



CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

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PAUL M. WENDEL, JR.

County Executive

2024 State of the County Address

Paul M. Wendel, Jr.

County Executive

Slide 1 – Introduction

Good evening... It is great to see you all here tonight!

Mr. Chairman...County Legislators... Department Heads... and fellow Chautauqua County employees and residents. Tonight I am here to present the 2024 Chautauqua County State of the County address.

I stand before you this evening with a sense of pride and determination to deliver a concise summary of the most important values our County provides. As we reflect on 2023, we had a year full of opportunities to form better ways to achieve goals. Our continued dedication and commitment for our County shares a vision for a prosperous future.

Slide 2 – Chautauqua County: A Look Back to 2023

As we embark on this journey through the State of the County Address, let's first cast our gaze back to the achievements and milestones of the past year. Despite economic uncertainties, Chautauqua County saw a surge in business investment, reflecting confidence in our local economy.

We witnessed an expansion in our labor force, driven by strategic workforce development programs and partnerships with higher education, such as SUNY Fredonia and SUNY JCC, as well as, community partners, like the Manufacturing Association of the Southern Tier Dream It Do It Program and P-Tech Academy, this collaboration ensures that our county remains competitive in the evolving job market.

Infrastructure improvements such as the complete streets program that promotes pedestrian and bike traffic in our local communities and continued investments walking, hiking and bike trail access throughout Chautauqua County.

Moreover, I'm proud of the phase 2 expansion of the South and Center Chautauqua Lake Sewer District, as well as, preliminary discussions on phase 3 of the South and Center Lake Sewer District Expansion, which will complete public sewers around Chautauqua Lake. This showcases our dedication to improving infrastructure in Chautauqua County.

Slide 3 – Fiscally Conservative Governance

As we explore the foundations of our county's success, it's imperative to highlight our steadfast commitment to fiscal conservatism. The principles of prudent budgeting, tax relief, and strategic financial management have guided our county to a solid fiscal position.

The 2024 budget reflects our shared strategy and vision: Chautauqua County continues to provide services and programs of the highest quality while maintaining a budget at or below the state-mandated tax cap for the fourth consecutive year. Despite challenges such as unfunded mandates and national economic conditions, our commitment to fiscal responsibility remains unwavering.

Our recently completed Housing Market Study revealed challenges related to housing, primarily as they relate to affordability. As such, the County of Chautauqua Industrial Development Agency (CCIDA) and Chautauqua County Partnership for Economic Growth (CCPEG) have been working proactively with municipalities to develop multiple projects that will provide affordable, safe, and efficient workforce housing throughout the County. These include a project in Silver Creek, several projects in Dunkirk, a project in Jamestown, and a project in Westfield.

Thanks to steady growth and fiscally conservative budgeting, Chautauqua County's property tax rate stands at \$6.91 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation—a notable 89 cents below last year's rate and the lowest since 1982. Since taking office, we've reduced the property tax rate by \$1.51, providing significant relief to our residents.

Maintaining a robust fund balance has been central to our fiscal management strategy. Our bipartisan fiscal plan, unanimously endorsed, mandates a general fund balance between 5-15%, guarding against unforeseen expenses and preserving essential services. We remain conservative in our sales tax revenue estimates, this allows flexibility for one-time increases without resorting to property tax hikes.

Our ongoing investment in the New York State municipal trust remains steadfast. As pioneers in this endeavor, our dedication to optimizing our financial assets has proven fruitful. Notably, our strategic allocation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds has generated a remarkable \$1 million addition to the county's finances. Specifically, \$800,000 was used in the 2024 County Budget and remaining funds, allows us to return money to the ARPA projects fund, thus allowing us to expand ARPA projects for the county.

Our fiscally conservative budgeting has cultivated a strong economy, fostering a business-friendly environment and ensuring the continued prosperity of Chautauqua County.

Slide 4 – Record Business Investment

In 2023, the CCIDA embarked on 34 projects in alignment with our county's Economic Development Strategy, resulting in an impressive \$842 million investment in Chautauqua County. These strategic endeavors are projected to yield 574 permanent jobs within 15 different local industries, while preserving 2,314 existing positions.

Noteworthy projects include the \$452 million Cummins Engine Internal Expansion and the \$250+ million Wells Ice Cream Expansion, demonstrating a commitment to industry diversification and expansion within our region.

Furthermore, key acquisitions such as the purchase of Weber Knapp by local ownership and the establishment of a Northeastern US Distribution Center by Refresco at the Conagra/CCIDA Facility in Dunkirk highlight our focus on fostering local entrepreneurship and attracting external investment.

In parallel, the Chautauqua County Partnership for Economic Growth advanced 26 priority projects closely aligned with our Economic Development Strategy. Providing financial and technical support totaling \$459,250, the Partnership catalyzed partner-led initiatives aimed at revitalizing our local economy and promoting long-term strategic investment. The Partnership used \$1.1 million dollars in grant funding, which in turn, was leveraged to create \$28 million dollars for its partners, this played a pivotal role in amplifying the impact of our economic development efforts.

These collaborative endeavors, guided by our county's Economic Development Strategy developed in conjunction with Camoin Associates and community stakeholders, not only strengthen our business ecosystem but also lay the groundwork for sustained economic prosperity and resilience.

The CCIDA has consistently ranked among the top performers in Western New York's Industrial Development Agencies (IDAs) for several years. Continuously securing its position within the top 10 performers statewide, the CCIDA stands out for its remarkable achievements in fostering investment and job growth. This distinguished track record underscores our unwavering commitment to driving economic prosperity and opportunity within Chautauqua County.

Slide 5 – 2024 Investing In Our Future: Building a Vibrant Tomorrow

Since assuming office, investing in the future of Chautauqua County has been my top priority. In 2024, we are taking bold steps to drive economic growth, address population decline, and enhance the quality of life for all residents.

In a strong commitment to address population loss, entrepreneurship and workforce development, the County of Chautauqua Industrial Development Agency (CCIDA) recently launched Live CHQ and Choose CHQ branding campaigns. Designed to showcase Chautauqua County as a premier destination for business, family, and recreation, these campaigns emphasize our strong quality of life indicators, robust outdoor recreation opportunities and welcoming business landscape. With dedicated websites for both initiatives, we aim to attract new businesses, residents, and visitors to our vibrant community.

In line with our commitment to economic expansion, the CCIDA has meticulously analyzed and with the recommendation of Newmark Group, one of the country's leading real estate advisory and services firm, along with support and endorsements from Invest Buffalo Niagara and the State of New York, an industry leader in site selection, we're moving forward with development of a shovel ready site in the Town of Ripley. This new site, spanning 150 acres, represents the second-largest industrial park in the county, is among the largest new industrial parks in WNY and promises significant development potential. With extensive due diligence and strategic negotiations, we are poised to unlock new opportunities for growth and prosperity Chautauqua County, related to warehousing, distribution, logistics, and light manufacturing.

Building on previous initiatives, strategic reactivation projects are advancing across the county. From the revitalization of the White Inn hotel in Fredonia to the redevelopment of key properties in Silver Creek, we are actively repurposing strategic assets to breathe new life into our communities. By leveraging public-private partnerships and targeted investments, we are transforming vacant spaces into vibrant hubs of activity, driving economic revitalization and community development.

In our ongoing commitment to broadband expansion, we've partnered with ECC Technologies to develop a strategic plan for broadband expansion. By identifying over 3,600 underserved locations across the county, we have demonstrated our commitment to bringing broadband to each and every household. We recently finalized contracts with DFT Communications and Charter-Spectrum to complete these efforts. This infrastructure upgrade is crucial for economic development and enhancing residents' quality of life, enabling remote work, better access to services, education, and healthcare. Strategically allocating ARPA funds will enhance Chautauqua County's attractiveness to young professionals who rely on high-speed broadband for their livelihoods.

Slide 6 – Success Speaks Volumes: Our Impact Is Evident

Despite some detractors, let me simply state: what we are achieving is extraordinary.

Over the past four years, Chautauqua County has issued 1,512 new business licenses, with 389 of those granted in 2023 alone. Having personally attended over 75 ribbon cutting celebrations, hosted by the Chautauqua County Chamber of Commerce, it is evident that small business growth continues in Chautauqua County. This is the backbone of our community.

Despite grappling with the unprecedented challenges of high inflation and economic uncertainty, our county remains a beacon for entrepreneurs seeking to establish and expand their business ventures. This surge in new businesses, coupled with increased investment from our existing enterprises, underscores the resilience and vibrancy of our local economy.

The strategic investments we're making in our economy are poised to yield even greater dividends. By fostering an environment conducive to growth, we will continue to create high-paying jobs, further lowering unemployment rates, and expanding our labor force.

Slide 7 – Community Alliance

Our unwavering commitment to collaboration has led to significant victories for our county. Working alongside Senator Schumer and Congressman Langworthy, we secured substantial funding for critical projects across our county. This includes vital support for Barcelona Harbor in the Town of Westfield, ensuring the dredging of the federal channel and improvements to the break wall to safeguard against sedimentation. Similar funding was secured for the dredging of Dunkirk Harbor in the City of Dunkirk and enhancements to its break wall, as well as for the dredging of Cattaraugus Creek Harbor in the Town of Hanover.

Earlier this year, we've successfully received funding for an Army Corps of Engineers Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration Feasibility Study on Chautauqua Lake, as well as federal earmarks for sewer projects around the lake. Additionally, through collaborative efforts with the legislature, we've allocated \$500,000 for in-lake maintenance, expanding early-season lake weed harvesting and ensuring ongoing maintenance efforts throughout the year. These initiatives are crucial for preserving the long-term health and vibrancy of Chautauqua Lake for generations to come.

In our continued commitment to fund travel and tourism with the use of our 3% occupancy tax funding, we have continued to fund festivals and events throughout Chautauqua County.

In addition to these longstanding events, this year we've partnered with Village of Fredonia Mayor Mike Ferguson to ensure the continuation of the Fredonia Farm Festival in 2024. This beloved event highlights our agriculture history and culture in Chautauqua County, while bringing together our community, simultaneously, driving economic growth. This festival draws thousands of visitors to downtown Fredonia, boosting our local economy. Through our collective efforts, we are committed to ensuring the continued success of this cherished tradition.

Slide 8 – Efficient, Effective County Government

In 2023, Chautauqua County inaugurated our new office space on Lucas St. in the City of Dunkirk, designed to offer a more conducive environment for both our county staff and residents seeking assistance. Centrally located and conveniently accessible via a CHQ Transit bus stop, this facility enhances our commitment to serving the community.

Slide 9 – Efficient, Effective County Government

In 2023, the integration of the Department of Mental Hygiene with the Department of Social Services has enabled us to identify service gaps and deliver more comprehensive wrap-around services to county residents.

Expanding Behavioral Health services has been a pivotal initiative in collaboration with the New York State Office of Mental Health, our Department of Mental Hygiene, and The Resource Center. Through concerted efforts, we have established school-based satellite clinics across eight additional sites, ensuring that students can access crucial services without sacrificing valuable school time. By integrating behavioral health support within schools, we aim to reduce stigma surrounding seeking help and promote a culture of mental wellness.

Moreover, tele-mental health services are now available, further breaking down barriers to access. These services encompass a spectrum of offerings tailored to each school district's needs, ranging from staff training in Youth Mental Health First Aid to fostering youth-led peer-based suicide prevention leadership teams. We are committed to supporting comprehensive suicide prevention training and response plans, as well as providing students with the necessary tools to navigate mental health challenges effectively.

Our partnership allows schools to increase their student services, while new therapists train under the county, ensuring seamless service delivery without burdening local school budgets.

This year, the Department of Social Services launched a code blue warming center to aid residents in need, alongside collaborative efforts to establish a women's shelter, supported by Chautauqua County ARPA funding. These initiatives reflect our dedication to addressing homelessness and providing vital support to vulnerable populations.

Slide 10 – Efficient, Effective County Government

With nearly one year under our belt, the Chautauqua County Health Department's Mobile Health Vehicle has proven to increase quality care across the county. Equipped with a medical exam room, this vehicle expands our capacity to deliver essential healthcare services to underserved communities.

Additionally, the Welcome Home Baby Program, operational for its first full year in 2023, provided in-home visits to nearly half of all newborns in Chautauqua County, offering valuable support and connections to local resources for new parents.

Looking ahead to 2024, the Chautauqua County Health Department plans to collaborate closely with Planning and Economic Development and municipalities to enhance green spaces countywide, promoting equitable access to outdoor resources for physical activity and wellness. Moreover, efforts will focus on substance abuse response initiatives, utilizing opioid settlement funds to mitigate risks, prevent overdose deaths, and raise awareness of the dangers of drug use.

Slide 11 – Efficient, Effective County Government

In 2023, the Chautauqua County Jail's Medical Unit achieved National Accreditation, while the Substance Abuse Recovery and Re-entry Program (SARRP) and associated Medication Assisted Treatment (MAT) Program completed their first full year of operation. With evidence-based treatment for opioid and alcohol use disorders, these programs enrolled 304 incarcerated individuals in 2023, with 3,519 medication-assisted treatment nursing visits.

Recently, Chautauqua County inaugurated a re-entry hub for newly released inmates, offering essential services to support their transition back into the community. These services include transportation assistance, CHQ Transit access, phone charging facilities, discharge planning, social services applications support, food pantry referrals, overdose prevention education, housing assistance, and more. The overarching goal of this initiative is to reduce recidivism rates by equipping individuals with the necessary tools and resources for successful community reintegration and long-term rehabilitation.

Slide 12 – Vision 2024

I'm proud to announce an initiative I am calling: Vision 2024. This will be a comprehensive analysis of our current office space and configuration. In an effort to provide efficient workspace for our county office buildings, we need to evaluate current office layout and configuration to optimize space and workflow. Engineers and architects will review and provide recommendations to best reconfigure our building's internal footprint at the Gerace Office Building and Hall R Clothier Building in Mayville, NY.

Neither of these buildings have seen any significant changes since they were constructed. (find dates) Creating a modern and efficient workspace is crucial for several reasons. This investment is aimed to enhance productivity and employee satisfaction. It is proven that a well-designed and equipped environment fosters collaboration, creativity, and comfort.

Our buildings need to reflect positively on the county's image and reputation, both internally and externally. These endeavors attract top talent and instill confidence in clients and stakeholders. Moreover, a modern workspace allows for better utilization of resources, optimizing efficiency and reducing operational costs in the long run. Bottom line: looking out for taxpayer dollars.

In addition to planned renovations, the county is currently collaborating with the Town of Chautauqua to secure additional space at the historic Mayville School for Civil Service Exams. This strategic move not only alleviates congestion within GOB, enabling other departments to utilize the freed-up space, but also offers a larger and more conducive environment for prospective county employees to undertake their examinations. While seemingly minor, this ripple of positivity exemplifies our commitment to maximizing resources across Chautauqua County.

Our efficiency and effectiveness will maximize our processes and outcomes achieving desired results.

Working with our municipalities, working with agencies, and working with all elements of the County government allow us to have constant focus on accountability. The vision is commitment to meeting our resident's needs.

Slide 13 – Improving County Services

I am filled with pride and excitement to stand before you today to share this encouraging message for Chautauqua County. Every success we achieve is a reminder of our unwavering dedication and steadfast commitment. Each time we overcome a challenge, we become stronger and more effective. OUR COUNTY stands tall as a testament to our resilience, elevating services for our residents, enriching their lives, and cultivating unprecedented economic prosperity. OUR VISION for County Government has become the bedrock of our efforts, anchoring our county's long-term financial stability. OUR FUTURE is full of promise and possibility, fueled by the successful actions we have taken and the strategic investments we are making.

Let us move forward together and build a future where resilience reigns supreme, where fortitude knows no bounds, and where Chautauqua County is more prosperous than ever.

So “let us renew our determination, our courage, and our strength. And let us renew our faith and our hope. We have every right to dream heroic dreams.”

This is *our county, our vision, our future.*

(words over video, on cue with highlight effect)

Slide 14 – Thank you and goodnight.

I express with great gratitude sharing this vision with you this evening and appreciate your attention. Thank you for attending my 2024 State of the County address, have a good evening.