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2011 State of the County Address
Legislator Barry Leemann, Chair
Oswego County Legislature
March 10, 2011

Good afternoon fellow Legislators, Oswego County citizens, community partners and staff. I am pleased to be here today to share with you this State of the County report. It has been our tradition to discuss our accomplishments of the past year and provide a preview of what to expect in the coming year. I am grateful for the opportunity to present this information to you today. As in past years this address will be posted on the Oswego County website. If anyone requires a printed copy they should contact our public information office.

I know the economy is at the forefront of all our minds. As I prepared this address, I considered the difficult economic times we are in. As I appointed the committees for this year I considered the hard tasks and decisions that we will make in 2011. I am confident this legislature is capable of performing these difficult tasks and making the right decisions. Several years ago we experienced major conflicts and continuous bickering while trying to do the job that we were elected to do. However, I am proud to say that at most times during this last year this legislature worked together to do what needed to be done. We worked to make Oswego County Government a more effective and efficient government - a friendlier government, a government that worked, **with and for**, all residents of Oswego County. We are all working hard to change the perception of elected officials, by doing, by taking action, not just talking or arguing. With New York State government deemed among the most inefficient governments in the nation, I am proud to say we **are not**, and **were not**, a part of that type of government. I stand in front of you today and say to all our state representatives, use Oswego County government as an example. We are not perfect and we don't have the solution to every problem, but during the last few years Oswego County Government did a better job governing than New York State did. The facts prove this:

- In 2005 our generic tax rate was \$9.20 per thousand of assessed value.
- By 2011 our generic tax rate was \$6.99 per thousand of assessed value.
- In 2007 Moody's investment services raised our credit rating to A3
- In 2010 our credit rating was again raised to Aa3 and noted, "High Quality"

This is the seventh year in a row that the generic tax rate for Oswego County has not increased, or was lowered. We have done this in spite of the State of New York continuously shifting its costs to our county taxpayers. Estimating conservatively, New York State placed over \$4 Million of new pressure on our tax levy this year. This is not fair or acceptable! Don't get me wrong, I am not blaming any political party; I blame incompetent Albany politics as usual. For the good of Oswego County and New York State, I hope the new administration and new legislature in Albany will make the necessary changes. This will take a lot of hard work because as we learn more about the proposed state budget, Albany is again shifting costs to the county and not seriously reducing the mandates that drive up our local property taxes. Remember - it is state mandates that cause high property taxes - not our local county services.

Albany is talking about capping property tax growth. That will only work if Albany also significantly reduces the costs of the mandated services it forces local governments to provide. For example, Medicaid will cost local taxpayers \$24 million this year, and our entire tax levy is under \$36 million. To put this in perspective, two-thirds of everyone's county property taxes pay for only this one state mandate! Furthermore, just nine of the largest state mandates will cost local taxpayers \$47 million this year. That means ALL of your property tax AND NEARLY HALF of your sales tax pay for just nine of the dozens of state mandates we must comply with. Simply put, this is not acceptable or sustainable! Mandate relief must be part of the tax cap, if the cap is going to work.

Now, I would like to report on the highlights of very interesting and productive projects we have been working on during the past year.

The Green Team—a Sustainability Committee

Oswego County's Green Team has been very productive during the past year. Some of our partners in this project are: Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems, the Environmental Finance Center at Syracuse University, SUNY Oswego, the Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board, and the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. I am aware of only one other county in our region that has a Green Committee and that is Onondaga County. We are taking a regional approach but we also have members from Oswego County Government, including Environmental Management, Highway, Solid Waste, Purchasing, Buildings and Grounds, our Legislature, and Planning and Community Development.

We have 13 projects we are currently involved in; nine of these involve our Buildings and Grounds Department and directly impact our county facilities. These are lighting projects, HVAC controls, etc. These are projects that Oswego County would have had to address soon, entirely at our expense. Thanks to the Green Team, we have accessed nearly \$800,000 in grant funds, mostly from NYSERDA and National Grid. The projects will require a local match of \$233,300.17 but the energy savings from these projects will pay for our investment in just a few short years and reducing our overall need for electricity and other fuels will help avoid the production of over 570 tons of green house gases. I believe this is an important function of our government: saving money for our taxpayers by taking advantage of grant opportunities. While doing this we are insuring a cleaner environment and providing clean breathable air for our children and grandchildren.

The Green Team is also looking into wind energy and solar energy to lower energy costs at our facilities. We are running a test program at our highway department with bio-diesel. We also have at least 27 flex-fuel vehicles capable of running on E-85, so we are exploring an E-85 fueling site.

The Green Team has proved very successful and their actions have already produced energy savings, monetary savings and environmental benefits for Oswego County.

The Camp Hollis Task Force:

In 2009 we set up a task force to study Camp Hollis and recommend improvements, changes, and maintenance priorities. They had many meetings and provided a comprehensive list of suggestions to the Health and Human Services Committee. That committee then reviewed and forwarded the approved changes on to the full Legislature for approval in 2010 and 2011. Camp Hollis has always been a fantastic camping facility for our county's youth and many other users. The hard work of the task force has insured that it remain a modern updated camping facility that Oswego County can be proud of. I wanted to take this opportunity to thank the members, publicly, for a job well done. I also want to thank this legislature for their support of Camp Hollis.

The Camp Hollis task force's recommendations and the Legislature's actions have ensured that Oswego County will continue to provide a safe, modern camping experience for all our residents.

The Airport Advisory Committee

This committee was charged with researching grants for development of the airport and recommending modifications to the Airport Business Plan to reflect current realities and future opportunities. The committee is chaired by Mr. Jonathon Daniels and has been very successful. This committee has applied for and received grants for the following projects:

- Rehabilitation of Runway 15-33. This project is presently under construction

- Obstruction removal and on-airport lighting. For many years we have had an Instrument Landing System on runway 15-33 that we could not use to its full extent due to some obstructions on private property. The inability to use this system prohibited larger jet planes from landing here. Members of the airport committee met with the business owner and reached agreement that allowed the county to remove and lower some of the trees that were obstructions. There is more to be done but the progress had been stalled for many years and is now successfully progressing.

The committee continues to look for ways to make our Oswego County Airport a more viable airport.

Suggestions have been provided to the whole body from smaller sub-committees. Those committees are: Facility and Infrastructure, Operation and Air Service, and Economic Development. These smaller committees have reported their suggestions back to the entire body for consideration. A few of their preliminary suggestions are:

Aircraft tie-down apron rehabilitation; acquire aircraft de-icing equipment; design a new terminal building; taxiway D & E rehabilitation; and many others.

The airport is now a 24-hour / 7-day operation with pilots having round-the-clock access to the rest rooms and the airport lounge.

Airport security was enhanced by improving our airport security cameras and increasing the numbers of cameras from 4 to 16. Grants funded this project 100%.

The airport advisory committee has provided valuable assistance to our county. They have found funding for projects, and have recommended additional designs and improvements. This year they will continue to function as a committee to research grants and recommend modifications to the airport and its business plan.

Many other county initiatives this legislature has approved for our county have also proved very successful. They are at different stages of development. Some of them include the Oswego County Fire School, which has evolved into an extremely important and successful educational operation for our first responders; the inter-operable emergency communication system, with seven new towers and proposed 97% coverage; and implementation of the BMD voting machines to comply with HAVA rules. Change is never easy, but using the BMDs, the Oswego County board of elections conducted very successful fall elections, and made the change as comfortable as possible for Oswego County residents.

Last year this Legislature approved a beneficial one-year tax agreement with the owners of the Nine Mile Point Unit One nuclear plant. The agreement nearly tripled the plant's payments to the County and Scriba. Negotiations will continue this year with all three plants, with the aim of achieving equally beneficial results for 2012 and beyond.

In closing, I would like to thank all Oswego County employees and department heads for their hard work and understanding during the past year. I ask you to continue to work very hard and help our county through these difficult economic times. We are financially solvent, and with your help we can stay that way. I am sure as taxpayers and employees you understand the challenges we face. I offer you the chance to submit any major money saving proposals you are aware of, in your own department, to your department heads for consideration. I can assure you they will be reviewed thoroughly.

Our legislators will again face difficult decisions this year. It will not be an easy year, and we will all have to work very hard on behalf of our constituents. I know this legislature can make these difficult decisions and I am positive we are up to the challenges the economy will present to us. I ask, that as we go through the year, we all keep in mind that our residents cannot survive a property tax increase and we must continue the course we have been following to stabilize and lower Oswego County property taxes. With the help of our department heads and employees we will survive the flood of increased costs passed down to us from the state. We will continue to provide a conservative government with ethics and integrity.

Thank you to all of Oswego County for the opportunity to serve you for another year and share these remarks today.