

2019 Minority Address

Chairwoman Bartels, Majority Leader Heppner, fellow Legislators and guests, Good evening! I know what you are thinking Hugh, here comes Ronk again to talk about working together with people...and you're right I have been coming before this Legislative Body for the past 7 years serving as Minority Leader, Majority Leader, and Chairman, and most of my addresses have revolved around growing the Legislature into the collaborative body that the Charter envisions. One where we do our due diligence together, ask our questions together, propose meaningful and responsible policy together, and debate each other civilly. I feel like we have made significant progress, but, as always, there is room for improvement. In that realm, I would like to discuss where we in the Republican Caucus think we can go from here **together** to improve not only our Legislative Body, but our County as a whole.

The First thing that I would like to do this evening is publicly commend former County Executive Hein for his unwavering dedication to our government and to the people of Ulster County. County Executive Hein and his entire team worked collaboratively with many of us to reform and reshape Ulster County, and they deserve our gratitude. Next I would like to thank Acting County Executive Adele Reiter. Adele and I came into government service together in a way: in 2007 I was just elected to the Legislature, and she was just appointed as Deputy Treasurer. She and I happened to be in the same NYSAC new elected and appointed officials training together, blossoming a friendship and working relationship that has stood the test of time, and nearly 12 years on the opposite sides of the aisle and issues. Since that first day together, I have come to know her as someone who's only goal is

providing the best government, and service to the people of Ulster County. She continues that service in an important way, serving as Acting County Executive at a point of massive change and tumult in our government. Adele, thank you for your friendship and your continued and steadfast dedication to Ulster County.

Some of you might think that the fact that because we are a separate branch of government means that we must be in continuous conflict with the County Executive's office. That we must consistently find disagreements with the other side of the 6th floor in order to be doing our job properly. We say that isn't so. We say that it is our job to work together to find consensus and compromise not only with one another but with our fellow countywide elected officials as well. My way or the highway governing is neither healthy nor helpful, and unfortunately, we are seeing significantly more of this type of governing happening at all levels, including our own.

One of the biggest complaints about myself that I have heard over the past few years is that I work too well with the County Executive's Office. A good friend of mine once told me at a point of peak frustration, "If the worst thing that they can say about you is that you work too well with people, you must be doing a pretty good job". One important thing for all of us to remember is that whomever proposes positive public policy contributes to a shared record between the Legislature, and the Executive. President Truman once said, "It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit." It is my hope that moving forward in our interactions with the Executive's office we will spend more time discussing the merits of a proposal than who proposed it.

Now I would like to discuss a few policy items that we in the Republican Caucus believe should be included in our agenda for this year. Last year I served on a panel of young elected officials of both parties hosted by Hudson Valley Pattern for Progress. One of the questions that interested me, and that I brought back to members of our Caucus, was what can we do better as a community to make new Hispanic residents feel more comfortable as members of our greater Hudson Valley Community. Our Hispanic population is the fastest growing ethnic group in our area, and we need to work hard to make sure these new Ulster County residents feel welcome and safe as important members of our society. The overwhelming answer in the forum was that there is a language gap on printed materials and in other ways that Spanish speaking people interact with our governments. We need to evaluate how each department in County government interacts with Spanish speaking residents, and our caucus will be sponsoring a policy next month that will require that County Departments furnish a report to the Clerk of the Legislature on how to improve access to Spanish speaking employees, and Spanish language literature from their department to ensure that our County resources are accessible to as many people as possible. After we receive the reports, we can further refine County policies and procedures to improve our operation in this regard. This is a good first step, but certainly not the last step to make sure this important segment of our population feels at home.

Let's turn our attention to our most important responsibility as a Legislature, the Ulster County Budget. As a former Chairman, I have held the responsibility to sign the deeds from the tax sale, selling one person's property to someone else because they just couldn't afford to pay their taxes. This unfortunate duty has given me an even more sober perspective on the use of taxpayer funds.

With this ever in the forefront of my mind, I want to discuss what I see as a growing concern since I have served on the Legislature, and that is the increasing number and dollar amount of legislative program appropriations that are added to the budget during our review, and the lack of policies and procedures to evaluate either efficacy, or even if the taxpayers are receiving the base services that are being advertised. I am going to be working with colleagues from both sides of the political aisle to create new schedules and standards for Legislative Program Appropriations that will include a firm deadline prior to the budget Consultants report for any additional programs or funding increases, the requirement of a fully executed contract before any money is disbursed, and the requirement of a detailed follow-up report from the organization on the taxpayer's return on investment. I think we should be as critical of the programs our colleagues propose as we are of those that are suggested by the County Executive's Office.

The third piece of policy that I would like to highlight this evening is the extension of the term of Ulster County Legislator from two years to four years. Much of the first two years of a new County Legislator is getting up to speed. There are so many departments in the County, each with its own intricacies and struggles, it can be hard to properly familiarize yourself with even the departments underneath the committees that you are assigned to, let alone the whole operation before it is time to run for re-election. A four year term would allow more time for policymaking and collaboration and less time on politics and punditry. In addition, a four year term would be the cheapest, most effective manner of campaign finance reform requiring no taxpayer investment, and cutting in half the campaign funds that are spent on legislative races. It is truly a win-

win for the taxpayers, and it's my hope that you all join me in offering the voters the opportunity to vote on this in November.

Finally, one thing that we have noticed this year and in previous years, if a Legislator is accused or convicted of ethics violations, misdemeanors or misconduct of any kind, the Legislative Body as a whole has no recourse to discipline the offender, or to protect the taxpayers and residents from that Legislator's misconduct having a negative effect on their government or their lives. To that end, I am going to be working with my caucus, and any others who would like to join us, in crafting new rules that will allow the Legislature to take any action within State Law to ensure that misconduct of any kind by Legislators in or out of this building will not be tolerated. I was encouraged to hear in a newspaper interview yesterday that Chairwoman Bartels is interested in doing something this year in the form of the crafting of a code of conduct for the Legislature! I eagerly await an invitation to the table to accomplish this in a bipartisan manner as befits our honorable body. I think that would be a good first step, but more will need to be done to ensure justice for the people of Ulster County.

Folks, we are privileged to come here to represent our communities, and our Constituents. They want us to work together for the greater good. They want us to compromise whenever we can and disagree only when we must. We should treat each other with respect without lobbing baseless accusations and innuendo. We should care more about the policies we pass, than who's idea they were. We should celebrate seven consecutive years of tax reductions and unprecedented investments in infrastructure instead of inventing new ways to slow down the process.

Thirteen years ago the voters of Ulster County elected to go in a brand new direction when they enacted the Charter. I'm sure we can all find things in it that we would like to see differently, but I know that the benefits FAR outweigh the negatives. I pledge today that the Republican Caucus is ready willing and able to bridge the deep partisan divide that has been thrust into the Legislature and continue our good work together to make Ulster County the best place in the world to live, work, and raise a family!