



Tompkins County Legislature

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2026 State of the County Address

Good evening and thank you for being here.

Tonight, I'm honored to share the State of Tompkins County: where we are, what we accomplished in 2025, and how our shared priorities are shaping the year ahead.

I am confident in saying: The state of this county is strong, resilient, and determined.

Strong because the strength of this County comes not from one single person, but from our collective commitment, especially the commitment of this Legislature and the dedicated County staff who turn policy into real-world impact - every single day.

Resilient because even with rising costs, housing pressures, federal uncertainties, and growing service demands, Tompkins County continues to deliver. The story of this past year is one of dedicated public servants, strong partnerships, and a clear commitment to serve all of our community members.

Determined because we stand by our values of respect, accountability, integrity, equity, and stewardship. A few weeks ago, we welcomed eight new legislators to this body alongside eight returning members. That infusion of fresh perspectives, energy, and lived experience has already deepened our deliberations, sharpened our questions, and strengthened our ability to make difficult decisions with integrity and care.

I am proud that in this Legislature, new voices are not just present, they are heard, they ask hard questions, and they help lead through thoughtful debate. Our government work benefits from it.

To the entire Legislature, returning members who bring institutional memory and new members who bring a new vision, thank you. And to our County staff, I echo what has been said in this chamber and beyond: you are the mission of Tompkins County government. You serve with compassion, professionalism, and skill, and this community is better because of your work.

Tonight, I'd like to reflect on where we've been and share how that foundation guides our focus this year, especially in how we support our staff, strengthen our community, and deliver services with equity, excellence, and accountability.

Our work is guided by the County's Strategic Plan, and I'd like to highlight our progress through those shared priorities.

Organizational Excellence

We know that strong government depends on strong systems - and on a workplace where employees feel valued, supported, and empowered. I'm proud that we are currently in contract with all of our unions. When I was Chair a few years ago a priority was undergoing a salary study that would set the standard for

our employees. I'm happy to report that we have conducted that study and have made adjustments to many of our employee's salaries – so that they are more competitive. We value our employees and are always looking for ways to provide a better working environment and stay competitive.

In 2025, we held 145 committee and legislature meetings, adopted four local laws, and tackled more than 300 resolutions - all with transparency, courtesy, and civic engagement. Over 170 public meetings were livestreamed, expanding public access and connection to local government.

We've made real progress modernizing how we measure performance - with the launch of countywide Key Performance and Equity indicators that help us track meaningful outcomes. We expanded leadership training and staff support, and strengthened IT systems to keep vital County services secure and reliable.

The County strengthened its fiscal stewardship and partnerships by successfully securing and managing competitive grant funding - including \$1 million in additional state support for Assigned Counsel, a \$324,000 assessment system modernization grant, a five-year OCFS grant supporting young parents, expanded GIVE funding for public safety and probation initiatives, federal funding for the airport, and USDA support for food-waste reduction and composting efforts - bringing outside resources back to the community, while reducing local cost burden.

Across Tompkins County government, departments helped residents navigate change by guiding people through new requirements and systems - from emergency communication around SNAP benefits in November 2025 to assisting with REAL ID and passport applications, department relocations, redistricting voters and updating election maps, hosting our first online foreclosure auction, implementing a short-term rental registry, and providing clear, hands-on support so community members could adapt confidently to new rules and technology.

Equitable Service Delivery

Equity isn't a buzzword; it's a daily commitment to fairness, access, and dignity.

Last year, Whole Health engaged more than 1,200 residents in its Community Needs Assessment - ensuring that real voices guide our policy. We expanded community-based mental health services into schools, supportive housing, and outreach settings, making care more accessible where people live and learn. While we are very proud of the work we have done in this area, we also recognize that the need is great in our community for expansive mental health services. We will continue to grow in this area and focus on meeting our community's demand.

Our Department of Social Services helped 25 families transition from shelter to permanent housing and exceeded federal benchmarks in child welfare by prioritizing family-based care and reducing institutional placements - which is better for kids and better for community stability. When we talk about changing situations and changing lives, this is a perfect example of what is working. Providing stability through housing for families is essential for us to grow and move forward as a community.

We expanded services for older adults, veterans, and youth, from new meal sites and ombudsman support to hosting the County's first Veterans Expo, shining a light on homeless and runaway youth and supporting municipal youth services.

We also celebrated belonging through naturalization ceremonies, welcoming new U.S. citizens - a powerful reminder of who we are as a County.

Economic Opportunity & Quality of Life

A thriving community is one where people can live, work, learn, and grow.

We coordinated the renovation and opening of the 227 Cherry Street Code Blue Shelter, providing warmth and safety to neighbors experiencing homelessness during our coldest months. Volunteers of America, our shelter service provider, treats our visitors with kindness and provides care management on-site as needed. We continue to see positive results and feedback. We also know that care management services added to sheltering, which provide additional supports and referrals, can achieve better outcomes.

Our Planning and Sustainability department awarded \$1.35 million from the Community Housing Development Fund for housing projects that resulted in 123 units, including affordable and attainable homes.

Youth employment programs connected hundreds of young people with jobs and training - equipping the next generation for economic participation and leadership.

Infrastructure projects advanced across the County. Our Highway crews paved, treated, and striped hundreds of miles of road; our IT and Facilities teams supported the relocation of multiple departments, and at Ithaca Tompkins International Airport, we restored direct service to Washington Dulles.

Climate Change Mitigation & Resiliency

Our strategic plan reflects our recognition that climate action must be part of everything we do. Departments across the County continue to embed sustainability into daily operations and long-term planning - from advancing green facilities and infrastructure projects, to integrating climate considerations into transportation and airport planning, and finalizing the County's Solid Waste Management Plan.

Health & Safety

Keeping our community safe and supported remains central to our work. Emergency Response and Dispatch teams answered over 126,000 calls last year, while we completed renovations to the Primary 911 Center to ensure reliability in critical moments.

We expanded Peer Support and Critical Incident Stress programs for first responders - recognizing that caring for those who serve is part of caring for community wellbeing.

Our Sheriff's Office expanded CARE Teams, providing crisis-focused response and reducing reliance on traditional enforcement models where more person-centered interventions are appropriate.

Public safety and community wellbeing were advanced through coordinated justice efforts, with the District Attorney's Office prosecuting serious violent cases while expanding alternatives to incarceration, the County Attorney's Office providing countywide legal support and enforcement while protecting the County's interests, and Probation and Community Justice strengthening trauma-informed, procedural justice practices to promote safer and fairer outcomes.

Across County operations, we strengthened security by standing up a new countywide security program, improving coordination and incident response in public buildings and meetings, and prioritizing the safety of both employees and the people we serve.

Looking Ahead

As we move through this year, our focus remains on strengthening staff support, expanding community wellbeing, and ensuring that government delivers with equity and effectiveness in every corner of Tompkins County.

We know the challenges ahead - from federal uncertainties to emergency services challenges and cost-of-living pressures - but we also know that our collective work, marked by curiosity, courage, and collaboration, equips us to meet them.

To our staff, our partners, and residents: thank you for your trust and partnership.

To my colleagues in the Legislature: thank you for your service, your questions, and your commitment to this community.

Together, we are building a government that works - for everyone, every day.

The State of Tompkins County is strong, resilient, and determined, and our best years are still ahead.

Thank you!

Shawna Black, Chairwoman
Tompkins County Legislature