a completely different way of thinking and a plan that includes a real belief in each other.

Now obviously infrastructure also means much more than just our roads and bridges. One of the other critical components is our growing rail-trail system, including a breathtaking segment that will open the entire north shore of the Ashokan Reservoir to the public for the first time in over a hundred years.

I want to say thank you to all of those extraordinary individuals from across our County who have worked so hard for so long on all the different segments; and tonight, I am going to share with you a little secret: all your hard work has actually helped shape the future.

Less than a month ago the Governor announced that New York State was going to build a statewide interconnected rail-trail system with a major leg running from New York City to the Adirondack State Park, and we can't thank him enough. Although that was great, the scary behind the scenes fact was the original plan did not include Ulster County. Instead, it was to be constructed entirely on the eastern side of the Hudson River and that would have left us out. However, because of the volume of amazing work that had already been done by so many incredible people many of whom are with us here tonight, we were able to successfully change that

original plan. Not only is Ulster County included, but because we are the only county on this section west of the Hudson River, and the only connection point to the Catskill Mountains, and so close to the 22 million people in the metro New York area, Ulster County is now uniquely positioned to experience the best, long-term economic benefits from this project of any county anywhere.

This year's proposed State budget also includes an additional \$1 million to further Ulster County's proven rail-trail efforts - money that will go a long way when combined with the \$10 million plus in grant funding we have already secured to pay for the work needed to make the dream of an interconnected rail-trail system a reality. Along the way we will never forget what an awesome responsibility it is to manage the taxpayers' money and make sure these projects go well.

Ulster County did not always have the best reputation with respect to capital projects, but following the nightmare that was the County Jail project my administration came in and completely overhauled how capital projects get done. In the process we have developed a strong eight year reputation for getting things done on time and on budget, and often under budget and ahead of schedule; and our friends in labor have helped make that a reality.

And though I hope you never need it, our next project together will be the Ulster County Family Court facility, and as we work on this I am sure I will need to keep my grandmother's sage advice very close to my heart. Even though the great people of Ulster County voted for, in a landslide, this common sense approach of moving family court from its current inadequate and expensive rental location to a County-owned facility right next to DSS where so many children actually receive critical services, just like my grandmother used to say, "there will always be some who will still try to tear things down."

But I take great comfort in the fact that it is usually the same pair of angry men who oppose virtually everything. They opposed the monument to fallen soldiers at the County Office building; they opposed the Patriot's Project that helps homeless Veterans; they opposed county budgets that lowered property taxes and countless environmental initiatives including the ones featured in National Geographic; they even opposed the STRIVE project that provided access to higher education for inner city youth at absolutely no cost to County taxpayers. So I guess my grandmother was right when she said, "No matter what, there will always be a couple of bad apples who try to tear things down." You see, my grandmother was very smart.

The good news is we have proven that when we all stand together our community can make unprecedented progress. When we all stand together those among us most in need can truly benefit from our collective humanity and when we all stand together we can stop those petty politicians who would otherwise undermine a promising future for everyone.

Family Court isn't about bricks and mortar or whether a building exists 800 feet one way or the other. It isn't about fancy courtrooms and it isn't about trying to make things more convenient for lawyers, and it sure as heck isn't about economic development. Family Court is about real people and the complex issues that alter the course of their lives forever. It is about powerful, heart wrenching choices; so what I care about most in this entire process is not the nonsense but instead, as County Executive I care deeply about the people who are impacted and I care about justice.

Just like all of America, we are wrestling with serious issues and I believe that real leadership means tackling these issues head on even if it is difficult, like the issue of drug abuse. Along with every other parent in the world I find the idea of a child addicted to heroin terrifying. But the fact is for far too many parents it is more than just a nightmare, it has become a reality. As a County, our team of professionals is dedicated to doing everything in our power to help.

The National Association of Counties has set forth a long list of recommendations to combat heroin abuse, and Ulster County has already embraced them all. In addition, we have identified a major impediment standing between those addicted and possible recovery and that is navigating the complex world of health insurance. In an effort to help, we have hired a Family Advocate to assist individuals and their families in their moments of greatest need, and it is working.

But with so much at stake, we refuse to sit back; so we are charging forward with additional tools to help those in the throes of addiction as well as the amazing people who love them. Just as we utilized technology to create a smartphone app to help in our suicide prevention efforts, in 2017 we will unveil a dedicated smart phone app that provides instant access to important resources for all those suffering from addiction as well as their friends and families too.

On top of that, we are focused on expanding Ulster County's own efforts. In addition to being among the very first to provide Narcan to all first responders, I have directed the Commissioner of Health to establish a voluntary program in which each and every county employee will have access to training on the lifesaving anti-overdose medication Narcan. I believe that working together our amazing County workforce-can be a meaningful force for good.

The scary truth is that many heroin addicts get their start by abusing legal prescription drugs and some by simply stealing excess medication from their parents or grandparents. Therefore, as a community we must continue our fight to reduce the amount of opioid based prescription drugs sitting in medicine cabinets all across our County.

I believe, on this issue, large chain pharmacies have been grossly negligent. Their lack of swift action has unnecessarily exposed more people to prescription opioids and thus created more people addicted to heroin. Simply put: You should be able to return your unused prescription drugs to the very same place you got them, the pharmacy, and right now – you can't. We know these drop boxes work because we have installed them in our police stations years ago. However, for many these are inconvenient or intimidating and as such they are not the best location. The best answer is right back where they came from. I want to be clear- these are the same pharmacy chains that are making billions of dollars selling narcotics, so there is no reason for delay. I am imploring our state representatives to act quickly in order to save peoples' lives and mandate that large chain pharmacies immediately install prescription drop boxes at all locations in New York, because asking nicely simply has not worked.

Out of respect for every family that has ever felt helpless as a loved one spiraled from prescription drug use to heroin, if the state fails to act then I will do everything in my power as County Executive to identify a different pathway to compel large pharmacy chains in Ulster County to install prescription drop boxes in their stores period. I invite our County Legislature to work with me in this effort and get this done to help our children.

Through a proactive approach Ulster County has shown that it can make extraordinary progress in improving our overall public health. By focusing on contributing factors we have dramatically improved in the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's National health rankings, climbing from near the bottom in our state to now near the top. But that does not mean that we don't have more work left to do; because in a world where threats to public health are always changing, we have to change too.

Similar to the fact that when the Clean Indoor Air Act was originally passed the concept of vaping" with e-cigarettes wasn't even a thing. Today the science is clear and the statistics even clearer: 90% of all current smokers began smoking by age 18, and without a change in today's national patterns far too many of our children will ultimately die from smoking related cancers, stroke or heart disease. There's something we can do about it.

This is why our County Health Department, will dramatically expand our prevention efforts to target the nationwide spike in e-cigarettes and other nicotine related products that are often marketed to our children.

In order to further protect our children and improve our overall community health I am working with Chairman Ronk and Minority Leader Rodriquez to coordinate with key stakeholders like the Tobacco Free Action Coalition, the American Cancer Society and The American Heart Association to address two other important issues:

1. Adding e-cigarettes to the list of items banned from public spaces in Ulster County under the Clean Indoor Air Act; and
2. Explore raising the cigarette purchasing age in Ulster County from 18 to 21.

These are great examples of meaningful changes that we can make together that will positively alter the future.

I believe that positively altering the future can happen every single day: from health related issues like smoking to other important areas like creating job prospects for the next generation. In all these areas it is always enlightening to remember just how far we have come.

Not too long ago back in 2009 Ulster County, just like the rest of America, was in the depths of the worst economic downturn since Great Depression. Unemployment had reached 8 % and we had some of the worst job creation numbers in the state. Our situation was further complicated by the fact that Ulster County was still digging out from a severely flawed economic policy that put all its eggs in one basket with IBM.

From the start- we partnered with our Legislature on a completely different strategy; one that focused on creating a better business climate as well as rethinking our entire economy. We did this by lowering County property taxes on small businesses and diversifying our economy to improve its overall sustainability. We worked with new and existing entrepreneurs to expand our tech community, evolve our agriculture, completely reinvent our tourism industry, and help advanced manufacturers and so much more. Since it's all really about results lets fast forward to today: unemployment has been reduced to only 4.3% almost half of what it was when we first began and our job creation numbers are some of the best in the State. Our real estate market is healthy once again after years and years in the doldrums, and along the way we have helped countless local businesses, including recently securing \$9.3 million for Ulster County projects in the most recent round of state Regional Economic Development funding.

Now this does not mean that we do not have challenges. It does mean that we are making serious progress and the opportunity for a brighter future for the great people of Ulster County is now at hand. To get there we still have to be bold and look to open entirely new sectors in our economy, especially if we are to increase the number of high quality jobs and improve the opportunities for our young graduates to have successful local careers.

That is one of the reasons I came before you last year to highlight a little known state taxing policy that was blocking large budget movies and new media production facilities from locating right here in Ulster County. We dared to believe that we could actually do something about it and ultimately help build a thriving entertainment industry from the ground up; an industry whose jobs consist of so much more than just movie stars and famous directors. It is an industry that creates high paying union construction jobs, tech jobs, finance jobs and so many others. High quality jobs, in an area with more artists per capita than anywhere in the State and in a County that fully embraces our creative economy.

When I think back on what we were trying to do I smile; because all we had to do was quickly convince a majority of the New York State Senate, a majority of New York State Assembly, as well as the Governor of the State of New York to all simultaneously agree that their existing upstate tax credit program was wrong,

potentially discriminatory and immediately needed to be changed. And one more thing - it all had to be done totally outside the traditional State budget process. When you say it like that, it sounds so simple and you think: "What could possibly go wrong?"

That is probably why so many political people warned us to not even try. But as the County Executive there was this one thing that I just couldn't get past and that was the simple fact that it was wrong. It was wrong that Ulster County was being discriminated against; it was wrong that in a place that embraces the arts so deeply that talented, high-skilled professionals could not work in their very own County; and it was wrong that our economy and the future of our children was being undermined by a severely flawed public policy - So instead, we decided to fight.

I want to thank everyone who chose to fight side by side with us; from world-class members of the entertainment industry like Mary Stuart Masterson who has been amazing, to other incredible actors like Mark Ruffalo, Academy Award winner Melissa Leo and so many others who simply love our area and want our creative economy to reach its full potential. In addition, I want to say thank you to our County Legislature -who saw the value of this initiative early on -and agreed to advocate too.

As a result I am pleased to report that the entertainment industry has noticed. In addition to Mary Stuart Masterson's exciting Stockade Works project along with the million dollars we helped secure from the Regional Economic Development Council, Laurent Rejto of the Hudson Valley Film Commission recently informed us that a number a major motion pictures, that never would have come to Ulster County without this critical business incentive are now on the way; and in fact, there is a Martin Scorsese film being shot in the Town of Saugerties and the City of Kingston right now, and that's a very exciting way to start.

I would also be remiss if I did not truly thank from the bottom of my heart a number of wonderful State partners; individuals from both sides of the aisle, and most of all, my good friend, Assemblymember Aileen Gunther who agreed to champion this issue in the Assembly with our very own Assemblyman Frank Skartados. A special thank you to Senator George Amedore who, along with Senator Bill Larkin, agreed to carry this legislation through the New York State Senate; and I want to personally thank Governor Andrew Cuomo who agreed to sign this critical legislation into law.

In the end, against all odds but working together, we accomplished what many thought was impossible. We created a powerful economic development tool that we never had before, and in the process we may very well have ignited an entirely new industry that can grow and ultimately help Ulster County's economy, and our people- for generations to come.

As we collectively strive forward toward more of these impossible dreams, let us always remember that they are only made possible because we live in a nation where we are free to dream big together. As we do, we must never forget those brave men and women who have paid for all of the freedoms we have.

Just like many in this deeply patriotic County, I believe that we have a sacred obligation to honor and assist all those who have served our great nation, and every day, in big ways and small, our team works to live up to the lofty examples our Veterans have all set for us.

Whether it is the monument to our fallen soldiers at the County Office Building, or the Patriots Project that has already helped over 56 homeless Veterans, we work to simply do what's right. Whether it is our successful FAVOR program that saves our Veterans a few dollars when they shop or our efforts to secure all the property tax assistance that our Veterans have earned and earned again, we work relentlessly to help repay what we know full well is an un-payable debt.

That is why we are so honored to visit home-bound Veterans and assist all our veterans through the bureaucracy of the V.A. It is also why we have quietly transformed the Ulster County Veterans Cemetery into a place now

worthy of the great heroes who call it their final resting place. We know in our hearts that all members of our military families sacrifice so much, and we will now pay for any spouse who wishes to join their loved one there and does not have the means - because whether it is our freedoms or our future, the truth is we owe our Veterans everything.

Now as we look forward to 2017 and the historic opportunities that are before us, I fully appreciate that everyone will not always agree on every issue. But passionate debate, freedom for all and a strong and active democracy is actually what is at the core of what really makes America great. So in those areas in which we all agree, let us be bold and act swiftly; and in those areas in which we disagree, let us find ways to disagree while still respecting the basic human dignity of others.

I believe that here, in Ulster County, by working together we can show exactly what is possible because the opportunities before us are unprecedented. I find it absolutely thrilling the idea that we now have the foundation of a flourishing entertainment industry right here in Ulster County. I find it spectacular that a world-class rail-trail system is closer to reality than ever, and I find it amazing that 40 years later my grandmother's words of wisdom can still ring true. As so many, she was the child of immigrants who didn't speak English and yet our welcoming nation accepted them with open arms. Through sheer force of will she rose up through abject poverty in a coal mining town in Pennsylvania and instilled in me a few things that you might not expect from someone with such a steep climb up the mountain to the American dream. No matter how hard her life was she taught us to have an unending level of optimism for the future, a deep appreciation and pride in our extraordinary Country and lastly, an enormous faith in the power of people to change things. You would have loved her.

As a result: My administration will never shy away from tackling tough issues; we will always put service to our Veterans at the top of our list; and we will always think twice before spending even one cent of somebody else's tax money because we learned a long time ago that money does not grow on trees.

Some lessons you have to learn for yourself. I have come to learn that being a real leader can mean shedding a tear with someone in their time of greatest need or holding the hand of someone when there simply are no words, and that doesn't make you weak - instead it makes you human. I learned that protecting the environment is our best way to show respect to the world today, as well as our children's children.

We are stronger as a nation when everyone believes they have an equal opportunity to participate in the American dream. So because of all of this -and so much more, I am thrilled to say, loud and clear, that the state of our County is strong; and as we look together over the horizon of our future, the opportunities for Ulster County are simply endless.

Each day that we have the privilege to live in the greatest nation on the face of this earth we will always remember to build things up and make things better for everyone, all with the crystal clear goal of ensuring that Ulster County remains, the finest place anywhere to live, work and raise a family...God bless you.