

# STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

**Delivered By**  
**Genesee County Legislature Chair**  
**Mary Pat Hancock**

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7PM

Old Courthouse Legislature Chambers

Good Evening and greetings to the Members of the Genesee County Legislature, County Manager Gsell, County Attorney Rizzo, and those who are in chambers tonight. It is a privilege to present the State of the County 2009. Allow me to call special attention to our newest Legislator, Robert Radley, who took office just a few weeks ago and represents District Seven as he deliberates on County wide issues. He will be a great addition to our Legislature.

Last year, about this time, we, in County Government, were anticipating a fiscal crisis of undetermined proportions. The struggle of our state's economy was expected to have an impact, and on a national level, the economy appeared to be in free fall. Now our upstate economy never enjoyed the peaks of economic development and sharply increased property values, but it appeared clear that we would share the downside of both...although slightly behind the curve and if past history was to be believed...the down curve would last longer. Therefore our 2009 actions were focused on limiting any unnecessary spending, on streamlining service delivery, and on planning our revenues most conservatively. Our goals were very clear, we needed to avoid raising the property tax burden on our citizens and we had to continue to deliver excellent services. We knew that the stimulus money flowing to us from the federal government had a two year stretch, after that only state program reform could address the growing budget gap, but we were determined to do what we could at the local level.

We did accomplish our goals...the tax rate did not increase and services flowed without interruption. But did we make surviving 2009 without a shocking diminution of services, higher tax rates, and/or personnel cuts look too easy? I assure you that it was not. In addition to the known and announced reduction in state aid, we had many fiscal surprises, none of them good...they ranged from delayed payment for mandated and already provided services, to lower sales tax revenues and to retroactive cuts in reimbursements. These continue to plague us. I am not an alarmist, this County has good and varied resources and will survive, but not by hiding its' head in the sand...the fiscal crisis is far from over. We cannot conduct business in the same old way...so I ask for your understanding and cooperation as the Legislature continues to examine the way county services are delivered. The process takes time and effort...and may try the patience of some. Starting with the consolidation of senior services at the present Office for Aging, the Water Project, the consolidation of County Dispatch Services, the Ambulance Service...the list of metamorphosed county wide services goes on. None were accomplished without a certain amount of angst and all of them continue to demand careful attention and the continued collaboration of many municipalities and agencies. Good and cost effective methods to deliver services are the result of hard, painstaking work. It is a complex and changing world that we live in and one that demands the best effort from all of us. This evening I am highlighting a few County department efforts.

Our election commissioners anticipate complete usage of the new ballot marking devices utilizing paper ballots during 2010. The Board of Elections selected the Town of Bethany to help run a pilot project using only the new ballot marking devices and it went very well. The ensuing audit proved the method extremely accountable. This change is

in response to a federal and state mandate changing the method of voting to a higher level of accessibility. We shuddered at the expense, but grant funding has so far provided for this change. Thanks to the election inspectors and to voters for their great participation and cooperation...it made all the difference.

Speaking of elections and voting, during 2009 an Ad Hoc Committee was formed by the Legislature to discuss and examine the optimum length of County Legislator Terms, the possible benefits of staggering those terms, and the ideal number of Legislators for our County. The topics appeared timely and are coincidentally being examined across the state with varying outcomes. The Committee has drafted their report and it was delivered to me on January 20<sup>th</sup> of this year. The Legislature will discuss the findings of the report during a Committee of the Whole meeting as soon as that can be arranged. Thanks to all the committee members for their dedication and hard work...and to Carolyn Pratt, the Clerk of the Legislature who assisted the committee.

Our Public Nursing Home, as you may know, is unable to sustain itself without increasingly large contributions from the County's General Fund. (...) Present projections indicate an annual cash gap approaching \$4.4 million by 2014. Each Medicaid bed in that home costs \$240 a day to maintain and our reimbursement for each bed is \$160. We have been doing the math and the daily gap adds up and it is not small change. NYS and the Federal Government remain inflexible regarding long term care institutional reimbursements (Public Nursing Homes funding). This is a heavily regulated environment with rapidly increasing pension and health care costs for our workforce. This combination of shrinking revenues and escalating expenses require this county like many others in NYS to perform due diligence on the future. We have studied the matter intensely, established an ad hoc committee several years ago and implemented many of their recommendations. We have streamlined The Home's financial system to insure the maximum reimbursement per bed. We offer a dynamite program and our services are top notch, but even as we worked to make it the best operation we could, the rules were shifting under our feet...let me repeat the obvious...costs were increasing and reimbursements were decreasing. The gap was widening. Temporarily, we are receiving, through the stimulus package, federal dollars which boost our revenues. They are still not sufficient to sustain the Public Nursing Homes without increasing county assistance. And we must look forward to the reality of the end of stimulus funding. Then what? Continuing the status quo is a dangerous choice. Who was it that said..."the same solutions...never solve new problems no matter how carefully they are applied." We continue to take responsible steps to answer this "then what" question. We, the Legislature, determined that focused professional help was the next step. We sent out a Request for Proposals...for a consultant to examine our NH operation and provide several options. We do not know the results of the study...we have not chosen the consultant to do the study as yet...but it is a process that will give us a different perspective. We look forward to that assistance. Providing excellent care for our frail and/or elderly citizens has been a long standing "safety net" service of Genesee County Government. To provide that excellent care in an affordable manner is our continuing goal.

The reorganization of our Treasurer's Office and the Office of Real Property is another example of our efforts to streamline and right size County Government. The retirement of a long time valued employee, Lori Cleveland, made this the appropriate time to shift responsibilities around a bit. So far it appears to be working very well, but we monitor the situation to insure that the municipalities and others continue to receive the same fine service.

Despite a worldwide economic recession, the GCEDC and GGLDC participated in 23 projects and enabled \$50 Million of investment in Genesee County during 2009. Two major construction projects began in 2009 and will be completed in 2010. The Upstate MedTech Centre will be completed in 2010. It will house GCC's Nursing Program, UMMC's Physical Therapy Program, the GCEDC's Offices and will also provide low cost space to emerging life sciences companies so that they can grow and thrive right here in our community. Phase I infrastructure for the Genesee Valley Agri-Business Park, a 200 acre park dedicated to Food Processing and Renewable Energy, will be completed in 2010. The Park is jointly owed by the GCEDC and Farm Credit of WNY and is the only park of its kind in New York State. It is a particularly appropriate focus for economic expansion in Genesee County as agriculture remains a cornerstone of our County's economy. It is a key reason the County Legislature remains committed to continual support of the Agricultural District Program and the Farmland Protection Plan insuring long term protection of the County's agricultural base and especially the preservation of prime farmland. At this time individual towns in our county are wrestling with this crucial balancing act. The needs of economic growth and the preservation of prime farmland must both be addressed in order to maintain Genesee County's unique economic base. In an effort to plan for all of the many needs the future may hold, the County has begun its fourth scheduled review/revision of the County's Smart Growth Plan originally adopted in 2001. This Plan is an important, integral component of the County-wide Water System and is used to help guide County land use decisions. It is a guide which respects local control and is used across the state as a good example of a tool to prevent sprawl and strip development.

The County's Comprehensive Plan Steering Committee, representing the Ten Focus Groups, made its Annual Monitoring Report to the County Legislature in September. The timing of the presentation made it possible for the Legislature to have this vital information as they completed the budget process. In addition during 2010, the Steering Committee will begin an overall review of the process with an eye towards making recommendations to the County Legislature as to how the ten year old process may be improved and become even more inclusive.

Our Social Service Commissioner reports that despite the poor economy and high unemployment rates of 2009, they have maintained their lowest level of on-going cash assistance cases in many, many years. However, the number of our county residents who have turned to DSS for supportive assistance such as Medicaid, Food Stamps and Home Energy Assistance continues to grow. This trend demonstrates that the citizens of Genesee County are still "working people" who need extra help these days to provide for their families and make ends meet. The stress placed on our families during 2009 has

shown up in other ways at DSS. Most disconcerting is the increased number of Child Protective Services reports requiring investigation. It's not an easy task to raise children in the best of circumstances, and the job becomes even harder when so many of our residents are struggling with their financial difficulties.

Office for the Aging continues to reach out to meet the needs of our growing senior population; and, through NY Connects, to provide assistance to younger disabled individuals as well. Over the next 20 years, the number of county residents age 60 and over will increase by 55% – Office for the Aging is working closely with planning groups such as the Genesee County Comprehensive Planning Committee, the Long Term Care Task Force and Office for the Aging Advisory Council to explore the “Livable Community” concept and see how it can best be applied in our county as we deal with housing, transportation, healthcare, economic security as well as other areas of community living.

Despite the ongoing dismal fiscal woes of New York State the Youth Bureau has an optimistic and hopeful vision for 2010...an appropriately young and positive approach... that includes a continued broadening of their horizons. Collaboration and consolidation are their keys. Our very successful Reality Check Youth Action program will continue, due to the new relationship with neighboring Wyoming County. This strategic addition to our application maintained this program for the GOW counties, when many counties programs have closed due to cut backs. A formal expansion mirroring this three county arrangement is also planned for our Ameri Corps Program. Orleans County has engaged the Youth Bureau to operate their Youth Bureau for another year based on the quality service provided in 2009.

The significant growth in the number of Veterans from various conflicts filing disability claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs, combined with the increasing complexity of those claims has increased the pending claims inventory with the VA, and continues to tax the resources of our Agency. They continue to strive to provide the complete and comprehensive services all of our Genesee County Veterans deserve.

Genesee County's Public Health Department continues to promote health, wellness and disease prevention, to protect the environment, to advocate, inspect, intervene, and commit to the principals of public health practices in order to achieve optimal health for our citizens.

During 2009 we were far more aware of this department and their direct services as they efficiently utilized the Emergency Preparedness grant funding to implement the ongoing vaccination program addressing seasonal flu and the H1N1 virus. If you haven't taken advantage of these opportunities, and over 6000 of our citizens have, it isn't too late, there are still clinics being scheduled.

Environmental Health is in year two of a three year grant from the Greater Rochester Health Foundation to implement electronic record keeping utilizing GIS and GPS technology for the individual water well and sewage disposal system programs. What a useful tool this promises with many practical applications.

Our Health Department and Home Care of Rochester are working cooperatively to transition certified Home Health Agency and the Long Term Home Health Care Program to Home Care of Rochester. The Board of Health is to be congratulated for their decision to transition this program...it made good programmatic and fiscal sense. Completion of this transition is scheduled for early spring.

Genesee County's Mental Health Clinic will be following several state initiatives/actions very closely in 2010! These include Clinic Restructuring (the new rate setting/treatment methodology), State Licensing amendments, Timothy's Law (AOT), Corporate Compliance, Medicaid Managed Care, and the effects of any impending Federal Health Care reform on the number of patients becoming eligible for Mental Health Services. This will coincide with reviewing/analyzing over all service delivery, staffing, space utilization, and general operation costs. Their goal is to anticipate factors which would affect the delivery of quality Mental Health Services in Genesee County and thus be proactive.

Some departments within our system more directly address public service and the maintenance of County infrastructure. In 2010, the Genesee County Highway Department continues to move forward with municipal cooperation on all projects, making the best use of county and municipal equipment and manpower. The county will use best practices and new materials to maintain our highway and bridge network to provide the same level of service during a tight fiscal environment. The county is able to take advantage of a state grant to erect additional hangars at the airport in an effort to modernize landside facilities. The Genesee County Park continues to offer recreational and educational opportunities for all residents through interpretive and outreach programs. These are much appreciated in these tight fiscal times, when vacations tend to focus on close to home venues.

The Office of Emergency Management Service, in conjunction with Emergency Management Services from Orleans and Wyoming Counties worked with a consultant assigned to evaluate the relatively inefficient, low band paging system currently in existence. They now have recommendations for a future paging system(s) for the three counties. The GOW consortium is pursuing an Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant (IECGP) to fund the deployment of this new system. The Office of Emergency Management Services continues to support County-Wide Volunteer Fire and EMS Recruitment and Retention programs and to pursue grant opportunities focused on a sustainable recruitment campaign.

Regarding law enforcement, the Sheriff's Office will continue to provide public safety and corrections to the citizens of Genesee County. By sharing resources and consolidating emergency dispatch services, they are able to provide outstanding public safety services at a conservative cost to the taxpayers. Meanwhile, the District Attorney's Office applied for and received a \$15,000.00 grant to purchase video recording equipment, to be located at our County's police agencies. This equipment allows recorded interviews of suspects in designated cases and thus strengthens the prosecution of such matters. We look forward to the completion and implementation of this project in 2010.

The ever expanding universe of problem solving Courts in Genesee County has come to include a nascent Mental Health Court, to be administered as a part of the Batavia City Court. New York State's Mental Health Courts seek to improve public safety, court operations and the well-being of people with mental illness by linking them to court-supervised, community-based treatment when appropriate. As the Mental Health Court continues to develop in 2010, the District Attorney's Office will prosecute cases before the Court consistent with their mission of providing for the health, safety and welfare of all citizens of Genesee County.

The Genesee County Public Defenders Office continues to experience increasing caseloads attributable to the continuing economic downturn. The task is daunting; however, some new programs such as the veteran mentoring program in Drug Court and the Mental Health Court do provide new opportunities to assist clients with positive life changes. This department remains committed to their clients, their families, and their communities as they address the critical issues circumscribing their lives.

Probation services throughout New York State and Genesee County remains the most cost effective alternative to incarceration for nearly 130,000 individuals across the state and more importantly for 700 adults and juveniles in Genesee County. Realize that as a mandated function with strong NYS oversight, state funding remains critical. However the statutory reimbursement to Probation Departments is strongly impacted by the NYS budget. It is anticipated, at this time, that NYS will reimburse counties at a 16% rate; which is far short of the 50% reimbursement required by statute.

The Central Services Department, including Purchasing continues to address the constant challenges to reduce cost and maximize talent and resources within by working with the County Departments as they buy everything from paper to consulting services. The County also offers these joint purchasing opportunities to school districts and many municipalities.

Like the rest of us, Cornell Co Operative Extension, pursues smarter ways of operating. Their focus is on regional opportunities when appropriate and they anticipate a greater dependence on their volunteers to ensure the continuation of research based knowledge which identifies and targets unmet Community needs. They will be making tough choices in order to survive and sustain.

Although there are not any anticipated changes in the Weights & Measures programs for 2010, the department alerts us to the possibility of the first station in Genesee County to dispense the fuel E85...containing 85% ethanol. That might bring some different protocol. Weights and Measures is working very hard to test as many petroleum stations as possible because they are used by the average consumer, and with the price of fuel everyone is watching the bottom line.

In the past twelve months, the Job Development Bureau has seen its training budget double with the distribution of federal Economic Stimulus dollars to Genesee County. We have experienced a 93% increase in the number of customers sponsored for skills training in new career areas, since February 2009. During the first quarter of 2010, we anticipate the majority of our remaining training dollars will be spent. The

unemployment rate rose slightly in Genesee County during the last quarter of 2009, but the emerging trend seems to indicate that area businesses will be gearing up for increases in orders and production during the spring and summer months of 2010. One challenge will be to assist our unemployed customers with re-employment activities as their Unemployment Insurance benefits expire.

The Genesee County History Department programs for 2010 include completing the cataloging of archival records, indexing the World War II notebook binder collection, scanning the photograph collection and the printing of *Genesee County's Famous III – Entertainers*. The Records Center will open its addition and the microfilm lab will continue to generate archival quality film. The County Historian takes the lead in developing a county wide organization to federate all historical organizations within Genesee County and continues to work with neighboring county historians to provide support and educational programs.

Genesee Community College's enrollment hit an all-time record during the fall 2009 semester with 7,208 credit students. All six campus centers, as well as online courses saw increases. Their *Promise Plus* program gave 358 graduating high school seniors the opportunity to attend one or two summer credit bearing college courses tuition-free.

One hundred and thirteen international students were enrolled and an innovative new student exchange program with a prominent Australian college began. Facilities were expanded and upgraded to meet the growing number of students including: The Gymnasium, locker rooms, and an outdoor athletic field, as well as a new soccer/lacrosse field. A new campus center was opened in Lima serving several hundred students and the GCEDC Bruce Holm Med Tech Park is scheduled to open in fall of 2010...allowing them to double their nursing admissions.

By providing business skills training to 12,031 employees, they helped area business organizations improve their productivity and profitability during an economically challenging year. Five hundred and thirty one businesses took advantage of this opportunity with the help of grant funding. Careful stewardship over the College's budget continues... cost per full time equivalent student was 19.4% below the NYS Community College average. The College works diligently to attract external grants and they have been most successful. Recognized nationally for excellence, GCC's vision for 2010 is to continue to provide superior education to their students and to intensify their efforts to support economic development and job training initiatives. Their many ambitious goals support this vision.

It is impossible for me to end this address without acknowledging the impact of this difficult year on our constituents. We relate to the high level of frustration and fear experienced as jobs were lost, retirement funds shrank and health care costs soared. Change was promised in good faith, but no one anticipated the type of change. It is said that the economy is back on track. Genesee County's unemployment is the lowest in the area, but it is still too high, small and large businesses are still struggling. Folks are

having a hard time meeting their financial obligations. We hear you and will continue to do everything possible to contain the costs and support and attract and retain “economy builders”. I hope that you heard me, as I tried to highlight the many county department efforts illustrating these goals. Now I am proposing a few additional considerations, a bit more generic, which are not to be interpreted as empty dreams...they are practical, basic steps to solvency. You will find them presented in various forms over the last several years...supported by NYSAC, business alliances, Chambers of Commerce, taxpayer groups and many other state associations...but never heeded. It is time to act.

The way our state budget is assembled and passed must be changed. State legislators must be made mindful of the impact of their actions on local governments and the communities we serve. A few areas require absolute attention:

- 1.) Fiscal discipline-the state should only provide what it can afford. If it can't afford the mandates, then change or reduce them! Counties are the administrative arm of state government delivering state services directly and locally. As an integral part of the system, we deserve to be reimbursed for services provided in a reasonable amount of time-not up to one year or so later.
- 2.) The state should reform the indigent defense program and do away with the maintenance of effort provision which penalizes counties who improve quality of defense while lowering costs.
- 3.) It is all about JOBS. All efforts should focus on a new and improved economic development plan for New York State. Is it impossible? No. Empower local governments, regional governments like counties, individually or acting in groups, to attract and maintain jobs to turn the state around. Counties should have a say about what industries contribute to their communities. For instance, a major emphasis on agri-business, the backbone of NYS, would stress local resources and offer stability in our capricious global market. Technology is another focal point. We have a framework to do this job, WIRED (Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development) linked SUNY and Community Colleges with economic development agencies, the state and the counties. WIRED convened the college presidents with county leaders and state officials and their sessions and subsequent meetings about regional economic development strategies were productive. There were positive changes in this region counter to the dire predictions reflecting the recession and hopefully lasting networks were formed.
- 4.) The present national health legislation may penalize New York State and ultimately that would be felt by county tax payers. But let's hope reform of this mammoth conglomeration of health care dollars and inefficiency, even fraud and abuse will be addressed. Between education and Medicaid, almost the entire state general fund is consumed, surely reform, cost containment and prevention in each program can help corral our NYS Deficit and the trickle down impact on our local public sector entities-Counties, Cities, Towns, Villages and schools would be positive. The federal legislation does extend FMAP stimulus for our Medicaid expenses until June 2011 and that does help temporarily. But time is running out for real positive reform.
- 5.) We again renew the call to realign pre-school special education with school district responsibility without shifting the cost to schools. The state wide study committee worked diligently for over a year and came up with this same conclusion. School districts have the administrative and programmatic structure to deal with PK. Counties do not.

In 2010 and beyond , Genesee County like all its colleagues across NYS will be challenged to provide Core services at reasonable tax rates as the State struggles with its' own deficit and lack of a long range plan. Genesee County will continue its' proactive, plan full approach to future challenges and opportunities to right size and restructure County Government and services in the best interest of our taxpayers and citizens.

Now...let me remind everyone that in April the National Census will be updated! It is crucial to return your form...take the 10 minutes to be counted. So much depends on the data received from this one effort. Do what you can to make this an accurate count.

Thanks to all who helped with information for this presentation...including all county departments. Thanks to Jay Gsell and Carolyn Pratt for their patient editing skills, and certainly I want to thank you all for coming, for your kind attention, and for all you do, especially the quality of your daily work which makes Genesee an outstanding County.