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CHAIR'S ADDRESS

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Good evening, members of the Legislature, Majority Leader Heppner, Minority Leader Ronk, honored guests and citizens. It is an honor to stand before you today as your elected Chair. More than that, it is a pleasure to finally see all of you in person.

Two years ago this month, the first case of COVID-19 in the United States was confirmed in New York. Within a month, New York state would report more cases than any country in the world. The unthinkable became thinkable. The world slowed and we locked ourselves inside.

Businesses shuttered. Overdoses hit record highs. And in New York State, nearly 70,000 people would lose their lives to COVID, including 360 Ulster County residents. They were our friends, our neighbors, our family. It has been an extraordinarily difficult time.

While I promise I won't stay focused on our recent past for much longer, I do think it's important to level set. We learn from our experiences. We are changed by them. COVID made me appreciate small things that I may have taken for granted—dinner with friends, a stranger's smile, and my time with you. Not on zoom but here in person. I am grateful to be together again.

On that note, we welcome eight new members—including two legislators returning to our body. They bring with them a breadth of skill and a wealth of talent. Among them—a farmer and community organizer, a special education teacher, the founder of a local nonprofit and economic development organization who is also its head chef, a government affairs and communications specialist who now lends those skills to his family's business, two small business owners, a physician, and a documentary filmmaker and professor.

Without a doubt, this is the most diverse legislative body that I have had the privilege to serve in. I look forward to working with each of you and learning from you. Together, with our returning members, there is nothing that we cannot accomplish.

While we faced uncertainty through the pandemic, New York State is experiencing a robust recovery. Eight of us just returned from the NYSAC Convention in Albany where we discussed the State Budget, and the fact that for the first time in history, there are no gaps.

In April 2020, the State enacted a budget that projected a \$69 billion four-year deficit. Headed into this budget cycle, the State is projecting a \$16.4 billion four-year surplus.

Similarly, Ulster County's financial state is strong. Thanks to sales taxes revenues that exceeded even the exceeded projections and federal stimulus, we are in a unique position. Together, we can deliver both real relief and transformational change.

And this moment could not come at a better time because while our current financial situation is strong, there are many among us that are not so fortunate. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to affect permanent, lasting, and structural change.

Under the leadership of Legislator Peter Criswell and Deputy Tom Corcoran, the ARPA special committee is undertaking the important task of prioritizing the allocation of the \$34 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds that the county will receive. Working closely with the Executive's office, including Deputy Executive Kelly and the Resilience team, the newly formed ARPA committee will evaluate project proposals before they come to standing committees and the full legislature for consideration.

On our agenda tonight, we will consider three ARPA projects. As I have stated many times, there is more need than there are funds. Though we may not always agree on individual proposals, through the ARPA committee we will work to build consensus and we will deliver to the people of Ulster County.

One issue that I think we all can agree upon is *housing*. I say the one word only, because the issues are many. I'd like to take a moment to read to you some excerpts from Ulster County's Rental Housing Survey put forward by the Ulster County Planning Board.

"For subsidized housing, vacancy rates are virtually zero (0.36%). Waiting lists are extensive and in quite a few instances the waiting time information is unavailable. When a public housing authority will not release waiting time information because it "does not want to discourage applicants," it is apparent that there is a need for more housing.

"The previous two surveys presented data that suggested that the housing cost burden, particularly, the affordability of rental housing, is a concern that warrants the notice of policymakers in Ulster County. The data from this year's survey reinforce that concern yet again.

"Low-income wage earners, single-earner households, the elderly and entry-level workers will have difficulty finding affordable housing or remaining in their current housing situation. The ramifications from an economic development standpoint may include employers struggling to fill entry-level positions or keeping those employees that they now have."

These statements were made twenty-two years ago in the 2000 Survey—twenty-two years ago. The most recent survey is more dire. Rents are up while renter income is down. Waiting lists number in the hundreds and are measured by years. County residents are financially burdened by housing costs. The wealth gap is widening. Hundreds of Ulster County residents are homeless.

COVID has exacerbated an already untenable situation. Home values in Ulster County are rising faster than anywhere else in New York State. At a budget presentation at the NYSAC Convention, Ulster was again singled out for extreme increases in housing values. According to the Washington Post, Ulster County (Kingston specifically) is second only to Boise, Idaho in the nation as far as home price growth.

We are at a crossroads. There is no doubt that this market benefits sellers, and along with them real estate agents and, to a certain extent, the economy. But what about the people who are already struggling to make rent? What about our kids and seniors on fixed income? What about our neighbors? Will we recognize them in two years?

We are working to address these issues, but we must do more. Tonight, we consider the purchase of a local boarding house to create temporary housing for families. Last month we funded a water/sewer connection in support of the transition of the former Quality Inn to 100 units of supportive housing. In the coming months, we will be discussing the demolition of the former county jail in order to make way for affordable and senior housing on Golden Hill. Even so, we must do more.

The Ulster County Housing Action Plan recommended a dedicated source of funding for housing initiatives in the county. The time is now. In advance of the 2023 budget, the Health, Human Services and Housing Committee, along with the Ways and Means Committee, led by Legislators Walter and Gavaris, will create a policy for annual appropriations directed to housing purposes, along with funding sources for the allocation.

In addition, next month I will re-introduce a resolution appointing a board of directors as the first step in our application to the New York State Land Bank Program with the goal of creating a countywide land bank. I look forward to working with you all to advance this legislation and to continue to consider solutions to this growing crisis.

Like housing, we face an increased need for health and human services. Under the leadership of Vice Chair Eve Walter and Deputy Craig Lopez, the newly structured Health, Human Services and Housing Committee, expanded its purview. Last year, Legislators Walter and Criswell introduced legislation committing to the creation of an Ulster County Crisis Stabilization Center along with locally sited respite homes. This is soon to be a reality.

The purpose of a Crisis Stabilization Center is to provide for those individuals with a known or suspected mental health condition or substance use disorder. Observation, evaluation, care, and treatment are all made available in a safe and comfortable environment. It is a community-based service that responds to a critical and urgent need. In Ulster County, we feel that need especially acutely.

As we all know, Westchester Medical converted inpatient mental health and chemical dependency and detoxification beds to make way for the COVID surge. To date, those services have not been restored. Our residents deserve quality behavioral health services. While the Ulster County Crisis Stabilization Center won't replace those beds, it will deliver on that promise. It will provide immediate assistance to those in crisis, right here in Ulster County.

Law enforcement has long been the front lines of engagement for issues of mental and behavioral health, as well as diseases of addiction. Under the leadership of Sheriff Juan Figueroa, Ulster County has received national awards for its ORACLE program. Awards tell only part of the story. ORACLE is about a foundational shift in how we address and treat addiction and overdose.

Like the nation, Ulster County is gripped by an opioid epidemic. Overdoses surged in 2020 after a decline in 2019. The Law Enforcement and Public Safety Committee, under the leadership of Legislator Abe Uchitelle and Deputy Gina Hansut, will continue to work with the Sheriff to support innovative solutions and community partnerships.

Later this month, counties across the nation will receive the first payment in the settlement of the opioid civil lawsuits that began in New York State with Suffolk County. These funds will be dedicated to prevention, treatment, and harm reduction. While money will never bring back those that we lost, it will impact our ability to change the future. I look forward to working together to invest in that change.

Like many of my colleagues in the Legislature, I am committed to addressing the solid waste crisis that looms large. We have for too long been complacent and paid to have our waste transported miles away—240 miles away—at a rising financial and environmental cost. It cannot continue.

The 2020 Local Solid Waste Management Plan, crafted with input from the Ulster County Legislature, calls for a feasibility study to recognize all costs associated with permitting, designing, and construction of a landfill. Even saying the word “landfill” results in backlash. We are all aware of the series of “Not In My Backyard” resolutions passed by local municipalities.

I’m here to say that I understand that fear, but fear cannot keep us from the conversation. It is critical to get stakeholders to the table. Our failure will impact every locality—increased costs to the County will mean increased costs to the towns, villages, and city. We are absolutely in this together.

The Recycling Oversight Committee, under the leadership of Legislator Laura Petit, began the work of drafting a Zero Waste Implementation Plan. That work has continued with Legislator Manna Jo Greene and representatives from the public, the Resource Recovery Agency, and the County Department of the Environment. The plan, once complete, will be delivered to the Legislature for its consideration and action. If followed, it will significantly reduce the amount of residual municipal solid waste and with that reduction, so will it reduce the necessary size of a local or regional landfill. This is important and painstaking work, but it will be completed this year.

One recommendation from that work is included in the 2022 capital plan and will be before the Legislature in the coming months—a feasibility study for the John Wackman Reuse Center. This is an example of Ulster County’s continuing environmental leadership and just one of many important initiatives addressing the climate crisis that will be undertaken by this legislative body through nearly every standing committee. As Legislator Greene so rightly reminds us, we must do everything we can to contribute to the solution.

Speaking of solutions, the Economic Development committee has been reorganized to include education, arts, and agriculture—three critical components of economic development in Ulster County.

For the first time in more than 20 years, we highlight agriculture in our committee structure. Under the leadership of Legislator Brian Cahill and Deputy Herb Litts, and along with our partners at Cornell Cooperative Extension and Ulster County Soil and Water, we will work to identify the needs of our agriculture community—including the development pressure placed on working farmlands by increasing property values.

Working farms are the backbone of this county. We are identified by our orchards and our CSAs. While they create scenic vistas and Instagram opportunities—they feed us. We will look to this committee and our partners to establish ways of supporting agritourism and identifying connections for farm to table, farm to school, and ideally, even farm to jail.

Additionally, I call upon the Economic Development Committee to identify a permanent funding structure for the Arts—a long time driver of our economy. This was proposed years ago in the executive budget, and while there was conceptual approval, it stalled over a disagreement on authority. As the Legislature, it is time to assume our role and set the policy.

As to policy—we are nearing completion on an update to the County Ethics Law, thanks to the dedicated work of the Laws and Rules Committee, led by Majority Leader Heppner and Deputy

Kevin Roberts. Working closely with Minority Leader Ronk, over the course of years, this is a true example of bipartisan effort. I thank you all for your diligence and your partnership.

It's important to acknowledge that we are sitting here today in the context of very significant challenges to democracy both at home and abroad. I want to share with you my commitment that it is the role of the legislature to represent and integrate a wide diversity of voices in our society and to do the people's business in a manner that is both respectful of that diversity and productive as a result.

If I have learned anything in my long time serving here, it is that we must build a consensus. The stakes have never been higher. COVID exposed our weaknesses. But it also showed our strengths. It revealed how deeply we depend on one another. It reminded us of what is really most important. It redefined what is essential—from workers to wants. Like so many communities, our county is at a crossroads. The decisions we make today will have a lasting impact on what Ulster County looks like in twenty years.

Working in partnership with Executive Ryan, Sheriff Figueroa, Comptroller Gallagher, County Clerk Postupack, and District Attorney Clegg, we will succeed in delivering a more just Ulster County, expanding our services without burdening our base. To my fellow legislators, once again, I extend to you my respect, my commitment to listen to your concerns, and my gratitude for giving me the opportunity to serve as your chair. I look forward to working with, and seeing, each of you in the coming year. Strongest together, we will rise to the challenges ahead.

Thank you very much.