

George Latimer
County Executive

Assemblymembers and Senators of Westchester County's Delegation to New York State – it is a pleasure to be here with you today, albeit virtually, because of the times we are living in. Thank you for including us in these ongoing deliberations and the important work you do on behalf of the great State of New York. Having served in the State Legislature, I understand the difficult task you have ahead of you.

As we continue our work to get through this pandemic, our patience and strength has been tested – as New Yorkers and as neighbors living in Westchester County.

Last March, Westchester County became the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost a year later, nearly two thousand people have died in our County and the role of local government has become more critical than ever before.

This crisis has forced us all to step up to the plate and become more responsible for each other and our children. Demand for food programs have more than tripled. I attended a food distribution earlier this week and more than 100 people, many with babies asleep in carriages, were lined up 4 hours before they could fill their grocery bags with produce and necessities. The food was gone within 45 minutes. An 8 year old girl, named Jocelyn, was thrilled to get bread and chips along with a small bottle of hair spray. You could see her smile through her eyes, she was wearing a yellow emoji mask. Her neighbors, grateful for diapers and warm coats. I was there, handing out masks, reminding people...we are going to get through this, but it's not over yet.

The damage to our economy has been severe – devastating the small businesses and restaurants which are the lifeblood of this County. New York State's current 15 billion dollar budget gap, is drastic, and creates issues for ALL of us. We want to work side-by-side with you, as an advocate, to help leverage the Federal Government to make New York fiscally whole.

We are more than cognizant of the budgetary issues of New York and through this time the County is suffering severe financial distress. There are essential workers, nurses, care-takers who relied on our Bee-Line Bus System for transportation. We decided they didn't have to pay to take the bus anymore, we knew they needed to get to work or a doctor's appointment, so we just stopped charging them. Everyone entered through the back of the bus, not only to keep everyone socially distant...but help stop people from getting sick.

We want to partner with you in finding ways to support new revenues so we can get our economy moving again. This includes the expansion of mobile sports betting and downstate gaming licenses, which would greatly benefit our County. We would like to respectfully request New York State lift the moratorium which currently bars the creation of new commercial casino licenses, prior to 2023. We support Senator Mayer's efforts to earmark funding for school districts throughout the region from any new arrangement.

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Lifting this moratorium and developing one such casino in Westchester County would increase tourism revenue, create jobs, provide crucial education funding and provide new opportunities for minority, women and veteran owned businesses. I want to direct you to our County's largest city, Yonkers, the City of Hills, and home to Empire City Casino, the sixth largest casino in the country. Before COVID, the casino would see more than 9 million guests a year with an average of 15 thousand visitors during the week. With restricted hours and 25% capacity, Empire City can have about 3600 guests and employees on the floor at any given time. The health and safety protocols around games has limited gaming capacity significantly. Pre-COVID, revenue was roughly 307 million dollars with an average 25 million going toward schools monthly. Needless to say, it is now considerably less. We want to help boost our schools, get people back to work and we want people to be able to have some sort of entertainment again.

Westchester County has proudly supported "Raise the Age" and our implementation has been extremely successful. Over the last few years, we have become a regional hub for juvenile offenders from surrounding counties like Rockland and Nassau and helping people turn their lives around. New York State allocated funding to cover these costs. New York State similarly designated funding to cover the costs of Westchester's patrol of state parkways within the County as well as dozens of critical programs at the Department of Health and the Department of Social Services. I can't emphasize enough these programs which are more critical now than ever before. The State allocated 60 million dollars to cover the cost of these vital programs, unfortunately over the last six months, we've received only 10 million dollars of that 60 million, leaving an outstanding balance of 50 million dollars. We ask the delegation advocate to ensure New York State delivers this funding to us.

Sales tax is one of the things driving funding here in County. If it is part of your strategy, we'd like to support Governor Cuomo's measures to make County sales tax permanent. If you plan to take action and support the Governor's initiative to legalize marijuana, we would like to respectfully request Westchester County is included in the sales tax benefit of it. We would like to call on you – and ask New York State not shift AIM funding to Westchester County's sales tax. I've been having regular meeting with leaders of other municipalities, using our time as an opportunity to coordinate and cooperate where we can save costs and work toward the interest of the County taxpayers. The revenue from sales tax can help repair and boost our economy that has been on pause for too long.

In closing, I want to thank you again for this opportunity and I would be remiss not to mention our appreciation over the last year for your assistance in removing the referendum requirement on all capital projects above 10 million dollars. Because of its success, we were able to do some work on Memorial Field. This is close to my heart, my hometown of Mount Vernon will soon see a renaissance of sorts in Memorial Field. Last year, the County made a commitment to invest in revamping the field which will have an eight lane track, tennis courts and skate park. It was

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once the jewel of the city's recreation system, and with your help, it can become that once again, for a new generation.

As we reflect on how this past year has impacted our lives, our health and our faith – we are New Yorkers, and we are resilient.