



NIAGARA COUNTY
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TEXT OF THE 2012 STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

LOCKPORT—*Legislature Chairman William L. Ross, C-Wheatfield, is currently delivering the following State of the County address at the Niagara County Courthouse. Tonight marks the start of Ross's ninth term as Chairman of the Legislature:*

Members of the Niagara County Legislature, County Manager, Department Heads, County Employees and Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to thank my Legislative colleagues for your vote of confidence in selecting me as the 2012 Chairman of the Niagara County Legislature. It is an honor and a pleasure to address you this evening on the State of the County.

I want to begin by wishing everyone in the Legislative Chamber and the outside listening audience a happy, healthy and safe new year for 2012.

Tonight's State of the County Address will review the Legislative Highlights of 2011 including the 2012 adopted budget, 2011-2012 economic development projects, 2012 goals and priorities for Niagara County Government and the 2012 regional economic development programs. It has to be remembered that the State of the County Address is a blueprint and there may be some changes during the 2012 legislative year.

There were several high points during the Niagara County Legislature's 2011 calendar year.

The Redistricting process which takes place at the conclusion of a United States Census every 10 years had a new look. The Niagara County Legislature passed a resolution in December of 2010 establishing an Independent Redistricting Commission. It was a bi-partisan commission of five members from different geographical areas of the county. The Redistricting Commission was sworn in during the month of January, 2011 and completed its work in four months. It included informational meetings and public hearings, which resulted in a few changes, which were acceptable to all parties.

We also aggressively handled a new Federal mandate. Narrowbanding is a Federal mandate for counties which must be completed and operational by January 1, 2013. The early discussion among the county's Community Safety & Security Committee along with Emergency Management had a preliminary cost of between 22 and 23 million dollars.

The Narrowbanding system would provide interoperability between all first responders in Niagara County. It is a system long overdue for the safety of the residents of Niagara County. The RFP process resulted in lowering the cost to \$10 million and the recent announcement of a State Interoperable Communication Grant of \$2,000,000, along with Homeland Security money, will reduce the final cost to the 5 million dollar level.

The Niagara County Community College Culinary Institute in downtown Niagara Falls is a 30 million dollar reality that will be able to service up to 1,000 students in the renovated Rainbow Mall.

Niagara Falls International Airport continues to be a highlight with air service provided by Direct Air, Spirit and Allegiant. There have been several new destinations added, with the latest being direct service to Orlando by Allegiant. The three parking lots at the airport are full, proving that this new air terminal is a wonderful economic engine.

The Western New York Regional Economic Development Council consisting of Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Erie and Niagara County is one of ten councils that in a period of four months from August to November, 2011 competed for millions of dollars for economic development.

Each council met in a series of meetings in their geographical area and constructed a strategic plan and evaluated economic projects that were sent to them from the counties located within their area.

The Western New York Regional Economic Development Council, which included Niagara County, was a big winner in the top four councils and received \$100.3 million for project implementation. Niagara County was the recipient of \$2,000,000 for the NCCC Hospitality and Tourism Center, \$970,000 for the Niagara Falls International Airport Master Plan and money for projects in the three county cities.

There were disappointments in 2011 for Niagara County as well as for other counties in the State of New York. The New York State 2% Property Tax Cap Law of 2011 puts popular restrictions on rising local tax bills but provides no unfunded mandate relief for counties.

A Property tax Cap is an excellent relief for long suffering property tax payers, but the lack of mandate relief creates fiscal problems for the 932 towns and 62 counties. The coming years, including 2012 will see personnel reductions and with this reduction in force, many services provided to residents could be eliminated. There must be mandate relief and it must begin with Medicaid.

The Verizon Project in the Somerset area of Niagara County, located adjacent to A.E.S., on the shores of Lake Ontario never came to fruition. This proposed project would have been a billion dollar venue when it was totally completed.

The Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority (NFTA) proposed budget cuts reduce the bus system miles which will adversely affect Niagara County riders, especially workers and students that depend on this type of transportation. The Niagara County Legislature will urge the governor to find the money to stop service cuts by the NFTA.

The AES Corporation is the highest property taxpayer in the county and would mean the loss of 120 good paying jobs. The \$10,000,000 annual RGGI assessment by New York State and harsh EPA mandates and directives bother me because of the great fiscal impact the closing of the AES coal fired plant would have on Niagara County.

The Niagara County Legislature, working closely with the County Manager, his team, Department Heads and Commissioners put together a good 2012 budget in a difficult fiscal year. There were unprecedented challenges that impacted the Niagara County 2012 budget.

Challenges included the New York State 2% Property Tax Cap Law, the failure of New York State to lift its burden on county and local governments through mandate relief and the ever-increasing New York State Retirement System pension funding. Medicaid costs are the greatest problem causing a property tax increase.

The 2012 Adopted Budget was aggressive and the department heads worked long hours to successfully meet targeted reductions. The decisions made did not come easily and the result was a balanced budget that responsibly funded necessary programs that are vital to the residents of Niagara County.

The key factors surrounding the 2012 budgetary conditions are summarized as follows:

1. Property Tax Rate for 2012 will be held to an increase of \$0.14 or 1.8% per \$1,000 of assessed valuation. The average projected county tax on a property assessed at \$100,000 would therefore increase by \$14.
2. The Niagara County's Sales Tax Revenue is projected to increase to \$58.45 million up 6.86% from 2011. Budgeted revenues from federal and state agencies are expected to decrease by \$1 million.

Niagara County's government employees provide excellent services to the residents of our county. These employees' salaries and wages are being frozen at 2011 levels. We know that for many, the wage freeze is painful. These employees deliver everyday and are one of the county's great strengths.

The last few calendar years were tough years for everyone. The staff of the Niagara County Economic Development Center was challenged to keep economic development in Niagara County moving forward, despite the economic climate. The Niagara County Economic Development Center focused on five areas during the last two years which included:

1. Creating and capitalizing on opportunities in these difficult times.
2. Strengthening N.C.E.D.C. outreach initiatives.
3. Closing deals and seeing tangible results in terms of capital investment and job creation.
4. Securing funds for local projects through stimulus funds and other sources.
5. Always planning for the future.

There were three areas to help Niagara County through these difficult economic times. 2010 saw the birth of the Opportunity Zones, the continuation of the highly successful Empower Niagara Program and the funding program for Brownfield Remediation.

The new Opportunity Zone Program the N.C.E.D.C. will run in conjunction with the three cities will help provide incentives to the tourism and retail sector companies who locate in economically distressed areas.

The Empower Niagara Program has been highly successful. This program is helping to ensure that even small businesses will be able to take advantage of the benefit of low-cost power. A great program, but Niagara County needs another couple of megawatts to keep it going. This Empower Niagara Program has resulted in the creation and retention of over 500 jobs and a private investment of over \$10 million.

The Brownfield Program (Niagara County Brownfield's Cleanup Revolving Loan Fund) will provide monetary assistance that can be leveraged to advance brownfield sites to the next level of redevelopment. These original BCRLF funds have been supplemented with a \$900,000 grant through the federal administration's stimulus program.

These three programs are creating opportunities from Niagara County's strengths in tough economic times

The above three N.C.E.D.C. programs along with many economic initiatives have helped generate economic development in Niagara County. These economic initiatives include:

1. Niagara County's Economic Development Center, working with member of the Niagara County Economic Development Alliance, will continue to administer the countywide business growth & retention program in 2012.
2. N.C.E.D.C. will work with economic development partners to develop "shovel ready" sites to facilitate more rapid site selection and project implementation.
3. N.C.E.D.C. facilitates Niagara County involvement in the Erie-Niagara framework for regional growth by advising and participating on implementation actions.
4. N.C.E.D.C. continues to administer the Niagara County Microenterprise Assistance Program to benefit low-to-moderate income individuals and small businesses with 5 employees.
5. Niagara Communities Comprehensive Plan 2030 was completed by the N.C.E.D.C. in 2009 and subsequently adopted by the Niagara County Legislature. This plan addresses the goals of encouraging desirable and appropriate growth and development.
6. The N.C.E.D.C. will work with the new N.F.I.A. Stakeholders Group to help market the new Niagara Falls International Air Terminal and other economic development projects at or adjacent to the N.F.I.A.
7. N.C.E.D.C. will continue to reach out to Canadian companies interested in a foothold in the United States market by locating an operation in Niagara County.
8. N.C.E.D.C. continues to administer the Business Community Enhancement Program in 2012. This program assists local business organizations in enhancing business districts by offering grants for brick and mortar improvements.

The economic programs and initiatives carried on and supported by the N.C.E.D.C. and Niagara County Industrial Development led to the facilitation of projects to the construction stage. The economic development projects include:

1.	Taylor Devices, Inc.	\$2,705,000	20 new jobs created
2.	Olin Corporation	\$20,000,000	15 new jobs created
3.	Gateway Harbor Inn, North Ton.	\$4,484,000	25 new jobs created
4.	Frank's Vacuum Truck Service, Inc.	\$2,325,000	15 new jobs created
5.	Hampton Inn, Niagara Falls	\$5,000,000	20 new jobs created
6.	NCCC Culinary Institute	\$30,000,000	TBA

The following are our goals for 2012:

1. ANNUAL BUDGET
The proposed budget should always be working in the direction of less spending and lower property tax while still providing county residents with essential services.
2. CONTROL OF STATE IMPOSED UNFUNDED MANDATES
 - a) Medicaid was the first unfunded and remain the largest mandate imposed on counties.
 - b) Eight other state imposed mandates that heavily impact County Property Tax.
 - c) Pension Contribution from counties are out of control.

3. C.H.H.A.
The Niagara County Legislature will be privatizing Homecare Health Services in 2012 as a cost cut saving measure for county taxpayers.
4. CONSOLIDATION OF VARIOUS FUNCTIONS OF COUNTY GOVERNMENT
The Consolidation of various functions of county government is feasible and the consolidations would reduce county costs.
5. PUBLIC SAFETY
 - a) Federal Mandated to begin January 1, 2013 for wireless broadband communications ensuing local control and interoperability between first responders.
 - b) Silver Alert System.
6. ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
The Niagara County Legislature strongly supports economic development as one of the best ways to lower taxes and provide employment.
7. AGRICULTURE AND TOURISM
Agriculture and Tourism remain keys to Niagara County economic growth.
8. NIAGARA COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Niagara County government is the main sponsor of the "Jewel" of post high school education. There are over 6,000 students who attend NCCC at reasonable tuition fees.
9. RETENTION OF NIAGARA FALLS AIR RESERVE STATION
The 914th and 107th Air Wing which are located at the Niagara Falls Air Reserve Station. The NFARS is the No. 1 employer and the No. 1 payroll in Niagara County. Niagara County must retain this strategic and highly important economic venue.
10. The Niagara County Legislature, along with WNY State Legislators, urge the governor to provide money to close the NFTA deficit.

The Niagara County Legislature has the responsibility of day to day operation of county government which includes the guarantee of providing essential county services to the residents of Niagara County. There are specific keys to be followed.

1. A majority caucus of veteran and like-minded legislators along with the minority caucus who together want to solve problems and create good government.

2. A legislature that believes in teamwork and with legislators working together, compromising when necessary, placing egos in check and limiting discussion to legitimate issues related to county business.

3. A Niagara County Legislature that believes in smaller government, reduction in property tax and a legislature that will wisely use the available economic tools, techniques and resources.

The Niagara County Legislature using the keys they control along with the available county tools can provide effective, efficient, and fiscally responsible government to Niagara County residents.

1. A County Manager whose professional experience and expertise is fully utilized.

2. County Manager's team (Budget Director, Human Resources Director and Risk Management Director), along with Department Heads and Commissioners.

3. The Niagara County Administrative Code.
4. The 2009 Niagara County Comprehensive Plan.

As I conclude this evening's address, one word becomes all important and it is communication.

The Niagara County Legislature realizes the importance of communication for our constituents. This legislature will continue to support public comment periods at our scheduled meetings, provide the published phone numbers of the legislators, legislator involvement in community meetings and events and in some cases scheduled county legislator district meetings.

A Niagara County Legislator understands good communication can lead to a better understanding of county government.

The Niagara County Legislature will continually work toward making Niagara County a better place to live, raise a family and support more prosperous times in our Niagara Community.

May god bless Niagara County and its residents.

Remarks complete.

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