

FROM THE CHAIR...

A Monthly Roundup of News from the Chair of the Sullivan County Legislature

WE DON'T BUDGET BY CRYSTAL BALL



**BY ROBERT A.
DOHERTY,
CHAIRMAN,
SULLIVAN COUNTY
LEGISLATURE**

Earlier this month, I read a letter, published in a local newspaper, accusing the Legislature of irresponsibly counting on gaming revenue in the County budget - in essence, gambling with taxpayers' money. The letter-writer argued this is why the Energy Tax was created and tipping fees are going up.



Incorrect.

Despite the author's insistence that this cannot be blamed on COVID-19, I can say - with certainty - that coronavirus dealt us a hard blow.

Yes, things are not as bad as they could have been, but this virus has had an undeniable fiscal impact, one that will continue long after a vaccine has been developed and distributed. Hey, it closed the casino for almost half the year, leading to a projected loss of \$1.5 million otherwise due us in gaming revenue. If anyone tells you we should have figured that in to our 2020 Budget, ask them for their crystal ball. The proposed 2021 Sullivan County budget does rely on projected gaming revenue of \$1.5 million. It also takes into account these significant projections:

- Losing upwards of \$2 million in originally anticipated sales tax revenue
- Setting aside \$2.5 million in anticipation of a 20% drop in State aid across the board
- Collecting \$2.5 million from the Energy Tax

Will all this ultimately happen? I have no idea. None of us do, to be honest.

Budgets are tricky - you have to guess even when you'd rather not. But I trust our County Manager and Budget Office team when they give me their best guess . . . because it's an educated one.

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THIS ISN'T ALL ABOUT MONEY

Whether you're a citizen seeking care for a loved one or a government official seeking the best outcome for your community, you've got to do your research and not make baseless assumptions.

I've done my homework on the Care Center and Certified Home Health Agency (CHHA), which is why I continue to advocate for turning over the administration of both to a professional management company. I don't buy into the lie that private care cannot compare with public care.

First, some facts:

1. We continue to lose a million dollars a month on Care Center operations alone.
2. Costs are rising, and if we had included those costs in the 2021 Tentative County Budget, we'd all be staring at a double-digit tax hike.
3. Despite the increasing amounts of money we've dedicated to these arms of County government, our quality of care is not anywhere near where it should be.

Take a look at www.medicare.gov/care-compare. At two out of five stars (below average), the Care Center's Quality of Resident Care is the lowest of all four nursing homes in

Three goals with the Care Center and CHHA . . .

1. Improve care
2. Protect taxpayers
3. Preserve jobs

Sullivan County (Garnet Health Medical Center-Catskills and Roscoe both rate the highest, while Achieve is a full star higher than we are). This, despite the fact that both Achieve and Roscoe's Staffing rating is lower than ours.

As for the CHHA, the same federal rating system ranks us at just 2.5 out of 5 stars in Quality. The CHHA that serves neighboring Delaware County - which is more similar to us than any other nearby county in NYS - comes in at 3.5 stars in Quality, again a full star above us. (And by the way, they're a privately-run CHHA.)

Our research, too, has shown that 10 years ago the CHHA was doing 10,000 visits a year, but now that's down to 6,500. Our population hasn't gone down in that time. In fact, our aging population has

gone up.

The current state of these agencies is neither a reflection nor an indictment of the staff. It's a direct reflection on the leadership who had been responsible for that facility over the past five years: the prior Legislature.

In the past seven months, I have spent countless hours gathering objective data, speaking to industry experts and learning to distinguish first-rate facilities from "also-rans."

Anyone who has taken the time to investigate the data would be led to the same conclusion: that the time for this County to save these operations passed years ago.

Advocating for the status quo simply means you're OK with higher taxes and inferior care. Not me.

I've said from the outset that I want three things to happen with the Care Center and CHHA: 1. Improve care. 2. Protect taxpayers. 3. Preserve jobs. We can do better. The citizens of this County deserve it, and I won't stand for anything less.

SHARING OUR SUCCESS

Too often people only criticize what government doesn't do to their liking, but we often do get it right, and those times should be noted, as well. Here are a few examples from just this past month:

- Our Division of Information Technology Services (ITS) had unofficial results posted on our website just an hour after polls closed on Election Day. It was the earliest of any county in the region, the result of months of planning and coordination with our Board of Elections.
- Our Probation Department was recognized by the NYS for 100% compliance in the all-important collection of DNA for all of 2019. And they're not resting on their heels. The latest innovation? Accepting credit cards for fees, fines and restitution.

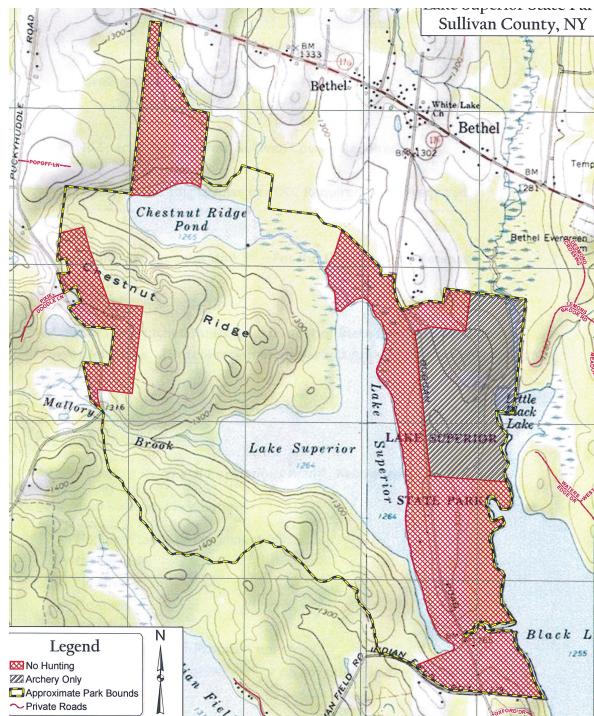
Making WIC even better

You may have wondered why Sullivan County transferred operations of our WIC (Women, Infants & Children) Program to Sun River Health (formerly Hudson River Healthcare).

It wasn't to save money, as it reduced our Health & Family Services budget by only around \$35,000. Nor was it to "gut" our services, despite a few uninformed and irresponsible rants on social media (not a welcome place for accuracy). It was simply to offer better services to those who use and depend upon this vital program. Sun River Health offers a far wider range of services for these demographics, and both our Public Health Services team and the NYS Department of Health agreed this was a wise course.

I'm proud we found a way to make things better for those we serve, without hurting our employees or burdening our taxpayers, and you can look to this as a perfect example of what we aim to accomplish in the months and years ahead.

Expanding the enjoyment of our most popular park



Our Parks Director Brian Scardefield has roamed the hills surrounding Lake Superior State Park in Bethel (which we operate), scouting out new trails to debut! These may finally make some scenic spots & the park's lesser-known lake, Chestnut Ridge Pond, easily accessible.

Now it's your turn...

County Manager Josh Potosek and his Budget Office team have spent months preparing the 2021 Tentative Sullivan County Budget, which they delivered to the Legislature in late October.

My colleagues and I have spent the last month reviewing, discussing and debating various aspects of that proposed budget, with a mandate of adopting it in one form or another by December 20.

But before we do that, I want to hear what you have to say about the budget. It's your money, after all.

But I ask you to do one thing first: your homework. Go to www.sullivanny.us and look at the Executive Summary - or even the full Detail, if you want to take a deep dive. (Find them in the left margin.) Then come to one of our Budget Hearings, scheduled for Tuesday, December 1 at 6 p.m. and Thursday, December 3 at 12:30 p.m. at the Government Center. Or email us your thoughts to annmarie.martin@co.sullivan.ny.us. I'm listening...

HOW TO GET IN TOUCH

- **Looking for the Chairman?**
845-807-0435 or
Robert.Doherty@co.sullivan.ny.us
- **General question?** 845-794-3000
- **Need a specific name or number?**
www.sullivanny.us/countydirectory



WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

While Legislature meetings are viewable online, not everyone has the time or ability. So let me fill you in on our activities in the month of November...

- **We dropped** the unpopular Solid Waste Access Fee from \$80 to \$50 a year for residences and from \$200 to \$125 a year for businesses.
- **We authorized** Public Health Physical Therapist Per Diem and Occupational Therapist Per Diem positions to maintain consistent and dependable services to our CHHA patients.
- **We agreed** to bring DMV staff and services to the Village of Liberty on December 1, 8, 10, 15, 17, 22 and 29 for the convenience of our citizens, and we hope to do more.
- **We allocated** \$100,000 to the Partnership for Economic Development for its 2020 contract with the County, provided we receive a plan for how those monies will be spent.
- **We loaned** \$50,000 to the Callicoon Business Association, to be used for the Callicoon Train Depot Project to turn the old station into a destination. These monies will be repaid to the County.