

# BUILDING A BETTER ULSTER COUNTY



## COUNTY EXECUTIVE MICHAEL P. HEIN 2016 EXECUTIVE BUDGET

### **2016 Ulster County Executive Budget Address**

Good morning. Before we begin, I would like to thank the team at SUNY Ulster for being such a gracious hosts, and welcome everyone to the beautiful Kingston Center of SUNY Ulster.

This facility is very special and I am extremely proud of it, because its sole purpose is to improve access to higher education for more people than ever before. As someone who was the first person in their family to graduate from college, I can't help but identify with all those students who, because of this facility, will now have the opportunity to become the first person in their family to graduate as well; and for some, maybe just maybe, a real chance to break the cycle of generational poverty and change the trajectory of their entire life.

In many ways, I view the success of this project as a microcosm of how my administration tries to work every single day. It started as an improbable idea that is now an amazing reality, and it is because of the hard work and dedication of so many wonderful partners. That is why as we create the County Budget, I focus my team on three very specific points: 1) Ensuring high quality essential services for everyone; 2) Embracing innovation and change to make sure the American Dream remains real and accessible for everyone; and 3) Protecting our hardworking taxpayers, some of whom are simply trying to make ends meet.

I am pleased to say that this budget delivers. It ensures more services than ever before, with greater access to the American dream for the great people of Ulster County, while it cuts property taxes yet again, to their lowest level in over four years. However, in spite of that, we are also very mindful that many Americans still believe that government in general costs too much and delivers too little.

So we strive to make Ulster County very different, and in the process we have delivered massive reforms and moved our entire county from the brink of disaster to one of the most fiscally sound counties in the State. However, I also know that everything we have accomplished could easily be washed away by elected officials who fail to remember just how bad things really were; because the reality is, in New York State, property taxes are still too high. Therefore, our work is far from done.

From 2002 to 2007 the combined Ulster County property tax increase was 115%, which means the amount of money coming out of a taxpayer's pocket more than doubled over that one, six year period. In order to understand the magnitude of this statement, this slide clearly shows the direction Ulster County government was headed before we took office. The pre-charter spending trend was taking us from a budget of roughly \$345 million dollars back in 2009 to one that would have fast approached \$400 million by 2016; and that level of spending would have required an enormous amount of taxpayer money.

Unfortunately, this kind of out of control spending was going on all across our state resulting in double digit tax increases that were breaking hard working New Yorkers, driving people from our state and ultimately inspired Albany to pass a law limiting how fast taxes could go up.

While most local governments focused on meeting what became known as the 2% tax cap, my administration has always viewed the entire problem very differently. The tax cap still allows taxes to go up, but I am much more focused on delivering tax cuts for hardworking families who desperately needed property taxes to go down. So, unlike typical governments, my administration took on the difficult and sometimes controversial choices and reinvented County government. As a result, our property taxes are actually lower today than they were back in 2012 when the tax cap took effect; and we haven't stopped. Since I am also very aware that it is much more than just county property taxes that are impacting our residents, it is the combination of town, city and many others that have become so burdensome.

In addition to lowering your County property taxes, since 2013 my administration in partnership with the legislature has also provided over \$22 million dollars in property tax relief to our towns and the City of Kingston with the take-over of Safety Net and now election costs. This means that on top of lowering your County property taxes over the last four years, we have also provided an enormous infusion of financial relief to our towns and City of Kingston to create a once in a lifetime opportunity for multiple governments to now lower your other property taxes too.

We did not do this alone; as a community we are incredibly fortunate to have an amazing County workforce who does so much, for so many, every single day.

And that is why I am thrilled that my administration has made sure that 100% of all of Ulster County's unionized workforce, over 1,000 hardworking men and women, and their families, now have the security and peace of mind of a fair and respectful contract.

Even with all these contracts, plus our ongoing efforts to ensure more services than ever before, Ulster County's government costs less today than it did all the way back in 2009. I would like to repeat that: Ulster County government costs less today than it did all the way back in 2009 before my administration first took office.

Due to our efficiency efforts, in the 2016 Executive Budget we have cut wasteful spending even more, this time by over \$4.5 million dollars. That means over the last four years we have reduced overall spending by an unprecedented \$32.8 million dollars; that is \$32.8 million dollars that my administration has put directly back in the pockets of hardworking Ulster County taxpayers.

In order to continue protecting our taxpayers today, and long into the future, this budget once again puts dollars aside in our highly responsible Tax Stabilization Reserve. We should also note that we have reduced the amount of general fund balance needed to balance this year's budget by over \$3.8 million dollars compared to just last year.

Because of our commitment to doing things differently, we have achieved the highest government bond rating Ulster County has seen in a generation, and the State Comptroller's Office has once again, listed us as one of the most fiscally responsible counties in all of New

York. The bottom line is this: I stood before you last year and I made a promise to the hardworking men and women of Ulster County to lower their property taxes; and so, for 2016, Ulster County property taxes are going down again, this time by almost a million dollars.

As important as it is to lower your property taxes, and it is very important, a County budget is so much more than just that. It is also a detailed spending plan that sets priorities and ensures essential services for those among us most in need. It is a roadmap that provides a safer, healthier and more prosperous quality of life.

Every step of the way we look to save money so that when unexpected issues arise, or critical investments are needed, we are prepared to act immediately. Such as midway through 2015, when the RSVP program which serves over 400 seniors and 39 local not-for profits was in danger of closing because of an unanticipated loss in funding, my administration was able to step in with the necessary resources and save this critical program. We faced a similar crisis with the Meals on Wheels program which provides an essential source of nutrition for so many of our most vulnerable seniors.

It is because my administration along with the legislature, have partnered on fiscal restraint that we had the much needed resources to step in and not only save this valuable program, but also make it even better.

In fact, not only does guarding taxpayer dollars allow us to save programs like RSVP and Meals on Wheels when they are in danger, it also allows us to expand essential services for everyone, especially our brave American Veterans.

In this budget, in addition to all the services we currently provide, we are expanding the number of outreach personnel to help Veterans in more remote areas. Additionally, we will now deliver completely free legal services to any Veteran seeking the federal benefits they have earned and so justly deserve. We are continuing to fund valuable programs such as the Patriots' Project and other special and meaningful initiatives including upgrading our County's Veterans' cemetery and ensuring the presence of military grave stone markers for all those who have served and passed away.

The reality is this: this \$330 million dollar spending plan touches the lives of virtually every Ulster County citizen. It is about seniors, Veterans, children and everyone else; and it is about providing greater access to the American Dream for everyone.

We do this in part, with one of the largest County contributions to our Community College in the state, and in this budget, that means over \$6 million dollars.

It is also about helping those in our community who are most vulnerable. Making sure that warming centers are open so that no one finds themselves out on the streets without a hot meal and a warm place to sleep on the coldest winter nights. It is about making sure that people who are victims of crimes have all the compassionate services they need to begin the difficult process of putting their lives back together. It is about funding creative solutions, such as shelters for both the victims of domestic violence as well as their pets, so that no one stays in a potentially deadly relationship simply because they are afraid to leave their pet behind.

In addition to over \$1 million dollars already dedicated in the county budget to fund significant efforts to help individuals and families dealing with the national tragedy of heroin addiction, with the 2016 Executive Budget we are expanding the fight.

I am pleased to say that in this budget I have dedicated an additional \$100,000 dollars to strengthen our prevention efforts in accordance with the UCAN, or Ulster Coalition Against Narcotics, recommendations. In part, to fund a “special family advocate to help devastated families as they struggle with both reluctant insurance companies and complex state bureaucracies; because as a father, I know these families are fighting for the lives of their children, and we are committed as a County to making sure they do not have to do it alone. I also want to personally commend the Ulster County Legislature for their added focus on this serious national public health issue.

I believe we must use creative approaches to ensure additional permanent funding is available, so with this budget I am proposing legislation that dedicates 100% of all revenues Ulster County receives from the newly licensed medical marijuana dispensary be used to combat the scourge of opioid addiction that is affecting far too many families.

On top of that, we are investing \$100,000 of County money to replace lost federal funding and save the highly successful One80 youth diversion program that keeps juveniles, some of whom have serious substance abuse issues, out of our local justice system and providing them with a real opportunity to turn their entire life around.

Since we cover such a wide array of issues for so many different people, in this budget we are also investing in a unique and desperately needed program to help some of our most vulnerable seniors. When there is no family and nowhere else to turn, if they become ill, some seniors face the frightening prospect of checking into a hospital - all alone.

Now, through our greatly expanded Meals on Wheels program, they will have a trained professional care coordinator by their side to assist them, not only with their hospital stay, but also when they leave, in order to make sure their transition home goes safely and smoothly. This kind of innovative and compassionate program is unique to Ulster County and it makes a huge difference in the lives of our seniors, exactly when they need it most.

It is because a county budget is so much more than just numbers on a page why my administration takes it so seriously.

A strong budget and a solid financial plan allow us to tackle longstanding problems that many believe are impossible; for example, last year when we began addressing the serious infrastructure crisis caused by decades of insufficient state and federal funding. The truth is, Ulster County and every other County in New York were facing a recipe for disaster. Many of our roads and bridges were built back in the 50's and 60's and were never designed for the traffic volume, weight or pedestrian needs that we now have today. In fact, most Ulster County bridges were engineered when the largest vehicle expected to cross them was a simple box truck, not the fully loaded 36 ton tractor trailers of today.

Unlike most other counties, our restructuring efforts have allowed us to act and take meaningful steps to reverse this troubling national trend. In 2015, my administration unveiled the largest infrastructure investment in Ulster County's history... A \$15 million dollar initiative we called "Building a Better Ulster County." It funded much needed upgrades creating safer roads and better bridges all across our County, including safer school zones for our children and improved

pedestrian access everywhere; more than doubling our typical road re-pavement plan in just one year.

We did not just want to re-create what we had; we wanted improve our entire infrastructure system from the ground up. However, we are not done because the problem of crumbling infrastructure was decades in the making; and I am very excited to announce that my administration is once again dedicating over \$15 million more in 2016. This means that my administration will have made a massive, two year, \$30 million infrastructure investment to help address this national crisis at the local level and “Build a Better Ulster County” for everyone - while we still lower your taxes.

We should also never forget the huge additional benefits that come with this type of investment. Our County’s increased infrastructure spending in 2016 will positively impact over 200 jobs for hardworking men and women and their families too.

Economic development comes in many forms; from our \$514 million dollar Tourism industry which continues to grow at a record pace, up 20% or \$87 million dollars since we restructured operations back in 2010, to our Agricultural industry which is a half billion dollar part of our economy too. There is also emerging sectors such as our tech based businesses and advanced manufacturers where many high quality jobs are being created every day.

Last year, Ulster County’s Office of Economic Development helped almost 400 valuable local businesses and not-for-profits who employ thousands of Ulster County residents and because of their efforts over the last four years, they have helped secure over \$28 million in State CFA funding to help grow our local economy. Even with all of that, our work is far from done. There is no question we must all continue to focus on improving the quality and number of jobs available.

As we do, we must also continue our efforts of helping chronically unemployed individuals out of the system and into the workforce. Therefore, this budget once again funds our successful Career Ladder program that delivers on-the-job training as well as work readiness assistance for individuals currently on public assistance. It also eliminates impediments to employment such as daycare and transportation, and I’m pleased to say this program is working great.

Our economic development efforts continue to lead the way, this year's Ellenville Million initiative as an example, where we identified valuable components that can now be expanded county-wide. A Soft Landing Fund will help defray some of the expenses associated with engineering and other pre-construction costs for the development of new businesses; costs that could otherwise become major obstacles. This kind of economic development tool creates a competitive advantage that resonates with national site selectors as they search for places to locate new businesses and create even more jobs.

Another component of the Ellenville Million that we are expanding county-wide is grant writing assistance for small businesses, from Saugerties to Wawarsing and from New Paltz to Woodstock, because in the highly competitive world of New York State Economic Development funding, this kind of assistance for our small businesses can make all the difference between success and failure.

We have seen that the stakes are high. Zumtobel Lighting in Highland, a company that has more than 200 employees, was at risk of leaving, not only our county but also our Country as well. My Economic Development team worked diligently to secure the necessary resources to create the competitive advantage that Zumtobel needed to stay. We coordinated the IDA, Empire State Development, Central Hudson and SUNY Ulster; and as a result, not only did Zumtobel agree to stay, but they have committed \$6.4 million of the company's own money to upgrade their current facility while guaranteeing more than 200 full-time, high-quality Ulster County jobs long into the future. That is why we invest in economic development.

When we cut through all the rhetoric and political nonsense, the New York State Department of Labor facts are clear: there are over 2,000 more people working in Ulster County today than there were back in 2009; and our unemployment rate has been reduced from almost 8% in 2009 to 4.8% today, and that is huge progress by any measure.

Looking at all the different facets of County Government and the long list of essential services we provide, as County Executive I still believe the highest priority for any government is to keep its residents safe and secure.

In case of fire we all desperately want well-trained and well- equipped fire departments on the scene immediately. If you are the victim of a crime seeking the justice you deserve, or simply

want to live or raise your children in a safe and civil community, then you fully understand the value of a well-trained and well- equipped Sheriff's Department. When there is a medical emergency for either you or someone you love, a fast and professional response from a well-trained and well-equipped EMT is exactly what you need to avoid a tragedy.

On the heels of Hurricane Irene, Tropical Storm Lee and Superstorm Sandy, we have all witnessed the courage, selflessness and critical importance of all our amazing first responders. They do it all, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year.

In the background there are yet more talented and unsung heroes, like the dispatchers of our Emergency 911 center and Ulster County's entire Emergency Services operation, always there when you need them making sure that help is on the way. Together with our police, firefighters and EMT's they are part of a dedicated system of public safety and the stakes could not be any higher. This is why, with this budget, my administration is delivering the largest comprehensive investment in public safety in Ulster County's history; over three-quarters of a million dollars in additional funding for our Sheriff's Road Patrol and nearly \$3 million dollars for a technology upgrade for our entire Emergency 911 and Sheriff's dispatch centers.

I have also included in our capital budget \$1.9 million dollars for a much needed county-wide fire training center; a facility that will be designed by our Fire Chief's Association and will benefit all 50 of our local volunteer fire departments and help ensure that we have some of the most well-trained and well-equipped firefighters anywhere.

More important than anything else we do, at that critical moment when our first responders are on the scene making the difference between life and death for either you or someone you love, as the County Executive know that I will do everything in my power to make sure they have the best training, the best equipment and the best chance to save someone's life.

The 2016 Executive Budget delivers immediate results for the great people of Ulster County, while it better positions our entire community for a brighter future; with greater access to higher education, and major investments that help grow our economy, it provides real access to the American Dream for everyone. Due to the massive, two year, \$30 million dollar overhaul of our infrastructure, our roads are getting safer and our bridges are getting better.

I am proud to say this budget continues to reflect our County's compassionate heart with some of the largest funding levels ever for our seniors, our Veterans and those among us most in need.

With the inclusion of millions of dollars dedicated to support our brave first responders we are making Ulster County safer and more prepared than ever before, because more than being the County Executive, I am a son, a husband, and a father, and I know that the health and safety of the ones we love are more important than anything else we do.

And that is why, for me, it has never been about building a bigger government or a smaller government; it has always been about building a better government for the people. In that process I made a promise to the hardworking men and women of Ulster County to lower their taxes and so the 2016 Executive Budget not only delivers more services for more people than ever before, it also cuts your County property taxes to levels that have not been seen since 2012.

Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank you for joining us here today at this extraordinary facility dedicated to hope, education and opportunity; and I am honored to say that with this budget, Ulster County remains the finest place anywhere to live, work and raise a family, for everyone.

Thank you.

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