

**MAJORITY LEADER ADDRESS**

Legislator Jonathan R. Heppner

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Thank you, Chairwoman Bartels, and thank you for your strong leadership.

I also want to recognize our dedicated staff and the engaged members of the public here tonight.

Minority Leader Ronk -- I look forward to continuing to work together as we have proven to do over the past 3 years.

The same goes for my fellow legislators.

While preparing this address, I have thought back on our successes and challenges, and one thing is certain. . .

That what we have accomplished, and what we have overcome, has been done together as a body.

Not because of one legislator. . . or because of one side of the aisle.

I urge for that to continue.

I will repeat what has already been said -- these are unfamiliar times in county government.

However, the people of Ulster County expect, and deserve, for us to function and deliver results and not be swept away by politics.

There will be plenty of opportunities for that on the campaign trail.

But while we are on this floor, and sitting in committee, it is our responsibility and duty to act in the best, and only, interests of this county.

This will also be dependent on us continuing to work with our partners in the Executive Office, as co-equals.

I want to acknowledge acting-Executive Reiter and the Executive staff for their efforts during this transitional period.

To the Democratic Caucus, I'm thankful and proud to have the opportunity to serve as your Majority Leader.

I am able to do so with confidence because of the strengths each one of you brings to this job.

While the length of our caucus meetings may cause a laugh and a few eye rolls -- it is proof of our eagerness to ask tough questions, desire to best educate ourselves on the issues, and our shared goal to make the best decisions - each month - on behalf of those we represent.

Our strength is our different viewpoints and willingness to fight for our values.

The Democratic Caucus brings a diverse depth of life experiences, including educators, clergy, medical degrees, business owners and environmental leaders.

In the coming year, we will strive to make sure that the daily business of county government moves forward with consistency and effectiveness.

Our greatest duty will be to again work with our partners in government to deliver a responsible and impactful budget on behalf of the taxpayers, local communities and those who rely on the many crucial services provided by the county.

In order to best to achieve this, the Majority is committed to an in-depth, inclusive and transparent budgetary process.

We remain dedicated to Ulster County being an environmental leader and building on our past successes.

This includes putting forth a comprehensive solid waste management plan that truly looks to the future, policies that continue to do our part to reduce the use of environmentally harmful plastics and that the County embraces leading green practices and technology in our many projects.

We find ourselves in an important time where long-needed justice reforms are front and center both nationally and locally.

We look forward to working with Sheriff Juan Figueroa -- who I want to acknowledge for the time he has already put in to both listen to and educate members of the legislature and the Law Enforcement and Public Safety Committee

-- to working collaboratively to support our local enforcement, keep our communities safe and ensure that our local justice system fairly addresses the rights and needs of all.

While recent reports show that unemployment rates in the Hudson Valley, including Ulster County, continue to be reduced, we must not sit idle.

It is crucial that we seek creative and smart policies, and investments in economic development to grow our local economy and create opportunities for our residents -- especially in communities that continue to struggle.

Doing so is dependent upon our ability as a county - especially through the Legislature's Economic Development Committee, the Office of Economic Development and the IDA - to come together and work collectively in the best interests of our businesses and communities.

Further, the Democratic Caucus continues to push for reforms to best improve this body and earn the public's trust in us.

This includes the need for strong legislation to prevent pay-to-play and self-imposed campaign reforms that limits the influence of money in our elections and creates more opportunities for individuals to run for office.

We will also look at a proposal put forth by our colleagues in the Republican Caucus to reform our current ethics committee to guarantee its independence and ability to ensure good government.

The number of challenges before Ulster County are many, however, we are fortunate to be in a strong position to address them.

And there is much to address . . .

Affordable housing remains a struggle for so many both young and old in our community.

The number of school children on reduced lunch programs continues to grow while working to reduce homelessness is crucial.

We must persist in our efforts to address the constant and evolving scourge of addiction, especially with opioids and heroin, in addition to providing and expanding needed addiction and mental health services.

The Democratic Caucus is ready to work together, with our colleagues here, and leaders throughout the County, to face our challenges and achieve our common goals.

In doing so, let us choose dialogue over drama.

Respectful debate over personal attack.

And again, results over politics.

Thank you.