

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
SPECIAL MEETING
THIRD DAY
STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS
February 15, 2000

Taken by: Lucia Braaten
Riverhead, New York

[SPECIAL MEETING OF FEBRUARY 15, 2000]

[STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS]

[THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 10:40 A.M.]

P.O. TONNA:

Henry, call the roll, please.

(*Roll Called by Mr. Barton*)

MR. BARTON:

There's 16 present. (Not Present at Roll Call: Legs. Guldi and Binder)

P.O. TONNA:

Okay. Please, all rise for the salute to the flag led by our First District, Legislator Caracciolo.

(Salutation)

Can we stay standing for one second. A moment of silence for the victims of the Tornadoes in Georgia.

(Moment of Silence)

Henry, could you please read the meeting notice?

MR. BARTON:

Yes, Mr. Chairman. Before each Legislator and filed with my office, the following notice:

"To all County Legislators, from Robert J. Gaffney, Suffolk County Executive, special meeting. Please be advised that a special meeting of the Suffolk County Legislature will be held on Tuesday, February 15th, 2000, at 10:30 in the forenoon at the Legislative Auditorium at the Evans K. Griffing County Center, Center Drive, Riverhead, New York, pursuant to Section 2-6(B) of the County Administrative Code for the following purpose: The State of the County Address by the County Executive." Signed Robert J. Gaffney.

P.O. TONNA:

Thank you, Henry. There being no cards, I'd like to make a motion to close the public portion.

LEG. CARACAPPA:

Second.

P.O. TONNA:

Second by Legislator Caracappa. All in favor? Opposed? So be it.

MR. BARTON:

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P.O. TONNA:

At this time, I would like to, in light of seeing the County Executive's wife here, and I'd like to introduce the County Executive,

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Robert Gaffney. Thank you.

(Applause)

I saw him around the back, so we're going to be clapping for awhile. We'll see how quick he is, unless he's -- can bilocate. We'll take her lead. When Joanne starts to clap, we'll all start to clap again.

LEG. GULDI:

Maybe he's not coming.

LEG. HALEY:

Times up. Let's go.

P.O. TONNA:

All right.

(Applause).

MR. GAFFNEY:

Thank you. Good morning. Thank you, and good morning. Presiding Officer Tonna, Deputy Presiding Officer Levy and Members of the Legislature, since I last addressed you, our County has crossed the threshold to a new period in its history. No one would dispute the fact that Suffolk County enters the new millennium in tremendous fiscal condition and focused clearly on our future with both confidence and anticipation. With a span of a new era stretching out before us, we would do well to take a long-term view in planning our County's future. We should commit ourselves to the premise that the interest of the people and the need to achieve a sustained stability should always take precedence over short-term political gain.

We enter this new century building on nearly a decade of historic progress in so many different areas. Building on a strong economy, we've made Suffolk County a better place. And the advances that we've made have come about because we, the Executive and the Legislative branches of government, have placed a concern for the people at the forefront of our agendas. Sure, we've had our disagreements, such as the way of government and politics. As the noted British statesman and philosopher, Edmund Burke, once said, "All government, indeed, every human benefit and enjoyment, every virtue and prudent act, is founded on compromise." And so it is between us. No, we don't always agree, but we've worked together in a bipartisan manner to advance the needs of our County. We've taken the task of governing seriously and our successes speak for themselves. We've created real fiscal integrity. When Wall Street looks at Suffolk County, it likes what it sees. We're experiencing a record reduction in crime and welfare. More people are working in our County than ever before. With the support of the voters, investing more than ever before to protect working farmland and open space. We've developed the closest working relationship ever between government, law enforcement, and school officials to keep schools safe.

The County's bond rating was upgraded by one prominent rating agency last June for the first time in 15 years. And with the cloud of the
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Shoreham tax judgment gone for the first time in 25 years, we'll be meeting with all the rating agencies later this month to press for yet another upgrade.

On March 1st, consumers and businesses alike will begin to benefit from the elimination of the sales tax on clothing purchases under \$110. And on April 28th, they'll throw out the first ball of the season at our brand new Minor League Ballpark in Central Islip.

(Applause)

Ladies and Gentlemen, these are only a few of the reasons why Suffolk County bubbles with pride and promise in these early days of the new millennium. So many of the important things we've accomplished in recent years are the result of bipartisan cooperation. Last year alone, we worked together to enact landmark new laws to reduce the use of pesticides, to get tougher on crime in schools, and to better protect our Pine Barrens watershed. We've taken a leadership position on so many important issues, and counties across the State look to Suffolk County as an innovator among local governments.

We have done well and we've accomplished much, but it is time to focus on the future and the need to achieve a lasting, long-term prosperity.

We face some challenges. We should acknowledge them and deal with them. Our efforts to create the high-tech economy we have all been working towards are proving successful, but the high-tech companies that fuel the economy are having trouble finding qualified people to fill all the jobs that are being created. It's a problem that could stifle our economic growth. Efforts to provide better technical training at our educational institutions, so that residents can take advantage of these new jobs, are underway. And the projects like the "Long Island Works" coalition are helping by bringing together school officials and private sector CEO's to work cooperatively on the problem. It's a partnership effort between government officials, educators, and the high-tech business community, and we need to continue to build on those efforts.

But another challenge, one that is making it tough for companies to attract or keep people here is the need for affordable housing. Our booming economy has caused property values and housing costs to rise, and that's making it more difficult for many people to afford their first home, and it's putting a squeeze on rental housing as well. Now, it's true that the County has been active in affordable housing. Since 1993, we've assisted in the financing of over 700 affordable housing opportunities through our Home Investment Partnership Program. And we've transferred more than 300 other parcels of land to towns, villages, and nonprofits to provide affordable housing. These parcels should allow for the construction of 600 additional units of housing for both families and for senior citizens. We continue to waive Health Department fees for affordable housing projects. And last year, we launched the Employer Assisted Housing Program to help businesses recruit and retain qualified employees. So we have done much in this field, but we can do more, and we need to be aggressive in our approach.

Today I'm asking for your support and cooperation to create a Suffolk
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County Affordable Housing Opportunities Program. The program would be comprised of several elements. First, I'll be asking the Legislature for authorization to set aside more properties in the County's inventory for transfer to local governments and nonprofits for affordable housing purposes. Second, I propose that improved properties in our inventory that do go to auction should be targeted as affordable housing for first-time home buyers. And let's change the County's current down payment policy, so that first-time home buyers no longer bear the burden of a full 20% down payment to get that first home. Let's reduce that requirement to just 5%.

(Applause)

These are simple steps that we can take, but we need to go -- we need to go further. We all know that one of the biggest obstacles to providing affordable housing is the high cost of land. We can do something about that. This spring, in the Capital Budget I'll submit to the Legislature, I will ask that up to \$20 million be set aside over the next two years to acquire property for the purpose of constructing affordable housing. Under my plan, the County would purchase the properties and transfer them to local governments that are willing to use their housing powers to create affordable housing. We'll be easing the burden of land acquisition expenses and freeing up Town, State and

Federal community development funds to make housing even more affordable.

We should give priority to acquiring property in areas where transportation, shopping, sewers and other infrastructure components already exist, consistent with smart growth principles. Our Towns and Villages would then work with not-for-profit housing corporations, like the Long Island Housing Partnership and the County to develop homes for first-time homebuyers. The new homeowner would be required to pay back the principle amount of the County's investment when they eventually sell their home. These payments would then be returned to a revolving fund and used to provide additional housing units. In this way, the program would become sustainable.

This program will provide a number of significant benefits. First, it will work as a catalyst, providing an incentive for town governments to join with the County and not-for-profit housing development companies to provide further affordable housing. And as we note from our experience in other areas, the combined resources of multiple levels of government are critical to an effective response to any issue of this magnitude.

Secondly, it will provide a substantial reduction in the up-front cost of buying a home in our County. This will allow us to do more to provide quality housing at affordable prices for young families when they need help the most.

In addition, to these initiatives, we'll continue to look for opportunities to promote senior citizen and affordable renting housing -- rental housing as well. I've asked the Planning Commission to identify distressed commercial properties in and near our downtowns that could be suitable locations for affordable rental and senior citizen housing.

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Riding the crest of this strong economy, we should work together to address the need for affordable housing, a need fueled in part by our success in strengthening the economy.

(Applause)

We should provide the leadership to bring the combined resources of all levels of government to bear in addressing this issue. With bipartisan cooperation, I know that we can, and I look forward to working with you on these proposals.

(Applause)

Another of the issues we've been working on together has taken on new meaning during the past year. I'm talking about our efforts to level the playing field for our downtown business districts. Our downtown revitalization activities have put Suffolk County at the forefront in working to spread the full benefit of our booming economy to downtowns. Our Downtown Revitalization Grant Program is a model that others are sure to follow. We've made land and facilities available for important downtown redevelopment projects in Patchogue, Riverhead and Bay Shore. And the County itself has invested significantly in projects which will bolster downtown areas, including the Court expansion and Cornell Cooperative Extension projects in Riverhead, and the Touro School of Health Sciences in Bay Shore. The concept was simple, targeting these projects to downtowns would boost our business districts, strengthening existing communities and limiting suburban

sprawl. And working to rebuild downtowns helps to promote compact orderly growth.

While we were working on these issues, a new planning term incorporating many of the same ideas became a popular buzz word, smart growth. In a strong economy, pressure to develop new areas increases. And right now, development pressure is the most intense it has been for a long time. And because we've invested more than any local government in the nation to preserve farmland and open space, our taxpayers have a significant interest in making sure that growth in the County is well planned and sustainable. Accordingly, I'll be undertaking a series of actions over the next several months to formally incorporate smart growth principles into land use planning practices in Suffolk County. First, I'll ask the County Planning Commission to develop a report for submission to both my office and to the Legislature. The report will detail how the Commission's guidelines for the review of development applications comply with or could be made to comply with smart growth principles.

Second I'll ask the -- I'll direct the Department of Economic Development to provide us with a big picture view of efforts underway to help our downtown business districts. This report should include a review of the status of the Downtown Grant Program and how it can be maximized to strengthen downtowns. The report will also include an overall look at existing economic development programs, including financing, tax incentives, and other inducements and how they comply with smart growth principles.

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In conjunction with our other affordable housing initiatives, I've asked the Planning Commission to identify distressed properties in or near our downtowns, properties that might better be used for affordable and senior citizen rental housing. Replacing blighted or underused commercial buildings with much needed housing would put residents close to the services they need, so they won't have to drive to go shopping or access to other services. These efforts will serve to strengthen our existing communities and help reduce both suburban sprawl and traffic congestion.

Along these lines, we have a major opportunity to meet several of our most pressing needs at once through intelligence planning for the future use of the major land holdings in our County that are being returned to private ownership by the State of New York. These properties, totaling hundreds of acres, are the largest undeveloped tracks in the western portion of our County. They lend themselves to innovative planning, and they should accommodate a variety of uses. It's safe to say that we will never again have such a great opportunity to use smart growth principles to create livable, preplanned communities. And, clearly, portions of the land at both Pilgrim Psychiatric Center and the Long Island Developmental Center should be targeted and designated to provide affordable housing.

Now, it's true that town and village governments have more direct control over land use decision than the County does, and the success of our downtown revitalization and affordable housing efforts will depend upon the willingness of those levels of government to embrace the principles of smart growth. So we need to promote a better understanding of how all levels of government can work together to

promote well-planned orderly growth. Along these lines, we'll take the lead in starting formal dialogue on smart growth with towns and villages, to share information, exchange ideas, and build a consensus on the actions that are needed to improve the quality of life in our communities. The growth we'll be experiencing over the next few years will help determine what living in our County will be like for future generations, so it's imperative that we ensure that this growth is well planned.

Another challenge that we face on Long Island, one that is linked to both smart growth and land use, is planning to meet the region's transportation needs. The fact is that traffic is becoming a bigger and bigger problem on Long Island. Traffic congestion is an environmental issue, an economic issue, and a quality of life issue. And while we've seen some minor improvements in highway, transit and commuter rail service over the past several years, transportation demands are increasing. Since 1970, Long Island's population has increased by about 2%, but the number of registered vehicles has risen by nearly 60%. Without an investment in our transportation system, we'll continue to see congested roadways and more and more travel delays during peak commuter hours. And make no mistake about it, this is a quality of life issue. An hour spent fighting traffic is an hour that might otherwise be spent with our families, reading to our kids, for example, or helping them with their homework. And quality time lost can never be regained.

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We need to take a long-term look at this issue and deal with it realistically. Consequently, I you will support the request of our Department of Public Works for \$150 million for improvements to our roads over the next seven years. However, I realize that simply building, repairing or expanding roads will not solve our problems. We need to plan carefully to protect our communities, using traffic calming measures where they're called for, because that, too, is a quality of life issue. And we need to focus on our entire transportation network to find sensible ways to reduce the growing number of cars on the road. We should work with private sector employers to encourage carpooling and to find ways to use other parts of our transportation system more effectively. For example, consider our Suffolk County Transit Operations. According to reports, riderships -- ridership on our bus system increased by more than 31% between 1992 and 1997 and that's a good start. But we need to move towards a fully integrated system that serves industry, working people, students, senior citizens, the handicapped, and even tourists. So I'll be calling on the Department of Public Works to review all existing bus routes and recommend changes to increase ridership. This will include a review of the benefits of expanded hours of operation, including Sunday service, filling gaps in routes on the South Fork, and strategies to attract more residents to use mass transit. We also need to work with our largest employers on joint programs to promote the use of our bus system, and we need to explore the possibility of continuous bus service from Patchogue to Montauk.

I've also asked DPW to explore the possibility of providing express bus service between the Ronkonkoma Station and Riverhead, and the Ronkonkoma Station and Speonk. Additionally, I've asked DPW to look

into the possibility of linking bus services with the Long Island Railroad from Riverhead and Greenport, and Speonk and Montauk, to reduce traffic congestion on the North and South Forks.

And finally, to address the big picture in assessing our long-term needs, I'm requesting the Legislature's cooperation in establishing a joint Legislative Executive Transportation Task Force. This Task Force would study our transportation needs, closely monitor the State's Long Island Transportation Plan 2000 Study, report their findings, and make sensible recommendations for improvements to our transportation system.

It's imperative for us to plan ahead to deal with the increasing demands placed on our transportation system, and this is another issue that will require a long-term commitment to achieve solid long-term results.

Another area important to our quality of life in which the County has already made a long-term commitment is in land preservation. No local government in the nation has invested as much to protect farmland and open space. Last year the Division of Real Estate set new records in almost every meaningful acquisition statistic. The protection of the 52,000 acre central Pine Barrens core is moving ever closer to completion. And together with east end towns, we're poised to undertake the most aggressive efforts ever to preserve working farmland in the years ahead. But buying development rights is just one of the

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things that we need to do to make sure that the agricultural community remains a vital part of our economy. Farmers are facing real economic challenges, and changes in regulations affecting the way farms are managed are likely in coming years.

I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of the agricultural industry to our County. We have already made a big investment in farmland preservation, so we need to protect that investment by working with the farm community to meet these challenges. With the Regional Market Authority legislation that we pressed for finally in effect, we'll be looking at the benefits of a local farmers market. And when I travel to Albany next month to deliver my State Legislative Agenda, I'll ask our State Legislators to expand the STAR tax exemption for farmers. Secondly, I'll ask them to broaden the sales tax exemption for farmers as well. With some of our farm families working the same tracks of land for more than three centuries, we are working to protect an important part of our history as well as our economy.

Working together, we took a major step forward with the Common Sense Tax Stabilization Plan for sewers and environmental protection, which was approved by the voters in November. This far-reaching plan will help us to continue our efforts to stabilize property taxes. It will protect residents of our sewer districts from significant sewer tax increases, and even provides a source of new funding to protect working farmland. And it will allow us to make important new investments in other areas as well.

For the first time in our history, the County will have a dedicated fund to protect our bays, rivers, and streams. The Water Quality Protection and Restoration Program will generate \$100 million over the next thirteen years for projects to keep our waterways clean, funding that will allow us to restore wetlands and wildlife habitat and protect

waterways from pollution. And the timing couldn't be better, because the planning work we've done over the past few years on ways to protect the Peconic Estuary, the Great South Bay, and the Long Island Sound is moving rapidly towards completion. As a result of these studies, we know we need to reduce road runoff and restore neglected wetlands to return our scallop and shellfishing industries to their past glory and to eliminate sources of pollution.

We should gear up to move directly into the implementation phase for these projects, and with our own funding source in place, we can be more aggressive in seeking State Clean Water-Clean Air Bond Act monies to accomplish even more. At this gateway to a new era, we're poised to take bold new action to keep our waterways clean. Again, it's an investment in our quality of life, and there are other areas in which we can also work to improve our quality of life.

Two years ago, we decided together that the growing need for active recreational facilities warranted a greater role by the County in working to meet those needs. Together we developed a plan to provide the resources for the County to partner with interested groups to develop new playing fields and other recreational facilities and we asked the voters to endorse it. The success of the Community Greenways Fund at the voting booth is a clear indication that there is broad support for an expanded role for Suffolk County in supporting and

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promoting sports activities and active recreation in our communities. And even as we continue to work to implement the active recreational component of the Greenways Program, I'll be proposing that we take several steps to further expand the County's involvement in promoting recreational opportunities and sports activities in general.

First, I'll be working with Legislator Caracappa and the members of the Legislature's Sports the Recreation Committee to develop legislation establishing a new Suffolk County Sports Council. The Council would promote the broadest possible range of sporting and recreational activities. This new council will further our goal of elevating sports and active recreation in the County's own park system, and it will serve as a resource to help our residents get access to athletic facilities and recreational services, and it will provide a vehicle for the County to pursue the development of sports-related infrastructure for the new millennium. The Council should seek State and Federal funding to finance that infrastructure and explore land lease opportunities with developers and users of athletic facilities.

Secondly, I'll be proposing the creation of a new Sports and Recreation Division in the Parks Department. This new division will support and coordinate the activities of the Sports Council and strengthen the implementation of the active recreation component of Community Greenways.

In addition, the Division would serve as an information resource for youth and community groups. And it would develop programs to support and encourage all levels of sporting activities from the amateur to the professional levels.

The Division of Sports and Recreation will be committed to enriching the lives of Suffolk County residents through participation in sports programs and other rational activities, and it will work actively to promote physical fitness and education as well.

And to that end, let's work with the State Legislature to develop a Suffolk County Pine Barrens Bicycle Trail. We can develop a low impact, high value recreation facility running from Setauket to the Shinnecock Canal that will improve our quality of life and provide a real boost for the tourism industry.

(Applause)

So many factors come into play in determining the quality of life in any region. And one major concern is the quality of health care. Together we're the stewards of a proud tradition of providing quality health care to people in need. Suffolk County's health care system is arguably the finest of its kind operated by any local government anywhere. Ours is the only municipally owned Medicaid managed care in the nation, and it's becoming more efficient each year. Last year, through Child Health Plus, we expanded the range of health care services for underinsured kids to include prescriptions and dental coverage. And this year, the Department will be expanding services for uninsured and underinsured adults who aren't eligible for other forms of health care with Family Health Plus. With each of these new programs, we come one step closer to our goal of making sure that

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everyone has access to health care.

When I addressed you last year, I pointed out that our sophisticated vector control operation had gained national attention, after picking out a single sample of a new species of mosquito from among more than 100,000 mosquito specimens collected. We had no way of knowing then at that time that a potential public health crisis would thrust this joint operation between the Department of Health and Public Works into a high profile effort to protect public health and calm people's fears. The encephalitis outbreak last fall showed that controlling the mosquito population is more than just a matter of reducing the number of annoying bites that people suffer. It's a public health issue that can mean the difference between life and death. And the fact that one of the largest cities in the world reached out to Suffolk County for help at a time of crisis is a tribute to the foresight the County has shown by equipping itself to deal effectively with this issue.

(Applause)

We do know that unlike neighboring jurisdictions, we did not have a single fatality or even a documented case of encephalitis in humans in Suffolk County during the entire crisis. What we will never know is just how different our fate might have been if we had not had such a sophisticated program already in place to control mosquito populations.

Looking forward, we enter the new century knowing that the public health implications of mosquito-borne diseases and of treatment methods for mosquito control have been elevated to a new level of interest and concern for both public health professionals and the general public. And with your support, County government has responded accordingly. Throughout the winter, Health Department -- the Health Department has been gearing up to attack these issues aggressively in the Year 2000. We'll be expanding the capabilities of our laboratory facilities and increasing mosquito surveillance activities as well. And additional staff are being provided to eliminate mosquito breeding sites. Special education materials and public service announcements are being

developed. And a public health educator will be available to visit local schools and provide adult education regarding the importance of preventing the accumulation of water where it can create breeding habitats.

As we learned all too well last fall, controlling mosquito populations can help prevent the spread of disease, and that's an important part of protecting the public health.

But when it comes to protecting health problems and preventing health problems, experts all agree that the single most important thing that we can do is to convince people not to use tobacco products. The fact is tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Smoking causes more than 400,000 premature deaths each year. And in 1990, the direct and indirect costs associated with smoking cost taxpayers a staggering \$68 billion -- billion dollars. My apologies. That's why the new Tobacco Control Program that I proposed last fall is so important. It will help save lives and it will help save taxpayers

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millions of dollars in health care costs.

Clean air advocates have said that our new program will raise the bar and set a new standard for other governments to follow. So I'll look forward to working with you to shape this important initiative.

Statistics show that 82% of smokers today began before they were 18 years of age. And experts tell us that statistically, each year, every day, 16 people in our County light up their first cigarette, and that one-third third of those young people will die prematurely from smoking-related illnesses.

We need to do more to discourage kids from smoking, and our new Tobacco Control Program will provide the tools that we need to do that. And we need to keep up our aggressive enforcement against illegal tobacco sales to kids.

Over the past two years, our investigators have visited more than 4,000 tobacco retailers and collected more than \$300,000 in fines. That's hurting violators in the pocketbook and that's good news. And compliance rates are increasing. But there are some problems as well.

A gap in the State licensing process is allowing some of the worst violators to continue selling tobacco. Here's how it happens:

If our investigators cite a business for a third violation for selling to minors, the case is referred to the State Department of Taxation and Finance for action. Last year eight repeat violators had their licenses revoked. But within weeks, some of these locations had obtained new licenses using different corporate names, and the process now in place allows that to happen. We need to change that.

When I travel to Albany early next month to press our State Legislative Agenda for 2000, I'll ask our State Delegation for help to close that loophole. We should put in place higher fines for those who profit through illegal tobacco sales to kids. And we should change the licensing process, so that when we put repeat violators out of business, they stay out of business.

(Applause)

Protecting the public health and safety are the two most basic responsibilities of government. And we have entered the 21st Century making bold strides in public health and in the fight against crime. Our neighborhoods are the safest that they've been in 30 years. Our

economy is a factor here, certainly, as is our commitment to provide the resources that law enforcement needs, and the close working relationship that we've built with community groups. The Weed and Seed Programs we've established in Bellport, Amityville, and Huntington Station have created a partnership between our police and the people of those communities that's making a real difference. And we're waiting for approval from the federal government to expand that teamwork approach to the Wyandanch community as well. The crime rate continued to drop in our Police District last year in almost every category. Murders and manslaughter declined by nearly 16%. Assaults were down by nearly 9%, and burglaries dropped by 18%.

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Incidents of violent crime dropped by 5.5%, and overall, the incidents of major crimes dropped by 10%, all in just one year. And since 1992, incidents of major crime in the Police District have dropped by over 60%, and that's a great return on our investment.

(Applause)

These statistics tell a remarkable story. But there is a human side to the important role that our police and emergency response personnel play in protecting people's lives. And I'd like to share an example with you. Last November 11th, a 911 call was transferred to the County's Office of Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services. Emergency Services Dispatcher Daniel Raia was there to receive the call. A frantic mother had explained that her 24 day old son had stopped breathing and was turning blue. Every second was critical to the baby's survival. Calmly, Raia instructed the woman on how to administer CPR. Shortly after she began, a police officer from the Fifth Precinct arrived on the scene and took over the CPR duties. Seconds later, Patchogue Ambulance volunteers arrived and prepared to transport the infant. Due to the urgency of the situation, nine police cars were used to stop traffic at various intersections as police and ambulance personnel rushed the child to Brookhaven Memorial Hospital. This was an example of teamwork at its finest, and all of the people involved performed superbly. Today, happily, that four month old little boy is doing just fine. And with us today are Dispatcher Daniel Raia, Police Officer Tom Conroy, Barbara Muller of Patchogue and her son, Shaun. And I'd like to ask them to stand.

(Applause)

Congratulations to all of you on a job well done.

As I indicated earlier, Suffolk County is a much safer place than it was just a few years ago. And in the face of this continuing trend, we've begun to focus more attention on issues affecting young people. One of those issues is school safety. Now, we've been working closely with school officials throughout the County over the past several years on important projects through our Juvenile Crime Prevention Commission. The Commission completed two major studies last year, Preventing Youth Gang Proliferation and Safeguarding Suffolk County for Our Youth. Both of these works brought together the best minds in education, law enforcement, and social work to provide thoughtful, long-term plans to keep kids safe in Suffolk County in the new century. The strategies are aimed at preventing problems from occurring. And the new Youth Crime Research and Planning Unit in our Probation Department will provide the resources to implement those

strategies.

But last year, America learned the hard way, that in addition to preventive programs, crisis response planning is an important part of an overall approach to keeping kids safe. I'm talking about the horrible tragedy we witnessed at Columbine High School in Colorado. Though it occurred thousands of miles away, the incident sent shock waves through every community in our County.

Parents, educators, and law enforcement professionals were all anxious

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to communicate on issues raised at Columbine in the days after the shooting. And so I immediately convened a special summit with school superintendents from around the County and law enforcement officials. We spoke frankly about security issues facing our schools. We discussed ways to spot potential problems and how to prevent them from occurring. And we agreed that while we're working harder than ever to prevent even a single incident like the one in Colorado from happening here, we need to make sure that we're prepared to respond quickly and effectively to any eventuality. Not to do so would be irresponsible. So we stepped up the level of involvement and cooperation between our police and school districts, and this cooperation has led to impressive results. For example, police officers on the beat are visiting school buildings in their sectors to become familiar with the layout and floor plan for those buildings. In the event of an emergency, the police should arrive with a working knowledge of schools, so that they can act swiftly.

Secondly, a cooperative effort between the Superintendent of the William Floyd School District resulted in the development of a model crisis response plan. This plan should be adopted by school districts across the nation as a model for safeguarding children. Under the plan, school districts will designate a special contact person in each school district, each school building. In the event that a crisis situation arises, the first police officers on the scene would know to meet that contact person. In addition, the first police officers to arrive would receive a special crisis kit designed to make their response more effective. This kit would contain, among other things, detailed blueprints and floor plans of the school building, a classroom phone directory, shutoff codes for all of the alarms, electricity and air conditioning, a student roster, a list of students absent that day, a current yearbook to use for photo ID's, and a cellular phone. If any problems arose, this crisis kit could help save lives.

This year, the model crisis plan will be offered to all school districts in the County. And the Police Department will be developing an instructional video showing how the plan would work during a simulated crisis.

Now, this plan may not even have been thought of had we not brought together school officials and the law enforcement community in the wake of Columbine, but we did. And I'd like to thank our Boards of Education and the School Superintendent's Association for working with us on this project. Through our collective efforts, we're all on the same page. Protecting public safety and providing effective response to save lives when emergencies arise is a major responsibility. But government, with all of its resources, can't do the job alone. Our volunteer fire departments and ambulance companies play a large part in protecting the

lives in our County. In many cases, their presence can mean the difference between life and death. And I'd like to share an example. On January 6th, an alarm went off signaling that a fire was raging at a group home in Shoreham. Four volunteers from Rocky Point Fire Department were the first ones on the scene. Nine residents had made it out of the blazing building, but one was still inside. The four men

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frantically searched for a way to enter the home. The house was fully involved and the heat was intense. The only way in was through a second story window. The four volunteers scrambled up a ladder and tumbled inside. Fighting their way through the impenetrable smoke, they found a resident, Ken Johnson, already unconscious in one of the bedrooms. Working as a team, they managed to get Johnson out of the building just before it was totally engulfed in flames. The victim was taken to the hospital for treatment and has since fully recovered. He would have certainly died, however, were it not for these four hero volunteers from the Rocky Point Fire Department, and three of these heroes are with us today: Second Assistant Chief Hank Strong, First Lieutenant Larry Blieka, and Second Lieutenant Ken Monz. Gentlemen, would you please stand?

(Applause)

Our volunteer fire fighters and EMS workers risk their lives every day and they do a magnificent job. They're part of a proud tradition in Suffolk County that dates back to the 19th Century. But in these earliest days of the new millennium, this tradition could be threatened. With the growing number of two income families and with many people working at jobs outside of their home communities, many of our volunteer fire departments and ambulance companies are finding it difficult to recruit new members. Last week, one fire department went so far as to place an ad in a weekly newspaper appealing to the community for help. And the ad ended by posing a troubling question: "Suppose there was a fire and nobody came?" The answer is frightening. We simply can't take our volunteer fire departments and ambulance companies for granted.

Later this year, we'll be working with the volunteer fire and ambulance service on a high profile recruitment program. But today, I'd like to issue a challenge to the people of Suffolk County. In these first days of the new century, consider the benefits of being a volunteer fire fighter or EMS worker. Your community needs your help. The volunteers who spring out of bed in the middle of the night to protect our families have busy lives, too, but they've made a commitment to their communities, and they will tell you it's a satisfying experience. The volunteer spirit evident in Suffolk County helps to enhance our quality of life. But perhaps nothing influences that quality more than the ability to earn a living here. In this regard, two of our County agencies are closely intertwined, our Department of Social Services and our Department of Labor. Social Services functions as the necessary safety net for residents who are most in need, and our Labor Department helps those people find meaningful employment and they are doing an outstanding job.

On the subject of the reduction in our welfare rolls, the numbers speak for themselves. Last month, the welfare caseload dropped to a record low of 6,390 cases, down from over 19,000 cases in 1993. That's a

reduction of nearly 67% in just six-and-a-half years.

(Applause)

And no other County in the State even comes close. But welfare reform
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is not just cutting costs. It's about making the system effective at improving people's lives, and helping them to stand on their own two feet. Consider, for instance, the story of a young single mother and her two children. In September of 1995, this woman was forced to seek public assistance. While receiving benefits, she was screened by the Department of Labor for the Suffolk Works Program. To help her gain work experience, the department placed the young mother at a work site in the Department of Audit and Control. After working there for a year as a clerical assistant, she moved to the County's Planning Department where she worked in grant development. It was then that she decided to take the Civil Service test to compete for the position of Community Service Worker.

Now, taking the civil service test does not guarantee a person a job, but it is an important first step. And this young lady wanted to be prepared. When she came home from work, she had studied for the test with her two children. It became a family effort. Well, that family effort certainly paid off. This young mother scored a perfect 100 on the test. Soon after, she began working for Audit and Control as a Community Service Worker.

Now, if the story ended there, it would be uplifting enough, but there's more. Given her initial success, the woman began preparing to take the Civil Service test to become a Labor Technician. Once again, she and her children put in long hours studying at the kitchen table, and once again, she was successful. This proud young lady now works as a Labor Technician in the Suffolk Works Program helping others to become self-sufficient, too. To paraphrase a certain television commercial, she did it the old fashioned way, she earned it. Her name is Susan Incze and she's with us here today. Susan, would you please stand?

(Applause)

Susan, thanks for coming here today. And congratulations from all of us.

The Department of Social Services and the Department of Labor are doing an outstanding job helping people to change their lives. But there's one area in particular in which Social Services needs help and that area is foster care. It's an unfortunate fact, but the number of children in foster care continues to increase. During the period of August 31st of last year to November 30th, the number of children needing foster care in our County increased by nearly four-and-a-half percent. Unfortunately, the recruitment of foster care and adoptive families has not kept pace with the number of families leaving the program. And as we all know, kids in crisis need our help. This problem is not unique to Suffolk County. Public and private agencies throughout the State are experiencing similar problems.

Being foster parents can be both an uplifting and rewarding experience. Consider, if you will, the story of a family from Bay Shore. The husband and wife were certified to be foster parents five years ago. Now, in addition to their own three children, this couple adopted three children, and until very recently, they cared for two

foster children as well. Well, that changed with the new year. The
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couple learned that an inmate at the Suffolk County Jail was about to give birth and that the child would need foster care. Even with all of their other responsibilities, the couple agreed to care for the newborn as their third foster child. Just days after they took custody of the child, however, the baby needed hospitalization. The new foster mother stayed with the child in the hospital around the clock for two days while her husband stayed at home caring for their other children. They treated this little newcomer as if it were their own.

By any standard, this caring and compassionate husband and wife are absolutely outstanding parents. They serve as a tremendous role model and have had such a positive impact on the lives of children. They are truly a giving couple. They understand that every child needs nurturing, that every child needs a loving, caring and supportive home environment. It's an environment that they lovingly provide. And then this past Christmas season, this same family was singled out for recognition by News 12 as, "People Who Have Made a Difference in the Community." They truly have. Their names are Gloria and Tom Costello, and they're with us here today along with eight members of their family. The Costello Family, would you please rise? Thank you.

(Applause)

The Costellos are a very special family, and they are typical of the many families who offer to nurture children who need their help by being foster parents. Unfortunately, more and more children are in need of foster care and the waiting list is growing. And so, once again, I'd like to issue a challenge to the people of Suffolk County. Consider being a foster parent. If you have room in your heart, if you have a desire to make a difference, if you want to help that most vulnerable segment of our society, children in need, this is one way you can really make a difference. As Gloria and Tom will tell you, words can't describe the satisfaction that you get from helping children.

The challenges that I've issued here today for the people to become more involved in meeting society's needs amount to a call for renewal of our -- for a renewal of our community spirit. And the people of Suffolk County have shown time and time again that they are ready and willing to come together to scale great heights and accomplish great things.

We enter a new year, a new century, and a new millennium with a spirit of purpose and firm resolve. Make no mistake, we are witness to a unique period in Suffolk County's history. We have crossed into the new millennium with our fiscal house in order, our economy thriving, and much of the rural character of our County intact. In the infancy of this new age, we have the opportunity, indeed, the obligation to take advantage of our strength to make great strides in planning for our long-term future. Let's use this strength of our economy to build on the solid foundation that we've created. We should take bold steps to address the challenges we face in ways that will help sustain our economy and protect our quality of life. Let's provide the leadership needed to spark cooperation among all levels of government to address our housing and transportation needs. Let's provide the catalyst for all local governments to take a new look at the land use planning, with

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an eye toward strengthening existing communities and limiting suburban sprawl. Let's continue to build on the relationship between government and educators, to keep students safe, and to prepare them for their new high-tech economy. And let's continue the leadership role we have played in promoting healthier living by working to protect people from the dangers of tobacco.

On fiscal matters, let's use our strong financial condition to bolster services and reserves, to protect our taxpayers over the long-term, rather than taking actions that have short-term political benefits. As this new --

(Applause)

As this new Legislature begins its work, I offer this agenda for a new term, and I ask your help in shaping the future of our County. All of our gains over the past few years are the result of a healthy debate, reasoned discourse, and constructive bipartisan cooperation. Let's build on these successes by working together to build a solid, long-term prosperity for the people of Suffolk County. Thank you.

(Applause)

P.O. TONNA:

Meeting adjourned.

(THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED AT 11:40 A.M.)

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