

State of the County 2020
Presented by: Martha Sauerbrey
Chair of the Tioga County Legislature
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The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime. ~ Babe Ruth, baseball legend.

Our team brought us through 2020...

2020 began with a high note. Expectations were high; we had finally secured a contract to upgrade our Emergency Communications System, an important project that took years in the making. A working Emergency Communications System is critical to the safety of all the residents in Tioga County and we were optimistic that we would hit the ground running, secure grant funding and start moving forward.

Our world stood still when the COVID-19 Virus struck NYC. The Governor declared a State of Emergency to contain the spread of the Coronavirus and we followed suit on March 14th closing all Tioga County schools. We spent the next days, weeks and months following the Governor's Executive Orders. There were daily meetings with Albany giving us directions on how safely to go about our daily life at work and at home. There were orders, guidance, and rules calling out a new way to behave and... it stopped us all in our tracks. Fifty percent (50%) of our workforce was sent home, some employees were able to work remotely thanks to the quick response of our IT Department. Quick thinking Department Heads split shifts to reduce the numbers of workers on site at one time, still getting the work done. Our DMV Department closed and the phone began to ring. There were so many questions and the answers were not ours to choose.

We needed masks, PPE and hand sanitizer and so did the rest of the community. Emergency Management stepped up, came through, scrounging for needed items, making deliveries any time of the day or night – providing items to insure our safety.

It was clear that the community wanted to know what was going on and we did our best to communicate with daily press releases, newscasts and radio reports. There was a lot of fear and concern in the community; even though our numbers were small, we had to prepare the community for significant behavioral changes.

The changes came and businesses were closing, restaurants switched to take out only, no sports, no community activities, and no gatherings. Our Legislative meetings quickly turned to zoom meetings and we managed to do the work of county government virtually.

Without the support of the County Attorney, Legislative Clerk and our Personnel Director, I am not sure how I would have survived. There was daily communication coming out of the State and Federal Government and some of it contradicted each other.

We developed plans for closing and then we developed plans for opening. As our numbers increased, it became more important to send a message to the community that they must be careful.

Then the deaths came. How do you report the loss of a loved one in a press release to the community – how do you say you are sorry, that you wish you could fix this, defeat the virus, win the battle?

To date - we have lost 70 individuals to the COVID-19 Virus. We lost friends and family and community members.

Anger and fear rose up - who would be next.

The increase in fear, anxiety and then abuse meant that more Mental Health services were needed and our Mental Health Department stepped up offering Telehealth sessions with individuals, helping people deal with the fear and depression that COVID-19 brought with it.

The disturbing upward trend of opiate use in Tioga County continued during 2020. This was manifested in addiction to prescription opiate medications as well as the use of illicit opiates. In 2020, Tioga County Probation saw a marked increase in the use of methamphetamine by people on probation. Despite the reduction in services due to the pandemic, Probation continued to work closely with agencies

such as ACBC to attempt to provide those struggling with addiction with the necessary services and support.

Spring and summer brought added anger and unrest across the country due to the death of George Floyd. In May, the Governor created a mandate that all municipalities with a police force must participate in the Police Reform and Reinvention Collaborative in order to restore the relationship between the police and the community. It was a lengthy process, one that involved all the community and I am pleased to say that we have completed and submitted our plan.

The Governor also mandated that counties create their own Pandemic Operations Plan in case there was another pandemic; thankfully, the Planning Office stepped up and did an amazing job managing the project, which we will pass today in our county meeting.

Good news - Amidst the pandemic, the Board of Elections pulled off a flawless series of elections, which included a Presidential Election and are right back at it again.

Despite the pandemic, bridges and roads had to be repaired, roads had to be plowed and our buildings had to be maintained. Our Public Works team took care of many needs as we rearranged spaces to accommodate space restrictions and traffic flow within our buildings.

Social Services stood like a fortress ready provide support and services for citizens during this tragic time. The Tioga Career Center helped with Unemployment benefits, and helped provide jobs and clarification to those in need.

Economic Development stepped up to help businesses through the closing and reopening phases, helping to communicate the many rules and regulations that came down from the state on how to do things properly and safely. They also created an Economic Development Recovery Advisory Board to help businesses recover from the economic downturn. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, TEAM Tioga worked with the Tioga County Foundations Coalition to establish the Tioga County Foundations Coalition Emergency Fund, a fund collaborative that provided support for organizations working with individuals and families most negatively affected by COVID-19. \$73K was quickly and efficiently distributed to 11 essential nonprofit organizations in Tioga County.

Tioga County Tourism pivoted from their original 2020 marketing plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting from promoting visitors to promoting Shopping Local. Tourism stepped up with a Tioga to Go Campaign to promote take out to keep our restaurants up and running.

As the pandemic wore on, more items were thrown in the mix for counties to juggle. The biggest challenge was creating a county budget for 2021 without knowing.... how long the pandemic would last, how big state aid cuts would be and if federal aid would come. The only thing that gave us hope was the years of prudent budgeting that allowed us to save for a rainy day. While county Public Health planned and prepared emergency health protocols, the Legislature planned and prepared for the fiscal storm. Early on in the pandemic, our sales tax income was at a shocking level of minus 41%. We made cuts during the year starting with a 10% cut across the board for every department and again at budget time. We put a 90-day hiring freeze in place to slow down expenses. The biggest challenge? We never knew what was coming next. As a result, we were able to produce a budget for 2021 and stay under the property tax cap. At the end of the year, we ended with a loss of only 3.1%, which was considerably better than expected.

I appreciate all departments that stepped up and did their best to save taxpayer dollars.

When the year started, we knew our Recycling Contract would expire at the end of the year and we had plans in place to work on a new contract however, a major fire destroyed the Material Recycling Facility and we knew we had to act quickly. We understood the value of commodities had decreased and we fully expected an increase in cost but not double the cost for half of the service. The lowest bid was simply not affordable. We looked at options, researched recycling districts but in the end after considerable thought, we decided that private business was the answer. To date – private businesses have stepped up and recycling continues.

The Land Bank started conversations with Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services and Tioga Opportunities on a proposal to construct 40 new residential units and 6 townhomes in the Village of Owego. Property has been purchased and 13 properties were identified for the Temple/Liberty St. Redevelopment Project, which addresses affordable housing.

Nine other projects in the Village Waverly were completed which improved neighborhoods and restored property value.

The IDA has been busy and work has begun on Owego Gardens 2, which is a sign of hope for the future. Manufacturing companies are looking at Tioga County for opportunity.

We are moving forward on the Emergency Communications System for the County, and **we will** accomplish this much needed communication system for the safety of **all** Tioga County residents. We will also look for ways to strengthen emergency medical services in the County especially in rural areas.

Things are beginning to change, to get better. Kids are coming back to school, playing sports, restrictions are being lifted, and vaccines have arrived.

What have we learned – that this community is resilient – we knew that because of the floods and fires of the past but this was something different.

We learned we can work and attend school from home but we need to expand broadband coverage so you do not have to do your homework in the school parking lot to get a signal.

We learned that we could carry on the basics of county government working at 50% for a very limited amount of time.

We learned we can do with less, but we also learned community and relationships are critically important. We need to operate as a unit focused and communicating to make good solid decisions and make sure everyone is heard.

Finally, we learned that we could meet a challenge, hunker down, and do the hard things. It is not pretty; it is difficult. But, we also learned that we can't do it alone, we need each other, supporting, helping and encouraging each other.

I would like to stop here and take a moment to thank all of the Tioga County Employees for being great team members - Thank you for the long hours, confusion, changing rules and most of all your commitment to the county.

I need to say a special thanks to the Public Health Department.

A hero is every public health professional in our communities across America working to protect us from COVID-19 and other health threats. There are many

Hero's in Tioga County and ours is the Public Health Department. The Public Health Director, nurses, contact tracers, educators, administrators, volunteers, jack-of-all-trades have been giving us what we need to protect our families and communities. Working seven days a week in the early days of the pandemic, advising our schools, businesses and communities, and protecting those at greatest risk.

We see you. We appreciate you. And, we thank you.

We have been doing **Hard** things

– and we are moving past that now...

We stared fear in the face and we did the things we thought we could not do.