

Ulster County Executive 2024 Budget Address
By County Executive Jen Metzger
October 3, 2024

Good afternoon everyone, thank you for joining me today for the presentation of the 2024 Executive Budget, and a special thank you to Legislators Corcoran and Hansut for the introduction and to the Town of Marlborough for hosting us today. It's great to be at the southern end of the county! I also want to thank Tracey for your words and for your leadership as Chair of the County Legislature. I look forward to our continued work together in the budget process. To all of the County Legislators and Department Heads joining us here today, thank you for all the work you do for the people of Ulster County. It's been an honor to work with you these last nine months.

This budget is the result of diligent work, careful planning, and creative thinking on how to use limited resources to tackle the challenges we face and capitalize on opportunities. It is a budget that allocates resources where they are needed most, builds on the County's strengths, and responsibly manages government finances to deliver for our residents and businesses. I am fortunate to have an incredible Budget team, and want to thank them for the hundreds of hours of work that went into this proposed budget.

We are in a very strong financial position as a County going into 2024. The independent accounting firm that has been closing the books on 2022 has completed the part of its work that affects our budget projections, and we expect the unrestricted fund balance to exceed \$110 million dollars. Because these numbers are not yet certified, and because we face an uncertain economic climate, I have taken a highly conservative approach to this budget. The budget reserves 20% of operating expenditures as a "rainy day" fund, which is the maximum permitted by County policy.

The 2024 proposed Budget includes \$413 million in spending, up from \$381 million in 2023. \$9 million of this new spending is funded by federal and state grants at no cost to the County. However, we do face a \$17 million increase in mandated and contractual spending, most of which is in just three mandated programs – Medicaid, Safety Net, and Early Intervention.

With those mandated costs top of mind, I have limited the increase in non-mandated spending to 1.4%, while making investments in priority areas to improve infrastructure, address the housing crisis, protect the environment, and help our people thrive.

Knowing the challenges our families and businesses face, this budget does not raise property taxes.

In my February State of the County address, I laid out a vision for our work ahead to build a resilient, sustainable, and thriving Ulster County that leaves no one behind. The 2024 Executive Budget reflects a continued commitment to moving this vision forward.

Housing

This work begins with addressing the harsh reality that we simply do not have enough housing that our residents can afford. Fully 41% of households in our county are severely cost-burdened, spending more than half their income on housing. People are losing their homes, and can't find affordable alternatives. Families in emergency housing stay in these temporary accommodations for an average of 19 months—that is nearly twice as long as two years ago. This instability interferes with school and work, and can take a major toll on people's mental health and well-being. And it's hurting our small businesses, which are struggling to hire and retain employees in the face of what it costs for employees to live here.

We need an all-hands-on-deck approach to this crisis, which is why we worked with our partners in the Legislature this year to create the Ulster County Housing Action Fund, dedicated to catalyzing development of housing that is healthy, green, and most importantly, affordable to our residents.

I want to recognize and thank, in particular, Legislator Abe Uchitelle, Chair of the Health, Human Services and Housing Committee, who has been a great leader and partner in these efforts. The County's commitment to expanding housing opportunities has been truly bipartisan, and I want to thank Minority Leader Ken Ronk and my colleagues across the aisle for their support of this initiative.

The housing crisis can not be solved overnight. We have made a significant upfront investment for the Fund, with \$15 million from the County's excess fund balance, but we need a sustained commitment over time. I have joined with the Legislature in supporting an appropriate increase in the County's occupancy tax rate from 2% to 4%, better aligning this tax with surrounding counties, and I am proposing in the Executive Budget to dedicate 25% of these revenues to the Housing Action Fund, or about \$1.5 million annually, to help meet this most basic need in the years ahead.

Using occupancy tax revenues for this purpose makes sense since a lot of this revenue comes from short-term rentals, which have contributed to the housing shortage.

A number of local governments in Ulster County have sought to preserve more housing for their residents by capping the number of permitted short-term rentals. But they have faced challenges enforcing these regulations because of the difficulty of identifying illicit vacation rentals. I am proposing as part of this budget that we expand our capability to monitor short-term rental activity across dozens of platforms, and then freely share this data with local governments. This will help them with enforcement, and importantly, will give all of us a better understanding of the short-term rental market in different parts of the County.

I also want to take a moment to acknowledge the commitment of local governments in our Housing Smart Communities Program to address other housing barriers. The game-changing zoning update spear-headed by Mayor Steve Noble and the City of Kingston is exactly the kind of initiative that we need. We have included funding in the 2024 budget for municipal planning studies to help other Housing Smart Communities move these kinds of initiatives forward.

As we work to preserve and expand our housing stock, we must also improve access to emergency housing for those in need. The experience of becoming unhoused can be destabilizing and traumatic, particularly if you are already in crisis, and it is not easy to navigate the complex web of services and resources. That is why I am proposing in this budget to create a more proactive, personalized, and nimble team within the Department of Social Services – a new **Housing and Homelessness unit** to streamline the client experience and connect people with the resources they need.

The unit will be led by a **Special Assistant to the Commissioner** and will include a **Housing Specialist** and **Emergency Housing Resource Coordinator** to provide individualized support for our unhoused residents, find the most appropriate emergency housing locations, and help them secure long-term housing in coordination with nonprofit partners. The Resource Coordinator will work primarily in the field at different emergency housing locations throughout the County, meeting people where they are and addressing needs on site.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge and thank Legislator Phil Erner for his tireless advocacy for constituents in crisis, and for elevating the need for new approaches to emergency housing more generally.

Climate

As a County, we are confronting the threat of climate change head-on. The unbreathable air quality earlier this summer from Canadian wildfires was yet another wake-up call to all of us--not that we need any more wake-up calls. Kids were kept

home from school and camp, elderly and vulnerable residents were forced to stay inside to protect their health, and work schedules were interrupted.

We can't undo climate change, but we can reduce the severity of the crisis, better protect our children's future, and adapt to the changes already underway.

In my first month in office, I issued an Executive Order to fully align our County government with the State Climate Act and aggressively reduce emissions. We've worked closely with the Legislature to fortify our green fleet and green purchasing policies, we launched a composting initiative in County facilities, and we are installing on-site solar panels at the Hall of Records and UCAT, with several other renewable projects in development. As stated in my Executive Order, our ultimate objective is to meet 100% of our electricity requirements through clean, locally-sourced energy, with as much of that energy generated on-site as possible.

All of this work must be in partnership with the Legislature, and I want to take a moment to thank my friend and colleague of many years, Legislator Manna Jo Greene, Chair of the Energy, Environment, and Sustainability Committee, for her long-standing leadership and tenacity in moving climate solutions forward. I also want to thank Deputy Chair Gina Hansut for her steady support in these efforts, Eric Stewart and so many others. This is a Legislature that is committed to leading on climate.

To help move our initiatives forward at the department level, we launched the Ulster County Climate Corps – a paid summer internship program that put 17 bright, motivated young people to work with County staff on climate solutions in eight different County departments and at SUNY Ulster. The program was incredibly successful and received such positive feedback from staff that I am proposing to expand the program to **24 Climate Corp interns in 2024**. They bring skills and ideas that add value to the work of our County, and importantly, we are building the bench of public servants for the future by giving them valuable experience in government today.

The biggest source of County government emissions is our aged and inefficient buildings, which also costs taxpayers a lot of money. To advance energy-efficient improvements, I propose creating an **Energy & Electrification Manager** position in the Department of Public Works, and allocating \$18 million from the County's excess fund balance to establish a **Decarbonization Capital Reserve**. This funding will support climate-responsible investments in County facilities as old, dirty fossil fuel-based systems age out. With in-house expertise, we can implement energy-saving projects cost effectively, ensure reliability, and optimize the integration of renewable energy.

Low-Income Home Energy Improvement Assistance Pilot

Beyond the County's own buildings, we can do more to help residents make cost-saving energy improvements in their homes. Currently, our Department of Social Services administers HEAP, a life-saving federal program that helps pay home heating bills. As part of this budget, I am proposing a pilot program to help HEAP-eligible homeowners and renters access federal and state resources to weatherize their homes and install energy-saving appliances. The federal Inflation Reduction Act allocates over \$300 million in funding to New York State for residential energy rebates and programs, and we want to make sure that **all** Ulster County residents take full advantage of it.

We are committed to a clean energy transition that leaves no one behind.

Transit

And this includes providing efficient and effective public bus service.

Our UCAT bus system isn't just an important climate solution; it's an affordable way for our residents and visitors to get around, and many people use our buses to get to work, to college, and to appointments. I have spoken with many seniors who no longer drive, and UCAT gives them independence and a way to see friends that they would not otherwise have.

We are also continuing our work to green the bus fleet. In August I signed into law amendments to our Green Fleet Policy requiring the fleet to be fully electric by 2035, which means replacing 3-5 buses annually as they age out. We can meet many of our public transit needs with smaller, less costly buses, and for the first time in 2024, smaller electric models are coming on the market. This is great news, and we're looking to purchase up to four electric replacements for smaller buses that have reached the end of their useful life. And thanks to a grant secured by the County Planning Department, much of the cost of these replacements will be paid with federal resources and not County tax dollars.

But we know that we are not meeting all our public transportation needs. We must work to expand routes and scheduling. As part of the 2024 budget, I am proposing that we commit 25% of occupancy tax revenues, or about \$1.5 million annually, to sustain a robust public bus system now and in the future. It's good for the economy, good for the environment, and most importantly, it's good for the people of Ulster County.

Investing in our Infrastructure

Just a few months ago, we saw our neighbors in Orange County experience terrifying flash-flooding, causing millions of dollars of infrastructure damage, and most tragically, taking a life. Here in Ulster County, we are particularly vulnerable to floods. In response,

we're making strategic investments in infrastructure, including nearly \$20 million in 2024 to improve roads and bridges. Major capital projects next year include replacements of the Wolven Bridge in the Town of Kingston, the Fantinekill Bridge in the Town of Rochester, and the Galeville Bridge in the Town of Shawangunk. As we assess, repair, and replace our bridges and culverts, we're preparing for the impacts of climate change. Past "100-year" events now occur roughly every 20 years, and we have to build our infrastructure and capacity accordingly. This means investing in our human power as well, and in the Executive Budget I am adding positions to the Bridge Crew in the Department of Public Works to more readily respond to safety and maintenance issues. The additions will also enable the Department to do more work in-house at a savings to taxpayers.

Improving our resilience also requires shoring up our infrastructure to respond to emergencies. The Executive Budget creates an \$18 million capital reserve for the planned Government Operations Center on Paradies Lane in New Paltz, a resilient facility to house emergency operations and other critical services. By dedicating these funds from the County's excess fund balance in a reserve, we will save taxpayers over \$1 million annually in borrowing costs.

Investing in Our People

We're not just improving the resilience of our communities in this budget; we're uplifting individuals with new economic and educational opportunities.

2024 will be an exciting year as we move forward with the Workforce Innovation Center at iPark 87. I want to thank Brian Cahill and Herb Litts, Chair and Vice Chair of the Economic Development Committee, for their partnership on this initiative and long-standing commitment to redeveloping the former IBM complex. With the lease approved by the Legislature, we will co-locate our economic and workforce development offices with educational partners and businesses seeking to grow at this re-energized industrial campus. We're forging a unique collaboration with SUNY Ulster, SUNY New Paltz, Ulster BOCES, employers, and community-based organizations to equip our residents with the knowledge and skills to access family-sustaining jobs--regardless of education level, income, or stage of life.

Broadband Access

We also want to make sure our residents have all the tools they need to succeed, and that includes access to high-speed internet. The COVID-19 pandemic brought into sharp focus how much internet access has become a basic necessity--for school, for work, for health and safety, for social connection. Every resident in our community should have affordable access to this service. I am excited to announce that my 2024

budget will provide funding to enhance wireless broadband availability in public spaces, such as parks, libraries, town halls, emergency shelters, and even main street areas.

This Executive Budget also reflects a strong commitment to our community college, SUNY Ulster, and the affordable high-quality education it provides to thousands of students every year. The proposed budget includes \$6.9 million in operating assistance, and about \$21.5 million in capital funds, half of which is reimbursed by the State, to improve campus buildings and reduce on-going energy and maintenance costs.

It's important to keep in mind that the County's investment in our community college pays for itself: Many SUNY Ulster graduates stay **here** in our County, contributing to the local economy and tax base, raising families here, and volunteering in our communities. The total economic impact of the college was estimated in 2022 to be nearly \$100 million. And it is a vehicle for educational equity, providing an affordable pathway to a fulfilling career. It is not enough to have a high school diploma for many jobs in today's economy.

Corrections to Careers

Education and job training can break generational poverty and reduce recidivism rates in the criminal justice system. In my State of the County Address, I announced plans for a **Corrections to Careers program** in the county jail in partnership with the Carpenter's Union and Sheriff Juan Figueroa. This pre-apprenticeship program provides a pathway for incarcerated individuals to become an apprentice with the Carpenter's union or another trade of their choice after their release. I'm excited to report that over 30 people in the jail have expressed interest in participating when the program kicks off this fall. I also want to give a shout out to the Sheriff for his successful launch of a GED program in the jail, with over 20 individuals participating. These are the kinds of programs that support a productive new beginning.

We can keep people out of jail altogether by expanding opportunities to those on probation, and I am happy to announce that the 2024 Executive Budget extends the Corrections to Careers program to the County's Probation Department, as well.

Restorative Justice

The Restorative Justice & Community Empowerment Center reflects our County's dedication to repairing harm and promoting reconciliation in a process that involves all affected parties.

This year's budget expands and strengthens our commitment by adding a new full-time Mental Health Specialist to the Probation Department to provide on-site services to young people on probation and those referred to our Restorative Justice Center.

Providing pathways to employment is another critical piece, and in addition to the Corrections to Careers program, our Office of Employment & Training will provide on-site services at the Center beginning in 2024.

Finally, the Executive Budget expands funding for community empowerment programming, including financial literacy classes and anti-violence workshops.

Mental Health & Substance Use Disorder

One of the greatest areas of need in our county is, without question, access to mental health support and substance use treatment and recovery. In 2023, we allocated \$1.3 million in opioid settlement funds to innovative programs, including the region's first Outpatient Detox Program, Spanish-speaking outpatient services, emergency housing for recovery, and an opioid spike response protocol in partnership with Ellenville Regional Hospital and the Sheriff's office.

The #1 concern I hear from our teachers, administrators, students, and parents is the desperate need for help in our schools. We initiated a successful pilot program last year offering supplemental mental health support to middle schools, the age group where we see the most critical need. Some 70 students from every district in the County are benefiting from this additional clinical support, and the feedback from educators has been overwhelmingly positive. This is a program I believe we must continue, and the Executive Budget extends the program in 2024.

One of our most ambitious projects is the Community Behavioral Health Center at 368 Broadway in Kingston, where youth and adults will be able to access the care they need while avoiding emergency room visits.

Agreements are now in place with providers for clinical services, and the County Department of Mental Health will relocate to the building in December, ensuring coordinated services for individuals across the continuum of care. I want to give a shout out to our Department of Public Works for the beautiful work they are doing to renovate the space for our Mental Health Department.

A key component of the Center is the crisis stabilization center planned for the first floor. The Executive Budget proposes to allocate \$2 million of opioid settlement funding toward construction, together with \$1 million in funding to support the first year's

operation. In the future, the Center's operation will be self-sustaining and fully covered by Medicaid and health insurance. When the doors open next year, our residents in crisis will be able to get the help they need 24/7.

Serving the Whole County

As I mentioned in my February State of the County Address in Ellenville, our government must be present in all corners of this big, beautiful county, including here in the town of Marlborough.

The County has dedicated \$8.6 million of our federal American Rescue Plan Act funds to villages and towns to help to meet local needs, including over \$4.6 million in grants for improvements to water and sewer infrastructure, and over \$1.5 million in funding for local parks and recreation areas. In 2024, we will roll out our latest ARPA-funded program for municipalities, proposed by Marlborough's own Legislator Tom Corcoran – a \$2.5 million grant program to support municipal solar and electric vehicle charging. The County is thrilled to be able to provide this support.

I want to recognize Legislators Criswell and Corcoran, the Chair and Deputy Chair of the American Rescue Plan Committee, Megan Sperry and all the committee members for their work to spread the benefits of this funding to all corners of the County.

We are also looking to bolster our services to underserved communities, beginning with a major project to breathe new life into the County's underused Trudy Resnick Farber building in Ellenville. We've taken a bottom-up approach to reimagining the building through robust community outreach, and have already introduced new programming: Ellenville Regional Hospital is providing weekly fitness classes and health counseling; the Center for Veteran Reintegration is hosting veteran coffee clubs as part of its peer mental health support program; and we're collaborating with the Town of Wawarsing Recreation Department to bring new youth services to Trudy Farber.

One of the most popular community requests is for an on-site "concierge" to directly connect folks with services and assistance and help avoid the need for a 40-minute drive to County offices in Kingston.

I am happy to announce that my Executive Budget includes funding for this position. The concierge will serve as a community point person for County services, not only for Ellenville-Wawarsing residents but also for neighboring communities like Shawangunk and Rochester.

The 2024 budget also includes capital funding for the design phase of major capital improvements to the building, including expanding kitchen and dining areas and installing solar on the roof.

We want this building to become a bustling community hub when all is said and done.

I want to take a moment to thank Legislator John Gavaris for his strong support of these efforts, and for his tireless advocacy for the Ellenville-Wawarsing community.

Sustainable Tourism & Economic Development

Tourism is the number one economic activity in Ulster County. We have been gifted with stunning natural landscapes and outdoor recreational opportunities that enhance our quality of life and draw millions of visitors each year. We must steward and protect these resources, not just for the residents and visitors of today but also for future generations. We have already seen natural treasures like Peekamoose Blue Hole suffer from overuse, and we have to come up with thoughtful strategies to balance protection of sensitive areas and unique ecosystems with our tourism industry.

In 2024 we will develop a sustainable tourism plan that gives our visitors a high-quality experience and keeps them coming back, while also building in the values of stewardship and environmental responsibility.

Our county's natural places aren't the only gift we have. The arts community is the cultural heart of Ulster County and absolutely critical to the continued success of our tourism sector. I want to thank Legislator Peter Criswell, Chair Bartels, and Majority Leader John Heppner for championing legislation to create an Arts and Culture Master Plan in 2024. I look forward to working with you and the rest of the Legislature to move that plan forward.

Improving Government & Investing in Our Employees

In my first year in office, we faced challenges that exposed vulnerabilities in County Government processes and procedures. From my perspective, these challenges are opportunities to seize the moment and make changes that improve governance, transparency, and accountability. This year, I have hired an entirely new, professional leadership team in our Finance Department, headed by our new Finance Commissioner, Roseann Daw. Roseann and her team are incredibly hardworking and dedicated. The Finance Department, working together with County Comptroller March Gallagher, is committed to strengthening internal controls and procedures to ensure that County financial management is as transparent and efficient as possible.

We are also making sure our dedicated employees in all 26 departments have the support they need for their success as public servants, including new training in the County's ethics law. Effective governance means clear communication of expectations and the provision of necessary resources. In 2024, we will also extend training programs to the County's numerous Boards and Commissions so that the volunteers serving on these bodies feel supported and prepared.

To promote professional development and pathways for advancement, the 2024 budget proposes a new initiative with SUNY Ulster called the **Ulster County Leadership Academy**, with opportunities for employees to earn micro-credentials in leadership and management. We are fortunate to have an industrious and dedicated workforce, and we honor them and improve our collective work by investing in their professional development.

Finally, we are committed to creating a more diverse and inclusive work environment and workplace, and the 2024 budget provides funding for new training initiatives like "Leading Inclusively," a management-level training program.

Conclusion

I want to close by saying it's been a great honor to serve as your County Executive these last nine months, and to have the opportunity to work with dedicated colleagues in the Legislature and our many partners in and outside of government. Once again, I'd like to express my gratitude to my Budget team, the hardworking staff in my office, and all County departments for their contributions to this Executive Budget.

Even with rising mandated costs, we have developed a fiscally responsible budget for 2024 that improves services, enhances our infrastructure, and invests in our greatest asset – our people -- all while keeping discretionary spending in check and keeping property taxes flat.

Together, we will continue to build a sustainable, resilient, thriving Ulster County that leaves no one behind. Thank you.
