

## 2010 State of the County Speech

### *“Putnam County: Defining the Government Role in Our Future”*

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County Executive**

Mr. Chairman, members of the County Legislature, Madame Clerk, Distinguished Public Officials, County Employees, Members of the Media, and, most importantly, residents of Putnam County—Good evening and thank you for taking the time to join us here for the 2010 State of the County Address.

#### **The Great Recession – Negative Revenue Impact**

What a difference a year can make. At this time last year, I delivered a speech entitled “Putnam County: *Controlling its Destiny.*” In that speech, we highlighted that Putnam County, according to the New York State Comptroller’s Office, had the highest sales tax growth rate in the entire State of New York from 2007 to 2008. We explained that this revenue growth, combined with our cost cutting efforts implemented throughout the years, enabled the County to meet its mandated obligations, while preserving the services that our citizens told us that they wanted us to provide, at a cost that they could afford. In 2009, this scenario changed dramatically due to the great recession that has not only hurt the economy of Putnam County, but also decimated the economy of our entire nation as a whole. Putnam County went from being first in sales tax revenue growth in 2008 to the

second highest in sales tax revenue decline in 2009, as actual revenues plunged \$ 5.1 million (10%). New York State Comptroller DiNapoli reported that unlike in other downturns, 2009 was the first time in recent history that there was actually an overall decline in County Sales Tax Collection in the State – a sign of the severity of this recession. The sales tax decline in 2009 was one of the worst on record, as every region of the state experienced a downturn, with the largest decline occurring in the lower Hudson Valley.

Other economically sensitive County revenues suffered in 2009 as well. Property tax revenue fell short of our adopted 2009 budget by \$ 3.5 million, as property owners encountered difficulty paying their property taxes. Outstanding property tax liens rose by 26% from \$ 9.9 million to \$ 12.5 million, liens which the County must foreclose upon if they remain unpaid. Interest earnings in the general fund totaled only \$ 212,000 (47% below the adopted 2009 Budget) as the Federal Reserve held interest rates near zero to help stabilize the economy. County Clerk fees and Department of Motor Vehicle surcharge revenues fell short of budgeted expectations as economic activity from home and auto sales plunged. Prisoner board-in fees dried up as new jails have opened throughout the area and our own prison population has increased. OTB revenues are down as discretionary spending by our residents has decreased. In yet another sign of the bad economic conditions, the Personnel Department reports that applications for civil service examinations from people seeking government employment increased by almost 20%, while requests for waivers of examination fees increased by 148%.

On a positive note, Putnam County received \$ 1.4 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act funding from the Federal Government to offset our Medicaid costs. The County recognized an additional \$ 1.8 million in revenue as the result of a three year revenue reconciliation process between our Department of Social Services and the State of New York. In 2009, operating revenues totaled \$ 132.1 million, nearly \$ 4.3 million short of our adopted budget of \$ 136.4 million. This revenue shortfall, combined with the increase in property tax receivables, was mainly responsible for the \$ 7.4 million decrease in cash on hand experienced by the County in 2009.

### **The Effect of the Recession on Putnam County Department of Social Services**

The great recession has placed an increased demand on the Department of Social Services. There has been a 156% increase in the number of applications for food stamps from 2008 to 2009. Of the 941 applications processed, 64% or 602 individuals were eligible for benefits. In total, the food stamp caseload increased 32%. The number of people receiving Home Energy Assistance (HEAP) increased 39% from 693 to 964 in 2009.

The loss of the Coordinator of Community Affairs will result in the loss of certain specific services to the residents of Putnam County. These services include the liaison between new residents and police departments when workers are exploited and wages stolen by unscrupulous employers.

However, children who were born in the United States by undocumented parents are American citizens. These children have and always will have access to those programs that will assure their safety, security, health and well being.

The Child Protective Services protects all children from harm, physical abuse, endangerment and neglect regardless of their citizenship status. Other services, such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families and access to health insurance via Medicaid or Child Health Plus continue to be available to children who are citizens.

The Department of Social Services employs staff who speak Spanish and has linkages with interpreters who speak Polish, Russian, Italian and Arabic, some of the languages we have served in the past two months, and through these interpreters we will continue to provide these services.

The County has also seen growth in the single largest social service program-Medicaid, as the Medicaid-only caseload has increased by 13% from 2008 to 2009. Currently, the number of people eligible for Medicaid in Putnam County is 5202. Of these, only about 98 individuals are eligible because they are on public assistance. The rest receive Medicaid because they are without health insurance and need very expensive home health care to keep them out of a nursing home or are already in a nursing home. Or, like so many of our eligible people, they had a job without health insurance and now have a life threatening illness such as cancer or liver disease and need Medicaid to receive treatment.

Applications for Temporary Assistance and Home Energy Assistance have also increased. These applications might continue to increase, as people who have lost employment and might have qualified for assistance have been able to stay off the rolls due to the extension of unemployment benefits. We are concerned that this population will join the welfare rolls when their unemployment insurance expires.

### **Putnam Workforce Partnership**

The Putnam Workforce Partnership continues to combat the problem of high unemployment. Located at the Donald B. Smith Government Campus, it has been a valuable resource center offering comprehensive employment services to job seekers and employers throughout our County. The Employment and Training Unit of the Department of Social Services, the Workforce Investment staff and the New York State Department of Labor all have a full time presence at the partnership. Additionally, Westchester Community College provides Career Counseling services on a part time basis. A primary function of the Partnership is to serve as the conduit for the unemployed population to reenter the workforce.

Once an individual becomes a recipient of unemployment benefits, then, he or she is required to report to the partnership for employment search purposes. The expert staff from the Department of Labor directs them to existing employment opportunities, advises them about employment trends, offers resume assistance and when necessary, recommends training. Unemployment benefits are processed electronically, using an automated phone system, for the convenience of the individual.

This past year the partnership relied heavily upon Economic Stimulus funding (ARRA) to support a 204% increase in demand for training in 2008. The areas where training was granted were in the green industries, tractor trailer industry, healthcare industry and computer skills training. In the present economy, we envision an ongoing demand for training, but without additional funding, we won't be able to meet this demand. Unfortunately, our traditional funding has steadily decreased over the years. Statistics indicate that for every employment vacancy in Putnam, there will be at least eight qualified candidates and only one individual will secure employment. Clearly, as a job seeker, that's a very unfavorable statistic. The Partnership is here to serve individuals as they struggle to become that one individual who successfully secures reemployment.

### **The Great Recession – Managing County Expenditures**

The fact that revenues across the board were falling in 2009 as a result of the recession, combined with increasing demands placed on our Department of Social Service programs, required the County to closely monitor and manage our expenditures. In 2009, County operating expenditures totaled \$ 128.5 million, \$ 7.9 million less than the \$ 136.4 million budgeted in 2009. We were able to achieve savings of \$ 3.5 million in employee salary and fringe benefit costs largely through the continued use of our vacancy control policies and procedures such as the hiring freeze. We also saw the return of premium dividend from the NYSHIP health insurance plan which kept our rate increase less than budgeted. We achieved savings of \$ 1.6 million in energy costs, as these costs in 2009 declined from their all time highs reached in 2008. Finally, mandated social service

program costs were \$ 1.3 million less than budgeted, with State and Federal Revenue reduced accordingly.

By all accounts, Putnam County Government has managed well controlling costs in the face of daunting fiscal challenges. The numbers speak for themselves. According to data published by the State Comptroller on his website [www.osc.state.ny.us](http://www.osc.state.ny.us), **Putnam County ranked second lowest in expenditures per capita in the entire State of New York in 2008. The County spent \$ 1,409 per person in 2008, 29% less than the statewide average of \$ 1,975 per person! In 2008, Putnam County spent less on social services per capita than any other County (#1 in New York State).** In their last independent bond rating report, Moody's Investors Service cites the County's "proven ability to control expenditures" when assigning the rating of Aa3, one of the strongest ratings in the State of New York.

### **Fund Balance and the Looking Ahead to the 2011 Budget**

Due chiefly to the County's ability to control expenditures, the County general fund undesignated fund balance actually increased by \$ 650,000 to \$ 14.6 million in 2009, quite an achievement in light of the revenue struggles outlined above. This strong fund balance should enable the County to again return surplus funds to the property taxpayer by offsetting the County property tax levy in 2011. In 2010, the County returned \$ 3.7 million to the taxpayers, and we will attempt to return that amount again in 2011 to keep County property taxes the lowest portion of the real property tax bill. Despite our strong

fund balance, circumstances beyond the County's control will make 2011 an even more challenging budget process than 2010.

We can all recall the difficult decisions we confronted such as employee layoffs, increases in health care contribution rates for retirees, and the elimination of several vacant positions in the County budget, including the Chief of Staff in the County Executive's Office. Our main concerns continue to relate to the revenue side of the ledger. Sales tax revenues remain lower for the beginning of 2010, and we are concerned about the State of New York's massive budget difficulties and their possible negative effect on the County budget. We believe that there will be cuts in State Aid. We just don't know where or how severe these cuts will be. The County has also depleted the \$ 1.4 million in debt service and transportation fund reserves used to balance the 2010 budget, and the \$ 1.4 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Federal Medicaid Assistance Program funding is currently set to expire in 2010. There has been talk of the Federal Government extending this funding, but no law accomplishing this has been passed to date. It is clear to us that in order to continue to deal with these revenue losses we will have to continue to focus on expenditures. Everything is again on the table, from employee layoffs to funding cuts to outside agencies. While the County has had a mortgage tax proposal before the New York State Legislature for months, the outcome of whether or not it will pass is uncertain. We know that departments are strained as we have cut the county workforce by 7% over the past two years, but this is unfortunately a reflection of the reality of the economic times in which we now live.

## **2011 Budget Focus – Discretionary Services**

One of the major dilemmas facing us as a County government is whether or not we will continue to provide discretionary, non-mandated services. We have to look at ways to lessen the burden of government. One such way is to focus our efforts on those essential, non-discretionary, mandated services, perhaps at the expense of the discretionary services. While those programs that are mandated by New York State and/or by the federal government make up the largest part of our County budget, a significant portion of the County budget is dedicated to discretionary services. Attached as an Appendix to this report is a listing of discretionary versus non-discretionary services.

The County decision to sell our license for the Certified Home Health Agency (CHHA) is one example of a service that we recognize as essential, but which is not mandated. It was worthy of all the passionate debate that took place during 2009. Putnam County government continued to sponsor a CHHA throughout 2009, as it has for many years. Just last week, this Legislature granted me the authority to pursue the sale of our certificate to Visiting Nurse Service of Westchester.

With New York State facing an unprecedented budgetary deficit, the home care industry as a whole continues to be barraged with cutbacks. For publically managed CHHA's, cutbacks are even more severe. A recent New York State budget proposal includes the withdrawal of state aide reimbursement for publically operated CHHA's which for Putnam County means an additional \$150,000-\$200,000 in financial loss and represents a

clear statement from New York State that they are no longer able to subsidize county run CHHA's.

Under the current financial circumstances that face all governments, this Administration felt it imperative in carrying out its fiduciary responsibilities to consider other alternatives for providing CHHA services. Interestingly, we were initially advised not to seek out an alternative to County government home health care. We were told not to even consider issuing an RFP and that the issue was declared "dead on arrival". Yet we continued the RFP process and are grateful that the County Legislature reconsidered their position on this issue. Near the end of this speech, the County Legislature will be asked to climb an even steeper hill. The only way we will all reach the top of the hill successfully, is if we work together as a team for the betterment of our County.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the employees of our CHHA for the fine work that you have done over the years and to those who served on the evaluation committees that put a priority on quality care as they evaluated the proposals. Yes, the bottom line is important to the County, but knowing that our residents are going to receive the same, if not better care, is reassurance that we made the best decision for those we serve.

We have successfully experienced this scenario in our past of divesting the County of certain services in order to improve their cost effective delivery. After two years of study, we determined that the only way to both ensure a seamless delivery of mental health services within a system that capped county costs, was to establish a not-for-profit

agency from scratch. We were one of the first counties in the state to contract out for mental health services, and the first to establish a brand new not-for-profit in order to do so.

The result was Putnam Family & Community Services which, under the leadership of Edythe Schwartz and a dedicated board and staff took a \$2.7 million dollar agency and built it into an agency that provides \$5.3 million dollars of mental health services. The cost to the county in 1998 was \$530,443. In 2010 it is \$492,744. Given the significant increase discussed above, it is estimated that the loss today to be made up by taxation would be in excess of \$1 million. This is an example of how creative thinking and determination can make things better while saving local tax dollars. Other examples of privatized services in the County include our data processing, print shop, Tilly Foster Farm and Putnam National Golf Course.

I question, and would ask you to question, whether or not the County should be contributing resources to other discretionary services. This is not to say that the discretionary, non-mandated services are not worthy of our support. The question is whether or not government should be supporting or providing these services in such a bleak, historically significant recession.

### **Moving forward despite the difficult economy**

In spite of the difficult economic challenges, your County Government continues to move forward, improving the quality of life for our citizens. Let us now discuss some of the initiatives that we have been implementing on behalf of the people of Putnam County.

### **Septic Repair Program**

The Administration is in the process of devising a new format for the Putnam County Septic Repair Program. It is our desire to expand this program to the entire County, beyond the East-of-Hudson watershed communities of Carmel, Kent, Patterson and Southeast. By spring of this year the Septic Repair Program is scheduled to complete the Phase I priority area whereby approximately 162 septic systems will have been repaired. This priority area is focused on creating a protective buffer around reservoirs and those water bodies that flow towards the reservoirs. This program has been very successful and my Administration is seeking additional funds so that we may expand the program to achieve our goal of water quality protection throughout Putnam County.

### **Landfill Closure**

The County has been working with the Town of Southeast to cooperate in the closure of their landfill that was active for about 16 years and comprises approximately 30 acres. The County has a landfill of 18 acres that was operated from April of 1975 to June 1976. Both landfills are under a consent order from New York State to either cap or reclaim these properties. Currently the plan is to reclaim the County's smaller site and transport the fill to the Southeast location that needs the additional material to properly cap their 30 acre landfill. The expense of reclaiming the Southeast site was judged to be entirely cost prohibitive. However, the smaller County landfill, which was operational for a much shorter timeframe, and had much less fill, made it a more practical candidate for reclamation. Reclaiming this site will allow the County to generate revenue for the

community by placing it back on the tax rolls. We anticipate that the County Legislature will have made a decision on the Landfill proposal tonight.

### **MS4 Water Quality Initiative**

The MS4 (Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems) water quality initiative is designed to protect water quality by upgrading storm water conveyances. This is a federal and state mandated program that is unfunded. It requires each community to retrofit existing storm sewers and create new drainage infrastructure, as needed, to capture sediment and reduce phosphorous loading in the reservoirs and other sensitive water bodies. Excess phosphorous degrades water quality by promoting extensive growth of aquatic vegetation and algal blooms.

A study was completed by Malcolm-Pirnie, a respected engineering firm that assessed the needs of the East-of-Hudson watershed communities of Carmel, Kent, Patterson, Southeast and a small section of Putnam Valley. The estimated costs for the first 5 years of the program slightly exceeded 16 million dollars. These planned upgrades, when completed, will require a much higher level of maintenance due to their greater ability to trap sediments and other pollutants. The cost of maintaining these upgrades will be approximately two to three times what is spent currently on our existing storm water infrastructure. Any effort by a host community to upgrade water quality will serve to benefit those beyond the community's borders; therefore, a larger regional funding approach is necessary, so that all beneficiaries of good quality drinking water will have an opportunity to contribute to this effort.

### **Resolution in Support of Towns for MS4 Compliance**

Tonight, my Administration is putting forward a resolution to the County Legislature, to provide funding support to Towns in the East-of-Hudson watershed, to help them meet their costly MS4 requirements. This resolution will set aside money that we received from New York City under the 1997 “Memorandum of Agreement.” Part of the MS4 initiative to upgrade storm water conveyances, is the need to acquire, or obtain easements on lands to place improved storm water infrastructures. These advanced infrastructures are designed to trap and reduce sediment and other pollutants from entering the water supply. The total cost for these acquisitions or easements for public infrastructure, if approved by the Legislature, is estimated to be \$1,419,000.00. This sum will be made available from the East-of-Hudson funds to help achieve our Water Quality protection goals. We continue to support using the proceeds from the East-of-Hudson funds for investment in infrastructure that all residents can appreciate for the longest time horizon.

### **MS4 Septic Maintenance Requirement**

Another element of the MS4 mandate is that all residential septic systems must be maintained and pumped out within a 5 year time period starting May 1, 2011 and running through May 1, 2016. This applies to all septic systems in the East-of-Hudson watershed located within the towns of Carmel, Kent, Patterson, Southeast, and a small section of Putnam Valley. The Lake Oscawana watershed is specifically mentioned and included in the 5 year septic maintenance requirement. While the start of this requirement is over a year away, we felt it wise to make the public aware of this future water quality protection initiative. There will be more public information made available in the future.

### **Putnam Trailway/Bikeway Improvements**

During 2009 significant progress was made regarding trailway improvements, and will continue into the future. These include:

- The Putnam Trailway construction project which was completed between Seminary Hill Road and Old Mine Road, and was opened to the public on 11/25/09.
- The Putnam Trailway construction project between Old Mine Road and Putnam Avenue is expected to be completed by July, 2010, and then opened to the public. The work is now about 50% complete.
- The Putnam Trailway construction project between Putnam Avenue and North Main Street is expected to commence in early 2011, with completion expected by 2012. The engineering design work and permitting process is well underway at this time.
- The Maybrook Trailway engineering design work and permitting process should be completed by October, 2010, and construction could begin on this project that extends from Pumphouse Road to the Danbury border.
- The Carmel sidewalk project is expected to begin construction in 2010, and be completed in 2011. The engineering design and permitting process is well underway at this time.
- And finally, the Maybrook Trailway project in Patterson is expected to begin construction and be completed by the end of 2010. All engineering design work is complete, and permits obtained.

All of these capital projects are significantly funded through Federal and State transportation funds, not County real property taxpayer dollars.

## **H1N1**

Last fall our Commissioner of Health provided us with an advisory on the new strain of influenza "Novel H1N1."

After the federal government purchased the H1N1 vaccine, the burden of vaccinating the public occurred at the local level. Fortunately, for many years, the Putnam County Department of Health had planned and practiced large clinics, called Points of Dispensing clinics or PODs, to distribute vaccines or lifesaving medications, as part of their emergency preparedness activities. As a result of this preparation, Putnam County was the first County in the Hudson Valley to set up a POD and start vaccinating the public against H1N1. This resulted in earlier protection from this virus for our residents. The Health Department conducted six large-scale PODs and many smaller clinics, which were open to the public and free of charge.

This was a true community-wide effort. The Health Department received vital assistance from the Bureau of Emergency Services, the Sheriff's Office, Pace University nursing program, and the Putnam County Medical Reserve Corp. Every school district in Putnam County volunteered their facilities when schools were not in session to house the PODs. County employees worked many additional hours (funded by the State) often on weekends to ensure vaccine was available to county residents. Our Medical Reserve Corp members volunteered over 700 person-hours to assist us in staffing these clinics. As

a result of the PODs and other Health Department immunization clinics, 4,880 doses of H1N1 vaccine and 5,186 doses of seasonal flu vaccine were provided to county residents. The Health Department continues to offer H1N1 vaccine free of charge in their regularly scheduled immunization clinics.

The Health Department was not alone in this effort against the H1N1 influenza; our local hospital and physicians were valued partners. In addition to directly providing vaccination to the public, the Health Department has helped our local doctors get H1N1 vaccine for their high priority patients. The Health Department successfully redistributed 5,263 doses of H1N1 vaccine to local physicians, increasing access to H1N1 vaccine for our local residents.

Currently, the H1N1 activity level is low in New York State. The Health Department continues to monitor influenza activity watching closely for any resurgence of H1N1, and is now planning for next season's influenza vaccination campaign.

### **County Health Rankings Report**

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the University of Wisconsin recently released a national study comparing every County within each of the 50 states, called the *County Health Rankings Report*. The report ranked Counties in New York and other States on length of life, quality of life, health behaviors, health care access and quality, social and economic factors, and physical environment.

This study ranked Putnam County as one of the healthiest Counties in New York State. Putnam County was ranked number one in New York State for having the best overall

health outcomes. This combined score was based on many health-related factors; in particular, more residents live beyond 75 years old and fewer residents reported being in poor physical or mental health.

This report provides one snapshot of the health of Putnam County residents. It confirms what we all believe, that Putnam is a healthy place to live and work, and that most of our people enjoy better health, overall, than some other parts of New York.

Like every other community, there is always room for improvement. The 2010-2013 Community Health Assessment was just completed by the Health Department and is our local assessment of the health status and priorities of Putnam County. The County Health Ranking report can be used as another tool to focus on pertinent health issues that need to change in our community.

## **DWI**

For years my Administration has been trying to tackle the myriad of problems that alcohol and substance abuse can have on the bottom line of County government. The efforts continued during 2009 with District Attorney Adam Levy and all Assistant District Attorneys providing in-service training to local and state police. Sheriff Don Smith saw arrests by Deputy Sheriffs increase by 30% from 2008 resulting in 173 DWI arrests. Probation Director Gene Funicelli reported over \$64,000 in administrative and supervision fees collected that were directly related to DWI arrests. Even our County-wide newspaper “The Journal News”, by carrying out their mission, helped Putnam

County raise awareness as it seemed every day we read a story about DWI arrests or tragedies resulting from the effects of driving while intoxicated.

That is why we continued our pursuit of every tool that will aid in decreasing the terrible statistics that we see in County government and that are directly related to the issue of Driving While Intoxicated. To this end, our Director of Mental Health and Youth Bureau, Joe DeMarzo, arranged a unique funding partnership with the National Council on Alcoholism, Stop DWI Program, Putnam Family and Community Services, the Sheriff's Department Traffic Safety Board, the towns of Carmel, Patterson and Putnam Valley and the Office of Children and Family Services to purchase S.I.D.N.E. (aka: Sidney) a Simulated Impaired Driving Experience.

S.I.D.N.E is a battery powered vehicle that simulates the effects of impairment from alcohol and other drugs on a motorist's driving skills. This highly interactive vehicle operates in two modes, Normal and Impaired. In Normal mode, the vehicle's steering, braking and acceleration respond appropriately. In the Impaired mode, the vehicle reacts with delayed steering, braking and acceleration, simulating the effects of a vehicle being driven by an impaired driver.

Participants will experience, with a sober brain, how it feels when reaction time is slowed and they are unable to make a turn or stop, even when they have ample time and space. This experience will help the S.I.D.N.E driver to identify firsthand the potentially deadly consequences of alcohol and other drugs on their driving ability.

S.I.D.N.E is a multi faceted program which includes classroom time and a brief video to stimulate conversation and engage participants in an educational discussion concerning driving while impaired. This past week the Youth Bureau held a training class on the use of S.I.D.N.E and we expect that you will see it in action in the very near future. District Attorney Levy reported that the number of DWI offenses committed by those individuals under the age of 21 decreased by over 19% in 2009. We hope that the awareness S.I.D.N.E will bring will help us continue the trend in underage drivers making better decisions when it comes to drinking and driving. We applaud our youth for setting a good example.

### **Electronic Court Appearances**

In order to make government more efficient and save precious taxpayer resources, Putnam County Sheriff Don Smith, working with the Committee on Fiscal Vision and Accountability, proposed enabling legislation to the New York State Legislature authorizing Putnam County to establish a program of electronic court appearances for inmates at the Putnam County Correctional Facility. This program would be used only for those court appearances that are considered ministerial in nature and in no way would infringe on the constitutional rights or legal representation of those people with issues in the criminal justice system.

Electronic court appearances would be facilitated by utilizing an independent audio visual system for the transmission and receiving of audio and visual signals in which

defendants are not physically in the courtroom, but participate in all legal proceedings simultaneously from a designated room located inside the Putnam County Correctional Facility.

Each year, Correction Officers conduct more than 200 transports involving hundreds of prisoners to various county and local courts. Using electronic court appearances would result in offenders being remotely present in court without leaving the jail facility, thereby significantly reducing the number of transports each year. The use of electronic court appearances would have a tremendous economic benefit for Putnam County in that it would improve Correction Officer and courtroom safety, reduce liability, and reduce overtime and travel expenses, while at the same time preserving the rights of defendants and attorneys who must appear before a court.

Electronic court appearance legislation has been passed in both the Assembly and the Senate and has been signed into law by the Governor. Putnam County has submitted a grant request to pay for the cost of procuring the electronic equipment for both the jail and for courtrooms throughout the county. When put into effect, this program will not be a panacea for all courtroom appearances, but should result in tremendous savings to our taxpayers.

In March of 2009, we wrote to Governor Paterson requesting that the current legislation be amended to allow the judge in each case to make a decision as to whether or not video appearances are appropriate for each situation, thereby eliminating each defendant's

option to attend court in any situation, thereby making the program more effective while at the same time insuring that the program would only be used in appropriate situations that would not violate a defendant's rights.

### **Tap a Tree / Borrow a Boat**

This year we will be developing a program in our Parks Department that will allow individuals to use Maple trees on County owned land and parks for the purpose of producing syrup. Our residents can go to the parks department and sign up for tapping as many Maple trees as they like on a first come first serve basis at the proposed cost of fifty cents per tree.

Another new initiative is a Borrow the Boat program at Veterans Memorial Park. New York City Department of Environmental Protection will provide the County with row boats and the County will furnish life jackets and oars. If you are interested in spending a couple of hours on the lake, you can rent a boat and necessary equipment at an hourly rate.

Both of these initiatives are not only modest revenue generators for our County Parks, but also highlight the natural beauty of what our County has to offer. We have considered in difficult times eliminating lifeguards and closing parks and our residents would not support that drastic measure. Tonight I hope you will all embrace and support these two initiatives.

## County Government Role in our Future

Recently, I have been asked by Chairman Tamagna to support a concept that would create two pilot programs between the Administration and the Legislature. The first would have the Commissioner of Finance and the County Auditor work together on certain projects as requested by the Audit and Administration Committee. This will save the Legislature approximately \$36,000 that could be used to fund the second initiative.

The second initiative will provide an opportunity for the Commissioner of Highways to work with a contractor whom the Legislature has great confidence in to develop a cost accounting system for the Department of Highways and Facilities that will provide an additional level and standard of management reporting to the County Executive and Legislature. Additionally, we are proposing that said contractor be charged with assisting the County Commissioner of Highways, County Executive and Legislature with plans to move the Humane Society project forward.

Normally, we could conclude this speech right now, believing that our citizens are satisfied in our stewardship of their Putnam County Government. After all, aren't they content that Putnam County ranks **second lowest** in county government expenditures per person in New York State? Putnam County, according to data compiled by the New York State Comptroller, also ranks second lowest in terms of the County tax levy as a percentage of the total property tax bill. Aren't our citizens satisfied that only 9.5 cents of every property tax dollar goes to fund County Government? Don't they appreciate that we have managed to keep our government strong, while delivering necessary

services that they have told us they wanted us to provide, as New York State struggles to avoid bankruptcy? Evidently they are not satisfied with our performance. In fact, I believe that our citizens are unhappier with all levels of government than ever before in the twenty years that I have been Putnam County Executive.

I am not singling out any particular government or politician as the cause for the dissatisfaction and distrust of Government. After all, does anyone really know when and why “politician” became a dirty word? I blame us all, beginning with myself. We have done an excellent job controlling costs in County government, yet we are perceived as being an out of control spending machine. Why? We have slashed our workforce 7% in the past couple of years, including eliminating the Chief of Staff in my own office, yet governments today are seen as being a patronage machine serving only the “good old boys”. Why? I believe the answer is found in the general disconnect that people feel toward all government’s inability to respond to their needs. Candidates for office in Putnam County continually run on a platform of lowering property taxes and promoting smart commercial growth, yet none of this gets accomplished despite the candidate’s best intentions. Yes, union contracts and mandates created by laws imposed upon all levels of government hinder our ability to respond as businesses have in this great recession. But worse, I think that the people that we serve not only doubt our ability to adapt to their needs, but the general perception is that we don’t care about what they need, or what they want. They perceive that we only care about ourselves.

Government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” cannot continue to exist long term with this level of distrust and dissatisfaction by those who are governed. Much of this unhappiness in Putnam County is found in the high amount of property taxes that we all pay. Although Putnam County ranked **2nd lowest** in New York State in terms of County government taxes as a percentage of the total property tax bill, we rank **4th highest** in the State in terms of the total property tax bill that our citizens pay. One study performed stated that Putnam property tax payers pay the 11<sup>th</sup> highest amount of property taxes in the entire USA. According to the NYS Comptroller website, \$ 378.3 million in property taxes were levied in Putnam County in 2009. That equates to almost \$ 4,000 in property taxes paid by every man, woman and child in Putnam County! Scrolling down the screen are the names of the 120 taxing authorities which have levied or will levy property taxes in Putnam County in 2010. **PAUSE FOR LIST TO SCROLL.** The Legislature and County Executive are responsible for exactly one of these taxing authorities. These property taxes have proven to be an unbearable burden in the great recession, and are a major reason that approximately one of every five deeds currently recorded in Putnam County is a foreclosure deed, according to the County Clerk and Director of Real Property Services. Do our citizens need or want 120 plus taxing districts in their future?

The questions that we all must answer here in Putnam County now are:

- 1) has the level of discontent reached a high enough level that our citizens are ready to get actively involved in order to make wholesale changes in their local governments?
- 2) what changes are they willing to make in their local governments? For example:

- 1) Do the people of Putnam need a County Executive and Legislature, or is there a less expensive form of government that can do the job?
- 2) Do the people of Putnam need 10 school districts in order to educate our children?  
Are parents willing to accept higher class sizes in exchange for lower property taxes?
- 3) Do the people of Putnam need multiple police departments, fire departments and highway departments to get the job done?
- 4) Do the people of Putnam County need six towns and three villages to conduct their business?
- 5) Can services which are provided by multiple governments such as assessment, tax collection, and public works be consolidated to provide more effective and less expensive services to the people of Putnam County?
- 6) Do the people of Putnam County want us to invest in new County facilities to house additional services, such as the Kent Senior Center?

Obviously, there are many options that need to be explored and vetted in public. I am personally going to travel in the coming weeks to each town to get residents input on defining the role of government in our future. I invite members of our County Legislature to join me at these meetings. Members of the County Legislature, let's put on our marching boots and climb this mountain together. (currently scheduled dates are: Village of Brewster, April 13<sup>th</sup> at 7 p.m., Town of Philipstown April 14<sup>th</sup> at 7:30 p.m., Town of Kent April 27<sup>th</sup> at 7 p.m.)

### **Consolidation Challenge**

The great recession has caused much concern, worry, and hardship for the people of Putnam County. The issue before us now is will it also provide the motivation and opportunity for all citizens to reshape **all** local government in a manner that best serves all of us. I ask everyone to ponder this thought: If you were forming government in Putnam County today, would it include the County, six towns, three villages, 10 school districts and 100 special districts which raise property taxes? Would you have multiple government entities performing the same services? The State of New York has passed legislation permitting local Governments to consolidate, and in some cases will provide funding incentives to encourage the process. As Government Officials, we must determine what our citizens want and have the political will to implement it.

Currently, the Legislature is convening the Charter Revision Commission, a process that occurs every ten years in which residents appointed by the Legislature focus **exclusively** on the Putnam County Charter. Therefore, this forum is not appropriate to accomplish the reshaping of all governments in the County that we are discussing now.

Change to the status quo is difficult, but can happen. Deputy County Executive John Tully has continued to pursue consolidated assessment services within Putnam County. With the support of Paul Jonke, President of the Putnam County Assessors Association, the two plan to make a formal proposal in the near future that will shape the future of the assessment function in Putnam County. Many town elected officials have expressed

support for a consolidation that makes sense to all people involved which includes our residents, current employees and town officials.

Finally, I want to thank the County Employees that work hard to deliver the services to our constituents each and everyday. The Highway Department that has met the challenge of the recent storms is an obvious example. These men and women are to be congratulated and thanked for rising to the occasion and keeping our roads safe. And a special thank you needs to go out to Gregory Bierce, Head Driver and Doreen Crane, Coordinator for Services, in our Office for Aging, whose quick action in checking on a County employee who had not returned to work at his scheduled time probably saved this employee's life as he had been involved in a life-threatening incident. This was a dramatic example of how caring and capable our County employees are and why they make working for Putnam County an honor.

Less obvious, is every department that has had to continue to get the job done with less people and less equipment made necessary by the great recession. I appreciate the work you do everyday. I also want to thank my staff: Marie, Rose, Elaine, and especially Deputy County Executive John Tully, for doing even more work despite the staffing cuts to our office. Most importantly, I want to thank the people of Putnam County for giving me the honor and privilege of serving as your County Executive for the past twenty years. I have always tried and will continue to do my best for all of you, whether you have agreed with me or not.

## **Conclusion**

I would be remiss if I did not emphasize the importance of three significant events - one past, one in the near future, and one that is currently in process.

Recently, the Counties of the Hudson Valley celebrated the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary or Quadricentennial of the discovery and exploration on the Hudson River by Henry Hudson. It was celebrated by communities up and down the Hudson. The Village of Cold Spring celebrated with “Community Days” over the Fourth of July weekend with record crowds attending a parade, concerts, fireworks and other special events. Nearby Constitution Island was opened to the public one weekend. There were also concerts at Our Lady of Restoration Chapel and special events at Boscobel. There were weekly musical concerts at the Cold Spring gazebo and waterfront. There was also a flotilla of power boats and sailboats that came up from New York Harbor one weekend in addition to an antique regatta of Dutch boats, and Cold Spring re-opened their waterfront for docking of the ships.

2012 will represent the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of Putnam County and its split from Dutchess County. I support the request of Chairman Vincent Tamagna to form a Bicentennial Committee to coordinate events for 2012 so that the County’s rich heritage can be showcased and celebrated. Finally, at the present time, all residents of our County community will receive their 2010 census form. The form should be completed on behalf of every person living in the residence, both relatives and non-relatives. Everyone in the United States must be counted. This includes people of all ages, races, ethnic groups,

both citizens and non-citizens. Census data helps determine how more than \$400 billion per year in federal funding is distributed to tribal, state and local governments for services that affect local communities like ours. Our community's future relies on the 2010 Census. Do what is right and take 10 minutes to complete and mail back your census form.

Over the years, we have accomplished much for the citizens of Putnam County, but I think we can do more. Here is a short tribute to the people who have helped us to accomplish so much. **PLAY VIDEO.**

Thank You. Goodnight.