

COUNTY OF SUFFOLK



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

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COUNTY EXECUTIVE

State of the County Address

*Accompsett Middle School, Smithtown, New York
Wednesday, February 7, 2007*

Thank you, Supervisor Vecchio, for the kind introduction, and for your years of outstanding public service, all 740 of them. Thank you, Presiding Officer Lindsay, members of the Legislature and our friends at home watching live courtesy of *News 12 Long Island*. Thank you as well to our friends in Smithtown who have opened their doors to us here at Accomsett Middle School.

The State of the County address is designed to reflect upon the overall condition and direction of our county government. But, before we can truly appreciate where we are now and where we are going, it is important to look back on where we were just a few years ago.

Three years ago county spending was increasing at a very high rate. Our open space program was on life support. Medicaid costs were out of control and our health plan was \$36 million in the red. More than 150 homeless families were housed in motels. There was little dialogue or consultation between the county and our ten towns.

Mandate for Reform

A few years ago, I put in place an aggressive agenda for change – a new, proactive, innovative mindset.

In a bi-partisan fashion, we ushered in a new concept of smart management. We took special aim at the more wasteful elements of government so that money would be freed up to provide services in a better way while giving our taxpayers a break. We started off by setting the right tone, removing hundreds of cars that were allowed for personal use and placed them in pools for the workers who need them to carry out their responsibilities. We cut back on unnecessary travel vouchers and put experts of the highest professional caliber in leadership positions – regardless of their political affiliations.

We committed to running this government with oversight and innovation, and most importantly, with the understanding that these are the taxpayers' dollars we are safeguarding.

This new tone was very helpful in our efforts to address a record \$238 million budget shortfall that we inherited just a few years ago. We did not sit back and hope a miracle would erase this shortfall. Nor did we throw up our hands and resign ourselves to the thought that a huge tax increase would solve the problem. Instead we committed ourselves in a bi-partisan fashion to creating the largest budget restructuring plan in our county's history.

The reforms we implemented not only erased the shortfall but gave us enough fiscal stability to provide for a general fund tax cut in 2005. Better yet, we followed that tax cut with a general fund tax cut in 2006 and, just recently, a third straight tax cut for 2007. Let us commit today to work together to deliver a fourth straight general fund tax cut for the people of Suffolk County in 2008.

Keeping a Lid on Spending

Stabilizing taxes is so important. Everywhere you go people complain about how hard it is to afford to stay here on Long Island. It is our number one issue and priority.

Summing up the fiscal conditions surrounding the 1992 national election, a political pundit said bluntly, “it’s the economy stupid”. Fast forward to 2007 on Long Island; we can say with certainty, “it’s taxes my friend.” People are looking to us for leadership. We must keep taxes under control. And, make no mistake; the only way to control taxes is to control spending.

There are two ways to handle spending. One is to examine each potential project to determine its worth, with all those deemed worthwhile being placed in the budget. The problem with this approach is that while they might all seem justifiable when looked at in a vacuum, when totaled, you can find yourself having spent an extra 13% over the previous year, as New York State’s government did last year.

The better approach, in my opinion, and the approach we have employed over the last few years, has been to set a spending limit at the beginning of our budget process and thereafter prioritize. We must resist the temptation to spend money to make every special interest happy. Families aren’t made happy when they are forced to pack up and move off the Island because taxes are too high.

Just like in our personal household budgets, the revenues must balance out with the expenditures. The only thing worse than raising property taxes is raising spending dramatically while cutting revenues at the same time. This is what Nassau County did in the 1990s and it brought them to the brink of bankruptcy. The Federal government is notorious for this as well. But, unlike the feds, we do not have a printing press in the basement to print money. We must have a balanced budget.

We should be proud that we have been able to control taxes without raising fees or resorting to gimmicks or smoke and mirrors. Such practices would certainly have been sniffed out by the independent analysis of the Wall Street bond raters.

Our fiscal prudence and solid budget management have been rewarded. Last year we received the highest bond rating in the history of Suffolk County. Today, I ask the Legislature to work with me in maintaining a balanced budget and our historically high bond rating. This government must resist the urge to remove revenue streams without corresponding cuts or offsets. Doing so might get you a quick headline, and is politically expedient in the short term, but it is irresponsible.

Over my many years in government, I have seen officials who want to spend lots of money and were willing to raise taxes to do so. I have seen others who fought for tax cuts and had the guts to trim programs to offset the loss in revenue. And I have seen others who sought to have it both ways. Folks, we cannot have it both ways. We can't spend, spend, spend and then introduce legislation to cut the revenues needed to fund all the spending that has been proposed.

Giving Motorists a Break

In 2005 we suspended 40% of the tax imposed on home heating oil and gas – and did so by finding specific off setting expenditures. This year, let's give our *motorists* a break by committing the full recovery of our lawsuit against LIPA overcharges to our residents to cut their gasoline costs rather than throwing that money into the general fund.

I propose to return the savings in the form of a credit card entitling every household to a free fill up of gas. The processing will be paid for by the participating credit card company.

If the process works, we'll take it one step further by contracting with a credit card company to allow our Suffolk residents to earn credits toward their property taxes every time they use the card to make their everyday purchases. Instead of acquiring frequent flier miles, how about earning frequent tax credits?

While we must resist the temptation to spend to excess, we must embrace the idea of spending smarter. The smart management principles we have employed have proven that you can do more with less, and actually improve services.

We Said We'd Do It, And We Have

That is not just rhetoric. We've made promises and we have delivered.

We said we would address the homeless problem and we have. We increased rental subsidies to help those in need afford their rents and worked with contract agencies to house the homeless. While we had over 150 families in expensive and inhumane motels a few years ago, today we have none.

We said we would lower prescription drug costs for our residents and we have. Our new SCRIPTS program, which allows residents of any age or income to pool their prescription purchases, has saved 8,500 residents over 24% on their average prescription bills. Additionally, the process saved the county over a million dollars in costs for our county employee prescriptions. *That* is smart government.

Working with the Legislature we enhanced the salaries of our nurses so we could be more competitive in attracting and retaining these professionals. Countywide, we have 411 wonderful nurse care professionals providing important services for the public. Of these, 265 are in our health centers. This is an increase of 8.6% over what we had in January, 2004. Most recently, we introduced a plan for four new nurses to deliver services to the East End, which is particularly vulnerable due to its elderly population and transportation challenges.

We said we would improve services for those seeking prenatal care, and we have. Our new minority health bureau is bringing nurses and social workers directly into communities. Our

prenatal units have resulted in a six percent increase in patient care over last year, thereby promoting the birth of healthier babies and, of course, savings to the taxpayers by averting problem births.

We said we would better serve our troubled youth and we have. Our Alternatives for Youth Program sends social workers to families in crisis to keep children with their parents and out of remote institutions that can cost as much as \$180,000 thousand per child per year. Of the 705 families we have serviced, only four wound up in the courts... a 98% success rate.

We said we would give greater priority to those suffering from mental illness – and we have. Our new dual recovery program combines the services of our health and probation departments to provide a two-track treatment to individuals suffering from mental illness and substance abuse problems.

A prerequisite to proper treatment is a location to place and counsel people with mental illness. We recently added 42 beds to care for this vulnerable population and plan to add another 150 in 2007. A placement for treatment sure beats a placement in the Riverhead jail – that's true for individuals with mental illness, *and* the taxpayers.

We said we would create a new phone line so residents seeking police assistance in non-emergencies would not be forced to flood the 911 lines. We have. Now you can get that assistance by calling 852-COPS and leave 911 for true emergencies. That proposal makes sense and will save lives.

We said we would improve bus service and we have. We've added more routes, free transfers and, for the first time, opened up bus routes to competitive bidding.

While others talked about the need for a cap on Medicaid costs, we went to the state and got one. We took it a step further by giving District Attorney Tom Spota and Comptroller Joe Sawicki the resources necessary to audit and prosecute Medicaid fraud.

Tearing Down Barriers

We said we would expand opportunity for minority and women owned businesses to compete for county contracts – and we have. High-priced performance bonds required by the county had shut out many of our minority-owned businesses from competing for county work. Our new policy waives that bond requirement for business owners of all colors or gender, on smaller capital projects. We’re leveling the playing field without lowering standards or setting quotas.

In my inauguration speech I stressed how in this county a person named Patel, Diaz or Chen should have the same opportunity to live in the neighborhood of their choosing as someone named Smith or Jones. Last year, this Legislature joined me and co-sponsoring Legislators Montano and Mystal, in passing the most comprehensive human rights law we have seen in decades to combat housing discrimination.

Developing our Economy

We said we would fight hard to create and maintain new quality jobs, and we have. Together we led a multi-level bi-partisan lobbying effort that preserved over one thousand jobs at our Air National Guard base at the Westhampton Airport.

And, we can be most proud that our intervention is helping to bring the Canon Corporation’s North American headquarters right here to Suffolk. More than 2,000 high-quality

jobs will be coming to Suffolk County thanks to these efforts - jobs upon which individuals can build careers and upon which families can take root.

One way to attract high-paying jobs is to give Suffolk an identity for specific high-paying job sectors. Twenty six percent of the nation's venture capital goes to Silicon Valley because it is known as a high-tech juggernaut. We need a new business identity for Long Island. Our development at Westhampton Airport, that will go out to bid this year, seeks to make us a base for homeland security development. Our Yaphank Center will attract businesses from outside the area to develop new products in the fields of alternative energies and wireless technology. And next year, we will unveil a new program to grow Suffolk's bio-tech industry by helping to secure a greater share of the two billion dollars available through the federal government.

We will continue to nurture Suffolk's growing reputation as a great place to produce films and an equally great place to attract entertainment and sporting events. The new arena we have planned for Yaphank already has a verbal commitment for a tenant. The owner of the New York Islanders has expressed his desire to site a minor league Eastern Conference Hockey team in the Yaphank arena.

Smart Deployment in the Workforce:

- **Enhancing Public Safety Through Redeployment and Civilianization**

Through our smart management approach, we recognized that *how* you deploy your county workforce, is just as important as how *many* you deploy. The answer to maintaining and improving county services does not always lie in the knee jerk reaction of spending more money and hiring more people to carry out the task. Our approach is to do it *better*, not more expensively.

We do not subscribe to the theory that the only way to cut crime is to raise people's taxes through the roof and hire hundreds of new officers. What's important is not how many sworn officers are on the payroll, but rather, how many are on patrol protecting our public.

Prior to our reforms, even though there were more sworn officers, too many were out on Worker's Compensation or deployed in white collar and clerical functions, creating an illusion of enhanced patrol. We added physicians to help get injured officers back to active duty quicker. We aggressively civilianized the department and redeployed officers to where the people want and need them – sector patrol cars and newly-created units. These changes have resulted in 73 more officers on patrol today than in January 2004.

Our administration started a new policy of placing officers in our downtowns and malls during the holidays, in part, by pairing academy recruits with experienced officers on training patrols. On one December day, recruits Keith Liere and Timothy Farino, along with Sixth Precinct Officers Michael Maresca and Philip Dluginski, came upon a burning car and pulled the trapped motorist to safety. These brave officers are with us this evening. Please join me in recognizing not only their heroic deeds, but the dedication of all of our outstanding officers who make the Suffolk County Police Department the nation's best.

As a result of our smart management policies in the Police Department, we not only stabilized taxes, but we gave the 7th Precinct full staffing for the first time in its history. We had the largest number of bicycle and foot patrols ever, and we created new specialty units to combat sexual predators, gang members and terrorists. The bottom line is, we saved money and we have cut crime significantly since January of 2004. We should be very, very proud of this outstanding Police Department that has helped our area be named the safest suburban community in the entire United States of America by *Forbes* magazine two years in a row.

- **Smart Deployment Works in all County Departments**

Redeployment has worked in other county departments as well. In our Health Department, for example, backlogs for residential and commercial building applications were reduced from 16 weeks down to four. The time it takes to investigate disease outbreaks was reduced from twenty-one days to seven. This was never more evident than in the prompt and efficient way our health department identified and tracked the recent E-coli outbreak. Their response received nationwide praise. Also receiving national acclaim was our new program to combat the rise in diabetes, which was labeled a “model program” by the National Association of County Health Officials.

Last year, our health department began a new program to provide free prostate screening at Stony Brook University and we enhanced access to mammographies. And next year, working with Legislator Alden, we will be expanding our state-of-the-art digital mammography units to more health centers.

In our Department of Social Services, the time to process Medicaid applications was reduced by 29%; and this year, we’ll reduce it even further. Meanwhile, the number of open child protective services files has been reduced by 50% in just a six-month period.

Our enhancements to services can be witnessed in the Parks Department as well. Improvements such as allowing golf reservations over the web have resulted in more positive feedback and fewer complaints from the public than in the past. Additionally, we’ve made substantial investments into rehabilitating our historic structures.

Eliminating the Perks

We said we would change a culture where government perks were a common theme on the local political scene – and we have. We put an end to sweetheart rent deals for individuals living in county buildings. And we’ve even slashed inflated salaries and removed cars from employees at sacred cows like Off Track Betting, saving almost half a million dollars.

Additionally, the concept of some government workers retiring from county service with payments approaching \$200,000 in unused sick and vacation time is finally being addressed. The reforms we passed early last year will help curb these abuses into the future.

We banned party officials from serving on our ethics and planning boards and we hired the county’s first ethics director. And let this be the year that we pass a package of bills to reform the process by which legislative districts are drawn, campaign funds are raised and discretionary member items are spent. We’ve already been working closely with Legislator Barraga on the latter.

Thinking Big

- **Coordinating Planning with Towns**

As you can see, we have accomplished a great deal together in just a few short years, but I believe the best is yet to come.

Each day I have the privilege of gazing out upon this beautiful county from the vantage point of the 12th floor of the Dennison building in nearby Hauppauge. It is remarkable how beautiful this county still is. As you take in this view, you realize very quickly how different we are from Queens and Brooklyn, and even our neighboring Nassau County to the west. Many may think

we're built out, but we are not. There are still thousands and thousands of beautiful open acres that remain, and that's just the way we want to keep them.

When you look at this county on a town-by-town basis, and all of the applications within their respective building departments, it becomes evident that this county will look very different within the next 20 years if we do not act now.

Studying our geography on a map, one sees the bold dividing lines separating one town from the next. From my view twelve stories up, however, there are no such borders.

As this suburb developed over the last century, each town did its own thing. But it's quite clear that development in one town can have a significant impact on its neighboring town. The only way to combat haphazard, ugly sprawl is to communicate and coordinate, town to town and town to county. If we do coordinate we can grow our economy in step with the necessary infrastructure to handle the commensurate traffic – and with the protections we need to guard our precious environment. Let us commit to preserve the suburban and rustic quality of life which drew so many of us to live here in the first place - and recognize further that we can only accomplish that goal by adapting to our changing demographics. The days of balkanization are over. The days of regionalization are upon us.

In recognition of this new way of thinking, just last year I called a historic summit of town supervisors and county officials to discuss methods by which our planning departments can coordinate with each other.

At last year's State of the County address, I directed our planning department to evaluate the five major points of potential development throughout Suffolk County. That report, issued two months ago, determined that there are still *millions* of square feet of commercial, residential and retail development that can potentially occur. The report stressed the necessity of municipalities

working together to create better land use planning. It also stressed the need for a concerted lobbying effort for the federal and state funds we will need to complete an infrastructure that can deal with the additional traffic that will come with the applications the towns may approve.

We are already seeing the results of this meeting. At our urging, and with the assistance of Legislator Stern, a consortium of town, county, state and federal officials are lobbying vigorously for infrastructure improvements in the Commack/Sagtikos corridor. These include alternative truck routes to residential Commack Road for access to the new Tanger Outlet in Babylon, the proposed Pilgrim State development in Islip, the Home Depot project right here in Smithtown, and other retail developments slated for the region.

- ***Major Road Improvements on the Horizon***

This year we will see further infrastructure improvements on the East End. This fall, working with Legislator Schneiderman, we will start paving a second eastbound lane on County Road 39 – the gateway to the Hamptons. This will eliminate the bottleneck that causes delays for motorists of up to one hour to travel a short four mile distance. We do a lot of things in government for the people of this county, but perhaps nothing affects their daily lives more than reducing traffic nightmares, as will be the case with this major project.

Later this year, we will begin safety and traffic flow improvements on County Road 111 which has long been a burden for the people of Manorville who bear the brunt of the heavy flow of motorists traveling from the LIE to the South Fork.

Gridlock is not germane to the East End alone. A number of projects are now in the works to alleviate the congestion at clogged roadways in the heart of Suffolk County. This year we will expand overpasses at Pinelawn Road and at North Ocean Avenue. We will also begin the acquisition of land for the expansion and beautification of County Road 80 in Mastic and we will

begin design work for improvements to reduce rush hour traffic along Nicolls Road at Suffolk Community College.

- ***Consolidating School Functions***

As evidenced by our regional coordination with the towns on land use and infrastructure, 2007 will be the year of thinking big. That concept will be evident once again in the upcoming year as we work with our education officials to find ways to save money on the school district level.

We in Suffolk have done a fine job of stabilizing taxes. In fact, three years ago, the county portion of a resident's tax bill accounted for about 13% of the overall bill. Today, that percentage is down to 11.3%. But stabilizing taxes on the county level means little to our residents if school taxes, which account for more than two thirds of your bill, continue to rise at a pace that far exceeds the rate of inflation. We will continue to work with our school officials, the community and Legislator D' Amaro in particular, promoting consolidation of functions within our school districts.

Long Islanders' thirst for home rule makes consolidation of districts an unlikely possibility. On the other hand, consolidating functions such as security, buildings and grounds and printing and purchasing are doable and *can* save money. We will also be looking in the coming year to create a consortium allowing schools to obtain lower-cost financing for health care and dealing with Workers' Compensation claims. Our school officials have agreed that there are potentially big savings in this type of regionalization and consolidation.

- *A Wireless Long Island*

This upcoming year we will also be thinking big in creating the nation's largest wireless network. Last year we announced it – this year we implement it. I'm sure Legislator Horsley, who is co-chairing the county's wireless committee, would agree with me when I say that we in Suffolk County continue to be on the cutting edge of technology and government efficiency.

Environment and Energy

We said we would take the lead in the field of energy conservation and alternative energies – and we have. Working with our local utilities, we have invested a great deal in installing energy conservation materials within our county buildings. These proactive measures save our taxpayers over \$1 million annually in county energy costs.

Early last year, I proudly signed a legislative initiative, promoted by Legislator Vilorio-Fisher, making Suffolk one of the first counties in the nation to adopt a policy that requires our larger buildings to be constructed in an environmentally friendly fashion. We were the first county in the state to adopt legislation waiving sales taxes on the purchase and installation of solar-related equipment in our private residences.

This year, we will be installing solar panels at police headquarters and at the 4th Precinct.

This great work earned us a number of accolades, including the Solar Achievement Award from Renewable Energy of Long Island.

There is an old saying that goes, "Think globally - act locally." While we in Suffolk County cannot clean the Earth's precious environment by ourselves, we can play a small role by leading by example. We were the first county in the state to be designated by the Sierra Club as a

“cool county” for our commitment to implementing policies to reduce fossil fuels in our environment.

That is why we are working with Legislators Cooper and Losquadro to replace our county’s vehicles with cost effective, fuel efficient and cleaner hybrids. We are also replacing our county bus fleet with cleaner vehicles that have removed harmful emissions by over 80% of what was previously being spewed into our atmosphere.

Perhaps no county initiative over the last several years better epitomizes the smart government approach than our biodiesel program that takes excess restaurant grease and transforms it into fuel to run our county trucks. So the next time you see a county vehicle on the Long Island Expressway and it smells like french fries, think of us.

While others have merely talked about addressing the dangers of road runoff seeping into our waterways, we took action. While some charcoal devices have not met expectations, we still have invested more than \$20 million to reduce contaminants that directly discharge into our surface waters, including stormwater ponds and treatment basins.

Our efforts helped force the cleanup of pollutants at the Brookhaven National Lab, and we are also working with Legislator Browning in helping to revitalize the Forge River. We gained national recognition by reseeded the Peconic Bay with one million scallops and are working with Legislator Lindsay to reseed the Great South Bay with one million clams. Furthermore, when Connecticut sought to dump its dredge spoils from its industrial harbors in the middle of our Long Island Sound, we said no and prevented it.

This year, we are embarking upon an ambitious plan to rejuvenate the numerous Brownfields littering our landscape. Polluted parcels and abandoned gas stations and factories are blights on our neighborhoods, drag down our property values and pay no taxes.

This June we will have an innovative auction that lets private investors take the liens on these properties in return for the payment of back taxes due on these parcels. They get the property, assess the cost of cleanup and have the option of selling them later for a profit. The county gets tax dollars and rids our communities of eyesores. That's called smart management and a win/win.

We're cleaning our air, our water, *and* preserving our land. Our commitment to saving our open spaces is greater than at any point in Suffolk's history; and for that commitment our administration was recently honored by the New York League of Conservation Voters.

Over the past 30 years our progressive county has invested over \$750 million in preserving open space. About \$250 million has been committed in the last three years alone.

It is our passionate quest to preserve our beautiful open spaces, not just for aesthetic reasons, but also because we recognize that a cleaner county means a healthier county.

While on a national level, we can rejoice upon hearing that cancer rates have declined recently; this does not erase the fact that cancer rates on Long Island are still too high. Every person in this room knows someone close to them who has been touched by the ravages of cancer.

Pinpointing the exact environmental factors contributing to cancer has been a difficult task. In 1998, the state health department conducted a study – but did not connect the dots. To finish the job, I propose that Suffolk County join forces with Dr. John Kovach, an internationally-known expert in cancer research at Stony Brook University, in a venture to seek grants for a follow-up study to test specific environmental factors prevalent on Long Island as possible contributing factors.

And we will do our part in the county to lead by example. The county has already committed to use only non-toxic products for cleaning, landscaping and pest management. But we can go even further by pressing New York State to follow the lead of California with its “green labeling” law to mandate the labeling of household products containing *any* known carcinogens. We will continue to work with Legislator Romaine, who has shown interest in this area.

Some have long suspected that the overuse of fertilizers in our suburbia is further cause for concern. I will shortly be proposing legislation to reduce the nitrogen pollution entering our waterways and our groundwater. These measures will include prohibiting fertilizer application on frozen ground and requiring the posting of signs at retail establishments that inform consumers, in a clear and simple manner, which fertilizers are most harmful to the environment. And we will expand our efforts to educate consumers and professionals regarding the proper use and application of those fertilizers. We can still have great looking lawns, healthy gardens, *and* cleaner waters if these measures are adopted.

In a similar vein, the county this year will be embarking upon an ambitious Wetlands Stewardship Program to develop pilot projects to protect the county’s 17,000 acres of tidal wetlands.

And one more thing about the environment – in the months ahead I will be working with Legislators Nowick and Kennedy to “keep the park in Kings Park.”

Protecting our Neighborhoods

While we are cleaning up our environment, let us also recommit to cleaning up our neighborhoods. The practice of slumlords cramming dozens of people into single family homes

has the potential to destroy communities. While code enforcement remains the jurisdiction of our town governments, last year, Legislator Caracappa and I passed a law providing incentives for towns and villages to implement a much stricter housing code. It permits local municipalities to bring legal action based upon the curbside observation of obvious multi-family characteristics such as multiple electric meters. This shifts the burden upon the *landlord* to prove that the premises are indeed single family.

Just this past month two major townships agreed to adopt these stricter codes. Hopefully, with this new enforcement tool available, this will be the year that town authorities will have the wherewithal to carry out the will of law-abiding homeowners who demand an end to these grossly-overcrowded illegal fire traps cropping up within their communities.

We want our neighborhoods to be clean, to be safe, and just as importantly, we want them to be affordable. The seeds we planted with our Workforce Housing Commission are starting to bloom. Last year, with the help of Legislator Eddington, our first workforce housing community opened in Patchogue – helping scores of young hopefuls experience the American Dream. Thus far, we have fast tracked 700 homes, with almost 1,000 more to come in Yaphank and thousands beyond that slated for the Pilgrim State site and other locations throughout our county.

There are still many challenges that face our residents on Long Island. While we on the county level cannot control the cost of oil, the price of homes or school taxes, we must pledge to continue leading by example and keeping our own house in order.

So, when people ask about the state of our county, all you need to do is look at the trends.

- Crime is down considerably over the last three years.
- General fund tax cuts for three straight years.
- A record number of new workforce housing starts.
- Preservation of several thousand acres of open space since January 2004 – equivalent to four and a half times the size of Central Park.
- The highest bond rating in our county's history.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the state of our county government is strong and getting stronger all the time.

Thank you, God Bless you, and good night.