



State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

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

2025 State of the County Address Delivered by Jason Garnar, February 20, 2025 Broome County Office Building, Binghamton

Good evening everyone and thank you for being here tonight.

I'd like to warmly welcome our county-wide elected officials here: County Clerk Joe Mihalko, Sheriff Fred Akshar, and District Attorney Paul Battisti.

It's also good to see all of our other elected officials and community leaders who joined us this evening.

There are a number of county department heads here tonight. Your leadership keeps things running smooth and steady, and you're the driving force behind the success of our programs and services. Thank you.

And a big thank you to our hard working employees of Broome County, day in and day out they work hard to deliver quality services to our residents, caring for our neighbors, tending our roads, keeping us safe, and lending a helping hand wherever it's needed. Their dedication doesn't go unnoticed, and we're grateful for all they do to make our county a better place for everyone.

I want to especially thank Chairman Dan Reynolds, Majority Leader Matt Pasquale, Minority Leader Kim Myers, and the entire Broome County Legislature for their partnership. And when I say partnership, I mean it in every sense of the word.

Now, I won't sugarcoat it - the first year of this partnership had its moments. Let's just say, we didn't always see eye to eye.

But over time, we've built something stronger - a working relationship based on mutual respect, open communication, and a shared commitment to the people of Broome County.

Together, we've tackled tough issues, found common ground, and most importantly, delivered real results.

And while we may still have our occasional debates - because that's part of the job - we always come back to the same goal: making Broome County Government the very best it can be.

I want to take a moment and look back at where we started and how far we've come.

When I took office in 2017, the state of Broome County faced significant challenges.

Our finances were strained, our infrastructure was aging, and critical services were in need of investment.

That year, Broome County had a reported 76 overdose fatalities.

The county unemployment rate was at 5.6%.

Property taxes had gone up over 4% over the last 5 years.

The average home in Broome County sold for \$121,000.

And our fund balance stood at \$255,000.

So we definitely had our work cut out for us.

But, with the support of the Legislature and the hard work of our employees, we made tough decisions, navigated challenges, and made the necessary changes to turn things around.

When things get tough, we don't quit. We find common ground, adapt to the needs of our community, and power through to make meaningful changes.

Because at the end of the day, it's not about politics. It's about people. And by working together, we've made real progress over the last 8 years.

And don't just take my word for it - we've got the numbers to prove it.

Since 2017, overdose fatalities have decreased by 45%.

Unemployment has dropped by more than 28%.

We've lowered the property tax rate by 24%.

The average home value has increased by over 73% to more than \$210,000.

And our fund balance is now over \$53 million.

We've come a long way, and the state of Broome County is strong, but let me be clear - we are not finished.

We're not only focused on today; we're focused on our future and what the next 4 years will look like.

The budgets we have built over the last 8 years have helped us withstand numerous challenges.

Just a few years ago, we made it through a pandemic that saw thousands of people in Broome County out of work, many businesses shut down, and tens of millions of dollars withheld by NY State.

This year, we face another potential challenge.

Broome County receives more than \$140 million in federal funding each year, which helps fund everything from health programs and transit initiatives to emergency services and senior care.

However, the uncertainty surrounding federal funding to counties remains a major concern.

We are committed to doing everything we can to make sure that Broome County has the resources it needs to thrive, no matter the challenges ahead. So while we will advocate to our federal officials the importance of funding critical county programs, we are in a much better position today than we were 8 years ago to deal with any potential funding cuts.

A critical part of ensuring our financial stability comes from the work of the Office of Management and Budget, led by Director Jane St. Amour, along with her deputy, Terra Adams.

We've consolidated the Purchasing Department under OMB, which has streamlined processes and improved efficiency. We've also modernized our operations with new budgeting software, ensuring we are better equipped to manage county resources and provide essential services to our community.

Better budgeting means more resources, and more resources mean we can make more investments in our infrastructure.

In 2025, we're going to see the results of years of planning, investment, and hard work come to life. Projects that have been in motion will finally reach the finish line.

This summer, we'll cut the ribbon on the Veterans Resource Center and 10 tiny homes on Binghamton's Northside - a one-stop-shop for veterans' services.

Our Veterans Services Director Brian Vojtisek and his team will be moving in soon, and they won't be alone.

Other agencies committed to serving our veterans, like Clear Path for Veterans, Soldier On, and the Southern Tier Veterans Support Group, led by Executive Director Ben Margolius, will also call this new facility home.

And through our partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension, programs and classes will also be offered for our local veterans.

It's been a long time coming, and it's going to be totally worth it for the over 10,000 veterans who live in Broome County.

With a \$32 million investment from the state, the Greater Binghamton Airport is getting a long-overdue upgrade. We obtained millions of dollars more in funding from the federal government, which combined with state funding meant that only a small percentage of local tax dollars paid for this project.

By this winter, we'll unveil a modernized, revitalized airport that will better serve Broome County and the Southern Tier.

Mark Heefner and his team will keep working every day to add more air service. We've done it before and we'll be in a better position once we finish this important project and bring the airport into the 21st century.

Over in Endicott, Grippen Park will become a destination for the entire community to enjoy, no matter the season.

Major renovations wrap up this spring, transforming what was once an empty park into a vibrant, year-round hub for residents of all ages.

Whether its families enjoying the new accessible playground, athletes competing on the basketball and pickleball courts, kids playing wiffle ball and flag football, or visitors taking a stroll along the scenic walking paths, we're creating a truly unique park where there is something for everyone.

And when winter arrives, the fun won't stop - the new skating rink will keep the park active even in the colder months.

If you ever needed an excuse to get outside, we're giving you several.

And that's just the beginning when it comes to sports and recreation in Broome County.

Our Parks Director, Brenda Gowe, and her team do an incredible job maintaining some of the most beautiful parks in New York, right here in our backyard.

Last year, we cut the ribbon on Greenlight Networks Grand Slam Park, and this year, that investment is paying off in a big way.

This state-of-the-art softball complex is the official host of the New York State softball championships for the next three years, bringing top-tier competition and many visitors to our community.

Meanwhile, at the Visions Veterans Memorial Arena, we've invested in a brand-new basketball court in preparation for hosting the New York State boys basketball championships for the next three years.

As teams and their families travel to Broome County, they'll eat at our restaurants, shop in our stores, and stay in our hotels, driving business and boosting our economy.

And speaking of the arena, the Binghamton Black Bears are dominating once again as #1 in the Empire Division.

Fresh off their 2024 Commissioner's Cup Championship, they're riding an impressive 13-game winning streak and even earned national recognition with one of their goals featured on ESPN's Top 10 plays this past Sunday.

Believe it or not, attendance at blackbear games this year is over 25% more than attendance was during the last full season of AHL hockey 4 years ago.

The Black Bears continue to grow their fan base year after year, and with an exciting atmosphere, the arena has affordable, family-friendly entertainment for everyone.

There's another sports venue that's just as important to Broome County's economy - En-Joie Golf Course.

For decades, En-Joie has been a centerpiece of our community, hosting the Dick's Sporting Goods Open and one of upstate New York's largest music events, drawing over 20,000 attendees annually and generating nearly \$3 million in economic impact.

Beyond the event itself, the Broome County Community Charities has played a vital role, raising over \$20 million for local charities, ensuring this world-class tournament continues to give back in meaningful ways.

But to secure En-Joie's future, we have to address its aging irrigation system which has exceeded its lifespan. Replacing it will cost nearly \$8 million.

We've made it clear that we are prepared to take ownership of the course to make these critical improvements and ensure that En-Joie remains a premier destination for years to come.

And some of our projects go beyond recreation and revitalization - they carry a deeper purpose.

At Roundtop Park, we're nearing completion of the Crime Victims Memorial, a space dedicated to honoring and remembering those tragically taken through acts of violence.

This project was made possible by a young man who turned his personal loss into a mission to help others.

Schyler Savage, who lost his mother to an act of crime, has poured his heart into this project as part of his Eagle Scout journey. His vision, combined with the hard work of our DPW team handling much of the construction in-house, and supported by the Crime Victims Assistance Center, is creating a lasting tribute to victims of violence.

Schyler is here tonight - let's give him a round of applause.

This spring, we'll stand together as a community to unveil this meaningful memorial and make sure the names and stories of crime victims are never forgotten.

While we honor the lives lost by crime, we also recognize the dedicated men and women who work every day to keep us safe.

I'd like to take a moment to honor the life of Firefighter John "JR" Gaudet, who tragically lost his life in the line of duty last week.

His bravery is a powerful reminder of the risks our first responders take every day to protect us. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, friends, and the entire Binghamton Fire Department during this difficult time.

Over at the Sheriff's Office, Sheriff Fred Akshar and his team continue their work to ensure our residents' safety.

Launched last June, the Strategic Response Group has made a significant impact on our community.

In 2024, the SRG had made 354 arrests, ranging from narcotics and weapon offenses, to warrant arrests and traffic violations. They've made over 900 traffic stops, with more than 800 of those resulting in violations.

The impact of the SRG's good work has been across the county, showing just how committed we are to cutting down crime and keeping our community safe.

District Attorney Paul Battisti has worked hard to address staffing challenges in his office, and we've been glad to support him in that effort by making investments to raise pay and attract talent.

As a result, the DA's office is now nearly fully staffed and well-positioned to continue its critical work of seeking justice and keeping our community safe.

The Office of Emergency Services, led by Director Neal Haight, is essential to the safety and well-being of our residents, especially when it comes to our 911 dispatch team.

These professionals are the first point of contact during emergencies, working under pressure to coordinate quick responses and ensure every emergency gets the attention it needs.

To strengthen EMS response and relieve pressure on local ambulance services, we're rolling out new fly cars designed for non-transport care.

These vehicles will allow for our paramedics to provide on-site medical treatment for cases that don't require a hospital transport.

By handling these cases on-site, we can ensure ambulances remain available for critical cases where hospital transport is needed, improving response times and patient outcomes across the county.

Keeping the community safe is just one part of what we're doing for the people of Broome County.

We've got more than 40 departments here at the county, all doing their part to make life better for our residents.

Our Highway Division, led by Deputy Commissioner Chet Kupiec, works to keep our roads safe in all seasons.

All 65 members of the highway team are out on the roads, plowing through snowstorms and ice conditions to make sure we can get to work and go about our daily lives safely.

And when the snow melts, their work doesn't stop. Every summer, they switch gears to tackle paving and road repairs, and for the last eight years, they've gone above and beyond to deliver record-setting results.

When I first took office, we were set to complete 53 miles of road work in a single season - a record at the time. Now, we've raised the bar even higher, completing 84 miles of road work this past season.

The Engineering Division, led by Deputy Commissioner Jeff Stafford, is responsible for planning, designing, and managing major projects to improve our infrastructure.

Whether it's repairing and upgrading structures or overseeing full-scale replacements, their work ensures our infrastructure stays strong for years to come.

Engineer Scott Mastin has led the Veterans Resource Center project, ensuring construction moves forward smoothly.

Meanwhile, Engineer Nazar Logvis manages our bridge work, overseeing repairs and improvements across the county. This season alone, we'll be completing work on four bridges, making sure they remain safe and reliable for years to come.

The Buildings and Grounds Division, led by Deputy Commissioner Pete Nefaris, keeps our facilities maintained and safe.

They've installed LED lights at Otsiningo Park, completed upgrades at the downtown Courthouse, and are completing the construction of the Crime Victims Memorial at Roundtop Park.

All of these fall under our Department of Public Works, under the leadership of Commissioner Roger Brown.

Roger, his deputies, and the entire DPW crew play a major role in ensuring our roads, bridges, and facilities are built to last.

Just as we're committed to building and improving the physical structures around us, we're equally committed to strengthening the services that touch people's lives every day.

At Willow Point Rehabilitation and Nursing Home, we've invested in our nursing positions across the board, and in less than two weeks received 30 new applications.

With the key administrative changes we've made under the leadership of Mike Keenan and Stephanie Jerzak, we're ensuring smooth operations and creating an environment where we can retain that talent and give our seniors the high level of care they deserve.

The Broome County Public Library is not just for books - it's a hub for connection and support.

Under the leadership of Director Josias Bartram, the Peer Support Program helps residents access guidance and critical resources.

Principal Library Clerk Kathleen Shores has been instrumental in overseeing this effort, ensuring those who walk through the doors for help find a welcoming and supportive environment.

Thanks to Kathleen and the entire library team, this program and so many others are making a real difference in people's lives.

The Department of Social Services, led by Commissioner Nancy Williams, serves as a critical safety net for our community, providing housing support, child services, and so much more.

Employees Darren Beardsley and Michele Ferrigno recently received a note of thanks that says it all. “I’m finally on my way to better things because of the assistance I received from both of you.”

Their mission goes beyond assistance - it’s about empowering people and ensuring stability.

Darren and Michele did just that, and I’d like to thank them both for their dedication to the critical support they provide.

The Department of Mental Health is expanding services and ensuring that support is always within reach.

This school year, we’ve placed dedicated staff members in Susquehanna and Chenango Valley schools to bring resources directly to the students.

BC SAFE - Broome County Suicide Awareness for Everyone - has grown from a local effort into a statewide movement, and even reaching as far as Canada. Launched in 2020 by Heidi Mikeska, the ‘Chalk the Walk: Have the Talk’ campaign continues to promote suicide prevention and reduce stigma.

Thanks to Heidi, the work of BC SAFE is helping raise awareness and saving countless lives in the process.

While a lot of our departments handle the day-to-day work that keeps Broome County running, we also need to focus on our future: on innovation, opportunity, and growth.

Just announced yesterday, BAE Systems is expanding its operations here, building a new assembly line for lithium-ion batteries for aircraft, further securing Broome County as a leader in next-generation battery innovation.

With this expansion comes more job opportunities, and we have to make sure we’re preparing the next generation with the skills they need to step into these roles.

That’s where SUNY Broome Community College plays a vital role.

SUNY Broome is a pipeline to opportunity, and programs like the Lineworker Training Program, in partnership with NYSEG, are equipping students with hands-on training for high-demand fields.

President Tony Hawkins continues to do a great job of leading students to success and expanding opportunities for them, ensuring that as Broome County grows, our workforce is ready to meet the demand.

But workforce development is only one piece of the puzzle - strong economic development is what creates the opportunities in the first place.

The Oakdale Commons, which was once a struggling mall, now stands as one of the most visible economic development projects in the Southern Tier, and a blueprint for bringing malls back to life.

We've welcomed several major businesses, like the Dick's House of Sport, Panera Bread, BJ's, Dave & Buster's, Beer Tree Factory, Chipotle, and most recently, Five Guys, all setting up shop and creating jobs.

It's home to our Workforce Development Center, Guthrie Lourdes Health and Fitness Facility, GiGi's Playhouse, and more.

The Oakdale Commons isn't just a shopping center anymore. Thanks to the team at Spark JC, it's becoming so much more.

With the help of state investment, in 2026, Guthrie Lourdes will open their brand new, state-of-the-art regional medical campus at the Oakdale Commons.

And right alongside it, a brand new, state-of-the-art child care facility will open, with space for up to 200 children.

It's no secret that there's a shortage of child care in our community. Working parents struggle to find reliable, affordable options, and businesses feel the impact - because without child care, employees can't work.

This affects families, employers, and our local economy, and for too long, it's been an issue without real solutions.

While others continue to talk about the problem, Broome County is leading the way in fixing it. We are one of the only counties in the state not just discussing child care, but building it.

It's an investment in our workforce.

Access to child care shouldn't be a barrier to employment, and by making it easier for parents to stay in the workforce, we're not only helping families, but retaining talent.

I also believe that economic development isn't just about bringing in businesses - it's about building a community where people want to live, work, and raise a family.

That means good jobs, strong infrastructure, quality services, and yes - housing.

Because without enough housing, businesses can't attract workers, families struggle to put down roots, and growth will stall. That's why housing is a key part of our economic development strategy.

We've made major strides in housing, business growth, and community investments, all aimed at making Broome County a place where people not only want to live, but thrive.

And to ensure we stay on track with that vision, we welcomed Anthony Fiala as the new Commissioner of our Planning and Economic Development Department. With Tony's experience and background in housing, we're putting our brand new \$5 million Economic Development and Housing Fund to work.

You don't see this kind of investment happening in neighboring counties, but here in Broome County, we're putting our money where our mouth is.

This fund isn't just a big number on paper - it's a commitment to our community, and we're already seeing interest from developers that will bring even more exciting projects our way.

We know that if we want Broome County to grow, we need more housing - and we're making it happen, one project at a time.

Right now, hammers are swinging on a number of housing projects actively under construction. These include:

72 units of affordable housing at 333 Grand Ave in Johnson City.

108 units of affordable housing at Helio Health's Court Street location.

161 market-rate units on Bunn Hill Road in Vestal.

252 affordable units at Town & Country Apartments in Binghamton.

75 affordable senior units on Hooper Road in Endwell.

10 tiny homes for veterans at our Veterans Resource Center site in Binghamton.

And as part of the Oakdale Commons transformation, a 125 unit workforce housing development is being built on-site.

And in the next year, over 850 additional units are in the works, awaiting final funding approval to break ground.

We're not just talking about the need for new housing - we're actually building it as we speak.

The county has never been involved in housing development to this extent, but that's changing. We're taking it into our own hands, making the investments needed to ensure we can meet the needs of our community and continue to grow.

As we invest in the future of our community, we also have a responsibility to take care of those who call Broome County home, especially our most vulnerable.

This past year, Director Mary Turbush and her team in the Office for Aging went above and beyond to help a homeless senior in desperate need.

Joe, a 64-year-old man in a wheelchair, had been living on the streets with nowhere to call home. As his health declined and his options ran out, he turned to OFA as a last resort.

When Joe suffered severe burns while trying to keep warm, Mary worked with hospital staff and made sure he got the medical care he needed. During his hospital stay, Mary and her team worked to find a stable home for Joe, and he was eventually placed in a skilled nursing facility, where he now gets the care he deserves.

And if you asked around, you would find hundreds of stories every year just like this one, of our dedicated employees going above and beyond to help countless Broome County residents.

In conclusion, Broome County is strongest when we work together. Time and again, we have shown that when we put aside partisan differences and focus on what truly matters—delivering real results for the people—we can accomplish great things.

The partnership between the Broome County Legislature and the County Executive's office has been built on respect, collaboration, and a shared commitment to progress. That relationship has allowed us to make meaningful investments in our communities, improve essential services, and ensure a brighter future for all our residents.

A great example of this is the Broome County Small Community Grant program jointly developed by the county legislature and the executive office in 2018 in an effort to better support our local communities across Broome County. Over the last 6 years the program has funded over 100 local initiatives, improving parks, playgrounds, public spaces, and other resources that residents use every day. It's a program that delivers real results making sure that our community has the resources it needs to thrive.

This kind of success wouldn't be possible without our executive and legislative teams working together. In any given year, hundreds of resolutions, contracts, local laws, and purchases are discussed and reviewed between our teams, including any new economic development or housing initiatives. They also work together to get input from legislators and answer any questions they might have.

Open communication and mutual respect is key to making all of this happen, and while they aren't the ones in the picture cutting the ribbons, the team of Legislative Clerk Aaron Martin, and Deputy County Executives Colleen Wagner and Michael Ponticiello in addition to their regular duties, work together every week to make sure government works efficiently and things get done.

This spirit of bipartisanship is what good government looks like. It's not about who gets credit—it's about doing what's right. Whether it's strengthening our local economy, improving infrastructure, supporting public safety, or expanding opportunities for families and businesses, we have proven that when we work together, we deliver results.

The people of Broome County expect and deserve leaders who put progress ahead of politics. And that is exactly what we have done. By continuing to foster this strong working relationship, we will ensure that Broome County remains a place where people want to live, work, and raise their families.

So let's keep moving forward—together. Let's build on our successes and continue to make Broome County a model of bipartisan cooperation and effective leadership. Because at the end of the day, our job is not about party lines—it's about the people we serve. And together, there's no limit to what we can accomplish.

Thank you, and God Bless.