

**Broome County Executive
Debbie Preston**

**State of the County Address
March 1, 2016**

“EVOLUTION”

WELCOME

Good evening. Thank you for being here tonight.

Special thanks go out to Chairman Reynolds, Majority Leader Flagg, Minority Leader Myers and all Legislators for hosting us here in their Chambers.

I'd like to thank all of our department heads for working with us on the day to day operations of the County.

I would also like to especially thank the many local Town, Village and City officials who are with us.

And a very special welcome to the members of the Union-Endicott high school Mock State Senate club.

Lots of people give "State Of" speeches – the President, Governors, local officials, and even college presidents and corporate executives these days.

These events are important because they give us the chance to share with the public exactly what we've been working on, and what's ahead in the future.

But, I have to tell you, I'm not a huge fan of a lot of these speeches – listening to them, or delivering them.

Quite frankly, a lot of the time they're chock full of rhetoric and hyperbole without really saying much of anything. It's kind of boring.

Well, most of you know me, and you know that's not really my style.

Love it or hate it, I tell it like it is.

So tonight I'm here to tell it like it is – the good, the bad, the ugly...and the hopeful, when it comes to the state of Broome County.

So let's get into it – where we've been, where we are, and where we're going.

WHERE WE'VE BEEN

It's hard to believe that it's been just over four years since my team and I took office.

A lot of you in this room might feel like it's been a lot longer....

The first time I stood before you in February 2012, I told you that the state of Broome County was a State of Change.

That was true. We needed big changes.

And we've made many of them – because we had to shrink the size of government and be more conservative with the taxpayers' dollars.

These changes made perfect sense.

We saved 7 million taxpayer dollars thanks to the hard work of our Welfare Fraud Team. Without those savings, property owners could've seen an across-the-board tax increase of 4%.

We honored our veterans by creating new memorials in their honor at the Arena and in Conklin, provided needed uniforms, equipment and funding to support veterans organizations, and expanded veterans discounts at local stores.

We successfully negotiated better contracts with 7 of our 8 unions to save taxpayers money.

We opened up County Government to make it more accountable to The People through Open Office Hours, where more than 600 visitors have come in to share their thoughts, ideas and concerns.

I appreciate your support on these initiatives.

But a lot of the changes were tougher. It was no picnic.

We partnered with a private company to run the Rehab Unit at Willow Point for better service and saved \$750,000 annually.

We hired a private company to run Central Foods and will save \$1.4 million annually.

We made significant improvements to BC Transit's operations and routes and will save over \$425,000 annually.

Unpopular? Maybe.

But they were necessary changes.

And we need to have the guts to make these types of tough decisions.

The people we represent expect it and deserve it.

These changes, along with many others, helped us keep property taxes down.

0% in 2013.

1.77% in 2014.

2.49% in 2015.

And 1.88% for 2016.

That's an average increase of just 1.84% per year.

We should be proud of that. I am.

All the while, we have had a tax cap implemented and State mandates that continue to challenge us.

In 1989, we received 53.5% from the State for probation services.

Today we are only receiving approximately 12% of a nearly \$3.1M program.

In 2010, we received nearly \$870,000 for the \$4.5M indigent legal defense program.

Today, we receive nothing for those expenses.

In 2010 we also received 50% reimbursement for the over \$13M Safety Net program.

Today we only receive 29%.

These are just a few examples of many State mandates that have negatively affected counties over the years.

A few weeks ago, I was in the Weis on Conklin Avenue. An older woman came up to me and said “You’re the County Executive!”

I said, “No; I’m Debbie Preston. ‘County Executive’ is just a title”.

We laughed, but then she got serious.

She told me about how tough it's been for her over the years.

Her income has stayed flat while prices for everything else have gone up – groceries, clothes, prescription medications and gifts for her grandchildren.

It broke my heart.

I couldn't help but think of my mom in the same situation just a few years ago before she passed in 2012.

I'm sure most of you can think of someone you know or love in the same situation.

Sometimes they're making a decision about whether to buy food, medicine or pay taxes.

But my new friend at the grocery store lifted my spirits right back up when she said, "Thank you for thinking about people like me when you make the tax rate".

I told her she was the boss, and as long as I worked for her, I'd keep my nose to the grindstone when it comes to her taxes.

Ladies and gentleman, times have been tough.

And there are a lot of our friends, family, neighbors and co-workers who are suffering, just like my new friend at the grocery store.

WHERE WE ARE

I mentioned earlier that, back in 2012, the state of Broome County was a State of Change.

That's still somewhat true today – but I like to think of it a bit differently.

Today we're in a State of Evolution.

Change meant we needed to flip the place on its head.

Evolution means we're on the way to where we want to go.

Think about it....

Where there was once vacant storefront after vacant storefront in Downtown Binghamton, we now have restaurants, shops and growing local breweries.

Walk around there on a Friday or Saturday evening. Go see what I mean for yourself.

Where there was once a vacant lot and dilapidated housing a few blocks from right here, there's now the structural shell of the \$19 million High Technology Incubator.

Opening in September of 2017, this state-of-the-art facility will house the innovators of tomorrow's economy, creating new patents, companies and jobs and keeping our young people here in Broome County.

A few blocks closer, where there once was the vacant and crumbling Carnegie Library, there now sits the future home of the SUNY Broome Culinary Program.

Where there was once the former Link Simulation building in Kirkwood – previously a sad reminder of better days past – there's now the future home of Link Park, Modern Marketing Concepts and 600 new good-paying jobs.

Where there was once a vacant building at Broome Corporate Park, there's now a home for ADEC, which will create 150-200 new jobs and get the building back on the tax rolls for the first time since Ronald Reagan was President.

Where there was once nothing but empty land surrounding the Greater Binghamton Airport in the Town of Maine, there will soon be shovel-ready sites for future job growth.

Where New York State once ignored the Southern Tier and our economic pains, there is now a \$500 million Upstate Revitalization Award to help spark innovation and create thousands of jobs.

And there's four straight years of winning the State Regional Economic Development Council Awards after previously coming in last place.

We are, indeed, evolving, and evolving for the better.

But we have a long, long way to go.

And, unfortunately, not all of the news has been good.

Lower than expected Sales tax revenue has made it more difficult for us because we count on that money to pay for many things. A perfect example is gas prices. While we are all thrilled to see lower prices at the pumps, those lower prices also put a huge dent in our sales tax projections.

Any shortfall in sales tax is something we have to figure out a way to overcome.

Heroin and drug use has climbed, causing increased criminal activity and costing far too many lives.

I don't know anyone who this monster hasn't affected.

To me, it's not about crime statistics, drug addiction rates or politics; it's about the individuals, people from all backgrounds – rich or poor, urban or rural, young or old.

I would love to tell you there was a simple solution. But there isn't.

But we have taken important steps forward in our fight against heroin and other drugs.

We partnered with the County Legislature and local schools to host nine Community Education events that were attended by more than 1,600 people.

We worked with Senator Akshar and Assemblywoman Lupardo to place additional treatment beds at Fairview Recovery Services as well as the Addiction Crisis Center and our work continues at all levels to further expand bed capacity.

We worked with Mayor David and the Binghamton Police Department to place a police presence at the bus station to slow the inflow of drugs.

We worked with Senator Schumer and Congressman Hanna to secure \$700,000 in Federal Grants for Drug Court.

And we recently announced a new program to help re-educate our local medical professionals about the dangers of overprescribing opioids.

There's more we can do, and I'm glad Sheriff Harder and District Attorney Cornwell are also committed to this fight from a law enforcement perspective.

Beating the heroin beast is an evolution that needs to happen.

WHERE WE'RE GOING

We need to keep evolving into a Broome County that can sustain itself for decades to come.

Our next big corner will be turned in Johnson City, as Binghamton University's new Pharmacy School, coupled with the move of its School of Nursing, will re-energize an important and historic part of our community.

This is a key piece in developing The Health Sciences and Technology Innovation Park at the center of the Johnson City iDistrict.

The Goodwill Theatre will also do its part through the revitalization of an entire village, preserving our cultural legacy while removing blight.

Funding from our URI win will also revitalize the eyesore at 59 Lester Avenue to create new shovel ready sites.

I'm no economist, but I'm here to tell you that in the coming years, we will see the same evolution in Johnson City that we've seen in Binghamton.

But Johnson City isn't the only place for further hope.

Binghamton will continue its evolution with a new parking, residential and retail facility at 7 Hawley Street.

At the Huron Campus in Endicott, Binghamton University will team up with BAE and i3 Electronics to expand the Flexible Printed Electronics Technology Center and an Industrial 3D Printing Center.

Farmers from Whitney Point, Deposit, Windsor, Kirkwood and elsewhere will have a new market for their products at the new year-round Farmers Market at Cornell Cooperative Extension.

In Conklin, we're finalizing an agreement for a Solar Farm, which will produce four megawatts – enough to cover 25% of County departments total power demand – reducing costs by millions of dollars while protecting the environment.

Solar power might not be a revolution anymore, but it certainly is evolution for Broome County.

CONCLUSION

You're all here tonight because you care about the future of Broome County.

You've seen where we've been and what we've been through – economic highs and lows, tragic floods that have cost far more than just homes and property, big bad news from the state, big good news from the state.

But the net gain is what matters.

We are evolving into something greater.

I truly believe this.

And you should, too.

Unemployment rates have slightly decreased over the last four years – though they need to decrease more.

We will soon see millions of dollars in revenue from casinos opening at Tioga Downs and Lago in Tyre.

But we don't need statistics to tell us what's happening.

Look around. Talk to neighbors. Listen to what The People are telling us.

It's pretty clear.

Let's keep shrinking government.

Let's keep innovating and re-imagining our economic future.

Let's stay accountable to our bosses, the people of Broome County.

Let's keep putting The People first.

Let's keep evolving to make a better Broome County.

I want to assure you that with your help we will continue to lead this evolving County to its brightest future yet!

Thank you, God Bless You and God Bless America.

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