

COUNTY OF SUFFOLK



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Steve Levy
COUNTY EXECUTIVE

State of the County Address Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy February 6, 2008 Touro Law Center, Central Islip

Thank you Dean Raful, the faculty, staff and students here at Touro Law School, Supervisor Phil Nolan, the excellent leader of my hometown Islip. Thanks to all of you who are joining us here tonight in the auditorium and thousands more through television via News 12.

Just a few years ago this magnificent facility was no more than a dream, and some may have thought we'd never be hosting such an address here. Those were the same people who said the Giants would never beat the Patriots.

Presiding Officer Lindsay, Minority Leader Losquadro, members of the Legislature, distinguished guests and friends, the State of the County Address lays a foundation for the year ahead. Sometimes it's rosy. Sometimes it's much more challenging. In this State of the County Address, I can say that the state of Suffolk County remains strong, but there are clouds ahead that can either part into sunny skies or morph into a hurricane. It all depends on what we do.

Four years ago, I gave my first address and warned of the 238 million dollar shortfall that we inherited. We could have sat back and hoped it would disappear on its own, which never would have happened. That would have led to a huge tax increase, cuts to services, and a lowering of our bond rating. Instead, we decided to act.

We put partisan politics aside and crafted the largest budget restructuring plan in our county's history. This led to four consecutive general fund tax cuts, something any other county in the state would be proud to match. And we kept our Police budget, which had been spiraling at near double digit increases, within our tax cap parameters for all of these years.

We have been able to provide this tax stability, not through any gimmicks or smoke and mirrors, but through pure fiscal responsibility. We understood that the only way to control taxes was to control spending. In 2005, for the first time in nearly four decades,

this county actually spent less than the previous year. And over the latest three-year period, actual spending in our county government increased a mere 2 and a half percent. That's not 2 and a half percent per year; that's 2 and a half percent total over three years. Less than 1 percent a year. Imagine if that had been the same pattern in our schools and other jurisdictions.

Our fiscal prudence has been admired, not only by our beleaguered taxpayers, but by the Wall Street bond raters as well. Under our administration, by working together with the Legislature, Comptroller, and Treasurer in a bipartisan fashion, our bond rating has risen to, and remains at, its highest level in our county's history. While other counties and jurisdictions have been placed on fiscal watch, our finances remain strong.

The fiscal responsibility we exhibited during the last few years must be more vigilant than ever in the upcoming year because of a bleak national economy that is headed toward a slowdown. The red hot real estate market that fueled so much of our Long Island economy during the first part of this decade has flattened, and even dropped. Thousands of our residents with overextended loans are seeing them come due. As a result, we have seen a significant increase in property tax delinquencies here in Suffolk County. In the past, we would have a near total payment of all property taxes owed. In these hard times however, we have seen delinquencies totaling 30 million dollars over a two year period. That was 30 million dollars we could not budget for.

As our property tax collections have declined, sales tax collections have dwindled to a fraction of what they were years ago. When the national economy was going strong in the late 90s, the county could expect sales tax receipts increasing as high as nine percent over that of the previous year. That made it very easy for officials to be all things to all people. Those days are over. You could increase spending dramatically and still cut property taxes at the same time. We are now lucky if we will see a mere two percent increase in sales tax collections over the previous year.

In the meantime, the cost of just maintaining our present operations continues to grow. Each year we must come up with 30 million new dollars just to pay for salary and benefit increases through mandatory arbitration in the Police Department. Still millions more are needed for other bargaining units throughout the county. Healthcare costs for our employees continue to increase exponentially. And the mandated preschool special education program, over which we have no control, has grown to more than 120 million dollars annually in our budget.

Both our Executive's Budget Office and the Legislature's Budget Review Office have concurred that the 2009 budget will be extremely difficult to navigate if national economic conditions do not improve.

So once again, just as in 2004, we have a choice to make. We can sit back and just hope that things work themselves out. If we do, we avoid the difficulty of making hard choices. But if we are wrong, and the economy does not pick up, we will have set

ourselves up for major cutbacks in services and personnel while making it very difficult to continue our pattern of tax stability. The better option for us this year, as it was in 2004, is to act and to act now.

I am therefore creating a panel that will meet as early as this week to address our budgetary concerns. Everything will be on the table in order to maximize efficiencies, and to restructure various elements of the budget. I will be asking Legislators from both sides of the aisle to join me in developing an action plan to protect our taxpayers. The only way a restructuring program can work is if there is a willingness on the part of individual lawmakers to not only say no to new spending increases, but also to say yes to changing the way things have been done in the past.

Together, we have done a fine job in controlling taxes on the county level of government. But the county's portion of the typical resident's bill is a mere 11.4 percent of the total. We can be proud that we have reduced that figure from 13.3 percent of four years ago. But real tax relief will only come about if we have new methods of controlling costs in other levels of government as well. Last year, I laid out a series of proposals that would help to consolidate common functions in all of our 69 school districts, such as transportation, security, buildings and grounds, and healthcare.

In December of last year, I was elected by my peers to head the New York State County Executives Association. The persistent lobbying that this organization employed, I am happy to say, has reaped rewards. For the first time, measures to make it easier for our districts to purchase their healthcare through a single consortium have been included in the Governor's budget. Authority was also granted to allow different levels of government to share equipment and functions, such as road maintenance. Additionally, money will be saved through another provision that will allow for schools and municipalities, for the first time, to buy less expensive products from bids from other jurisdictions throughout the nation.

While these measures provide some sense of relief, we still face enormous challenges in our quest to keep property taxes steady. This is one of the reasons we must continue to grow our economy. A healthy business climate leads to more jobs, more incomes, and more money spent and filtered down through our economy. This means more sales tax coming back to our county coffers in our attempt to relieve the burden of the property taxpayer.

Our Economic Development Department has been second to none in helping our companies to expand, and in luring high paying jobs to our county. Important companies such as Honeywell, Airtechniques, and Telephonics have expanded their job base thanks to the county's aggressive economic development policies. And, of course, we take much pride in our greatest accomplishment, attracting Canon Corporation's headquarters to Suffolk County – over 2,000 jobs that will help keep our economy moving.

But if we want to sustain our growing economy, we must continue to invest in our infrastructure. Because of our strict environmental regulations and our precious groundwater supply, our health department limits the amount of economic growth that any particular acre of land can handle. If that area is sewerred, the concern is moot. But while almost 100 percent of Nassau County is sewerred, a mere 27 percent of Suffolk County parcels are within a sewer district. Consequently, in order to grow our economy, this administration is embarking upon a 150 million dollar investment in building sewers in targeted commercial and downtown areas over the next decade.

Building sewers isn't very glamorous, but it is very much needed. It is also very expensive.

Back in the 70s, we were able to build sewers because of the immense reimbursement from the state and federal governments. For every dollar spent on sewer construction, 87 and a half percent was reimbursed from federal or state levels. Unfortunately, today the amount coming from the state and federal governments is close to zero. There is simply no way that the county going at it alone can meet our demands for new sewers. It is time for the state and federal governments to get back in the business of helping us to grow our economy and keep our water supplies clean by sharing in the cost to expand our sewer districts.

I am therefore calling upon the Governor and the State Legislature, and our congressional delegation, to create a fund that will match the county dollar for dollar for every sewer investment made in the next decade. To further accentuate the importance of sewer development in Suffolk County, I am calling for a sewer summit on March 20th that will bring together leaders from the public and private sector to map out an action plan to meet this county's growing needs. This summit's findings will complement a legislative study to be conducted this year on the subject.

This county can be proud of its pioneering efforts to revitalize our downtown communities. Over the last decade, over 7 million dollars has been pumped into our local communities that has been leveraged into another 21 million dollars to beautify our downtowns. We've worked with innovative mayors, such as Paul Pontieri of Patchogue, to provide incentives, tax breaks, and expedited permits to revitalize our downtowns.

Together, we are promoting a major redevelopment in Patchogue, where the old Sweezy's department store, that has been vacant for over a decade, will be converted into a hotel, retail, and next generation housing hub that can serve as a model for other downtowns throughout the county. These will be beautiful, state of the art designed units that have the appearance of luxury, but at a cost that is within the reach of our twenty-somethings now living in mom and dad's basement apartment. This project comes on the heels of the Copper Beech Village development that the Village and County constructed last year and the new Artspace proposal that will allow for 70 up-and-coming artists to live in beautiful lofts in downtown Patchogue. This revitalization effort not only provides our young people with a vibrant and affordable place to live, but also provides the shopkeepers and restaurants in the area with a built in base of

customers. And, of course, the beautiful architecture and the positive activity in the street brings up property values and instills a sense of pride, identity and excitement in the community.

This year I am unveiling Destination Downtown – an integrated marketing campaign to acquaint our residents and visitors alike with the new and improved “Downtown Suffolk”. If you haven’t been to Patchogue, Bay Shore, Greenport, or the county’s other burgeoning downtowns in a while, you owe yourself a visit. And you will be pleasantly surprised.

It is no coincidence that it is these downtowns that are now on the rebound. All of them have sewer districts that allow them to consider these types of innovative projects. Without the sewers, revitalization is a very iffy proposition.

A lack of sewers also inhibits our ability to build the type of next generation housing that is so essential to keep our families together and our talented young workforce from fleeing to less expensive areas of the nation.

When it comes to workforce housing, this county gets it. Over the last couple of years, we have built hundreds of homes for our sons and daughters and have thousands more in the hopper. While in years past, affordable housing was a dirty word that brought with it the connotation of lower property values, today we are recognizing that housing development done correctly can give our next generation the opportunity to experience the American dream as we did. And, of course, this investment will also help our businesses from losing the talented workforce they need to survive in a very competitive marketplace.

We understand how important this housing is for the health of our future.

But building the type of housing we need will only be acceptable if it is done in a smart way. First off, we shouldn’t allow our need for more workforce housing to compete against our strong desire to preserve our beautiful open spaces. There are abandoned warehouses and shopping centers and other pre-developed areas that we can revitalize in order to provide this housing stock. This puts these properties back on the tax rolls and raises property values by removing blights within our communities.

Secondly, we need not seek greater density in our traditional single family neighborhoods. Many people moved here for their single family home with the white picket fence and we should not be encroaching upon their slice of suburban heaven. However, greater density, with attached one and two bedroom units, is appropriate in our downtown areas and in the redevelopment of abandoned sites.

While survey after survey shows the public becoming more accepting of the need for next generation housing, our leaders are often lagging behind. Our housing needs are blocked, either by officials backing down to a small group of “not in my backyard” folks or through unjustified fears that needed housing will lead to more strain on the local

school system and the existing infrastructure. Building starter housing for our twenty-somethings does not bring more children into a district. It has been proven that such construction is usually a net plus in terms of tax revenue for a local district. Nevertheless, there continues to be many who fight this needed housing on the mistaken fear that it will raise taxes.

This issue is dealt with once and for all in the Downstate Suburban Workforce Housing Initiative that I have promoted along with six other county executives in the downstate region. It seeks to establish an 87 million dollar fund in the state that will help pay for water and sewer hookups, as well as planning for housing. And, most important, it will provide monies to any school district that can prove the workforce housing had a deleterious impact on its tax base. In part, due to our lobbying effort, the Governor has proposed a 400 million dollar allocation in his budget for affordable housing purposes. If the State Legislature is to confirm our proposal, it could have the result of being the most significant housing initiative in the state since the advent of the SONYMA program in the 1970s.

As noted earlier, we are facing some very difficult economic times. We need to further eliminate inefficiencies in government so that we free up the money we need to carry out the more humane purposes of government. We in Suffolk are generally very fortunate, and relative to other parts of the nation, a wealthy community. But let us not forget that we have so many within our midst who are struggling, and still others who are living in poverty. The high cost of living has led to many of our singles and families without a place to call home.

Over the last several years, our Department of Social Services, at my direction, has continued a policy of contracting with not-for-profit entities to ensure that our homeless families do not have to stay in cramped motels. Five years ago, there were up to 190 families in these motels. Today that number is near zero. Nevertheless, we must continue to care for our most underprivileged. That is why I am announcing today that Suffolk County will be working in conjunction with the Nassau-Suffolk Coalition for the Homeless in preparing a 10-year plan to end homelessness in Suffolk County. The committee will develop an action plan enabling us to become eligible for federal grants to provide the utmost care for those who have lost their homes.

Let us also endeavor to involve our young people in cultivating a sense of responsibility toward their fellow man. I will therefore be asking the Legislature to pass legislation, called Credits for Caring, at our community college to provide a semester's worth of free tuition to students who are willing to serve the poor in food kitchens, homeless shelters, or similar humanitarian causes.

We will be establishing a homeless hotline that will be capable of receiving a phone call from any resident who has knowledge of an individual who is living exposed to the harsh elements. I have instructed our police officers to physically go to the site and our social workers to help individuals avail themselves of every service for which they are eligible. It's 2008, no human being should die because he or she froze to death.

Additionally, we will increase to twice per year our Operation Stand Down, where our Veterans Service Agency workers will find any and every homeless veteran, bring him or her to our seminar, and provide access to over 30 different services at this one site. And every veteran returning from combat will be contacted by our agency to apprise him or her of all our services that can help them re-adjust to civilian life. We cannot allow these brave men and women to return to the land they protected only to find themselves hungry, alone, cold or homeless.

All of our citizens deserve an airtight roof over their heads. They should also have access to quality healthcare. America's healthcare system is facing enormous challenges. This great nation remains the only industrialized country in the world that does not provide adequate healthcare for all of its citizens. The lack of a comprehensive federal healthcare policy has left it up to the local counties through our health clinics and private hospitals to foot the bill. While reimbursement is available for some of our uninsured, at least half of these clinic visits are not reimbursed a dime from the state or federal government. This lack of accountability must end and must end now.

Yet, there are some things that we can do on a local level to try to mitigate these costs while improving healthcare services to our residents. The answer is preventive care. The earlier our residents receive treatment or diagnosis, the healthier our county will be. Consequently, we have created a new Division of Preventive Medicine. The division will examine ways we can expand preventive medicine throughout the county. First, efforts will be made to educate our own county workers as to the importance of proper nutrition, healthy habits, exercise, and early screenings. Second, we will focus on those with asthma to help them take early preventive measures and keep them out of hospitals. Our pilot program in this area reduced emergency room visits by an astounding 75 percent. Third, we are coordinating a county/school healthcare consortium that will provide an unprecedented level of attention to healthcare amongst our children and teenagers. My staff and I have been meeting with Rosemary Jones, the president of the Suffolk County School Superintendents Association, in order to further this program. A major forum is planned for May of this year to be followed by regularly scheduled health fairs within our schools to address issues including childhood obesity, nutrition and healthy lifestyles. Fourth, we will host a seminar for private sector employers to work towards making their employees healthier and their worksites safer.

One of the most important components of preserving healthcare on Long Island is to preserve our precious and vulnerable water supply. We in Suffolk can be quite proud of our accomplishments. Together in a nonpartisan fashion, we have preserved property over the last four years the equivalent of 6 times the size of Central Park. The preservation of these beautiful open spaces not only helps protect our groundwater, but leaves a marvelous legacy for future generations who can enjoy the beautiful vistas for which many of us moved here in the first place.

But we cannot do it alone. For the most part, the state and federal governments have lagged behind in this regard. The state and federal governments must step up and agree to match the county dollar for dollar for our purchases, as many of our local towns have. The state has done a great job preserving properties in the Adirondacks over the last two decades. Our precious Long Island should be no less a priority.

We can protect our environment through preserving open space and also by encouraging greater recycling. We recycle paper. We recycle cardboard. We recycle plastics and bottles and cans, but when it comes to the most potentially toxic product of them all, our electronic waste, we have few recycling programs at all. It is time to change that. I am therefore issuing a Request For Proposals for the creation of a comprehensive E-waste recycling program to handle discarded computers, video games, and other electronics. This program will dovetail on the E-waste recycling efforts being done through a legislative initiative and expand the movement to the private sector.

When it comes to recycling, something else has always confounded me. If we can recycle the garbage produced from our homes, why can't we do the same for our businesses, schools, and apartment complexes? That's a large component of our waste stream going straight into landfills or incinerators. We will be joining with the Town of Babylon Supervisor Steve Bellone to develop a model recycling program for our businesses, institutions and municipalities.

And we will work with Town of Islip Supervisor Phil Nolan, Long Island Power Authority CEO Kevin Law and others to expand solar energy usage in Suffolk. We'll do it by putting our county property and Brownfields to good use. Last year we implemented an innovative Brownfield sale that brought in over 3 million dollars in revenue to the county. Dealing with Brownfield sites has posed a dilemma for decades. We can find a silver lining through a program we call Brownfields to Solar Fields. Under this program we will work with either private entrepreneurs or the Long Island Power Authority to place solar panels on those blighted properties, or on other county locations, to provide clean and renewable electricity. Together, let's make Suffolk County, "Solar County."

In our efforts to reduce the amount of greenhouse gases we generate, one of the most effective steps we can take is to promote the use of alternative-fueled vehicles. To help drive the market for these vehicles, I am inviting the towns and the state to work with me, the Long Island Gasoline Retailers and Congressman Steve Israel to help site alternative fuel pumping stations at various locations throughout Suffolk County.

The key to solving our many challenges here on Long Island is to strike balance. We must continue to expand our open space and environmental programs, but at the same time work diligently to expand our road network. As we speak, there is a tremendous amount of road expansion occurring throughout our county. Prior to this Memorial Day, I will proudly cut the ribbon to open the additional lane on County Road 39, opening up traffic that flows to the gateway of the East End. This project has been dubbed "The Municipal Miracle." We have already enhanced safety and traffic flow on County Road

111 in Manorville. And this year, we will begin our efforts to enhance traffic flow on Nicolls Road in Selden at the Community College, Portion Road in Ronkonkoma and Farmingville, Motor Parkway in Hauppauge, Pulaski Road in Huntington, Bay Shore Road in Islip, Montauk Highway in Mastic and Shirley, and County Road 58, the gateway to the North Fork in Riverhead.

I will continue to lead us in our efforts to make huge investments in our sewer districts, our road network, and our open space preserves. But as with sewers and open space, when it comes to roads, we in the county cannot do it alone. Each year, the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council, an organization known as NYMTC which is comprised of five county executives and the City of New York, helps divvy up monies that come from the state and federal government for roads, bridges, and mass transit. In the past, the overwhelming share of this money has gone to the New York City transit system. We don't begrudge large allocations for this purpose, because it has a tangential benefit to those of us on Long Island as well. But when 8 billion dollars can go to an east side access to the railroad, and another 6 billion to the 2nd Avenue subway, is it too much to ask that we get 200 million dollars for a truck road to run parallel to the Sagtikos Parkway? I have been calling for a change in priorities from NYMTC for the last two years. So far, we have not seen much of a result. If the pattern continues, it would be my recommendation that Suffolk and Nassau Counties consider breaking away from NYMTC and create our own Metropolitan Planning Organization to receive and manage these state and federal funds. Long Island is larger than 18 states. We should be treated as such when it comes to infrastructure improvements.

While we continue to invest in infrastructure, let us remember it is the people of Suffolk County and their diversity that is our greatest resource. The sense of responsibility we owe to the disadvantaged also extends to those from all cultures and religions within our family of Suffolk. It is why we can take pride in having passed landmark legislation that created the most sweeping anti-housing discrimination language in the county's history. While we as a nation have made great strides in erasing the vestiges of racism from an earlier time, there still exists a fringe that would seek to harm others simply because of their race, gender, creed, or sexual orientation. Any type of violence, whether perpetrated against one who is white, black, Hispanic, or Asian, documented or undocumented, Christian, Jew, Muslim or Hindu, will simply not be tolerated.

Recently there have been a disturbing number of incidents on Long Island where a noose has been displayed in an attempt to intimidate African Americans. When we sought to charge the perpetrators, we were surprised to learn that the present statute did not qualify this heinous act as a hate crime. We could have done nothing. Instead we joined forces with people of good will throughout the county – our Human Rights and Anti-bias divisions, our clergy, and community and civic groups – to demand that the State of New York change its hate crimes legislation to make the displaying of a noose an act under the umbrella of the hate crimes legislation. The State Legislature has yet to adopt this proposal. Let this be the year that this bill becomes law.

Tomorrow, I will be meeting with our Minority Advisory Boards to discuss yet other ways that we can expand this legislation to create a necessary deterrent against those who would try to intimidate their fellow county residents by denigrating their race or religion.

In law enforcement, videotaping interrogations has been an issue over the past few years. Presently, New York State law does not require video recording of interrogations. In Suffolk, the District Attorney and Police Department have been electronically recording statements made as a result of interrogations. I have been discussing the matter with District Attorney Tom Spota and Police Commissioner Richard Dormer, and I am happy to announce tonight that they have agreed in concept to video recording the entire interrogations of those in custody in homicide squad investigations. This new protocol will afford the community at large, and our juries, with further transparency and heighten confidence in the criminal justice process.

We certainly have our challenges here on Long Island. As a maturing suburb, we face the inevitable problems of overdevelopment, heavy traffic, and a high cost of living. But no problem is insurmountable. We as a county have the talent and the determination to ensure that we not only maintain the type of suburban bliss that drew so many of us out here in the first place, but also to improve our collective condition to hand off to our children a better Long Island than we inherited. And despite some of the problems that we face, let us not forget that this is still one of the most desirable places in which to live. We are within an hour of the cultural and economic capital of the world. We have one of the best school systems in the nation, among the best beaches in the world, and the lowest crime rate of any suburban area in the United States of America.

Let us put petty partisan politics aside and remember that before we are Democrats, before we are Republicans, before we are Independents or Conservatives, we are first and foremost the descendents of folks just like my mom and dad, who moved to Suffolk County in search of a better life in the suburbs.

Over the last four years, this county government has lowered general fund taxes four straight times and lowered our crime rate by nearly 11%. We have raised our bond rating to its highest level ever, increased our stock of next generation housing, and made the largest investment of open spaces in our county's history. We passed ethics reforms, removed perks, and enhanced professionalism and accountability. We maintained, and often enhanced, the services we provide to our public through Smart Management.

Can this county government do it again? Ladies and gentlemen of the Legislature, when we work together -- you bet we can. Our residents deserve no less.

Thank you and God bless.