



Government

Odell Brands 2019 'Year of the Health Provider' in State of the County

By BOB DUMAS

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MAHOPAC, N.Y. - County Executive MaryEllen Odell declared 2019 the Year of the Health Provider in her state of the county speech last week, while extolling the county's fiscal health and the progress it has made toward expanding its commercial tax base.

"This year, we made a decision to [spotlight] the importance of the health providers in this county," Odell said during the opening of her address, which she presented Thursday, March 7, at the Putnam County Golf Course in Mahopac. "I want everyone to understand that when it comes to health providers in this county, it really crosses all kinds of professions. You have our volunteers—substance-abuse counselors, social workers, librarians who have been trained to use Narcan. They've now become healthcare providers."

She also praised the staff at the county's Department of Health.

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"All these people in their professional capacity lend something to Putnam County when it comes to wellness," she said. "[And places like] Arms Acres—it is so important that we have the facilities to counsel and treat those who need it the most."

Odell said providing good health and safety is "all about responsibility" and noted "responsibility takes all shapes."

"We (the government) have a responsibility for the stewardship of this county as leaders," she said. "Things like social and fiscal responsibility."

Under the banner of fiscal responsibility, the county executive cited the Aa2 bond rating Putnam has received from Moody's, meaning it can borrow money at cheaper interest rates.

"Look at our record. We have consistently delivered a budget on time that meets the needs of our taxpayers. We met the Albany-imposed tax cap," she said. "We have reduced the long-term debt. We have eliminated the short-term debt completely. And we continue to manage and improve all our infrastructure."

For social responsibility, Odell cited enhancing the county's services at the Veterans Service Agency; Tilly Foster Farm, which is now an educational institute as well as a destination; the PILOT [internship] program, which is "Putnam investing in the leaders of tomorrow"; and enhanced school safety with an increased number of school resource officers.

"And, of course, there is what we've been able to do for our seniors," she said noting that the county will receive seven new buses for senior transport in April and that the Friendship Center will open in Carmel later this year. "All of these are quality-of-life initiatives and there are so many more."

Odell addressed the opioid epidemic problem, which, she said, Putnam continues to fight with its One Army in the War on Addiction. She noted there have been 71 overdose deaths in the last four years in Putnam.

"The odds of dying from an opioid overdose have surpassed that of dying in a car accident," she noted. "Hoping won't help someone struggling from addiction. But working together we can make a difference."

Odell said that in 2018 the county provided nearly 700 kits of Narcan, a drug that can reverse the affects of opioids in an emergency situation.

"We know it's a Band-Aid, but we have focused on the starting point of this epidemic by joining the lawsuit against Big Pharma...holding the pharmaceutical companies responsible for what they've done—what've they've done for profit; what they've done for greed. We will make sure they are held accountable."

Odell lauded Judge James Reitz and his drug court for helping to curtail drug addiction in Putnam County.

"For Putnam County, it is not about catch and punish but identify and assist," she said. "From 2012 to 2018 there have been 295 graduates from our nationally recognized drug treatment program. Not only are these individual able to be with their families and have a productive life, but it saves the taxpayers \$60,000 per individual [from incarceration], an approximate \$2 million savings annually."

She also cited the Tobacco 21 law passed by county legislators last year, which restricts the sale of tobacco and e-cigarette products to anyone under the age of 21.

"It's important. I applaud the legislature on this bold step," she said.

She also praised the drop-box program which allows people to drop off expired or unused prescription medications at police stations throughout the county. The program has netted 3.5 tons of unwanted prescription drugs since it began in 2010, she said.

A new campaign recently undertaken by the county to address teen drug, smoking and drinking issues, Odell revealed during her speech, is called the "pizza box sticker campaign."

"Thirty-eight local pizzerias are participating," she said. "The idea is to invoke that conversation [between parents and kids]. Little stickers are put on each pizza box to invoke a conversation on Friday nights that might not otherwise happen. [For example], one of the stickers reads, 'Do you know what T-21 is? Why do you think Putnam just passed the T-21 legislation?'"

Odell also had praise for the Sheriff's Department, noting there has been a significant drop-off in crime.

"There has been a 25 percent reduction in reportable crimes in Putnam County in 2017," she said. "We continue to partner with our local schools to keep our children safe and informed."

Odell said the county will launch a task force this year to crack down on motorists who pass school buses when their flashing red lights signal that the buses are picking up or discharging students.

"It's amazing that people still don't understand about school buses and children's safety," she said.

Also, to improve safety throughout the county, Odell said her administration is working to increase the reliability of the radio communication systems by installing a new microwave system and moving its radio communications to a state-of-the-art trunked radio system.

"We could not do what we do without the volunteer-first responders in this county," she said. "Talk about dedication to the health and safety to our residents!"

Odell also discussed the county's infrastructure and the myriad projects the county is engaged in.

"We are managing infrastructure [like] road-paving projects," she said. "The DOT paved [part of] Route 6 last year and said it will come back to do Route 6 from Willow Road to Route 301. We maintain 117 miles of roads in Putnam County."

Meanwhile, Odell said, the county continues to work on improving and expanding its commercial tax base.

"The Alexandrion distillery project—we are proud they have chosen Putnam County for its home for its first United States distillery," she said. "Thank you to [Carmel Supervisor] Ken Schmitt and the Carmel Planning Board for welcoming this project. It's a game-changer. Putnam County is now on the international map. The Alexandrion Group will invest \$40 million into the old Guidepost campus with over 100 new jobs."

Another attempt to boost the commercial tax base is a project to expand the sewer district along Route 6 in Mahopac.

"It will help responsible commercial expansion while providing jobs and improving our commercial base, not to mention cleaning up the environment," she said. "There are three [treatment] plants along that corridor that are aging out and we could consider consolidating the three into one plant. We are working closely with the town of Carmel and the feasibility study will be ready this spring."