



State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

Office of the Broome County Executive
Jason T. Garnar, County Executive

2025 Budget Address Delivered by Jason Garnar, September 12, 2024 En-Joie Golf Club, Endicott

Good evening and thank you for joining me tonight.

First, thank you to Chairman Dan Reynolds, Majority Leader Matt Pasquale, Minority Leader Bob Weslar, and all the members of the County Legislature for working with me on this year's budget.

To our Department Heads – thank you for leading your teams each day with dedication.

And to the two thousand county employees; thank you for everything you do for our community. Your hard work is greatly appreciated.

It's hard to believe that 7 years ago I delivered my first budget address as county executive.

I'm truly grateful for the support and efforts by Chairman Reynolds, the County Legislature, and county staff over the years as we've worked together to develop responsible budgets, improve county services, and collaborate on many meaningful community projects. We've been able to accomplish a lot in the last 7 years and I'm grateful for our partnership.

Tonight, we're here at the En-Joie Golf Club, overlooking the beautiful course, a place that has been under the county's management for the last 17 years.

Under the leadership of Director Mike Deuel, with efforts from Sully Murphy and the rest of the grounds crew, this course is truly a crown jewel in this region.

Every year, the world watches as we host the Dick's Sporting Goods Open, which will continue here for the next five years, thanks to John Karedes and the team at Broome County Community Charities and the sponsorship and generosity of Dick's Sporting Goods and the Myers-Stack families.

This tournament not only has become a source of pride for our community but also brings significant economic benefits to Broome County.

Each year, the event draws thousands of visitors, filling our hotels, restaurants, and local businesses.

And right behind you, some of the world's most famous country, rock, and pop groups have performed, right here in Endicott, in front of tens of thousands of people.

The continued charitable contributions of Broome County Community Charities help turn this world-class event into an opportunity to give back to our community.

Their efforts have raised over 20 million dollars for local charities, providing vital support to those who need it most.

But we are at a pivotal time in this golf courses' history.

The 70 year old irrigation system is failing. It's taking millions of gallons of water from the Endicott water supply, which has only one functioning water well.

The entire irrigation system needs to be replaced, and if it doesn't soon, the entire course will be unplayable and the tournament will cease to exist.

We're conducting a comprehensive study to determine how to replace the irrigation system and how much it will cost. Our goal is to take the irrigation system off the village water system to give Endicott residents more water capacity. But at the end of the day, the system will cost millions of dollars to replace.

According to the New York State Comptroller, of the more than 533 villages in the State of New York, the Village of Endicott has the 7th highest tax rate. Asking Endicott taxpayers to shoulder the expense of the irrigation system would move them to the highest taxed village in the entire state.

Broome County doesn't want to see that happen.

As we look to the future of En-Joie, Broome County stands ready to take ownership of the course from the Village of Endicott.

We understand the historical and emotional significance this course holds for the village, and we are committed to preserving and enhancing it for the entire community.

Taking on this responsibility will help alleviate the tax burden on Endicott residents.

The county's ownership will also help address a pressing issue for the village – water.

And most importantly we will preserve this community jewel for the next generation of village and county residents.

Just this past week, Golf Magazine ranked En-Joie one of the top 100 courses in the entire United States.

So let's keep moving forward with our success with En-Joie, and not backwards.

Thanks once again to Mike, Sully, and the rest of the staff at En-Joie for all of the great work they do here, you are all rock-stars.

Across the street, you can see where the Red Roof Inn Motel once stood.

For too long the structure was a decaying eyesore, but thanks to the Broome County Land Bank, we turned that blight into an opportunity. Just weeks before this year's tournament, we demolished that building, paving the way for something better to come.

To my right, Grippen Park is undergoing a transformation that will bring new life into this community. What was once a flood-damaged and underutilized space is now on its way to becoming a vibrant hub for activity.

After the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, we realized how vital our parks are to the community, and we knew we had to take action.

Soon, families will enjoy new amenities – a place to ice skate, basketball courts, pickleball courts, a wiffle ball stadium, flag football field, accessible playground, and more. This fall, construction will wrap up, and by spring, a renewed Grippen Park will be ready for the community to fully enjoy once again.

With the flood resilient measures built into the design, this park will stand stronger than ever.

And over at the Phoenix Campus, Broome County has committed almost two million dollars to demolishing the empty and condemned old IBM building group, to pave the way for more economic expansion and jobs.

And it's not just Endicott—we've partnered with every municipality in Broome County to work together to make their community better.

And that's the message I bring to you tonight – Broome County is making investments throughout all of our community to improve our quality of life.

And the 2025 budget I'll present to you tonight and during the budget process will build on that.

Our Small Community Fund has made a great impact all over Broome County on our local programs, parks, and neighborhoods with over 100 projects funded since it started several years ago.

This year, through my partnership with Chairman Reynolds and the Legislature, we've awarded 32 organizations with grants from this fund to assist in projects aimed to better our community.

We've supported projects like making improvements to Endicott's little league field, rebuilding the bridge at Wolfe Park in the Town of Chenango, construction of the Deposit Community Park, and getting new life-saving equipment for Windsor Emergency Services.

We see the effect these funds have on our community, and we want to do even more.

In the 2025 budget, we are allocating an additional \$500,000 for Small Community grants, allowing even more local organizations and municipalities to benefit from this funding and continue making positive changes throughout Broome County.

We recently partnered with The Agency to launch the Small Business Grant Program to help local businesses continue to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We know how much our small businesses mean to this community, and we're committed to helping them thrive.

The Small Business Grant Program is one of the last projects that our American Rescue Plan Funds will be allocated to, as we have just about exhausted our allotment of funding.

I'm proud of how we invested this funding. Working with the county legislature, we used these funds to recover from the COVID Pandemic in a number of ways. We made big investments in mental health, increasing food access, rebuilding parks, supporting volunteer fire and ambulance services, and so much more.

But some of our biggest and most important investments have been in economic development and housing, and for good reason. The unemployment rate in Broome County was at 17% at the height of COVID, and a recent housing study has shown that there's a need for an additional 6,000 units of housing, including all types – single-family homes, market rate, senior housing, and affordable housing.

We've invested millions of ARPA funds in both housing and economic development projects like the EJ Victory Lofts in Johnson City and the transformative Oakdale Commons project.

These projects have not only provided much-needed housing but have also created hundreds of jobs, revitalized neighborhoods, and leveraged hundreds of millions of dollars in private investment in Broome County.

We've seen our economy recover, with our unemployment rate even dipping below 4%. Our sales tax revenues are strong, and several key housing projects we invested ARPA funds in are currently underway, like CMS Monarch's project in Endwell, and Regan Development's project in Johnson City, all which will break ground this year.

Even though our federal funding is exhausted, it's important we continue growing our local economy and building more housing.

So tonight, I'm announcing that we will allocate \$5 million for an Economic Development and Housing Fund for 2025.

Building on this momentum, the new Economic Development and Housing Fund will allow us to continue expanding housing options and supporting economic development projects throughout Broome County.

By creating opportunities for growth and ensuring our residents have access to safe, affordable housing, we're working to make Broome County a place where everyone can thrive.

And while we've seen a lot of progress in our economy and in housing, we still have residents who struggle with housing and even food insecurity brought upon by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past year we have made key investments in our community to help provide more food to people who need it.

Through our small community grant program, we provided funds to CHOW to purchase a brand-new refrigerated trailer, which has allowed them to double the amount of food they can provide for our community.

We also used small community funds to increase capacity for other local food pantries in our community, including school-based pantries and the pantries at Salvation Temple Church and at St. Cyril's.

And in the 2025 budget, we will increase our funding to the Food Bank of the Southern Tier by 33%!

While we've made great strides, we still face challenges. The pandemic has impacted our community in countless ways, including a rise in overdoses.

To date, we've awarded \$1.2 million from the Opioid Settlement Fund to organizations focused on treatment, recovery, harm reduction, and education. These efforts are saving lives.

We see it in the numbers.

In the first 6 months of 2022, there were 56 suspected fatal overdoses in Broome County.

In 2023, that number dropped to 45 for the same period, and this year, it has decreased even further to 36.

A 36% decrease over two years, and a 20% decrease from just last year.

While even one overdose death is too many, we are moving in the right direction.

I'd like to thank the Health Department for their part in dispersing these funds to make a difference.

Our Director of Public Health, Mary McFadden, has retired after more than 30 years of dedicated service with Broome County.

Thank you, Mary, for your tireless efforts and caring for our community's safety and well-being. Lynette Bellmore, our Interim Director, is already doing an incredible job leading our Health Department forward.

And speaking of improving the health of our community, tonight I'm excited to announce that Broome County has been selected by the Department of Defense to be a host site in 2025 for their Innovative Readiness Training Program. A joint military force of close to 200 members of our military will conduct a 10 day deployment readiness training operation right here in Broome County, and will be providing health and dental care at no cost to our entire community.

While more details on this will be coming soon, a number of county departments are committed to supporting this operation, and I want to extend a big thank you to Southern Tier 8 along with our own County Clerk Joe Mihalko who were big supporters of getting this in Broome County and ultimately submitted the winning application.

Over at the Department of Social Services, we're adapting to meet the growing mental health needs of our community.

Nancy Williams will now focus solely on her role as DSS Commissioner, and we've appointed Kim Saunders as the acting Commissioner of Mental Health.

Together, they will ensure that Broome County residents receive the support and care they need.

We're also focusing on helping at-risk youth through a new innovative program launched by District Attorney Paul Battisti.

The Youth Diversionary Intervention Program offers support for 16 to 21-year-olds facing felony charges by providing educational resources, job training, counseling, and mentorship.

This program helps them make positive changes and reintegrate into the community. We've added a Juvenile Justice Coordinator position into this year's budget to coordinate efforts and provide necessary support to these young individuals.

Public safety remains a top priority, and in July, we announced Broome County's new public safety radio system is now fully operational.

This system, which replaces outdated technology from the 1970s, connects our emergency responders instantly and seamlessly across the county.

To strengthen our call center, we are adding four new dispatch positions, and we are once again upgrading pay for our dispatchers.

Our local ambulance services are under pressure due to a high volume of calls, many of which don't require transportation.

To address this, we are introducing new emergency response vehicles specifically designed for on-site care.

These vehicles will allow our teams to address medical concerns directly at the callers' locations, reducing the strain on our ambulance services.

This means that while our new vehicles handle non-transport emergencies, ambulances can be reserved for cases that require transportation to a hospital, ensuring faster and more efficient emergency care, and ultimately improving patient outcomes.

Under the leadership of Acting Director of Emergency Services Neal Haight, we've made significant strides to improve our emergency response capabilities.

I am really proud to see all of the good work that Sheriff Akshar and his team are doing to make Broome County safer. Whether it's changing the culture of the correctional facility to reduce recidivism and help positively change lives of those who are incarcerated or increasing patrols to better protect our citizens, their dedication and efforts are making a difference.

The 2025 budget provides an additional 2 million dollars in funding for the Sheriff's Office. This funding includes support for the sheriff to begin running the STOP DWI program which also adds an additional deputy for the program.

We will also fund 2 new canine positions and 3 additional correction officers to start a brand new inmate work program.

In 2023 the crime rate in Broome County decreased 6%, and Sheriff Akshar and his team played a large role in that, so it's important we continue to give them the resources they need in the 2025 budget.

As we focus on keeping our community safe, it's equally important that we honor and support those who have dedicated their lives to protecting our country.

For our veterans, working with Director of Veteran Services, Brian Vojtisek, we will continue to support programs like the Twin Tiers Honor Flight and Stand with Me through our veterans fund, including providing free tickets to local sports games like the Black Bears and Rumble Ponies for the men and women who have served on our behalf.

A partnership between Cornell Cooperative Extension and Broome County even offers monthly free cooking classes and farmers markets coupons to our local veterans.

Over 60 veterans have participated in the cooking, gardening, and nutrition programs.

And in the past year, more than 250 veterans have received over \$4,000 in farmers market coupons through the veteran coupon distribution program, helping to support both our veterans and local farmers.

Currently under construction is Broome County's new Veterans Resource Center and Tiny Homes.

The project at 530 State Street on Binghamton's North Side will be completed next year with 10 accessible homes fully furnished with appliances for our veterans. On site, the resource center

has been designed to serve the more than 10,000 veterans who live in Broome County with support and educational services.

Our 2025 budget fully supports the operation of our new resource center and our tiny homes when they officially open next summer.

I've also been working closely with our Parks Director, Brenda Gowe. Brenda and her team continue to do an excellent job in taking care of our parks, some of the best in New York state!

Events like Spiedie Fest, Festival of Lights, Beach Bash, and Winterfest will return for our residents, bringing entertainment and attracting visitors to Broome County.

Last week, we broke ground on the Crime Victims Memorial at Roundtop Park, a local hidden gem known for its peaceful surroundings.

This project, led by soon-to-be Eagle Scout Schyler Savage who tragically lost his mom to an act of crime, will serve as a place to honor and remember the lives that have been taken from our community through acts of violence.

Broome County is proud to be the primary beneficiary of Schyler's Eagle Scout project, and to be a part of such a meaningful space for the community.

This year, we celebrated the grand opening for Greenlight Networks Grand Slam Park – a state-of-the-art softball complex that has already shown to be a great investment.

For the next 3 years, the girls softball state championships will be held there.

Teams and their families from different states are coming here, staying in our hotels, eating in our restaurants, and experiencing everything Broome County has to offer.

Next door to the softball complex is SUNY Broome Community College.

In the fall of 2023, roughly 35% of students enrolled and attending school there were from outside of Broome County.

Attracting students from outside the county is vital for our community's future.

These students bring fresh ideas, energy, and skills that can boost our local economy.

When they experience what Broome County has to offer, we encourage them to stay and work after graduation.

By retaining these young professionals, we strengthen our workforce and create future entrepreneurs and leaders.

We will continue to support and invest in SUNY Broome in the 2025 budget, making Broome County a place where students want to live, work, and drive our community forward.

President Tony Hawkins has done an excellent job in his first year, leading the school and its students to reach their full potential, and for that I thank him.

Our contract agencies including Visit Binghamton, the Broome County Arts Council, Cornell Cooperative Extension, GiGi's Playhouse, Discovery Center, and many others, are receiving a 10% increase in this year's budget – the largest one-year increase from the county in decades.

These agencies are important to our community, and we are committed to supporting their continued impact.

Our Department of Public Works, led by Commissioner Roger Brown, has been doing an incredible job of meeting the growing needs of our community's infrastructure.

From installing new LED lights at Otsiningo Park, to upgrading the Courthouse in downtown Binghamton, the Buildings and Grounds team led by Deputy Pete Nefaris is consistently working to improve and enhance Broome County's infrastructure.

In the last four years, our Deputy Commissioner for Highways, Chet Kupiec, has led his crew in making our roads safer, completing a total of 302 miles of road work.

Seven years ago, I announced 40 miles of road work would be completed, which at the time was a county record.

Last year, I announced the reconstruction of twice that number.

Each year, we've surpassed our previous records of miles of roads completed, and we plan to continue our streak in 2025.

Times are changing and we're adapting, modernizing, and streamlining government operations.

In the 2025 budget, we're consolidating the Purchasing Department into the Office of management and Budget. Under the leadership of Director Jane St. Amour and Deputy Directors Terra Adams and Chris Mullins, this move will eliminate redundancies, improve resource management, and ultimately reduce costs.

We're upgrading to a new electronic budgeting software, replacing our antiquated systems. This modern solution will make tracking spending, improving budget forecasting, and financial management even more efficient and transparent.

By embracing technology and updating outdated processes, we're building a more responsive, accountable government that better serves the community.

But at the end of the day, it's our amazing employees who are on the front lines every day delivering quality public services.

County employees are the backbone of our community, working to provide essential services to residents.

Their dedication keeps Broome County moving forward. Just like we've done in the past, we are continuing to invest in our workforce. The 2025 budget includes 271 position upgrades, totaling a \$3.9 million investment.

And just like in years past, we continue to raise incomes and provide the very best benefits so that we can retain and attract new employees.

Tonight you've heard a lot about the things we're doing to improve our economy and address the challenges facing our community.

From investing in parks, public safety, and our workforce, to supporting small businesses and expanding community programs, we're tackling these head-on.

And with all of the additional investments we are making, I'm proud to tell you that we're still cutting the property tax rate once again in 2025. Since 2017, we've worked with the county legislature to produce responsible budgets that have lowered the property tax rate 24%. At the same time, the national inflation rate has increased by almost the same amount. So while costs have gone up across the board, Broome County has successfully eased the tax burden on our residents during this difficult time of high inflation.

I'm looking forward to the next two months of budget hearings with the County Legislature as we work together on a budget that balances our commitment to making big investments in our community while keeping taxes low for our residents.

As we look ahead, I'm confident that Broome County is moving forward with purpose, and together, we will continue to make our community a better place to live, work, and raise a family.

Thank you and God Bless.