

**2022 State of the County
Tompkins County, N.Y.
Legislature Chairwoman Shawna Black**

Fellow Legislators, I'm honored to address this elected body, the dedicated public servants that make up our county staff, and all our fellow County residents with this year's State of the County address.

Tompkins County continues to be excellent in its service to residents, creative in problem solving and addressing the challenges facing our community, and fortunate to have the people dedicated to the work of our local government. While I'm confident that we have the people and actions in place to serve residents and address challenges, there is much work to be done to increase our resiliency and to sustain the efforts that have led our County to where it is today.

The service that our County provides to residents is unparalleled. Look no further than the operations of our Health Department and the nurses who have personally impacted tens of thousands of lives by helping people through COVID-19. Our nurses and COVID responders have been there for people in all circumstances, whether they were sick, caring for a loved one, or afraid of how the pandemic or disease might impact them. And through every shift in guidance from the state or federal government, our staff has been there to provide clear interpretations and inform the public of not only what is changing, but why it is changing. This type of commitment to serving our community is inspiring, and I see clearly why Tompkins County has been a leader in responding to this pandemic.

At the Legislature level, we have supported and increased access to free testing for all County residents, our vaccination rates are among the highest in the state, and we've been able to support keeping our community's hospital open and operational. The County's COVID response has also strengthened community partnerships with our colleagues in higher education, non-profits, and inter-municipal partners.

The level of service I described in our COVID response happens each and every day across our organization. Our county services help people find jobs, manage over 300 miles of county roads, respond to emergencies, keep the community healthy, safe and vibrant, manage records and technology important to peoples lives, deliver critical programs to people in need, oversee local elections, the list goes on and our responsibility to keeping these services running and supported has never been greater. This is something that we should all be proud of.

Tompkins County has a reputation and history of progress and creativity. We're not ones to shy away from a sticky challenge, in-fact we usually dive in headfirst.

This legislature commits frequently to gaining a deep understanding of issues facing our community and entrusts our departments and staff with finding and implementing thoughtful, creative, and oftentimes collaborative solutions. That can many times involve hours and hours of great debate – Welcome aboard to the 5 new legislators!

A highlight of Tompkins County's ability to creatively address challenges facing our community is our Reimagining Public Safety work. Our Reimagining commitments, passed by the Legislature in early 2021, chart a course for a more inclusive and responsive public safety system and our process is committed to centering the experiences of Black and Brown members of our community. There are nearly 20 plans under Reimagining, everything from better and more consistent collection, analysis, and presentation of data to more equitable ways to recruit, retain, train, and support our law enforcement officers.

I am particularly excited about the plans to implement an alternative response system for crisis intervention and wraparound health and human services delivery. We have incredible people in our workforce and community who offer direct services to those experiencing crises and in pain – with this plan we'll be able to study approaches in other communities and best practices to build on what we do well and invest in new approaches. As previous chair of the health and human services committee, I know firsthand the critical need for mental health and wraparound services in our county and see this plan as central to our success.

I'd like to specifically offer a shout out to our Tompkins County Sheriff, Derek Osborne, and his office for their work toward implementing a pilot program to respond to non-emergency calls in new ways. This pilot will open the doors for a better understanding of how we can respond differently when a law enforcement officer is not needed on scene, freeing up officer time to respond in emergency situations and further reducing disproportionate minority contact with the criminal justice system.

These creative solutions, approved by our Legislature, are being diligently implemented by our County staff. I recognize that reimagining public safety can be a divisive and sometimes political issue, but I believe strongly in the plans we passed and the positive impact they will have on our community. Each month this year we will receive an update on progress made under Reimagining Public Safety from our new Community Justice Center Project Director, and I look forward to this Legislature staying engaged and continuing this work throughout our terms.

The opportunity for the most creative energy from Tompkins County is how we move forward coming out of this pandemic. Our response to COVID-19 has been stellar, having engaged staff and volunteers from nearly every department and community partners, and having leveraged resources made available through our legislative actions. Moving forward, we have the opportunity to evaluate our activities over the past two years and adapt to be a more responsive, connected, and agile local government. Just as we put a concerted effort toward responding to the pandemic and addressing Reimagining Public Safety, we can make strides based on what we've learned during this national and local tragedy.

Our recovery fund will invest directly in the needs of our local communities and organizations. In the upcoming months the legislature will focus their attention to the applications and decide how to send the recovery money into our community.

I challenge legislators to be active and engaged listeners and partners in the work ahead, and our staff to seek the training and resources to carry out the work with excellence. The State of our County stands to be forever improved by what we do coming out of the worst of this pandemic.

None of the work I've mentioned so far would be possible without our employees. The Tompkins County workforce is made up of over 700 dedicated public servants across nearly 30 departments. To best honor and support our employees, it is incumbent upon the Legislature to continue to invest in them and support a continually more diverse and inclusive workplace.

In 2021 we completed successful contract negotiations with Road Patrol and White Collar bargaining units, bringing us up-to-date with three of four bargaining units. These new contracts are responsive to our labor units and reflect an ongoing commitment to our workforce.

This year we will undertake a compensation study to better understand the investment we currently make in our workforce and what adjustments must be made to further invest in our employees and the future operations of this organization. We want to continue recruiting, retaining, and supporting a diverse and excellent workforce that can continue to render excellent service to our community.

Our work in the areas of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion has become a cross-organizational effort, with engagement from employees and legislators across different backgrounds and departments. This work, being carried out by our Chief Equity and Diversity Officer continues to strengthen our organization and I look forward to the efforts in 2022 to improve our organization in these areas.

In 2021 we adopted organizational values and updated our diversity statement to further provide a vision for this organization and our people. Our values of integrity, accountability, equity, and respect are guideposts that direct our work and reflect the input and ideas of our workforce. These mutually agreed upon values will be further rolled out in 2022 in conjunction with the updated diversity statement. Our workforce, diversity and inclusion group will continue to provide guidance on a monthly basis. They will continue to collaborate with our employee-based Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion or JEDI Committee. Each month in our Budget, Capital, and Personnel meeting we will have a report from WDIC and listen to their recommendations and ideas.

While we celebrate our achievements and investments, we must continue to acknowledge the work to be done to increase resiliency and sustain the efforts that have led us to where we are today.

Each year our County budget is an opportunity to address critical needs, sustain our efforts and operations, and increase our resiliency. Our 2022 County budget is an expression of our values, and it reinvests in our workforce and sponsored agencies while holding the tax levy constant. As we think about and develop our 2023 budget, we must continue to listen to our community's needs.

Through the Capital program, we accelerated our goals for achieving net-zero emissions from County facilities to 2027, invested in greening the County's fleet vehicles, and invested in needed infrastructure improvements. Environmental sustainability and conservation continue to be priorities for our County and we are making strides toward lowering emissions and influencing change throughout our community.

We have a responsive Legislature, with a tradition of investing in what matters to our organization and our residents, I am looking forward to a successful year in 2022 of becoming more resilient and investing in sustainability and betterment across our operations.

In closing, local government feels closer to people's lives than ever before. The successes and challenges I noted in this address have deep and lasting impacts on the lives of our constituents and neighbors. It is my sincere hope that we, as a Legislature, continue to make the investments to reflect our roles in peoples lives, and take the responsibility seriously.

Thank you.