



Lackawanna
County

Commissioners
Jerry Notarianni • Debi Domenick, Esq. • Chris Chermak

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Debi Domenick, Esq.
Chris Chermak
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Lackawanna County Government Center
123 Wyoming Avenue, 6th Floor
Scranton PA 18503
t (570) 963-6800 f (570) 963-6812
www.LackawannaCounty.org

The County of Lackawanna's 2022 Budget Message

2021 Lackawanna County Budget-Funded Accomplishments

The year 2021 can be characterized as a truly different era in Lackawanna County Government. Traditional economic development activities, Community Re-Invest funding, law enforcement initiatives, programs to assist families and older adults, and some community events were all coordinated, but with safety as the underlying current.

The main focus was the health and welfare of all County residents. The ultimate concern was to combat the very stubborn COVID-19 virus.

The Commissioners committed \$1 million in CARES Act funding to the Area Agency on Aging Department to protect the County's 210,000 residents against the virus. A comprehensive plan was developed and executed with a variety of concerned partners to accomplish this task.

Testing and the vaccination of older adults in 13 high-rises/communal living facilities began in late December 2020 and has never stopped. Medical delivery was also provided to the homebound, ensuring their safety.

A major ad campaign was developed to spread factual data on the perils of the virus and the importance of getting vaccinated. The Commissioners have and continue to encourage residents to get vaccinated for their safety, as well as the safety of family, friends, and other residents of Lackawanna County.

Lackawanna County partnered with Family Services Association of NEPA to expand 2-1-1 services in order to provide vital testing data and, more importantly, assistance for securing an appointment to get vaccinated.

Strong alliances were forged with area pharmacies, health care providers, social services agencies, nurses, nursing students, and other groups to provide food, tests, vaccines, transportation, and a host of other amenities for people to survive and stay healthy. Lackawanna County joined the Kick COVID-19 consortium to deliver even more services and information.

Over 45 public clinics at community venues were held to provide convenient vaccinations for residents. The March 2021 clinic with Hometown Health at the Montage Amphitheater drew over 3,600 people, along with accolades from Governor Tom Wolf.

Record-keeping on the vaccination distribution was vital to ensure that Lackawanna County received a continuous supply of vaccines. We joined forces with the Greater Scranton Chamber of Commerce, area colleges, and other affiliates to develop a program for inputting data, thereby removing the burden from small pharmacies so that they could focus on vaccinating residents.



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Additional clinics with various incentives are still being held, focusing on ethnic and faith communities and high school youth. Civic functions, like “Give Back on the Mountain,” were also scheduled.

The virus did not overlook any segment. Residents and businesses suffered great economic loss, resulting in the loss of jobs, cutbacks, and reduced hours. To that end, the departments of Aging, Human Services and Economic Development offered programs for rent, utilities, and mortgage relief with CARES Act resources. A variety of business incentives and grants was also developed and implemented.

The County received tremendous news this March when the Commonwealth approved a Department of Health designation for Lackawanna County. That has opened the door to numerous resources and services to keep people well and active. In mid-July, the County hired an Epidemiologist and then adopted Ordinance #272 in August establishing the Department of Health & Human Services. This allowed for the creation of a community board and the hiring of a Director, in the future, to run the operation.

All of the aforementioned actions led to the current 76% fully vaccinated rate for all eligible residents.

In addition to fighting COVID, the Departments of Human Services and Aging administered their traditional services, and Human Services continued to aid the homeless. The family unit is, and always will be, a vital concern. Opioid treatment for youth was funded by a grant to get teens back on the road to recovery and a normal life.

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the United States. It affects people of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds. It is also no stranger to our community. To that end, the Lackawanna County Suicide Prevention Alliance was formed to provide assistance to individuals and families who are dealing with this issue.

Area Agency on Aging is dedicated to the health of our older adults as witnessed by the numerous wellness contracts that were approved for exercise, social activities, nutrition, and much more. This department has also entered into a new five-year agreement with the State for over \$5 million annually to develop cutting-edge initiatives, which will make a difference in the lives of many individuals.

While a great deal of focus in 2021 centered on mitigating the virus, the vision for new growth and opportunities did not cease. The Commissioners acted swiftly to bolster the economy through a myriad of grant programs aimed at assisting businesses from all sectors. Over \$2 million was invested in the local hospitality industry. This Spring, the very popular Community Re-Invest Program awarded 21 grants totaling \$101,338 for projects throughout the County.

CDBG funds were again provided to the municipalities for projects aimed at improving infrastructure. In addition, CDBG funds were used to fund a mortgage/utilities COVID-19 assistance program. Low-income first-time homebuyers also received support with resources for closing costs. Because the music and entertainment industry was hit hard by the pandemic, the Department of Economic Development provided up to \$25,000 in music grants to assist performers to get back on their feet.

Fair and equitable property taxes have long been discussed. For too long, under the current system, many residents have been overburdened. For over 50 years, everything has remained static due to outdated assessed property values. To that end, an RFP was sent out in mid-Summer seeking a firm to conduct a Countywide reassessment to establish a fair, equitable, and uniform tax structure.



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The safety of the community continues to be a major priority. Grants for bulletproof vests and a civil disturbance unit were unitized to further enhance security in our area.

Continuing education is essential in all fields, especially public safety. Training was offered by Penn State for our Sheriffs and Parole and Probation officers. Our broadband and 911 data bases were upgraded to provide more information for those who use the network, which translates into faster response time to assist those in need.

The prison is another important element in County law enforcement. It has undergone an administrative restructuring that has streamlined duties to be more effective in the areas of security, treatment, and operations. Changes were necessary to ensure the enforcement of the County's chain-of-command, policies, and protocols.

Preparing a prisoner for his/her return to community life is vital, especially as it pertains to successful re-entry into our community and the reduction recidivism. To assist with that transition, a Behavioral Health Department was created at the Lackawanna County Prison. This has enabled staff to provide one-on-one clinical counseling with inmates, as well as group programing, which centers on self-help topics.

In partnership with Lackawanna College's Police Academy, a Community Awareness program for law enforcement agencies was developed. The four-part series focused on critical issues, including racial profiling, de-escalation training, substance abuse issues, and mental health disorders and awareness.

The COVID-19 virus brought a grinding halt to all community activities. Under the guidance of Governor Wolf and the CDC, the County's Arts & Culture Department awarded a series of grants to help organizations and agencies with the difficulties of the re-opening process. Over \$145,000 in program grants were awarded, along with Spring and Summer COVID-19 grants in excess of \$236,000. The traditional \$500 municipal grants were also given out on a periodic basis.

Our parks opened-up for residents to picnic, recreational activities, and family gatherings. Additionally, the Scranton Ballet conducted a novel beach event at Covington Park.

The County's transportation network remains a vital element in the community's economic landscape. Paving projects and bridge repairs and replacements were funded by the Commissioners.

The Commissioners recognize the importance of providing public transportation, so that our residents can conveniently get to work, school, and medical appointments. In early Spring, the Commissioners extended the Certificate of Incorporation for COLTS for 50 more years, ensuring that the bus fleet will continue to provide uninterrupted services for our residents.

Debt Position

The County has been able to mitigate its annual expenditures for debt service by taking advantage of favorable interest rates. The savings from the refinancings of 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021 allowed the County, without extending the maturity of any of the refinanced bonds, to maintain its annual debt service in a manageable range.

The County will continue to be diligent when seeking further opportunities to restructure its long-term debt.



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Financial Policies of Lackawanna County for 2022

In 2022, the Commissioners will again be conservative and demonstrate fiscal responsibility, restraint, and management when addressing the County's financial challenges.

The Administration will continue their commitment to addressing the constant challenges facing County government on numerous fronts, especially in the area of its workforce. Personnel-related expenses, such as salaries, wages, and health care, comprise 65.77% of the County's general fund budget, net of tax transfers out.

Important Features of the Budget

The 2022 general fund budget includes no property tax increase.

Many man-hours went into the preparation of the County's 2022 fiscal blueprint. Its goal is service to the 210,000 residents. The budget reflects no cuts in programs that our communities and residents rely on.

The budget also contains provisions for our parks, human services programs, aging initiatives, environment, and spraying for gypsy moths and black flies, while also monitoring for various other pests. We continue to meet the challenges of an ever-changing society by doing more with less in a fiscally responsible manner.

It is vital to secure public input on this financial plan. The budget hearings are the perfect venue for the public to provide the Commissioners with ideas which they can review and implement, where possible, to help cut expenses further and generate additional revenue.

The cost to run County government and its various programs is substantial. A prime example is the Prison. A great deal of revenue is expended for staff, programs, medical treatment, supplies and other ancillary services. The Prison restructuring and changes relating to security, treatment, and operations were implemented for this very reason, and we will continue to operate as efficiently as possible.

Reasons for Major Financial Policy, Expenditure & Revenue Changes from 2021 Budget

Due to continued pressure from shrinking Federal and State funding, collectively bargained wage and benefit increases, and rising law enforcement costs, the County's 2022 budget will exceed the 2021 budget.

During 2021, the County was able to capitalize on a significant surplus in its debt service fund. Since the debt service fund surplus was depleted, the County will need to transfer additional funds from the general fund to the debt service fund for 2022.

As previously noted, the Human Services area continues to be the main priority of the programs offered by County government. In addition to that sector, emergency response, the court system and other vital functions will comprise the majority of the County's 2022 expenditures.



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Budget Overviews

The 2022 general fund budget totals \$148,406,629. The 2022 debt service budget totals \$19,491,214. The 2022 special purpose funds budgets total \$81,029,657.

*This Budget Message is respectfully submitted this 15th day of October 2021 pursuant to
Section 1.12-1203 of the Lackawanna County Home Rule Charter.*

Debi Domenick, Esq., Chairwoman
Board of Commissioners

Jerry Notarianni, Vice Chairman
Board of Commissioners

Chris Chermak
Board of Commissioners