

2021 Legislature Chairwoman Leslyn McBean-Clairborne's State of the County Statement

“At our organizing meeting, you, my colleagues, voted to elect me as Chair of this Legislature for 2021. I want to take time now to thank you for your vote of confidence. I am not the best leader, but I promise to continue to lead from a place of trust and confidence in each of our abilities, individually and collectively, to do what’s right for Tompkins County and for our residents. This is not a job of ego or Big I’s and Little U’s. It is one of respect, coordination, communication, and transparency to the best extent possible. I must also thank my biological family, J.R, Kelsey, Julius, and Indira and my GIAC family for the love and unwavering support you give me to allow me to do this work. Vice Chair, Shawna, you described yourself as my wing woman. I respectfully beg to disagree with you. We have worked collaboratively, as a true team. There were instances when I was Robin, and you were Batman and vice versa. We set out to deliberately present a collaborative and cordial partnership, but we did not have to work at it because it fell into place organically. We relied on each other’s strengths, availability, and experience to help us navigate the work and changes seamlessly. Thank you, Shawna for your calm, conciliatory, humorous, and steadfast leadership. We respected and learned from each other and I hope that our approach this year will resonate with future leadership; that treating people right will never fail you.

“2020 brought on challenges, the likes of which we have not dealt with in County Government. COVID-19 descended upon us like an avalanche and we felt like our very world was collapsing in on itself. Protests erupted throughout our nation, including locally, because Black and Brown men and women continue to be unjustly murdered in the streets or in their own homes by those who swore to protect and serve our citizens. The images of George Floyd with a police officer’s knee on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds until he could no longer breathe--dead, or of Ahmaud Arbery, shot while jogging, or Jacob Blake shot seven times in the back at point blank range while his children were in the car bearing witness to it, or the reports of Breonna Taylor shot dead in her home, and countless others, are images and reports that we cannot just forget. The rise of White Supremacists groups and their encouragement by national leaders put all of us at risk. Our economy was on a high-speed racetrack to having the bottom fall out, higher education institutions and public schools were forced to transition to remote learning. Workers were losing their jobs, and many were unsure of whether they would find work again or any time soon. We, the Legislature, had to quickly transition to remote meetings. Fear and anxiety related to all of these conditions gripped us, but the good news is that the resilience, intelligence, and talent of our workforce kept us from going over the edge. Our staff led by County Administrator Jason Molino and Public Health Director Frank Kruppa, spent sleepless nights planning and strategizing on a response plan to the twin pandemic of COVID-19 and systemic racism. They built an inclusive community partnership team and rolled out a comprehensive response plan to COVID-19 that set the standard for New York State. Staff from various departments willingly accepted re-assignment, dusted off skills they might have forgotten they had and became communication specialists, contract tracers, and more. I want to pause and thank the Emergency Operations Center leadership team, Deputy County Administrator Amie Hendrix, Communications Director Dominick Recchio, Director of Assessment Jay Franklin, former Interim Commissioner of Human Resources Lisa Holmes, and everyone else who without question stepped into various roles to help manage our response to the pandemic. If we, as Legislators, could do the work of all the staff we would not need

them, so I want to acknowledge that we have hired, and have working for us a highly skilled, experienced, and future-thinking workforce who have not failed us. I applaud them and encourage us to trust that they know what they are doing otherwise they will not be here as part of our team. I also want to appreciate that we listened to our staff who self-selected to take on the daily tasks associated with forwarding the County's diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice movement. They brought forward a well-thought out and visionary proposal to hire our first Tompkins County Chief Equity and Diversity Officer, and we did so. Welcome again, Deanna Carrithers as our CEDO. As we continue to address the pandemic of systemic racism, we look forward to your leadership and stand ready to support you in this change movement because we know that it will take all of us. Thank you, staff.

“As we roll into 2021, we continue to struggle with bringing in the revenues at the levels to which we have become accustomed. It will take time to recover but we will get there. Despite what seems like insurmountable challenges still ahead, I feel confident in declaring that the State of our County is solid. We would love for it to be strong but at least we know that with a solid foundation, we can build our way to strong. We have proven that we are a team driven by principle, compassion and hope as evident by our vaccination administration plan. A plan that received praise from Governor Cuomo and many of our counterparts throughout the State. Thanks to Marty Stallone and the entire team at Cayuga Health Systems for being a steadfast partner in this plan.

“In 2021 we must forge a new path that is based on some ongoing and some new priorities and a path focused more on unity, service, and collective responsibility. Those priorities include our new Tompkins County International Airport – we all know that the pandemic has severely wounded the airline industry. Housing and particularly a push for more affordable, quality low-income housing in our county. Police Reform – reimagining law enforcement; working to dismantle old systems and giving birth to accurate responsibilities and accountability. Sustainability planning and mega attention to climate change. Our Community College – strategically supporting and helping TC3 reimagine its service model so that the students for whom a TC3 education is their ticket out of the conditions of poverty and oppression can be confident that it will be there for them. Public transportation – strengthening and enhancing what we already have with TCAT. Economic recovery – through our advocacy for federal funding so that our local businesses can get back to growing and thriving. Last but certainly not least, taking care of our employees. As I mentioned earlier, we are no place without our employees so it is imperative that we do our best to ensure the best working climate, resources, and compensation that we can reasonably afford to keep our employees engaged.

“With these priorities in mind and considering the strengths and expertise of our policymakers, Shawna and I have asked the following Legislators to lead our committees to address the afore-mentioned priorities and more.

Budget, Capital, and Personnel - Dawson (Chair), Robertson (Vice Chair), Lane, Morey, John

Facilities and Infrastructure - Lane (Chair), McKenna (Vice Chair), Koreman, Morey, Klein

Government Operations - Champion (Chair), Klein (Vice Chair), John, Sigler, Lane**

Health and Human Services - Black (Chair), Granison (Vice Chair), Champion, Sigler, Klein**

Housing and Economic Development Committee - Robertson (Chair), Sigler (Vice Chair), Koreman, Granison, Black

Planning, Energy, and Environmental Quality Committee - Koreman (Chair), Dawson (Vice Chair), Klein, Champion, McKenna

Public Safety - John (Chair), Morey (Vice Chair), Granison, Black, McKenna

Special Committees:

Downtown Facilities: - McKenna (Chair), John (Vice Chair), Lane, McBean-Clairborne, Dawson

Tompkins Intergovernmental Relations: - Robertson (Chair), Sigler (Vice Chair), Dawson, Granison, Lane

“Colleagues, as we go into 2021, I want to end with these words from former First Lady Michelle Obama, “We cannot allow our hurt and our frustration to turn us against each other, to cancel somebody else’s point of view if we don’t agree with every last bit of their approach. That kind of thinking only divides us and distracts us from our higher calling – it is the gum in the wheel of progress.” Let us go forward together. Thank you.