

State of the County 2008-09

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Chairman
Madison County
Board of Supervisors

Fellow supervisors, employees, citizens, taxpayers:

It is with great humility and honor that I bring to you this State of the County Address for 2009. As we approach the end of the decade, we as a County and as Towns will be challenged like no other time in our history.

This Board of Supervisors is up to that challenge by bringing change the way it has in the past year, trying new things like consolidating committees. This is a work in progress and will continue to evolve throughout the new year.

You as a board have adapted well to our changing environment. From agriculture to energy, we have all worked together without concern for party affiliation to achieve common goals. We have collaborated, negotiated and compromised to build consensus that helps move the County forward.

This Board's broadest and boldest work is our legislative initiative.

Park Strategies, although expensive, will bear fruit. One, getting an ear in the Governor's Office is imperative to the way we do business and already has been a benefit. On one occasion, we called the Governor on a Monday and were granted a meeting for the following day. Several times, we have met with him regarding various issues of concern to Madison County.

Another facet of this networking is meeting with different State department heads on grants and learning what is available, how to apply for them, what they are looking for in the applications they receive and letting Albany know Madison County has innovative thinkers moving way ahead of the curve.

This relationship is very unique. We want our own state and local representatives to utilize Park in ways that will mutually benefit Madison County and themselves.

The federal side of this equation has everything to do with that consensus-building I have mentioned already, something that only benefits us when we will be looking for aid in an increasingly competitive funding environment.

Park is on a 30-day-and-out contract with the County, and any time the Board feels we are not getting what we are paying for, we can terminate with 30 days' notice.

Many relationships have been built from California to Alaska, all helping further our legislation. It is evidence of the importance of establishing relationships wherever we go, whatever we do and in whatever way we can in order to rise to the top of the "slush pile" in Albany and Washington, D.C., in order to make things much better in Madison County.

2008 has seen:

1. Improvements in relationships with the Oneida Indian Nation;
2. Our unions and the Board build better relationships;
3. Our employees, whom we feel are the best in the state, have improved relationships with the Board;
4. We saw the retirement of our County Assistant to the Chairman, and this Board changed the job to be a County Administrator who answers to the Board, not just the Chairman;
5. We have seen our prospects for growth expand with the addition of \$70 million in new construction alone in 2008.
6. Enhanced emphasis placed on the rural nature of Madison County; two years ago, we hired Becca Brier-Rosenfield as Agricultural Economic Development Specialist to help our struggling farmers. It has paid off tremendously with benefits such as a \$99,900 grant for an AED Revolving Loan Program. Working closely with other members of our Center for Economic Excellence, such as the Madison County Industrial Development Agency staff, our economic development team is well poised for future projects.

7. The budget for 2008 was a challenge that this Board successfully stepped up to the plate and tackled. At an increase of less than 1 percent in County spending, we feel good about the spending plan put forward by our Budget Officer. The net result was a 23-cent tax decrease on properties assessed at 100 percent of their value.

8. Continued implementation of the Pay for Performance initiative, which has gone a lot smoother than originally thought.

9. The County Clerk's Office served more than 144,757 customers in 2008. The Clerk's Office also received a \$100,000 grant to organize, digitize and protect Madison County's records stored in remote storage.

10. The radio communication project put out to bid, with two firms vying for the best system for the greatest value.

The challenges in 2008 were beginning to haunt us mid-year, as the financial crisis across the country took hold, and gas and utility prices peaked.

One of the biggest indicators for us was the activity at the Department of Social Services.

✓ Food stamp applications were 27 percent, 750 additional families over the previous year.

✓ There are about 8,000 families enrolled in the HEAP Program, with 1,000 new ones in the last year alone; 150 of those new consumers have never before applied for any County services.

✓ Medicaid has 8,400 people on its rolls, a staggering 12 percent of our County's population. The cap on this program is one of the greatest legislative advances of the previous Board.

Non-profits such as Community Action Partnership and the Office for the Aging help greatly to take the burden off our County workforce.

Now for 2009...

As we go through this year, we will have to be vigilant on how our budget is playing out. A budget increase of 0 percent or less than the rate of inflation should be one goal going into 2010, and no increase in employee head count should be another.

These are changing times, and change is necessary not only in our government, but also in our society and culture. Higher taxes do not necessarily mean your representatives are wasting money.

A lot of the time it is the request of services by the taxpayers that drives budgets up. To combat unemployment, jobs must be developed in the area, and this may mean we invest in economic development initiatives. People ask why roads aren't clear, why County Offices aren't open longer and why the Sheriff does not take on more police work around the County.

Those are good questions, but all of them will cost more money.

The same is true at the state level. There are children without health insurance, people going hungry or without heat and fewer scholarships available for low-income college students. All of these are legitimate needs, and all require a great deal of capital.

We need to take an honest look at what is needed versus what is wanted. What can we do without to better afford what is needed?

This Board understands this, but some things are out of our control. Steep hikes in Medicaid drove up the tax rate for years. Now there is a cap, and the State is talking about paring the cap back, which will push the burden back onto the County's shoulders. That is considerable when considering there are 8,400 people enrolled in the Medicaid program in Madison County.

There is talk of mandate relief along with the economic stimulus package expected to roll out in the next few weeks. Only time will tell.

Our new County Administrator, Paul Miller, has a number of tasks ahead of him. At the top of the list is a comprehensive fleet evaluation. His research will help develop a

comprehensive program of consolidation and streamlined preventive maintenance measures for vehicles. We want to reduce the number of cars purchased, insured, maintained and repaired by the County – all at considerable expense to our taxpayers.

Space evaluation and restructuring is being performed to better utilize the space the County has. Part of that project may mean an investment in furniture or equipment, but it also means eliminating the need for a capital project for either an addition or new building and will increase the efficiency of staff.

This Board will look at our energy as a resource in 2009. Our recently repopulated Public Utility Services Committee will research how we can get less expensive power here in Madison County. That move would help us compete in attracting new businesses and retaining existing businesses.

This Committee, headed by Russ Cary, is collaborating with Morrisville State College to look at school lunch trays manufactured from potato starch. These biodegradable trays ideally would be made from locally grown potatoes and sold downstate, then composted with other organic material to help make energy and fertilizer to help create more of this product.

This project – in its ideal form – would help our farmers by increasing the demand for crops.

These are some of the ideas the AED will run with.

Liz Moran, who heads the County's Planning Committee, is leading the Committee in working on our countywide Economic Development Plan.

All of these things tie together, whether it's jobs building a pipeline from the Madison County Landfill to the waste water treatment plant in Oneida or our \$20-million radio communication system that will be implemented this year, it all takes resources, and the more resources we bring into the County, the less it will cost us in the long run.

Growth will come, whether it's the one-stop shop at the IDA, a renewable energy park at the landfill or a public utility. These things cannot be a reality without a common vision among our Board and more assertive behavior on the part of our local representatives in Albany and Washington.

Finally, onto Native American Affairs:

Our approach thus far has been to reach out to our neighbors while looking for help from State- and Federal-level government to come to some resolution. Around mid-year after disappointingly little interaction with the Oneidas, we decided to take on a dual-track approach: litigation, which can be dropped at any time, and the pursuit of legislation.

The legislation we seek would come in the form of making the counties and other municipalities whole for any land that goes into trust.

This is where consensus-building across the aisle will be of the utmost importance. We can sit at the table anytime with anyone who wants to, in order to resolve this situation.

It is another area where our legislative consultants can be helpful.

It is important to keep all these strengths and challenges in mind as we go about making the day-to-day decisions required to operate the County.

I promised you last year that we were going to try new things... that some of them would work, and some of them wouldn't. We have seen some great successes in some areas, and we are working to fine-tune others where performance was less dynamic.

Our work is a work in progress.

I thank you for allowing us to do that work for you, and I thank you for being here today to hear our vision for the County.