



## **Putnam County Executive Kevin Byrne**

### **2024 Executive Budget Presentation**

As is required by section 7 of our county charter, earlier this week my office submitted to the legislative clerk our Administration's proposed executive budget, also referred in our charter as the county's tentative budget, for 2024.

Chairman Jonke, members of the Legislature, thank you for holding this special meeting. This is an extraordinarily busy time of year for many of us, and I know you just had your regular meeting earlier this week. Scheduling an additional meeting this evening is much appreciated. Especially because this meeting was originally scheduled to be yesterday, October 4<sup>th</sup>, ... which also just so happens to be my 10-year wedding anniversary. So I thank you, and more importantly, my wife and family thanks you.

To those watching this meeting at home, thank you for joining us. To those here tonight, many of whom are our incredible county employees and public servants, thank you for being here and for the work you do every day to serve the people of Putnam County.

Before I go on, I must first provide special recognition to the remarkable team members of this Administration, whom without I could not compile, manage and present this county budget. So first and foremost, I need to thank our new Commissioner of Finance, Mike Lewis, and his entire team for all the incredible work they've done these past few months. As you are all no-doubt aware, Commissioner Lewis had enormous shoes to fill with the retirement of the man, the myth, the legend, Bill Carlin. This is the first budget in over 20 years that Bill Carlin was not leading us through the budget process. And while Bill's been a great resource in his retirement, I can tell you that Mike and his team really stepped up and executed. The Finance Department is

still down a deputy commissioner position, and in the face of this challenge ... the entire department rose to the occasion. Please join me in giving Commissioner Lewis, First Deputy Commissioner Sheila Barrett, and everyone else in our Finance Department a round of applause.

Commissioner Lewis and everyone in Finance deserve the lion's share of the credit for their work on this budget, but the fact is there are a lot of other people who were involved in making this happen. In Putnam County, we have what is called a "decentralized budget process." Unlike our surrounding counties, we have no designated central budget office or budget director and in fact the county charter cites that the County Executive is the Chief Budget Officer. The process begins with our departments and elected offices presenting their budget requests to the Finance Dept. and our executive office where we review their requested budget with representatives of the Legislature included as part of the early vetting. I personally participated in every budget meeting and recognize that a lot of the follow up work that would normally fall on a budget office in other counties, ultimately falls on our Finance Department as well as the Legislature's Auditing Department led by the county's Auditor Michelle Sharkey. That's in addition to the men and women working in my Executive office; Deputy County Executive Jim Burpoe, my chief of staff Matt Covucci, our director of communications Chris Formisano, our confidential secretary Lisa Ranghelli, and the newest member of our team, Jenn Caruso who serves as our Director of Compliance and Intergovernmental Relations. Please join me in thanking all of them for their hard work over these past few months.

This Administration continues to recognize the overwhelming tax burden that county residents, and New Yorkers in general, bear everyday. There are many national, state-wide, and regional factors that can either strengthen or hinder our opportunities to foster economic growth and provide tax relief. Sky high inflation continues to be driven by a post pandemic economy, high energy prices, as well as a number of other decisions made at the national and international levels. The Tax Foundation's 2023 State Business Tax Climate Index ranks New York's tax system 49<sup>th</sup> overall (just behind New Jersey for worst overall), and this year's Rich States, Poor States, ranks New York State 50<sup>th</sup> (dead last) for economic outlook. As New Yorkers, these are serious challenges we face, but they don't prevent Putnam County from marching towards progress to ensure that brighter days remain ahead.

The budget I present to you today, represents a concerted effort to prioritize county government spending, fulfill its mandated responsibilities and core functions, honor our County's obligation to provide services that taxpayers have come to rely on, while reducing the overall tax burden in this county, in part, by offering zero County property tax increase, keeping the property tax levy flat and reducing the property tax rate. Now it's worth noting that the

*County's share of the average homeowner's property tax bill in Putnam County is relatively small compared to what our property taxpayers actually have to pay. Only 9% of your average homeowner tax bill goes to the county government. The rest is made up of school, village, town and other district taxes. But we recognize that within that portion we do control, we have an obligation to practice fiscal discipline where we can.*

This budget lowers the property tax rate to \$2.87 per \$1,000 of assessed property value or 2.87%, representing the lowest property tax rate for Putnam County in over fifteen years (since 2008 to be exact). In this budget, our team is projecting a conservative estimate of \$77.5 million in sales tax revenue supplemented by approximately \$46.6 million collected from the County's property tax levy. This is in addition to other sources of revenue we receive to fund a portion of the mandated services we provide, and those dollars almost always have restricted uses. All of this comes together to represent a \$195 million spending plan. This is a big number, and it's important we recognize it is significantly skewed by a number of new outliers which you will hear me highlight in this presentation.

But let's be real, this is a tremendous amount of taxpayer money and I recognize the sticker shock associated with it. It is important to note that it still pales in comparison to most counties throughout the region. If you look, you'll see that we are spending less per person than almost every other county in the region. That notwithstanding, taxpayers deserve to know how we got to this number. And this requires an understanding of the many challenges being foisted upon county government in 2024.

The cost of doing business in every regard has continued to rise, even for those in stable financial situations. Interest rates are through the roof, and even though we have maintained a AA+ bond rating (the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest possible bond rating achievable, and the highest of any current county in NYS), gone are the days of 1% lending and low cost financing of projects. While traditionally the County has borrowed to fund its large-scale capital projects, after consulting with our Finance Department and independent auditors, we have determined that it instead makes much better fiscal sense to utilize \$7.8 million from our general fund and take advantage of our capital reserve to support our Capital Plan by committing resources to support important infrastructure projects across the county.

Our nation, and in particular our state, is still in the midst of an affordability crisis that affects both residents and county government operations. Inflation affects every resident of Putnam County, it increases our cost of living and makes the pain associated with increased taxation hurt all the more. At the same time, inflation doesn't just affect our residents directly, but

indirectly. As it requires the cost of government to increase as well. The price of fuel, utilities, equipment, paper, computers... everything has gone up. The consumer price index is increasing, and as a result, our operating expenses increase as well.

We cannot ignore the economic reality we face. As the price of everything increases, we know that we must also ultimately adjust compensation to our public employees. As we work to negotiate 4 new county contracts with collective bargaining units, we acknowledge that compensation will be modified. This budget better prepares the county to move forward with those discussions and decisions.

And then of course, predictably, we have a slew of new unfunded mandates coming out of Albany. This year, Governor Hochul and the powers that be in Albany, within the state's budget, eliminated the direct line of Federal Medicaid dollars we traditionally received to support our most vulnerable populations. In New York, county government is the implementing arm of Medicaid services, and while the state had successfully capped the growth of Medicaid spending on county governments several years ago, this recent act demonstrates Albany's appetite to further claw back this critical cap and soak property taxpayers at the local level.

It is important to note that in Putnam County, we appreciate our state legislators who fought to protect this funding, ultimately negotiating for a phase out of the funding as part of the state's budget deal. This funding, the Enhanced Federal Medical Assistance Percentage, (more commonly known as eFMAP) accounts for approximately \$1.5 million in lost funding, just this year. And let's be clear, it's lost funding to programs we absolutely cannot afford to cut at the county level because of how devastating it could be to those families that rely on the social safety net of services the County administers on a daily basis. Our representatives in the Senate and Assembly did speak up for us this last budget cycle, but the final budget came up short. Putnam County asks them, our most vulnerable residents ask them, and I ask them, to continue to speak out, and stand up against efforts to claw back the cap on the local share of Medicaid costs, and restore eFMAP funding in the next state budget.

Pair this surprise theft of funding, with an announcement just a few weeks ago by New York State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli that we as employers would be required to increase our contribution rates to the state pension system. This increased expense is \$1.3 million more than what was budgeted for in 2023, quite a dramatic increase that was not predicted last year.

But what can be predicted each year, as many of you have already heard before, is the fact that on average approximately 70 cents of every tax dollar that county governments collect is already accounted for because of mandates out of Albany and Washington, DC. New York State is known for pushing down more of a property tax burden on its residents than almost any other state in America. As a result, you and I bear the financial burden of their decisions.

We confront these challenges with an eye toward fiscal responsibility. The truth is that other 30 cents or 30% of your tax dollar, it's not nothing. It still represents nearly \$59 million. This is not all discretionary spending. Some of it, while not mandated, may be subject to various contracts or collective bargaining agreements. Still, we have an obligation to identify savings where we can, become more efficient, maximize your tax dollar, and practice *fiscal discipline*.

It is for this very reason, that earlier this year my office began discussions with New York State Comptroller Tom DiNapoli's Office to explore various resources they make available to assist local and county government. Based on those discussions, I formally requested the Comptroller assist us in performing a comprehensive risk assessment and review of our county's fiscal practices and controls, a service that came at no expense to the County. If there are opportunities for us to further improve and strengthen our financial controls, we want to know about them. It also reaffirms our commitment to transparency and accountability.

This budget is the result of many months of careful planning and execution, long before we began the County's formal budgeting process. Early this year, in consultation with our Finance Department and independent auditors, we made the decision to invest in and bolster a Property Tax Stabilization Fund with an additional \$1.5 million within the County's general fund, bringing the total amount to \$5 million. This fund strengthens our County's financial position and provides us a flexible alternative to reduce the County's need to rely on future property tax increases. When I ran for County Executive last year, I said we would put in place guardrails to help control county government spending and taxation. This is one of them.

The fact is, excluding this year, for the past 12 years, every year, the property tax levy has gone up in Putnam County. In 2010, in his last year as County Executive, it was Bob Bondi who kept the property tax levy flat for 2011. Prior to that, you'd have to go back before the year 2000 to find another instance of a County Budget without a tax levy increase. Again, that is, until the more recent 2023 budget.

Last year, the Legislature adopted the 2023 County Budget with no property tax levy increase, and I commend you for it. This Administration, took the budget that was mandated for us, we worked within it, and identified a number of ways to become more efficient and institute savings for taxpayers. And we're doing it again within this budget as we provide for no property tax levy increase and further reduce the property tax rate.

We recognize that while the county government's property tax levy is flat and the rate is lowered, the distribution of that property tax is still based on local assessments. That means that adjustments to the assessed value of homes, properties coming on and off the tax rolls, and new exemptions can all affect how the property tax is ultimately distributed to homeowners.

Fiscal discipline and governing in a conservative, responsible manner are not just buzz words for me. It is something I embrace as a mandate from the voters that put me in this position. And again, in the face of extraordinary economic times, I believe it is our duty to find creative ways to right-size government, prioritize spending, and where possible, reduce the tax burden on our residents.

And so this year, in addition to holding the property tax levy flat, I'm also proposing we participate in New York's program to eliminate sales tax on clothing and footwear under \$110 (*Appendix A*). A move that would help modestly reduce the overall tax burden within this county budget. Something that has not been done in the budget in 25 years. Sales tax on needed goods like these are inherently regressive, disproportionately harming those most economically vulnerable in our society. To many residents, that 4% tax on a new pair of shoes doesn't seem like much at all, but as the cost-of-living rises, those few extra dollars can mean a world of difference to the family struggling to provide. This is not a novel idea. Recognizing the regressive nature of this type of tax, several other counties as well as the state of New York have provided a similar exemption for many years.

Consumption based taxation like sales tax is typically preferable compared to income or property taxes as it is driven by choice and market pricing. Sales tax also allows Putnam County to collect taxes from those who visit and travel through our county. But that doesn't mean it's not regressive, and it doesn't mean that it doesn't affect our residents.

Years ago, this type of sales tax exemption would have realized little benefit for our residents. However, after the *South Dakota v. Wayfair* decision in the U.S. Supreme Court, which

eliminated a concerning Constitutional conflict and cleared the way for an online sales tax, the reality is many- if not most- of these types of purchases are being made online and being paid for directly by Putnam County residents. Unlike traditional sales tax that is collected at the location of the in-person sale, online sales tax is collected online based on the buyer's residence. That means this tax exemption will directly support Putnam residents who buy online, keeping more of their hard-earned money in their pocket. It will also still provide an added benefit for small businesses that realize additional moneys will be left in the pockets of their consumers instead of government. At a time when businesses and families are struggling, we must do our part, no matter how small it may seem, to offer relief. Politicians have long battled over the 4% county sales tax permitted by the state (which was an increase from the 3% provided many years ago). The reality is, proposals that would abruptly roll back 25% of our county sales tax could destroy our financial position, cost us approximately \$20 million, and force us to rely more on property taxes. The exemption we are proposing costs substantially less and is sustainable. This 2024 budget accounts for the Legislature opting into this sales tax exemption next year. A draft resolution is provided in this budget package, for the Legislature to review and hopefully act on at a later date.

Identifying creative ways to save taxpayer money must become part of our culture in Putnam County government. During my State of the County earlier this year (and admittedly at several other points) I noted that no savings is too small to tout as a victory for taxpayers. Some aspiring political pundits and even my own office at times have poked fun at me for eliminating the costly outdated cable bill in our executive office in favor of utilizing our internet. But there is a method to our madness here. We wanted to show individuals throughout county government that if there is a way to save money, we want to hear it.

And so today, I am announcing that this budget accounts for a new opportunity for county employees: the Savings Incentive Partnership Program (*Appendix B*). If you have an idea on how to save the county money, and that idea in its execution realizes actual cost-savings, you'll have an opportunity to get a share of that savings. This program, sometimes referred to in business as "gainsharing" seeks to encourage our employees to think outside the box about how we can save taxpayer money. We have a brilliant and talented workforce in Putnam County, and I propose we start tapping into their vast knowledge of operations and expenditures to create a more efficient system of government. While a budget line does exist for this program, it will only be used after savings are realized, which means the financing for this program comes from its own success. As drafted, the review process for proposals will include participation from both the Administration and the Legislature. A proposed local law for this program is included in this budget for the Legislature's review and consideration.

This budget also creates additional opportunities to enhance efficiency and realize savings through the centralization of expenditures under our Purchasing, Central Services & Information Technology Departments. This year, we're consolidating a number of line items like fuel, security cameras, utilities, copiers and vehicle leases to name a few. Unlike all our neighboring counties, many of these lines and purchases had traditionally been segmented department to department. By centralizing the administration of these services, we will have a clearer picture of the County's total spending on these items enabling us to better leverage our purchasing power in the free market and get substantially better deals and rates. These changes will be further aided by moving the unfilled Asset Manager position from DPW to Purchasing. I have every confidence that as the Director of Purchasing and Central Services, John Tully is more than capable of handling this added responsibility.

Centralizing contracts and services under these departments simply makes sense. We're already beginning to do a lot of it administratively, but we know we can do more. Oddly enough, in researching the history and design of these departments in Putnam and other counties, we also discovered a major deficiency in the county's charter.

How many people can point to where IT is cited in the charter? You can't. You know why? As far as we can tell, some ten plus years ago it was mysteriously erased from the charter and was never rectified by a charter review. Years ago, IT used to be recognized in the charter as part of Purchasing, Central Services & IT, but that was when IT was much more focused on data processing. As our IT Director Tom Lannon can attest, a lot has changed in the last 20 years, and IT is a critical part of our county's operations. This flaw in the charter must be rectified, and there are number of ways we can do it by looking at our own county history as well as neighboring municipalities. I look forward to having additional discussions with the Legislature in the future, separate from this budget, to address this issue and I'm confident we can do so in a way that doesn't simply copy from others but is tailored to and for Putnam County.

This budget proposal also includes several changes to our Department of Planning, Development and Transportation. Many, if not all of you on the County Legislature know our own Doctor Vinny Tamagna. He has been serving diligently in county government for nearly 30 years including as Chair of the Putnam County Legislature, and over ten years in this department as transportation manager. For years, he has taken on tasks outside his job description to better serve the department and the people of this county. That's why in this budget we are restructuring the make-up of this department, proposing the elimination of the transportation manager position and the unfilled planning assistant position to create a new Director of Transportation. This will be a senior management position where Vinny can continue to elevate our county's transportation services into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One such example is



remodeling Part 3 Public Transit in the northeastern portion of our county with a Demand Response system to improve utilization and fill gaps in service. If successful, our hope is to explore expanding this type of service to the Western parts of Putnam County in the future.

This all said, the Putnam County Department of Planning, Development, and Transportation provides much more than just one service. As a former member of the Putnam Valley Town Planning Board, back when our DA Bob Tandy was Town Supervisor, I recognize that our local governments have a tremendous responsibility in local planning and zoning, and that many don't have the full-time services and support of a town planner. Our Planning Department is a natural place to build bridges and relationships that create smart, sustainable economic growth that bring about new opportunities for Putnam County. That's why it was important to fill the previously vacant position of commissioner with a seasoned planner possessing detailed experience in this field. And so today, I'm proud to publicly announce I have appointed a long-time Putnam County employee, our current Senior Principal Planner, Barbara Barosa, as the Commissioner of Planning, Development, and Transportation. Her interim appointment is presently effective, and her permanent appointment awaits a vote of the Legislature.

With an eye toward creating a more transparent county government for all, during my State of the County, I introduced numerous components of our Taxpayer Transparency Agenda. Part of that plan included a proposal to establish a budget transparency website that the public can view, more easily understand and digest at any given time. I am happy to report that, as I stated in March, we're still on track to have this website built and implemented for our 2025 budget proposal. Instead of just providing a hundred plus page spreadsheet with numbers and line items that the average citizen has no time to look at, our budget transparency website will provide accurate explanations as to what our county budget entails in laymen terms. The funding for this important new feature is included in this budget. It is our responsibility as public servants to provide accurate and up-to-date information to the public in an accessible format.

It is also our responsibility to ensure a strong investment in the maintenance of our county infrastructure. Our newly re-organized and re-named Department of Public Works, under the leadership of Commissioner Tommy Feighery has been hard at work with major improvements and renovations already completed at the 6N DPW Garage and the William Koehler Memorial Senior Center. The needs at the Koehler Center were highlighted earlier this year during the State of the County and served as part of our inspiration to move forward with investing \$2 million into a Facilities Improvements Fund. I thank the Legislature for approving the creation of this fund, and I'm pleased to report that the Koehler Center project was completed quicker and at a significantly reduced cost than if we had gone out to bid through the traditional procurement process. Commissioner Feighery estimated that if we hadn't done these

renovations in-house, the cost would have been 5 times what it wound up costing taxpayers, and the project probably would not have even started yet.

Congressman Mike Lawler has also been actively supporting our county's efforts to provide infrastructure improvements and continues to be a champion for us in the House of Representatives where he has advanced measures that would bring back over \$5 million to bolster our efforts to invest in our infrastructure and help connect our communities through a variety of enhancements to sidewalks within Putnam County. Likewise, U.S. Senator Gillibrand has submitted proposals to appropriate federal dollars to support the County's new Fire Training Center that is scheduled to be built next year. State Senator Peter Harckham also helped secure \$200,000 in a state CREST grant to support the new Fire Training Center project. While it's frustrating to see the frequent squabbling that happens in Washington, D.C. in Albany, it is good to see and know that our representatives are working to find ways where they can partner with us and better serve our residents.

This 2024 budget proposal invests \$7.8 million in county spending to support our infrastructure, with a renewed focus on sticking to our Capital plan. As required by our Charter, the county is responsible for implementing and maintaining a 6-year capital plan, while maintaining our 83 culverts, 31 bridges, and 116 center lane miles of county roadway, a good portion of which is encompassed in Peekskill Hollow Road in the Town of Putnam Valley, our longest county road. Earlier this year, I addressed the long-standing issues regarding the delayed work and the previous contractor on Peekskill Hollow Road. Since then, this Administration has brought in a new contractor with work finally resuming in late August. Earlier this year, Legislator Bill Gouldman and I held a joint town hall in Putnam Valley to address residents' questions and concerns, while also mapping out timelines and expectations for residents. We had almost 100 in attendance and answered every single question that was asked of us.

We intend to take those lessons learned from Peekskill Hollow Road and apply them to the upcoming Fair Street project, here in Carmel, where we hope to announce additional details of the major reconstruction next year. This is a huge project that has been talked about for decades, but it's just one of the major projects outlined in our Capital Plan; a plan that we will be diligent about sticking to as we prepare for the future based on the needs we've identified prior to, and during, my tenure as your County Executive.

In addition to traditional infrastructure improvements like roads, our capital plan also focuses on increasing water quality and energy efficiency improvements to further bring us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and save taxpayer dollars year after year in utility expenses. We've already installed

solar arrays on several of our county buildings and know this investment will save the county money on our utility bills in the future. We expect these improvements will also be helpful as we prepare to submit our application to become a Climate Smart Community in the coming year.

Our Capital Plan is also informed by our Community Health Needs Assessment, which identifies areas where we should strive to improve for the health and wellbeing of our residents. This year, Putnam County, once again, was ranked the healthiest county in the state. Under the leadership of our Health Commissioner Dr. Nesheiwat, Putnam has consistently ranked in the very top tier for health outcomes in New York, but of course, there is always room for improvement— and in Putnam, we always strive to do better. Our Community Health Needs Assessment has consistently identified one particular item that requires attention in Putnam County; Mental Health Services.

Whether we'd like to admit it or not, every single community, every family, every individual in one way or another, is affected by mental illness or the preventable and curable disease that is addiction. It is critical we confront the challenges that our loved ones face and expand access to reliable services. And so, as with any issue, we must begin by addressing it. With words, out loud. But that must be followed up with action. Rhetoric about reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness is welcome and helpful, but we cannot let that be the end of our action.

Commissioner Mike Piazza of the Department of Mental Health and Social Services will tell you that for the majority of the 30 years he's been here in county government, they would only receive a few mental health calls a year that required him or his deputy to be on the scene. Now, Commissioner Piazza and Deputy Commissioner Sara Servadio are out responding directly to mental health related calls at LEAST once-a-week. At least. Let that sink in.

The fact is, we need more dedicated professionals focusing on the mental health of our residents and so today, I am announcing that this budget creates a new position in county government, the Director of Mental Health. This individual will assist in responding to these growing needs and strengthen our relationship with our providers like CoveCare, our county's main provider of mental health and recovery services, as well as play a critical role in helping to oversee a new Stabilization Center in Putnam County.

The Director of Mental Health will ensure we're getting the most out of the services we presently pay for, while also serving as a resource for those in crisis and their families, going out

on call and assisting those in need. This position will be funded in part by opiate settlement abatement funds made available to the county through New York State. As your former Assemblyman and now as your County Executive, I pledged I would not support the use of opioid settlement funds to plug budget gaps or supplant existing services, but would use them to help support and supplement the system we rely on and are always working to improve. My predecessor, MaryEllen Odell, made a similar commitment. Creating a Director of Mental Health very much honors that commitment.

When I took office, I promised that we were going to refocus and prioritize our efforts on those core responsibilities and functions of county government. Know that the health and safety of our residents remains a priority of this Administration.

While I do believe that county government has a large role to play in the health of our residents, I still believe there are those in the private/non-profit sector that can do and are doing incredible work beyond what we're capable of. Organizations like the Putnam County Prevention Council work around the clock to save lives. Which is why earlier this year, with the Legislature's approval, the County appropriated a modest portion of the opioid lawsuit settlement funds to the Prevention Council. The prevention council has been providing educational forums, professional training, harm reduction services and so much more since their inception. But they aren't the only organization in Putnam working on this. So in August of this year, we opened up a process for local organizations to apply to receive some of this funding. With the goal of creating a county-wide system of care that is welcoming and effective, we encouraged all community providers committed to prevention, harm reduction, treatment, recovery, and education to apply for funding. A lot of great proposals have been submitted and are currently being evaluated. Legislator Amy Sayegh, Deputy Chair of the Legislature and Chair of the Health Committee sits on this committee and I know she and the team have been hard at work reviewing all proposals. I look forward to seeing the evaluations completed, and for us to announce the awards later this year.

Our goal in creating this review committee structure was to take the politicking, the hand-shake deals, and who-knows who-out of the funding award process. These types of dollars should be distributed not simply based on population size, not based on backroom deals or partisan politics, but rather it should be done in an open, transparent, and competitive manner that allows good ideas and projects to be funded on their merits. We can never completely remove politics from what is an inherently political process, but I believe we can make it cleaner, fairer, and more objective. That's why I'm proud to announce that in this year's budget I am also proposing the creation of two new initiatives to assist community organizations and local

municipalities with funding their own ventures. The Community Assistance and the Municipal Partnership initiatives.

The Community Assistance Initiative (CAI) (*Appendix C, D*) is designed to award funding on a competitive basis to 501 c3 non-profit organizations. Throughout my years of public service, I've made it clear I do not support the arbitrary picking of "winners" and "losers" with taxpayer dollars, but that is essentially what our traditional budgeting process had enabled for years. I recognize that Putnam County's budgets have not treated all non-profits equally or fairly, but this initiative seeks to remedy that. It is important that we lend assistance to those organizations who can demonstrate they have the ability and a plan to provide greater assistance to our community, if awarded funds. Focus areas for this initiative include projects that align with the County's goals and budget priorities, address our department of health's community health assessment and health improvement plan, incorporate sensory sensitive components to support our special needs populations, as well as improve overall compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Similarly, the Municipal Partnership Initiative (MPI) (*Appendix E, F*) will be able to award funds to our town and village governments, as well as special districts. The initiative will support local plans that champion community development with public facilities improvements, encourage environmental sustainability, revitalize areas for economic growth, or provide other general shared services that result in efficiency improvements and tax reductions. Through this new initiative, we're also encouraging municipalities to partner with one another to apply for larger sums of money. If two municipalities demonstrate they have a plan to work together on something that encourages economic growth and is strategically aligned with Putnam County's goals and priorities, the county stands ready to assist through this new initiative.

The previous Administration, after more than a decade of refusing to have any kind of direct financial assistance to towns and villages, abruptly changed their tune last year, disseminating over ten million dollars from a combination of the county's general fund and ARPA dollars in a way that no other county in the entire state did. Putnam's local governments had already received money from ARPA directly from the federal government, in total about \$10 million, and according to our friends in the New York State Association of Counties, Putnam County was the only county government in the state that gave a portion of its ARPA dollars to local governments on top of what they had already received. This act was done separately from any traditional budgeting process and in a manner that has tied up some of the funding with various federal government requirements associated with the American Rescue Plan Act. That said, this Administration has honored that commitment and will continue to work with our local

municipalities to ensure that those projects are still supported with funding that was previously committed.

It is my sincere hope that by creating new mechanisms and defined programs for the county to partner with local agencies and municipalities, we can create a fairer system that evaluates how taxpayer dollars are spent based on the value and quality of the idea. Good projects and worthwhile ideas should be encouraged, and checks and balances must be in place.

I suspect that there will undoubtedly be those who disagree with our decision not to directly divert county taxpayer dollars from the general fund to local governments with no strings attached. But the fact is, we are taking on more expenses, more responsibilities to provide a better quality of life for the people who call Putnam home. I mentioned it earlier, the hit the county is taking from the Governor choosing to steal Medicaid funding from us is real. But I will not leave our most vulnerable residents behind, and we will not cut services provided to those individuals. In addition to having to fund millions of dollars more because of the state's eFMAP diversion, just a couple of months ago, I announced that we had entered into a new county wide Advanced Life Support contract— this makes us stand out as Putnam County continues to fund paramedic services, something, to our knowledge, no other county government in New York State does. By taking on this \$3 million dollar per year cost (\$1.5 million more than what was budgeted for in 2023), we kept much of that financial responsibility off towns and villages. We are still waiting for a number of local EMS agencies to enter into an agreement with the paramedic provider. We hope this will be remedied soon, because if they don't opt-in to the program that is subsidized by the county, the full financial responsibility could then ultimately fall back onto other local governments. In the end, the County is providing this funding to provide a more effective county-wide service while relieving this financial burden from our towns and villages. It's been successful for many years, and this budget continues it.

Putnam County government has also stepped up in a number of other ways where it has continued to provide services that local governments shoulder in our neighboring counties. For example, in Westchester County when a property owner is delinquent on their taxes it is the local government that pays the county to make it whole—whereas in Putnam County it is the County that pays to make local governments whole. Another example, where in some counties the county government charges back the cost to operate the Board of Elections, Putnam County government shoulders that responsibility. While several of these points have been raised before by previous administrations, they are no less true today than they were several years ago. The reality is, the cost of the Board of Elections is even more conspicuous as next year, 2024, we are faced, yet again, with the cost of multiple primaries and a Presidential Election. Make no

mistake, we want maximum turnout every year- not just in presidential years- but the reality is there is a cost to running this essential service and that is realized by county government.

Wherever you call home in Putnam County, just because the seat of the County is in Carmel or that the DPW, Planning, Transportation facilities are in Patterson, know that this County government serves you. If you are in the face of an emergency and you call 911, whether you are from North Highlands, Putnam Lake or Lake Peekskill, our County 911 Center will answer the call and dispatch services to your location. Our County Sheriff Kevin McConville and his deputies are based here in Carmel, but they put their lives on the line every single day to serve every corner of this county. County Clerk Mike Bartolotti runs one of the greatest DMV's in the state. An office that's based in Brewster, but an office that serves all no matter what part of the county or state they come from! (We have individuals coming from the Bronx to utilize his office.) The same type of response goes for every other agency- our remarkable case workers at Social Services who manage adult and child protective services, our health department employees, DPW crews, you name it... Our mission, our presence, and our work encompass ALL of Putnam County.

I recognize that a lot of what this Administration has tried to do in less than a year has been bold, and some may say overly ambitious. Ultimately, we are trying to change part of the culture in Putnam County government and get people to think differently. That doesn't happen overnight.

In this budget, we are recommitting ourselves to ThinkDIFFERENTLY, a movement to change the way individuals, businesses and governments think about and treat those with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As a result, earlier this year we created a position in the DSS, the Coordinator for the Office of Individuals with Disabilities, and after an extremely competitive search process, we hired Dana Touponse for the position. She's hit the ground running and is working with community groups and families in Putnam to create a more welcoming environment for those of all abilities. But ThinkDIFFERENTLY is not the job of one county employee. It is very much about all of us. It's why (as you heard earlier) one of the focus areas of our Municipal Partnership and Community Assistance initiatives is about funding projects that make facilities more accessible (ADA compliant). It's why as part of our 6-year Capital Plan, we're also going to upgrade a number of county buildings, including our own county office building, to make them more welcoming. Right now, the third floor of our county office building does not have an ADA accessible public bathroom near Room 318. This is the same room where Legislative Committee meetings are held and where the public has important opportunities to engage with its elected representatives, including me. Our main entrance only has stairs. Those unable to use the stairs must enter through the opposite side of the building, come in through

the basement and then up the elevator. Quite frankly, it's a bit embarrassing. Our county offices belong to the public, and they should be accessible to members of the public, regardless of their physical ability. Changing the culture, thinking differently, it can be hard, but it doesn't have to be.

When I was running to be County Executive, and since taking office, we have been pushing everyone to think differently, not just about those with different abilities, but about everything we do. I made it clear using the justification "well, that's how we've always done it" would not be an acceptable answer. I was elected to change the status quo and strengthen this county with a more affordable, accountable government that serves us all. This executive budget highlights new financial controls, keeps the tax levy flat, lowers the property tax rate, and provides for the reduction of sales tax on more regressive purchases. It also honors a pledge I made when I first announced my candidacy for this office, and does not raise pay for elected officials, including me. As an elected official, we are public servants and I believe in public service. I don't need a special parking space and I'm not asking for a raise in pay.

When I announced my candidacy for this position, I committed publicly that, within my ability, I would freeze pay raises for politicians. I didn't say it would be frozen forever. The executive budget I present to you delivers on that promise: it includes a 2.75% salary adjustment in pay for management employees, excluding elected officials. If we want to find ways to control spending, I believe it necessary to lead by example. My executive budget proposal for 2024 has no merit increase or cost of living adjustment for myself, the sheriff, the clerk, the district attorney, or county coroners. That does not mean these officials are not doing a remarkable job, it simply means we are taking steps, leading by example, to demonstrate fiscal discipline at a time when so many of our residents are struggling to support their families and navigate through the economic uncertainty, we all face.

It's also important as we continue forward with our contract negotiations with various collective bargaining units. I believe it to be unfair to grant myself a pay raise while we are still negotiating contracts for many of our public employees. The County Charter, while vague in a number of other areas, *is* clear that the Legislature's tentative budget is their budget, and "shall not be modified by the County Executive". Also noteworthy is that, while not adjusted in this specific budget before you, next year the State's Office of Court Administration will likely set the mandated salary of the District Attorney.

This is not the Final budget. It must still go through the required Legislative process which almost always includes some adjustments and compromises, but this budget is one that keeps



our tax levy flat, reduces the overall tax burden, enhances needed services, and pushes us into a fairer and brighter future. While there are many economic factors beyond our control, be it far off global events, or presidential politics, or unfunded mandates, I believe we are laying the groundwork for a system that ultimately gives us the best chance to succeed. This budget makes it clear that... despite the challenges thrown our way... We're going to protect taxpayers. We're going to ThinkDIFFERENTLY. We're going to provide for our most vulnerable. We're going to be more transparent. We're going to take advantage of every opportunity presented to us. We're going to build a future worthy of the generation before us, and the ones yet to come.

Thank you.