



NIAGARA COUNTY  
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE  
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CONTACT: CHRISTIAN W. PECK  
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER  
TEL: (716) 439-7241  
FAX: (716) 439-7058

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**ROSS: ALBANY MUST PROVIDE MANDATE RELIEF  
STATE OF COUNTY ADDRESS CALLS ON STATE TO FUND OWN PROGRAMS**

LOCKPORT—Niagara County Legislature Chairman William L. Ross, C-Wheatfield, warned county lawmakers that a host of unfunded—but mandated—programs from Albany were increasing pressure on county governments around the state during what have been tough budget years.

Ross noted that, despite preventing all but a miniscule tax hike this year, Niagara county lawmakers were under pressure in the budget process because county government must pay more than ever for the state's Medicaid program and local contributions to the state's pension system.

In a speech that clocked in at just under 34 minutes, a succinct Ross addressed what he considered top goals for the County Legislature to pursue in 2012. As in past years, a major portion of the speech was devoted to providing guidance for the Niagara County Center for Economic Development.

"There are three areas that can help Niagara County through these difficult economic times," Ross told the 15 members of the newly-downsized Legislature. "2010 saw the birth of the Opportunity Zones program, the continuation of the highly successful Empower Niagara program, and funding of the program for brownfields remediation. All of these are necessary for job creation."

"These programs are creating opportunities from Niagara County's strengths in tough economic times," Ross told his fellow lawmakers and an audience that included the county's other elected officials and appointed department heads.

Ross devoted several minutes to the topic of economic growth, noting that resources like the Niagara Falls International Airport—which has added several airlines in the past two years—must continue to evolve, and the county must rely on institutions like Niagara County Community College and its new Culinary Arts Institute to provide skilled workers to meet local demands.

Ross also pleaded with leaders at the New York Power Authority to provide additional megawatts of low-cost power to the county for its highly-successful Empower Niagara program. Demand for the program, which subsidizes electrical power for local businesses, has grown, causing the county to pull back free power previously provided to some government agencies to bolster job creation.

"This program is helping to ensure that even small businesses will be able to take advantage of the benefit of low-cost power," Ross explained. "The Empower Niagara program has resulted in the creation and retention of more than 500 jobs and a private investment of more than \$10 million."

The speech was not a paean government programs, however. Ross alluded more than once to the record downsizing of the County Legislature to its present 15 members during his address, and reminding his fellow lawmakers of the importance of cutting government and lowering taxes.

"The Niagara County Legislature believes in smaller government and reducing property taxes," Ross said. "No one in this room opposes those things."

Ross noted that county lawmakers had been pleasantly surprised by Gov. Cuomo's embrace of a 2 percent property tax cap on county and municipal governments, but that the cap would be meaningless until unfunded mandates are reined in by the state.

Ross drew heavy applause from the room at the conclusion of his speech.

Despite the fact that this was Ross's ninth State of the County address, for more than a quarter of the Legislature, it was the first they had attended. That's because four of the 15 county lawmakers were sworn in for their first full terms Tuesday night by County Clerk Wayne F. Jagow.

One of them, Legislator Kathryn Lance, R-Wheatfield, was asked for her reaction to Ross's address following Tuesday night's meeting.

"I was very interested in hearing what Chairman Ross had to say," Lance said. "I felt that he offered solid guideposts for county government. I agree with his call for further fiscal restraint, and I'm glad he had an emphasis on economic development."

Lance, whose Wheatfield district includes much of Niagara Falls Boulevard and parts of the Niagara Falls International Airport, also praised Ross for devoting a portion of the speech to bolstering that community resource.

"I also agreed with Chairman Ross's praise for the property tax cap, but I'm concerned about unfunded mandated costs that are being passed on by Albany to county government," Lance said. "That needs to be addressed this year, and that's a message we'll be sending to Gov. [Andrew M.] Cuomo."

While the speech was heavy on policy, Ross did take a moment to reflect on the role of the County Legislature and its 15 members—particularly in the midst of the continuing weak national economy.

"The Niagara County Legislature will continue to work toward making Niagara County a better place to live, to work, to raise a family, and we will strive to support more prosperous times for our Niagara community," Ross vowed.

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