



OFFICE OF THE SUPERVISOR

**TOWN OF RAMAPO**

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*SUPERVISOR*

## **STATE OF THE TOWN MESSAGE 2008**

### **Good evening ladies and gentlemen...**

Tonight I have the honor of delivering my 8<sup>th</sup> State of the Town Message, sharing with you our many accomplishments and my vision for the future of our Community. Since becoming Supervisor eight years ago, I have embraced the progressive, political philosophy of President Teddy Roosevelt – the following quotation reflects his basic approach to governing... “Rhetoric is a poor substitute for action, if we are to be a really great nation, we must not merely talk we must act.”

In 2007, the Ramapo Town Board again acted on a number of critical issues impacting our region, not just the Town of Ramapo.

### **In Acting Locally, while Thinking Regionally...**

1. We fought Utility Company Rate Increases and were victorious against Orange & Rockland and United Water.
  - Orange & Rockland – We won a historic victory for Rockland families! O&R’s rates were frozen, the Company was given a zero rate increase and \$12 million dollars will be returned to ratepayers. We were also the only municipality to Intervene in this case and the United Water Rate increase case. In the United Water Case, we were victorious in United Water being mandated to invest \$16 million dollars in infrastructure improvements and reduce their proposed rate increase request by 50%. In addition, working in partnership with the County Fire Chiefs we worked out a service plan for maintaining fire hydrants. Several water lines are being upgraded, and you may have

noticed that the classic old water tank in New Hempstead disappeared from the skyline last month. A new tank will be erected this spring greatly improving water pressure and fire safety in the surrounding area.

I will watch with a critical eye the long term water resource plans that United Water is developing for the County. The company is currently investigating the construction of a desalinization plant, which I have serious reservations about because of the high costs of implementing this technology, high costs which will be borne by Rockland ratepayers.

2. We were successful in persuading the F.A.A. to hold Public Hearings in Rockland County. F.A.A. Officials first were guests on my Cable Show "LIVE From Town Hall". The F.A.A.'s presentation was cablecast live throughout Rockland County, broadcast over local radio, video-streamed, and attended in person by hundreds of Rockland residents. When I offered to host a Countywide Meeting, the F.A.A. officials agreed to participate recognizing our advanced technological capabilities. Over 1,000 people attended this Town Hall Meeting at the Joseph T. St. Lawrence Community, Health & Sports Center. Our efforts helped solidify opposition, and increase awareness, of the negative effects on Rockland County of the proposed F.A.A. Flight Path Plan.
  - We continue to facilitate the Western Ramapo Sewer Project. In the year 2001, I stated that by the end of the decade an advanced wastewater treatment plant would be operational serving the Villages of Sloatsburg, Hillburn and the Unincorporated areas of Western Ramapo. The Villages of Sloatsburg and Hillburn rely primarily on the disposal of sanitary wastes through a conventional subsurface septic systems. Most of these systems are located on the Ramapo River Valley aquifer and/or are in a recharge area to the Ramapo River. It was imperative that this project be undertaken to safeguard public health. Sewer pipe installation has been completed in Hillburn, and will soon start in Sloatsburg – the advanced wastewater treatment plant is under construction, and will be operational by year end 2008.

This Facility will:

- Protect public health
- Protect environmental and natural resources

- Protect the Ramapo River Valley – sole source aquifer
  - Increase Property Values in Western Ramapo
3. In 2007, the Town of Ramapo accelerated its Open Space, Park Enhancement and Historic Preservation endeavors. Recently, I received the following letter:

Dear Citizens of Ramapo,

Congratulations to Ramapo on your designation as a *Preserve America* community! The preservation and enjoyment of your historical and cultural resources celebrate an important part of our nation's heritage. You honor our nation's past and inspire and educate for the future.

Thank you for your enthusiastic participation in the *Preserve America* initiative.

Sincerely,

Laura Bush  
Honorary Chair – *Preserve America*

In New York State only 24 municipalities have received this prestigious recognition, which is awarded to communities who protect and celebrate their heritage, and use their historic assets for economic development and community revitalization. This year we acquired the St. Gregorios Mission, the Crow House, and began restoration of the Historic Smith Family Farm, Sloat House and Mowbray-Clarke property; and the restoration of the Historic Salt Box House located at the foot of Torne Mountain. This year the Town of Ramapo was awarded \$800,000 in grants by the New York State Office of Historic Preservation.

Open Space is the cornerstone of a community's quality of life. It is the conduit to maintaining home values, attracting public and private sector investment, and stabilizing taxes. Over the past several years median home values throughout our Town have greatly increased:

#### Home Values in Ramapo

Town of Ramapo Home Values Keep Rising!

<u>Area</u>	<u>Median Home Sale Price</u>	
	<u>2002</u>	<u>2007</u>
Unincorporated Ramapo	\$315,000	\$525,000

Spring Valley	196,300	405,850
Montebello	514,500	809,000
Sloatsburg	265,000	395,000
Chestnut Ridge	345,000	500,000
Wesley Hills	400,000	575,200
New Hempstead	337,900	482,500
Airmont	355,000	496,500
Pomona	439,400	583,400
Suffern	310,000	365,200

New York State has been ranked as the second worst State to locate a business in the United States. Over the last decade, corporate exodus from New York has been pronounced. In the Town of Ramapo, however, private and public investment has continued to escalate – Avon, Sentry Electronics, Shoppers Haven, OT Delivery System, Info USA, and a plethora of Banks and small businesses, underscoring the fact that Ramapo is business friendly and is thriving.

One of the major issues currently facing our region is escalating property taxes. A recent study ranked Rockland as having the sixth highest property taxes in the United States, since local municipalities have no control over 70% of local taxes which are collected to fund our schools. We must endeavor to reduce costs and minimize the Town tax burden on our residents. We have pursued the following initiatives in the Town of Ramapo.

1. Expansion of our commercial ratable base, which reduces the burden of taxation for property owners.
2. Creation of a Utility Assessment Law which shifts 20% of the local property tax burden from homeowners to the Utility Companies.
3. We must seek alternative methods to fund our schools. The current state aid formula, which does not take into consideration cost of living – penalizes Rockland because we are considered affluent, and as a result, we get a negligible amount of state aid and lottery revenue. The state aid formula must be changed to reflect an area's cost of living, and unfunded state mandates must cease.

4. We have recently finalized a Franchise Agreement with Verizon which will ensure that there will be competition among Cable providers in Unincorporated Ramapo. This Agreement must be approved by the Public Service Commission. Unlike past cable agreements, this will result in competitive rates for Cable, High Speed Internet Connection and Phone Service.
5. Ramapo remains in excellent economic shape. In 2007, Moody's Investment Services has once again given us the highest bond rating in the County, our job growth has been over 7% for the last several years, assessed value of property is now over \$10 billion dollars and 70% of our Town debt will be retired within ten years. In 2007, we had no borrowing and reduced our Town debt by 10%.
6. In the area of Public Safety, this year we expanded our commercial vehicle enforcement and pedestrian safety programs.
7. Culture and Recreation – Ramapo's cultural and recreational amenities are second to none! Very few communities have a Cultural Arts Center, Equestrian Center, two major Sports Centers, a Tennis Club, Award Winning Golf Course, Camp Facilities such as Camp Scuffy, plus a multitude of outstanding multi-generational recreation programs. This year we opened our new Ramapo Senior Citizens Community Center, which has become a central meeting place for many civic groups and senior club activities.
8. In 2007, we implemented major technology enhancements for Police, Highway, Building & Planning creating seamless communication within these departments and we modernized the technology platform in the Town Assessor's Office and the Tax Office.
9. Awards received this year – NYS Governor's Quality Community Award, Rockland County Historic Preservation Award, Preserve America recognition. Money Magazine has designated Ramapo as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Best

Town To Live In on the East Coast, and one of the Top 50 communities to live in the United States.

## **PART II**

I would now like to present my 2008 “Avenue to the Future Initiatives”:

1. Establish a Town Office dedicated to Open Space Protection and Historic Preservation

Ramapo envisions integrating its ambitious open space protection program with an equally ambitious historic places acquisition program. To safeguard the Town’s natural and historic assets, Ramapo shall endeavor to:

- Adopt a historic Preservation Law, which will confer historic designation on public and private places
- Obtain the financial benefits the New York State’s Community Preservation Act
- Establish a Low-Interest Loan Fund to promote private ownership historic properties by easing costs of restoration and maintenance
- Ramapo will promote intermunicipal historic preservation

Ramapo’s Office for Open Space Protection and Historic Preservation will oversee our integrated program of public open space and historic property acquisition, preservation and management. It will seek grants and gifts, and provide administrative services, and submit recommendations for dedication of Parkland acquired by the Town to the Supervisor and Town Board, such as, the 425 acres in the Torne Valley which we will soon acquire.

2. Implement “Smart Growth”

Governor Spitzer has initiated a “Smart Growth” Program to coincide with the massive funding that will be infused in three local projects – the Tappan Zee Bridge, Stewart Airport the conversion of Route 17 to 86. This Lower Hudson Valley Smart Growth initiative, which we sit right in the middle of, will help

communities plan for economic growth and development that will be spurred by the infrastructure improvements.

“Smart Growth” sparks economic expansion and maintains quality of life – Open Space is the key component of all Smart Growth Plans. Greenspace is rapidly dwindling – preserving Open Space must become a Rockland County Priority. We intend to continue our pro-active acquisition of greenspace, completing a Town-wide Open Space Inventory, and partnering with our local Villages to acquire properties such as Camp Regesh in Airmont, the Cutler Mansion in Montebello and the Schwartz Property in Suffern. We will also begin pro-actively lobbying for the creation of Exit 15B on the NYS Thruway, which will greatly reduce local traffic gridlock throughout our local communities.

### 3. Economic Initiatives

- A. Establish an Employment Opportunity Center which will promote job readiness, employment skills and coordinate the Ramapo Jobs for Juniors Program
- B. Develop a Public/Private Partnership in Bio-Technology and Nano-Technology
- C. Establish a Town Industrial Development Agency
- D. Develop Housing Opportunities for municipal employees, service workers and volunteers throughout the Town. Maintaining a high quality workforce attracts businesses and volunteer services enhance our quality of life, and saves countless tax dollars. Developers will be required to set aside at least 10% of units to be built for purchase by municipal employees and volunteers.

### 4. Environmental Initiatives

- A. Squires Gate Flood Mitigation Project utilizing the Tilcon Quarry to reduce flooding along the Mahwah River
- B. Establish the Rockland County Power Authority in anticipation of re-opening and converting the closed coal fired generation plants in the North Rockland area into clean energy plants, and restore economic stability to the local area.

- C. “Green Alternatives/Beautification” – We will continue to utilize “Green Energy”, purchase additional wind power, purchase alternative fuel vehicles, utilize geo-thermal energy, and create nature walkways, “Beautification Corners”, and a Bird Sanctuary on the Mitch Miller Property.

## 5. F.A.A./O&R

- A. Lawsuit against Congress – We will be instituting a lawsuit against the U.S. Congress for subsidizing and approving the F.A.A. Flight Path Plan, which violates equal protection under the law, as it pertains to environmental justice.
- B. Oppose new rate increase, O&R is currently seeking a 10% rate increase before the Public Service Commission. The Town of Ramapo will once again intervene on behalf of Rockland ratepayers.
- C. Offer “Welcome Home Veterans” and Multi-generational Wellness Programs at the Joseph T. Saint Lawrence Center

## **PART III – Priority #1 – Community Unity**

Perhaps the greatest asset that a community can possess is intangible in nature, encompassing the following attributes – mutual respect, tolerance, cooperation and brotherhood. Unity creates a sense of belonging and increases well-being for all.

In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of hatred and divisiveness, that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become reality”

Our Community Unity endeavors will be an attempt to bring together diverse groups in Ramapo focused on improving communication, building community partnerships and fostering civic pride. Working collaboratively we will brainstorm community needs, prioritize them, and then tackle them together.

Lack of communication and information can cause individuals to speak and behave in ways that are damaging to others, and are contrary to the spirit of our own values. I hope, through presenting information, we will encourage dialogue,

lessen division, clear away misunderstandings, counter-act stereotyping, and open hearts...

I anticipate that service organizations, local public officials, members of our Twinning Committees, United Americans and all interested Town residents will participate in our endeavors. Our First Unity Forum will take place on Wednesday, January 16<sup>th</sup>, at the new Ramapo Senior Citizens Community Center, Route 202 and Mayer Drive in Montebello starting at 7:30 PM. Please join us.

In closing, these are indeed challenging times that we are living in – Ramapo is not immune to problems such as high property taxes, dwindling greenspace and natural resources, conflicting wants and needs of diverse groups, controversial Federal and State mandates, lack of adequate job training for our young people, inadequate healthcare for some of our citizens – the list is seemingly endless. However, in my approach to government and to life, my actions have always reflected the following words of Sir Winston Churchill –

“The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity, the optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

I will forever remain the eternal optimist, who seeks to pro-actively approach difficult issues trusting that with your help and support Ramapo will always persevere. I was born in this Town, raised in this Town and I am raising my Family in Ramapo. Since becoming Supervisor, I have kept one promise – namely to not leave the controversial issues to future administrations. I have not relented from this goal... Now they have been addressed and we must work to bring Ramapo together for the benefit of future generations.

Christopher P. St. Lawrence  
Supervisor  
Town of Ramapo

Dated: January 9, 2008