



# State of New York County of Broome Government Offices

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

## **2026 Budget Address** **Delivered by Jason Garnar, September 15, 2025** **Riverside Gardens, Johnson City**

Good evening everyone,

Thank you for being here tonight. Let me begin, as I always do, by recognizing the people who make this work possible. Chairman Dan Reynolds, Majority Leader Matt Pasquale, Minority Leader Kim Myers, Finance Chair Stephen Flagg, and every member of our County Legislature — your partnership is essential. Thank you also to our county-wide elected officials and community leaders who've taken the time to join us.

Most of all, I want to thank our department heads and the more than two thousand Broome County employees who keep our government running every single day. You plow the roads, answer emergency calls, serve our veterans and seniors, keep our parks open and our buses running. Without your dedication, none of this would function. I am deeply grateful for what you do.

I've now served as County Executive for nine years.

We've weathered floods, historic snowstorms, economic downturns, public health crises, and plenty of tough budgets. But I can tell you — this is one of the most challenging budgets we've ever had to prepare.

We're facing a convergence of pressures that are not of our making: inflation driving up costs everywhere, higher interest rates and tariffs squeezing budgets, state mandates adding to our expenses, and continued uncertainty at the federal level — all on top of the \$5 million state Medicaid cut we absorbed two years ago.

We can't control what Washington or Albany does, but we can control how we respond. That's our responsibility to the people we serve — to be ready, to be disciplined, and to protect the services our residents count on. When people call 911, visit a county park, or rely on a bus to get to work, they shouldn't feel the impact of budget turbulence. That's on us to manage.

So let me be clear about what this budget does not do: It does not cut programs. It does not take away services from the public.

We are not balancing the budget on the backs of residents. We are tightening our own belt.

That means scaling back discretionary spending — things like office supplies, travel, professional development, even software purchases.

In total, that's \$3.5 million in reductions. It was a tough decision to make, and it's not something we take lightly.

We're asking every department to scrutinize what it spends and look for ways to be more efficient. The goal is simple: safeguard the core services our residents rely on while being responsible stewards of taxpayer dollars.

Even in the toughest of times, we're delivering for Broome County, and we're doing it without shifting the burden onto the public. In fact, this budget includes a 0.1% property tax rate cut.

We're able to do that because our community has grown. Over the past year, property values rose 10.5%, driven by new housing, business expansion, and investments that strengthen our economy. That's nearly a billion and a half dollars of growth in just one year.

Because of that growth and our careful budgeting, we're not just cutting the county tax rate this year — we're also taking a historic step forward for the people who built this community.

This budget also delivers the first expansion of Broome County's senior citizen property-tax exemption in over 20 years.

For two decades, the income limits for this exemption stayed the same while the cost of living climbed. With this expansion, more seniors will now qualify for real relief on their property taxes.

I want to thank Legislator Mary Kaminsky for strongly advocating for this change and for standing up for our seniors.

Our seniors are the heart of Broome County. They're the teachers, veterans, nurses, small-business owners and parents who raised families here and stayed. They gave their energy and talent to build the neighborhoods and institutions we all benefit from today.

Many of them are on fixed incomes, carefully budgeting every month.

This change is about honoring that lifetime of contribution and making it easier for them to keep calling Broome County home. It's a tangible way of saying: thank you, we value you, and we're proud to stand with you.

It's important to remember: even in a year like this, Broome County is still growing.

And growth doesn't happen by accident — it takes investment. If we stop investing in infrastructure, housing, workforce, and services, we risk losing momentum. This budget manages the challenges in front of us but also keeps our eyes on where we're headed.

One of the clearest examples is our young people. In 2026, we're restoring the Youth Bureau as a standalone department for the first time in 15 years.

Our kids are the next generation of leaders and community builders. They deserve programs and support that give them every opportunity to succeed. That's what this change delivers.

Think about it: every time we help a young person find a mentor, land a first job, or take part in a positive after-school program, we're not just spending money, we're investing in the fabric of our future.

We're also investing in quality housing. A year ago, we launched a \$5 million Housing and Economic Development Fund to support projects that add real value to our neighborhoods. One of the first investments we made from that fund is right here at Riverside Gardens — the former Davis College campus — a \$15.5 million redevelopment that will create 67 modern apartments and more than 22,000 square feet of commercial space.

I want to take a moment to thank Dave Drew and Square Deal Partners for their vision and leadership on this project, and for having us here tonight.

Where others saw an idle campus, he saw a chance to bring it back to life.

And while other recently closed colleges in upstate NY like Wells College, St. Rose, and Cazenovia College remain vacant, we're the first county in upstate New York to actively redevelop a closed college campus. Once again, a big thank you to Dave Drew and Square Deal Partners, and we can't wait to see the entire project finished next year.

And Riverside Gardens is just one piece.

Across Broome County, more than 1,000 housing units are under construction: 72 on Grand Avenue in Johnson City; 75 on Hooper Road in Endwell; 108 on Court Street with Helio Health; 252 units at Town and Country Apartments; 161 units on Bunn Hill Road; 10 tiny homes for veterans on Binghamton's North Side; 197 units at the old Vestal Quality Inn; and 55 units at the old NYPenn building. These projects mean families get access to homes, neighborhoods are revitalized, and our local economy grows.

Each one of these projects are a place where someone's life will change — a senior moving into a safe apartment, a veteran finding stability, a young family starting out.

And I want to take a moment to recognize someone who has been instrumental in making so much of this possible. Our new Commissioner of Planning and Economic Development, Tony Fiala, has hit the ground running.

In just a short time, Tony has been at the center of coordinating a large number of housing projects — working with developers, state partners, and local officials to move them from concept to reality.

His leadership and steady hand are helping us turn empty lots and buildings into places where people can live, work, and thrive.

Housing is only one part of the equation. We also need good-paying jobs and the training to fill them. That's why, with state support and a \$500,000 county investment, Broome-Tioga BOCES is expanding its Licensed Practical Nursing program in Johnson City at the former NYPenn building. This will grow the program from 30 students to 90, preparing more people for in-demand healthcare jobs. It's a perfect example of housing and workforce development going hand in hand.

When a student walks through the door of that program, they're stepping into a career path that keeps them here, raises their family here, and builds our healthcare system at the same time.

We're seeing the same forward-looking growth in the private sector.

BAE Systems is expanding its Endicott campus with a 150,000-square-foot addition focused on high-voltage energy storage — the technology driving the future of sustainable aviation.

Phoenix Investors have cleared the old IBM building group to make way for new development, thanks to state and county funding.

Oakdale Commons is one of the clearest examples of what long-term vision can do. For decades it was the Oakdale Mall – a shopping center that had seen better days, with empty storefronts and dwindling foot traffic.

A lot of communities in upstate New York have watched their malls turn into ghost towns. We chose a different path.

Working with state partners, local developers, and our own Economic Development team, we've been transforming the Oakdale Commons from a struggling retail center into a true mixed-use community hub. Today it's home to major stores like Dick's House of Sport, BJ's, and Dave & Buster's – and just as important, it's becoming a place to work, to access health care, and eventually, to live.

Soon, Guthrie Lourdes will open a new state-of-the-art regional medical campus at Oakdale Commons. This will expand access to health care for our residents and anchor hundreds of good-paying jobs right on site. And we're not stopping there.

A 125-unit workforce housing project is planned for the property so that people can live close to where they work and shop.

And one of the most critical pieces of that puzzle is child care. We hear it every day from working parents, and we see it in our own county workforce: the lack of affordable, reliable child care keeps people out of the labor force. It forces parents to choose between a paycheck and staying home. That's why, in late 2026, we will open a brand-new 200-slot county day care center right at Oakdale Commons.

This will be the largest single expansion of child care availability ever undertaken in Broome County.

It will help parents stay in the workforce, help employers fill jobs, and strengthen families across the community. And because we recognize our own employees face the same challenges, we will give priority enrollment to Broome County employees. We want to support the very people who serve our residents every day.

Another way we're making Oakdale Commons a true community hub is by supporting the expansion of GiGi's Playhouse.

In the 2026 budget we're increasing operating funding for GiGi's Playhouse so they can expand right at Oakdale Commons and launch a brand-new workforce training program.

This will give participants the job skills they need to become productive, confident members of the workforce.

The new expansion will include classroom space and several new storefronts inside the Commons where participants can practice real-world work — learning customer service, inventory, scheduling and teamwork — before stepping out into jobs in the wider community. It's a hands-on, practical approach that helps them build experience and independence.

This year we also provided additional funding from our Small Community Grant Program to support this expansion. That's exactly what the program was designed to do — give local organizations the resources to launch innovative, community-driven projects.

And we're not stopping there. The 2026 budget includes \$500,000 in Small Community Grant funding so that more ideas like this can take root.

Since 2018, these grants have supported over 150 projects across Broome County — everything from new playground equipment in rural towns, purchasing life-saving equipment for volunteer emergency fire and ambulance companies, to critical upgrades at community centers.

Each one is a small but meaningful investment that makes our neighborhoods stronger.

And sometimes growth shows up in ways that make people smile. For the first time ever, in 2026 Broome County will see not one, but two Chick-fil-A restaurants open.

I know for some folks that's practically a public service in itself — finally, we can get a Chick-Fil-A chicken sandwich without the drive to Syracuse.

But in all seriousness, it's a sign of something larger: national brands and major employers see Broome County as a place worth investing in. They're opening doors here because they believe our market is strong, our workforce is ready, and our community is on the rise.

This is the momentum we've worked for. It's not just about one project or one restaurant — it's about building an environment where businesses, big and small, feel confident putting down roots, hiring our people, and contributing to our tax base.

We're also investing in quality of life and tourism. In 2024, tourism generated \$626 million in economic impact and supported over 5,000 local jobs.

We're hosting state championships at our upgraded Arena and Greenlight Networks Grand Slam Park. We just cut the ribbon on a revitalized Grippen Community Park and are launching the first-ever Broome County Fall Festival. Our parks team under Director Brenda Gowe makes these places not just functional but a point of pride.

When families come together at a park, when visitors spend a weekend here for a tournament, when kids see their hometown host a state championship — those are moments that stick, and they're part of how we grow. I stood at the entrance of our arena as teams from across the state rolled their bags in and parents took pictures. You can feel the energy and pride those events bring into our county.

Public safety remains a top priority. Under the leadership of Sheriff Fred Akshar, the School Resource Officer program is expanding. At the jail, we're funding new medical positions to treat addiction, including Suboxone administration to help people start recovery. District Attorney Paul Battisti is visible in the community, focusing on prevention and education alongside prosecution. These efforts show that public safety is about more than arrests — it's about building stronger, safer neighborhoods.

We're modernizing government itself: rolling out our first six electric buses, expanding mobile crisis services under our new Mental Health Department led by Commissioner Liz Warneck, building supportive housing, upgrading technology under IT Director Rebecca Kennis, and even finally accepting credit cards at places like the landfill and event parking. These are practical changes that make life easier for residents. They're not flashy, but they're exactly the kind of improvements that build trust in government.

I also want to highlight the leadership of our Health Department, because protecting the health of our community is one of the most fundamental things county government does.

This year we welcomed Olivia Catalano as our new County Health Director and Dr. Lazarus Gehring as our new Health Department Medical Director. Olivia and Dr. Gehring bring fresh energy and expertise to one of our most important teams. Under their leadership, the department is sharpening its focus on prevention, rapid response and public education.

Most people don't see everything the Health Department does, but its work touches every family in Broome County. They inspect the restaurants where we eat, test and protect our drinking water, monitor for infectious diseases, provide immunizations, run maternal and child health programs, and offer clinics and education that keep our residents safe. When there's an outbreak,

they're the first to respond. When there's a need for guidance, they're the ones making sure accurate information reaches the public.

With Olivia and Dr. Gehring at the helm, we're strengthening our ability to safeguard the community's health today and build a healthier future for the next generation.

One shining example of that commitment is our Healthy Broome Initiative which was held earlier this summer. Through this initiative we partnered with the U.S. Department of Defense to bring a broad range of medical, dental, vision, and wellness services at no cost right to our residents at the campus of SUNY Broome.

Over the course of the initiative, more than 2,000 Broome County residents received free health screenings, dental care, immunizations, nutrition counseling, free eyeglasses, and information on mental health and substance use resources — all in one accessible location. Families who hadn't seen a dentist in years walked away with cleanings. Veterans received needed exams. It was a true community effort.

I want to sincerely thank SUNY Broome President Tony Hawkins and his entire team for their partnership and support of Healthy Broome, proving once again that they truly are "THE COMMUNITY'S COLLEGE".

Without their willingness to open the campus and their dorms, coordinate logistics, and work hand-in-hand with our staff, we could not have delivered this level of service to so many people in such a short time.

I also want to thank our Director of Emergency Services Neal Haight and his entire team. From planning and coordination to being on-site every day, their dedication ensured this mission ran smoothly and safely. Their hard work was critical to making Healthy Broome the success it was.

This is what it looks like when local government, higher education, and our federal partners work together for the common good.

I also want to take some time tonight to recognize Deputy County Executive Mike Ponticiello. Many of you already know Mike is leaving to become County Administrator in Cortland County. That's a big loss for us, but an incredible opportunity for him. And I want to officially welcome Hal McCabe who will be our next Deputy County Executive of Physical Services.

Mike's story is a Broome County story. A native Long-Islander who first came here when he went to Binghamton University, Mike started working here as a 911 dispatcher while he was in college — literally the person answering the call when someone was in trouble.

Over the years he worked his way up through Emergency Services, eventually becoming Director, and then stepped into the Deputy County Executive role. At every stage, he's been steady, smart, and deeply committed to this community.

He's been at the table for every major decision we've made in the last several years — from managing crises to launching new initiatives.

If you've seen our emergency operations run smoothly during floods, or our county coordinate resources in a snowstorm, or our COVID response roll out efficiently — Mike's fingerprints are on all of that.

Beyond the work, he's been a mentor to younger staff, a calm presence when tensions run high, and someone who always, always puts the public first. In government, that's rare. And it's something I'll miss personally. Mike has been not just a deputy, but a trusted advisor and friend.

Cortland County is gaining a leader with deep experience and a heart for public service. On behalf of Broome County, Mike, thank you.

We wish you nothing but success. And know this: you've helped build a foundation here that will last long after you step into your new role.

Despite a challenging environment, this budget continues to invest in our people, keeps services strong, and still reduces the county property tax rate. Together with the Legislature, we've cut down our debt, grown our fund balance, and lowered our fiscal stress scores.

It's easy to dwell on the difficulties. But what defines Broome County is our ability to face challenges head-on.

We're protecting services, investing in our youth and neighborhoods, maintaining fiscal discipline, and laying the foundation for a stronger, more resilient Broome County.

I want to close tonight with this thought: budgets aren't just numbers on a page. They're a reflection of our values. This one says we believe in our young people. We believe in safe, quality housing. We believe in strong neighborhoods and good jobs. We believe in taking care of our seniors, our veterans, and our families. And we believe that even when times are tough, Broome County can keep moving forward together.

Thank you, and God bless.