

ORANGE COUNTY REVISIONED – A PLATFORM FOR CHANGE –

Michael Sussman, Chair

During the last four months, scores of county residents have joined together and studied our county government, its funding, its policies and its priorities. We did this because, to discuss change, it is critical to understand the *status quo*. Our study focused on these major areas:

--- sustainability and economic development

--- agriculture

--- Kiryas Joel

--- health policy

--- our cities

---- the arts

--- government organization

Re-visioning committees spent weeks reviewing policy documents and budgets and speaking with involved policy makers. Our conclusions follow. This report does not purport to address all issues which face county government, specifically the important interests of identifiable groups like the aged, veterans, children in need of early intervention services. In coming weeks, we expect to release detailed proposals which address each of these issues and others.

I. SUSTAINABILITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Under the current administration, the County has sacrificed environmental sustainability for development. The counter-position of prosperity and environmental protection is false. We can have both vibrant economic development and protect our environment and both must be priorities.

Today, there remain more than forty unremediated toxic waste sites in our county. See, Exhibit 1 for report prepared in August 2016 presenting status of these sites. Cleaning up these sites expeditiously and allowing for their redevelopment will create hundreds of useful jobs. Ignoring these sites or delaying remediation plans, as the DEC has done, not only imperils our environment; it costs us jobs and economic growth.

Economic development in our County has been subject to “pay and play” politics and the control by the few. This must end. The Orange County Industrial Development Agency [IDA] was created to spur economic development and economic opportunity in our County, not as the private bank for the Orange County Partnership, a private organization, or those associated with it. However, the IDA has been hijacked and is not fulfilling its critical role. It has supported a plethora of projects which foster development in more rural areas of the county and has done little to support urban re-development and job growth for the neediest populations. The projects it supports have largely been sponsored by the Orange County Partnership, a PRIVATE entity with an Executive Director who profits from the financing provided by the IDA. The IDA has supported subsidies for companies with the capacity to themselves access capital markets. In helping locate employers in communities which have had substantial challenges attracting private investment, such subsidies may make sense; however, our County IDA has not successfully

prioritized such projects and instead supports projects which are either environmentally and/or socially undesirable, like CPV ad Legoland, or in rural areas where development is unwanted or unrelated to fostering employment opportunities for those lacking the same.

The IDA should have a different commitment: to work with local communities throughout the county to assist in projects which have community support and are consistent with the comprehensive plans of individual towns and villages and the County's own Planning Department. Each town/village should be advised annually of the funds which can be made available through the IDA [raised through bonding] and should compete to support economic development projects which gain traction in their communities. This should be a ground-up, not a top-down, process and interested companies should first be directed to localities not to the Partnership or the IDA.

Apart from the IDA, county leaders have supported major projects which threaten the way of life of many of our residents. CPV and Legoland are prime examples.

CPV presents profound environmental impacts both in the immediate vicinity and more broadly. Th power plant must be fed by pipelines and compressor stations which themselves pose real environmental and public health dangers to residents. The development of CPV contravenes state energy policy and the pollutants associated with the project contribute negatively to climate change and earth's warming. Just as some would deny the existence of climate change, our County leaders have failed to recognize the profound impact associated with a huge power plant. The County has never insisted that CPV study the actual environmental impacts of its project and has been satisfied with the flawed oversight of the Town of Wawayanda Planning Board. This must change. Before CPV is permitted to operate, all facets of its environmental, health and economic impact must be reviewed; the last environmental studies were done 7-8 years ago, no

health studies have ever been done and a huge amount of current research has occurred since then about the effects of a huge facility like this.

The County Executive supported Legoland from its introduction to the Town of Goshen in May 2016. While urging all to "keep an open mind" while the applicant completed environmental reviews, his own was never open; he supported Legoland from the beginning at a location which fails to meet any reasonable measure of appropriateness. The 500 plus acres the company has optioned to purchase are zoned in a very restrictive manner consistent with the Town of Goshen's Comprehensive Plan. This is precisely because the land selected by the applicant features fragile ecosystems which will be destroyed by large scale development. In April 2016, the Goshen Town Board recognized this when it summarily rejected a less dense housing development on the site, citing the Town's longstanding drought issues, the unacceptable traffic congestion such development would yield and the Comprehensive Plan's recognition of the fragile environmental nature of the site. Yet, the County Executive would sacrifice these same values to a higher bidder; this is the way to turn our County into something most residents oppose.

The County must take a more active and direct role in reviewing major development projects which, like these two, impose substantial impact far beyond their "neighborhoods." In conducting such reviews, the County must elevate the common good over private, corporate interests.

The County must also assess impacts cumulatively, in a manner which it alone can accomplish. By keeping track of development proposals throughout its scope, the county's Planning Department can aggregate impacts from simultaneously proposed projects and end the myopic and segmented consideration often accorded each. The County can then share the actual

impacts with local decision-makers.

The County has no long-term sustainability plan and must develop and adopt one: this plan will demonstrate how the creation of alternative energy sources on appropriate locations *within our county* can replace our reliance on fossil fuels, improving our environmental and health. Renewable energy already employs more people than fossil fuels, and it makes sense to invest in in a growing industry, not an industry in decline. Nobody is investing in VCRs now that streaming is available. <https://thinkprogress.org/clean-energy-more-jobs-than-fossil-fuels-32f615915399>
<https://www.scribd.com/document/343243328/Sierra-Club-Clean-Energy-Jobs-Report-Final-1>

The sustainability plan should also include much broader reliance on electric cars, the purchase of which is now being encouraged by relatively aggressive state and federal tax rebate policies. The County should site charging stations strategically on county-owned parcels.

In short, with the tremendous increase in school construction projects in the region and implementation of the plan discussed below to rebuild our cities, economic development should be focused on re-vitalizing housing and infra-structure, including transportation resources, in developed areas and on projects which support education and health care. The County and its IDA should not subsidize development projects on farmland especially when doing so contributes to environmental degradation, congestion and a decline in our quality of life. And, the County cannot fritter away, as it has done, opportunities for substantial economic development, typified by the decade-long delay in generating any profitable use of the Camp LaGuardia site. That site has been entirely mismanaged by the current administration with a huge waste in potential taxes and revenues.

II. AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is a bedrock industry throughout many areas of Orange County; the diversity of agriculture must be maintained and encouraged. Currently, the County has no Commissioner of Agriculture and no centralized means of supporting our farmers. This should change.

We support the creation of an executive level office to encourage and support farming and farmers. The urgency of this effort must match the public demand for produce grown locally and public enthusiasm for our farm markets.

Hydroponic farming also provides a means to help urban communities develop viable micro-industries and employment opportunities. But, we need clean water for that – PFOA/PFOS are taken up by vegetables.

Any renewed focus on agriculture must be multi-faceted and involve serious address to flooding conditions which have repeatedly harmed farm families along the Wallkill River. The Wallkill River needs to be cleared of accumulating silt depositions which limit river flow capacity and predictably contribute to flooding events which harm our farming communities and economy. These floods have costs local farmers tens of millions of dollars. In addition, snags created by congestion occasioned by seepage from the landfill must be rectified and the river's capacity to absorb large scale weather events must be made more uniform. Cooperation with neighboring counties and state and federal governments is essential to gaining the resources needed to reclaim the Wallkill River. However, and regardless of the success of these efforts, the decades-old agreement between the County and four of our towns to maintain the Wallkill is obsolete and needs to be redone with the goal of markedly decreasing flooding events which have cost our farmers tens of millions of dollars and made less viable their way of life.

III. KIRYAS JOEL

The endless expansion of Kiryas Joel remains a dominant issue throughout the southern corridor of our county. This process challenges our shared opposition to residential segregation, the dominance of a political jurisdiction by a particular religious group and the growth of tax exempt properties, which burdens all taxpayers. On the other hand, attempting to restrict the growth of Kiryas Joel challenges notions of religious liberty and personal choice, including the choice to procreate at levels which far exceed the average. Dealing in a direct manner with these tensions, rather than wishing them away, is the challenge and calling of leaders.

Our sub-committee strongly opposes the annexation to Kiryas Joel of hundreds of acres of property or creation of a new and more powerful political sub-division, i.e., the Town of North Monroe, which, we believe, would promote, not limit, the entanglement of church and state. We support the efforts of Assemblyman Skoufis to insure county planning department review of all annexation proposals, including those expanding the Village of Kiryas Joel.

But opposing annexation and the formation of a new town does not confront the exponential and inevitable population growth in this community or afford any solution to the like-ascending housing needs of its population. To address that, we favor an ongoing and coordinated dialogue between the elected leaders of each of the neighboring Towns and villages and elected and appointed political leaders from Kiryas Joel. Creating such a venue would provide an ongoing means of engaging in dialogue and problem-solving and, we hope, reduce the corrosive and pervasive distrust which now exists between neighboring communities and their residents. Community groups should be welcome participants in this exchange. We believe our next county executive should create such a working group and chair its regular meetings. In good

faith dialogue, now polarized parties must come together in honest exchange.

We also oppose the ongoing disproportion of federal and state funding directed toward Kiryas Joel, one direct result of the perceived bloc vote. Just last month, New York's budget continued this inequity, assigning a greater increase to the Kiryas Joel schools than to any other school district in our County.

Finally, we urge the leaders of Kiryas Joel to more expressly recognize the rights and aspirations of other county residents and to project values of sharing and civic-mindedness integral to their faith.

IV. HEALTH POLICY

Our health sub-committee found that there had been a welcome expansion of health care facilities in the county and that the *status quo* has closed the gap between medical care offered here and in larger metropolitan areas. It also documented the alarming proliferation of opioid addiction in the region, as well as our continued need to remediate the effects of lead paint in our urban areas. We note the recent proposal of the County Executive to expand the county's capacity to treat those suffering from opioid addiction, though question its timing.

Amongst the major unmet priorities of a new administration should be the following:

1. development of a psychiatric facility equipped to handle the needs of young people;
2. Restoring separate Commissioners for the Social Services and Mental Health Departments so as to insure –appropriate attention is given to the distinct issues handled by each department;
3. Redesign of the County web site, which is uninformative and difficult to navigate. The county should allow departments to update their pages regularly, and provide a seamless access process

allowing county residents to identify services. This should include: a searchable index of county services, including eligibility requirements for critical public health programs and contact information; a single point of contact for services; physical service centers to accommodate walk-in clients; pre-screening for services on line, by phone and in person and follow-up to ensure that those in need obtain services.

The county's Community Health Improvement Plan does not identify substance abuse as a priority area. Centralizing information on the county web site for those seeking access to drug and/or alcohol treatment facilities to facilitate assistance for those in need. We also need to ensure that every school has up-to-date information on treatment options.

4. The cities of Middletown, Port Jervis and especially Newburgh have higher rates of elevated lead levels than the county as a whole. There is no current effort to systematically assess the risk of lead contamination of residential tap water in urban areas of our County and this must be rectified with proper investment to redress the underlying problem. In addition, reliance on health clinics poses risks now made manifest by the financial crisis of Middletown Community Health Center. We need to insure that our local hospitals provide a full array of services to residents and the County must oppose hospital efforts to contract critical services, whether emergency services in Cornwall or maternity services in Port Jervis. The current administration has been far too docile in resisting such actions at the state level.

5. The alarming levels of PFOs detected in Newburgh's water supply reveals the deficiencies in state and county regulations and testing protocols. We support a more aggressive county health department which takes responsibility for insuring public health and safety, particularly in relation to sources of water. We also note that the county legislature should require testing of private

wells and water systems that supply fewer than 10,000 people for chemical contaminants which currently need not be tested.

The County's Health Department should also be a strong advocate against the dumping of every manner of toxic facility in or near our cities and must play a more aggressive role in lobbying the DEC and EPA to force more expeditious remediation of toxic waste sites. These cannot be allowed to fester for decades on end without strong county advocacy for their clean up. In addition, the Health Department should sponsor public forums to discuss the status of these sites and the risks attendant to their unremediated status. This will create a more informed public, citizens able to take proactive steps to protect their water supplies.

These issues and others are more fully addressed in the report by the committee which studied Health, Mental Health, Substance Abuse, EMS and Veterans' Issues. See, Exhibit 2 for complete report.

V. ASSISTING THE COUNTY'S CITIES

Our cities offer a magnificent opportunity for renewal and cultural renaissance. Progress is being made in each and we applaud local leaders committed to the improvement of Port Jervis, Middletown and Newburgh. But, the cities need more assistance from the counties, both through adjustments to revenue sharing formulae to policies which disallow the cities to become dumping grounds. All three of our cities need ongoing and significant public initiative and commitment to jump start the investment of the quantum of private capital needed for revitalization.

While the IDA had directed substantial resources to private companies which can access the capital markets, they have generally ignored our cities. This must be redressed. Our plan follows:

1. Each city will complete and submit to the County Planning Department an inventory of city-owned properties which need gut rehabilitation. After review, the Planning Department will provide that list to the County Executive and the IDA. The inventory will designate the municipality's priorities for rehabilitation and a proposed five-year budget to accomplish this task. In this regard, efforts should be made to sequentially upgrade specific areas of each city, with priority going to the most immiserated census tracts.
2. Using its access to bond markets, the County IDA will raise capital to support this rehabilitation and each city will issue RFPs for proposals to accomplish the gut rehabilitation of municipally-owned properties. Each proposal will be judged on its promise to provide apprenticeship programs and job training to area residents in coordination with the county's major construction trade unions.
3. In this manner, three primary objectives will be achieved: the re-birth of urban neighborhoods and the stimulation of private investment in our cities; job creation for skilled unionized workers and aggressive hands-on job training which will be coordinated through our unions.

To make more feasible this major re-development effort, the County should also expand its public transportation system, insuring better intra-municipal routing and transit between our cities.

To coordinate the implementation of this proposal, the County legislature should create a county-wide level "municipal development" officer. His/her principal function would be to operationalize, in concert with the IDA, the above-stated project and to put the critical pieces

together.

Incident to this strategy, the County should also support the development of early intervention centers in Newburgh and Middletown. These centers will offer child care, parenting and self-development opportunities for residents, facilitating their access to employment while insuring the highest quality child development programs. Again, construction of these centers will offer substantial local employment opportunities.

The county can no longer take a hands—off approach to job creation and redevelopment of our cities. The current effort is marginal at best and fails to countervail the pathologies which exist in all three cities – drug use, crime and hopelessness must be addressed through programs which offer real opportunities.

VI. PROMOTING THE ARTS

Anchoring healthy cities must be an increased County commitments to the arts. We observe with dismay the diminishing federal commitment to the arts and believe that this trend must be reversed at the county level.

In 2015, the Citizens Foundation Quality of Life report card noted: “Grant funds continue to be scarce. The National Endowment for the Arts gave no grants to Orange County recipients in 2013; the NYS Council on the Arts reduced its grants by 19%, but did fund 15 new grants administered by Arts Mid-Hudson through its Decentralized Grant Program; and the New York Foundation for the Arts have no scholarships in Orange County. Orange County continued to be a grantor of arts-related funds.”

However, upon closer inquiry, the County’s commitment to the arts and our artists has

been minimal. During two years of the current administration, county arts-related grants were not provided at all. Indeed, administratively, county-wide arts programs are administered through Orange County Tourism. Under “County Executive Arts, Heritage & Tourism Grants, the following appears, “Thank you for your interest in the 2016-17 Executive Arts, Heritage and Tourism Grant Program. As of December 1st, applications are no longer being accepted. Please check back in 2017 for updates to the program.” By April 1, 2017, no update had been provided.

Examples abound of county level apathy toward the arts and this must be reversed: when the Sugar Loaf Performing Arts Center was up for sale four years ago, the County and towns expressed no sustained interest and it was purchased by the Mid-Hudson Civic Center in Poughkeepsie. After sponsoring an inspiring theater program for two years, in late August [2016], the Civic Center Board abruptly terminated this program and this wonderful performance space has sat dark since. The County did not lobby or fight for the proper use of this space. Likewise, the Jazz Festival which attracted substantial audiences has likewise received no county support.

We support a different approach: supporting the arts and artists who are willing to settle in our communities, particularly in our cities, will reinvigorate these communities and spur positive economic growth and development. The County should have a Commissioner of the Arts to serve as the point person for disseminating updated information on artistic events throughout the county and for distributing increased county grant funding to spur clusters of artistic enterprise in development, particularly in urban areas.

As other parts of the state and nation have seen, promoting the arts will have a substantial

spill-over effect for our entire county. Again, the current administration has lacked the creativity and commitment to make this happen.

VII. RESTRUCTURING COUNTY GOVERNMENT

In the attached three reports, our group demonstrates that during the current administration, funding priorities have shifted toward law enforcement and the Sheriff's Department and away from public health and social services; the current county government has too slowly adopted to the opportunities for interactive technologies and has likewise failed to promote budgetary savings through the consolidations of services and purchasing arrangements which would save other units of government. The full text of these reports is incorporated herein. See, Exhibits 3-5.

Likewise, the County government remains woefully out of compliance with reasonable standards for the hiring and promotion of members of racial minorities and this must change for us to achieve equality of opportunity for all.

CONCLUSION

One political party has dominated County government for fifty years. As a result, our county subsidizes corporate interests and promotes projects that threaten our quality of life, weaken our economy and degrade our environment. We now need new ideas to preserve the best of our County. We also need to involve our citizens and residents in the development of these new ideas.

Orange County is located within a 1 hour drive of NYC, which is a huge potential market. Why are too many driving through our County on the way to the Catskills, and not stopping to

spend their dollars here? Let's work to attract tourism, not heavy industry and polluters! We propose to reorganize county government, directly address ongoing causes of tension, promote local businesses, and support urban redevelopment, the environment, public health and the arts. By doing so, we will strengthen our economy, preserve our environment, promote responsible development and improve the lives of our neighbors and ourselves.