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ULSTER COUNTY LEGISLATURE

CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS

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Colleagues, friends and guests,

We are in a unique position. I cannot remember a time in our history when there were three former chairmen of the Legislature remaining in our body. To have that kind of leadership enduring with us is truly a gift, one I do not intend to waste. I have spoken to all three during my time on the legislature and will be relying on all of their advice, experience, and expertise to help make me the best Chairman I can possibly be. I, therefore, will begin this evening by reflecting on the many recent successes of our Legislature with the support of former Chairmen Richard Gerentine and David Donaldson and the leadership of Chairman John Parete. Together over the last two years, we did many great things for the people of Ulster County. Instead of engaging in petty partisan politics, we were able to build a coalition government that focused more on consensus than conflict. Over the past two years we have set up an environmental remediation fund and a tax reserve fund. We have absorbed the election costs from the towns, albeit a few months later than we should have. After eight years of debate and discussion, we finally have a countywide false alarm law to put an end to the waste of police and emergency services resources. We passed an Animal Abuse Registry, and we finally have a policy for the greening of Ulster County's vehicle fleet. The initiatives that I just named while vast, are just a sample of the many great things that were accomplished together.

Now let's fast forward to the present. It certainly has been a very busy month and a half for us here in the Legislature so far. At our regular meeting in January, we passed more resolutions in one meeting that I have seen in any of my monthly meetings since I have been a legislator. Between roads and bridges, new contracts and contract extensions, and countless other resolutions, we are rebuilding Ulster County's infrastructure, greening our vehicle fleet, and increasing vital services that benefit our constituents. Altogether, we have passed 83 resolutions, authorizing over \$9 million in capital improvements and services benefiting the residents of Ulster County, but still there is much work to be done.

We have before us tonight three appointees to the UCRRA Board. First, I have chosen former Chairman Frederick Wadnola to serve out the remainder of Ms. Nielseon's unexpired term. A Former board member himself, Fred is the person we need to bridge the gap in institutional knowledge, and I am confident that he will do a great job! For the other two full term positions I believe I have proven that I am serious about us working as one body by initiating an unprecedented bipartisan process for RRA appointments, where the Energy and Environmental committee interviewed 6 candidates to fill the seats. We were blessed to have an abundance of talent, so much so that it was difficult for us to choose. I am thrilled with the two candidates that were chosen. Former Legislator Jack Hayes who also served the public for many years as both a State Trooper where he rose to the rank of Zone Sergeant and as a Town Supervisor, and Brian Devine, a retired regional director for the New York State Health Department. Both have a diverse background, and bring something different to the agency and both will be an asset to the RRA and to the county.

Before I move on though, I would be remiss if I did not thank Catherine Nielsen, Dominick Tagliaferro, and Leon Smith for their dedicated service to the RRA and our County. They were all an instrumental part of an important time in the history of the RRA, and they deserve our gratitude and respect for their part in bringing the agency back to solvency. I am certain that Brian and Jack will continue their good work.

Looking ahead, the biggest priority of this legislature must be fostering sustainable growth in the economy of Ulster County. We all know too well that New York has one of the worst business climates in the Country, largely because of the worst tax and regulatory burdens in the country. I say this not to just point out an unfortunate disadvantage that we are all dealing with, but to also point out that in order to facilitate growth here in Ulster County, we need to be bold, we need to think differently, and we need to work outside the box.

Now, let's talk about the word growth for a moment. The right kind of growth in Ulster County's business community has the potential to lower unemployment and underemployment, reduce homelessness, increase sales tax collections, lower property taxes, and create a better quality of life for residents here in Ulster County. But the business growth needs to be sustainable and compatible with our quality of life here. With all of our natural beauty, it is incumbent upon those of us in public service to approach possible development projects with care, so as not to damage the resources we have, while also making sure that we don't create regulatory roadblocks that stifle reasonable growth here in Ulster County. In our beautiful county, we have resources that you cannot buy with all of the money in the treasury, cannot steal with all of the tools in the shed, or win, as Legislators might say, with all of the luck of the Irish...Our County's magnificent vistas, mountains, fields, farms and streams. These assets coupled with another treasure, our amazing talented and hardworking workforce provide the perfect venue for high tech businesses to relocate and operate here...so why does that not happen more often? What roadblocks have been erected that are obstructing this growth industry from booming here? I certainly don't have the answer, but we do have local expertise that can answer that question. I propose tonight that the Legislature create a tech sector task force made up of industry professionals such as tech consultants, data analysts, computer & system services specialists, software developers, and network managers that will investigate the hurdles (such as lack of adequate broadband coverage) that exist, to propose solutions that will take advantage of our unique resources and to recommend a policy that will bring Ulster County's information technology infrastructure and industry into the 21st century. It will not be easy, but I am certain that working together, it will not only be achieved, but it can become a statewide model.

Sustainable growth can solve many of our issues here in Ulster County, but other challenges still remain, such as the relocation of our Family Court Complex. The State Legislature in its beneficence passed legislation for a third family court judge for Ulster County to lessen the heavy dockets our judges were facing, but as is often the case with Albany, only half the job was done: they pledged no extra funds to cover the cost. Now the Office of Court Administration is threatening to withhold or intercept financial aid if we do not make their required changes. There are numerous possible options for the future location of family court: It may involve renting or repurposing an existing structure in the City of Kingston or a referendum to allow us to move the Court to the BRC in the Town of Ulster.

The time has come for the Legislature to make our decision on which option is best for the people of Ulster County and for the people who utilize our family court. It's certainly not an easy decision, or one that we should come to lightly. We should invite testimony from our esteemed Family Court judges, members of the Ulster County Bar Association, and representatives of the City of Kingston and Town of Ulster Governments. I will be asking the Chairmen and Deputy Chairmen of the Public works and Ways and Means committees to hold joint meetings over the coming weeks and months to fully understand the needs of the family court. With public input and collaboration, these committees can explore possibilities and weigh every option, in order to make a reasoned and informed recommendation to the Legislature by this May. This will insure that we have time to approve a referendum in the fall if one should prove necessary. Certainly one of the most important decisions made during our term, I know that with the leadership of former Chairman Richard Gerentine, and Legislators Dean Fabiano, TJ Briggs and Peter Loughran, we will choose the option that best serves the residents and families of our great County.

Finally, I would like to take a few moments to discuss the necessity of fiscal responsibility in the performance of our duties here. It is vital that all parties involved in any negotiation act in good faith. Rather than legislating or negotiating through the media, taxpayers are best served when their elected representatives come together and make decisions based on frank and thoughtful discussions. Remember, at the end of the day, we all work for the citizens of Ulster County and regardless of which pocket their hard earned money comes out of, taxpayers need to know - and trust - we are looking out for their interests.

Over the past eight years, we have practiced fiscal restraint as a legislature, restraining to overspend and overtax our residents. We have re-tooled County Government and made smart financial decisions that have positioned us as one of the most fiscally sound counties in the State. This has caused some folks, even some legislators in this room, to say: "we have lowered taxes, we have privatized our nursing home, and we have taken over 22 million dollars in Town and City Costs...it seems pretty hard to argue that we could be in a tough financial position." All of the statements made there are true, save the last. We cannot let down our guard. I submit to you that all we have done could be undone with a Legislature or an Executive that makes a few poor decisions or by a Legislature or Executive that gives into external pressure and does not remember our history. Few current Legislators were here during times of fiscal stress. If we are complacent, careless or capricious we could be there again in a flash, so I challenge each of us individually and together as a body to treat every dollar of the county budget like it is our own, to be good stewards of the tax dollars that we are entrusted with.

In closing, I want to state emphatically that I have great faith in this body and believe that together we can accomplish noteworthy and important things over the next year! We have a vast diversity of background, an immense presence of spirit, and a unity of purpose: to serve the residents of Ulster County and of our districts to the best of our ability.

Over the last month and a half, we have truly begun the process of working together as one body. We have been bipartisan. We had the first open interview process for RRA appointments in our history, taking party politics out. We have the most bipartisan committee appointments in the history of our Legislature with minority committee Chairs, and for the first time, multiple committees that have more minority members than majority members. I am not naive enough to think that these first steps mean we won't have some bumps in the road ahead but hope it demonstrates my commitment to the give-and-take necessary to building something worthwhile, something special. - a unified Legislature. I value the time I have spent since becoming Chairman getting to know our new colleagues, and getting to know other long time colleagues even better. There is an amazing amount of talent here in the 2016-2017 Ulster County Legislature. I know for sure that if we live up to our full potential we will leave Ulster County even better than we found it. It is what our constituents demand of us and we will settle for nothing less.

Thank you very much!