

# **SCHOHARIE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

## **2023 GOALS**

These goals are the result of a collaborative effort that polled Supervisors on what they feel are some of the most important challenges and opportunities in 2023. Most gave their input. And what follows are the four top areas as the goals of the Board this year. There are several other areas which were brought up that should be addressed and will be referred to the respective oversight committees.

Also, learning from experience, we need to work on our goals in a more structured way this year with. As such, I think it is important that each committee that will be setup report back to the Board with a progress report at our monthly meetings starting at the April Board of Supervisors Meeting. Not all goals and actions are equal. Some will take longer than others to complete their review and recommendation to the Board. Hopefully, when possible, findings and recommendations will be made no later than July to give us the opportunity to consider the financial commitment that may be needed as part of the 2024 budget.

A further word on financial commitment. A number of us like to consider ourselves as fiscal conservative. However, that doesn't mean being a fiscal conservative requires us to be inflexible and not invest in improvements that benefit our citizens and employees. We have a healthy fund balance that should be preserved for unforeseen circumstances. But on the other hand, it appears there are important needs and opportunities facing the county that would be good candidates for what excess fund balance should be used for.

**Here are the four goals for 2023 which are the result of the feedback and discussions with Board members.**

### **Economic Development and Tourism Strategy**

Economic development and tourism is the area that drew the most comments and suggestions from Supervisors about our goals for 2023. Comments and discussions received had multiple ideas and comments including:

We once had in-house economic development expertise which was eliminated several years ago. That was a mistake. We lost internal county skills whose sole mission was to look after the interests of the county within our goals and strategy. In addition to Supervisors, I have heard from a surprising number of community leaders and stakeholders that the County needs to consider having a qualified and an competitively compensated person employed by the County who will understand our needs and be the go-to or contact person for the County on all things related to economic development without a political agenda.

Moving over to tourism, I recently had the opportunity to meet with Josiah Brown who represents our tourism consultant Destination Marketing. We had a long and enjoyable conversation which I found enlightening and which confirmed my opinion that we are working with professionals. I learned a great deal from my meeting with Josiah and my greatest takeaway from the meeting was his comment that all economic development starts with tourism which means getting people to visit and letting them see our qualities and what we have to offer. Josiah's comments confirms that tourism has a dual role. Of course, what we all consider vital is the attraction of visitors who inject their dollars into the local economy. But equally important is displaying what our county has to offer which can be a precursor to the pick and shovel process of economic development.

That said, those comments work into the several Board Members who said we should look at our contract with Destination Marketing not as a means of finding fault. Nor is anyone advocating ending the relationship the County has with Destination Marketing. To the contrary. I think the consensus of the Board toward

Destination Marketing is overall quite favorable. But perhaps after the several years since we started working together it could be the time to take a new look at areas relative to tourism that Destination Marketing and the County might want to focus on.

The mission for this special committee will be to:

1. Review and report to the Board of Supervisors on the concept of restoring the in-house focal point for all things related to economic development through the hiring of a qualified individual.
2. Take a fresh look at our tourism strategy to see if we need to freshen it up consistent with the current state of Schoharie County tourism and where we invest our occupancy tax dollars.
3. Any additional areas of economic development and tourism that the committee finds noteworthy to report on and make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

I have asked Supervisor Luniewski to chair this committee which includes Supervisors Manko, Tavenner and Terry, County Administrator Akumfi, and County Treasurer Wollaber-Bryan.

### **County Buildings Security**

Several of our Supervisors feel our county buildings need to be better secured.

A secure facility includes the protection of employees and visitors. It is not always convenient or cost-free but providing a safe workplace for our employees and visitors is our responsibility. And frankly, in too many cases, today visitors have unfettered access with little or no controls in several of our buildings.

As you may recall, there was an act of violence in this building by a visitor which could have escalated into something worse than it was. The team that worked on a solution to correct the security and safety issues associated with this incident are to be commended for their efforts which addressed one of multiple vulnerabilities. However, we need to do more. I personally have had several incidences where an

emotional non-county employee simply walked into my office with no screening whatsoever. By comparison, these events probably would not have happened or the likelihood of them happening would have been minimized at the Delaware County Office Building. As a potential model for the County to consider, when I and a Department Head attended a meeting there, we were greeted at the main entrance, which is the single point of entrance, by a uniformed employee who inquired what our business was and who we were meeting with. The person we were meeting was contacted and confirmed we had an appointment. Compare that process with ours and ask yourself which is safer for employees and visitors. This example may work in Delaware County but not necessarily here. Or there may be a better solution for Schoharie County but I point it out to illustrate that being proactive with even a low-tech process like the one in Delaware County increased the safety level to something higher than we presently have.

I have asked Supervisor Hait to chair a special committee and Supervisors Laraway, Skowfoe and Weinhofer, Sheriff Stevens, Office of Emergency Services Director Hartzel, and DPW Commissioner Crandell to examine our present security profile and to make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors on how to bring our buildings up to 2023 levels using the tools and resources available that are seen in government buildings elsewhere. Whatever the recommendation, this will require an investment by the county. I cannot think of a better way invest some of our excess fund balance dollars if that is what it takes.

## Homeless Strategy

It cannot be denied that Schoharie County like most, if not all, surrounding counties has a homeless problem. Most people don't realize how pervasive this is and would be shocked how many of our citizens are homeless and what is equally shocking is the cost to the County to address this major problem. Even the definition of homelessness falls short. Those who couch surf from friend to friend, sleep in their cars, or camp out in tents in the woods or along a creek are not considered homeless by the State which is hard to believe. And, it appears this problem will continue to be an issue which we cannot ignore.

I don't know too many people who want to be homeless. The cause of homelessness encompasses many reasons including but not limited to those with mental health issues, those with substance abuse issues, some with limited skills hindering their ability to compete for employment, some who simply are out of work and have limited resources to pay rent, and veterans who may have one or several sets of the circumstances just stated.

Multiple County Departments, non-governmental agencies and religious organizations do what they can to serve this population and deserve our thanks for doing their best to get our fellow citizens back on track. We need to look at options to drive down the cost of working with our homeless population and just as importantly we need to work to get our homeless back on track.

As such, I have asked Supervisor Rosa to chair a special committee with Supervisors Airey and Van Wormer, Social Services Commissioner Becker, Office of Community Services Director Nies and Social Services Deputy Commissioner Munford with the following mission:

1. One suggestion has been to utilize the former Public Safety Building. The initial investment without sufficient assistance from the State might make that option prohibitive. Work is underway to size the cost which we need to incorporate into the consideration of a total strategy. However, this process does have an urgency because we are considering marketing the building if it is a viable option. If it is not suitable as part of a homeless strategy, funds

received from the sale of the building would be helpful towards other options.

2. Identify the number of homeless persons currently receiving assistance or who are using county resources and to also identify an estimated number who are not homeless by definition.
3. Identify what the County and others are spending directly and indirectly on anything that involves the homeless including the cost of overnight stays in motels, meals, transportation to and from lodging, transportation to and from counseling and medical appointments, transportation to and from school for children, and the direct and indirect cost of the time spent by county employees in multiple departments dealing with all aspects and service to homeless. I'm sure there are other expenses that don't fall under any of the circumstances just cited that the committee should attempt to identify.
4. Using this information, identify and recommend to the Board of Supervisor better ways to address our homeless population with the goal of reducing costs while finding more efficient ways of providing the services leading to a reduction in the number of persons that are truly homeless. This a big task and probably some of the potential recommendations the Committee will make, if adopted, could take a great deal of time to implement which is all the more reason this effort needs to be taken on with a sense of urgency.

## **Law Enforcement Merger**

You may or may not have heard there has been some initial informal conversation about the possibility of a merger of the Cobleskill Village Police Department and the Schoharie County Sheriff's Department. This is not the first time this subject has come up. But perhaps it is time to go beyond the prior casual discussions and to take a formal look at the positive and negative points of a merger.

For sure, there are a lot of considerations that come to mind immediately ranging from coverage, integration of salary scales, health insurance benefits, union representation, department policies and certainly the financial impact. That is probably just a quick first pass on what needs to be looked at to decide the merits of a merger. For sure there are plenty of other facets that we would need to rely on our law enforcement professionals to look at for the County and Village of Cobleskill to consider a merger.

This will be a big effort, but several of us believe we owe it to our constituents to do an in-depth look at the potential of a merger of these law enforcement agencies and report to the Board of Supervisors and Cobleskill Village Board with their findings and recommendations.

I have asked Supervisor Leavitt to chair this committee made up of Supervisors Hampel, Haslun, and Vroman, Cobleskill Mayor Terk and Sheriff Stevens.

## **Additional Focus Areas**

As I said earlier, there are several additional areas that will be referred to the appropriate oversight committee for follow-up and action as necessary.

**Real Property Tax Office data collectors** – We need to accelerate the data collecting process. Some apparent impediments to the process of collecting property information for our Assessors is a shortage of data collectors. Among other things it probably would be a good idea to assess additional job descriptions with the intent of broadening them to attract interested candidates.

**Stream bank** – continue to work on resolving financial issues with our streambank contractors and assessing our options on the remaining work to be done.

**Weighted voting** – explore all the options or alternatives to the present weighted voting system.

## **Conclusion**

In several quarters it has been questioned why we need goals. For a \$90 million enterprise like Schoharie County not to have goals is like a ship at sea without a compass or GPS and is a disservice to the taxpayers whose money we spend every day. I am confident we will not let them down.

And lastly, these goals are the Supervisors goals. Not solely the Chairman's as they have been labeled in some places. This is a team effort that will take some time for each committee to look at their respective areas and then putting together recommendations. But they could result in opportunities that will benefit our residents, employees, businesses, and agriculture. We need to do this.