



NEWS

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VALERIE A. ARKOOSH, MD, MPH, CHAIR
KENNETH E. LAWRENCE, JR., VICE CHAIR
JOSEPH C. GALE, COMMISSIONER

Contact:

Kaitlyn Foti, Public Information Officer

610-278-3062 kfoti@montcopa.org

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Montgomery County Commissioners Deliver State of the County Report

Norristown, PA (Feb. 15, 2018) – Montgomery County Commissioners Dr. Val Arkoosh, Chair; Ken Lawrence, Jr., Vice Chair; and Joe Gale delivered the 2017 report on the State of the County at today's Board of Commissioners meeting.

State of the County Report

February 15, 2018

Report by Chair, Dr. Val Arkoosh:

As we begin 2018, Montgomery County residents are served by a county government that is data-driven, transparent, and efficient. We measure our success in the vibrancy of our economy, the health of our communities and the thoroughness with which we meet the needs of the people we serve. By these measures, and many more, the state of Montgomery County is strong.

As many of you remember, in 2012, our county faced a \$10 million budget deficit, zero payments to the pension fund, and a depleted reserve fund. These numbers threatened to dismantle the many services that we provided to our constituents.

Today, six years later, I am pleased to report that our county is on strong financial footing, due to years of focusing on strategic fiscal management. Fund reserves increased 70 percent over the past four years to \$57 million; the General Fund finished with four consecutive surplus years and the 2018 projected budget surplus is \$3.8 million. In recent years, the county has contributed \$9 million annually to the pension fund, and our reserve fund is at a healthy 15 percent level. We've accomplished this while maintaining the lowest property tax rate among the four counties surrounding Philadelphia.

The strength of the county's fiscal recovery was validated last fall, when Moody's Investors Service upgraded

Montgomery County's outlook to "positive" and reaffirmed its Aa1 bond rating, citing our strong fiscal management, multi-year budgeting, and long term capital planning as justification for this upgrade.

Getting our fiscal house in order enables us to maintain a high level of county services while also planning for the future by making wise investments in economic and workforce development, repair our long-neglected county infrastructure, and invest in our employees.

One new tool that we are employing will specifically support our data driven approach. The county has completed a strategic plan for implementing a Geographic Information System. This plan provides a roadmap to make county geographic information even more readily available to the public and give our county departments the data analysis tools they need to provide state-of-the-art services.

We continue to partner with our local municipalities, businesses and non-profits to build on Montgomery County's record of success. Today, our unemployment rate is lower than the state and national averages and even more people are moving into our county because of the high quality of life and economic opportunity we have to offer here.

As a physician, I focus constantly on how our county can make healthy choices the easy choices. Our seven parks, four historic sites, and over 90 miles of trails attracted 2.4 million visitors in 2017, a 21percent increase from when I became Commissioner in 2015. Last year, we had more than 1,500 participants in our popular Montco Trail Challenge, and I'm looking forward to launching 2018's Challenge this spring.

We are home to 70 farmers markets, farm stands, and nurseries, with more than 9,200 acres of preserved farmland. This year, the county is embarking on a new initiative aimed at improving connections between local farmers, small-scale food producers and local residents. Our Planning Commission (MCPC) is partnering on this initiative with the Montgomery County Health Department, Penn State Extension, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC), and the Montgomery County Farm Bureau.

Not only do we want our communities to be healthy – we are committed to making them safe. We are working closely with our 62 municipalities and 50 police departments on several important public safety projects that are launching this year. I am very pleased to report that we will complete the new county-wide public safety radio system in the first half of this year, providing enhanced coverage and capacity to our law enforcement, fire, and emergency management agencies. We will also activate our first law enforcement records management system to enhance criminal justice data information and intelligence sharing.

Over the past year, our Department of Public Safety has employed new technologies to improve the health and safety of our residents.

In May, the county launched the PulsePoint application to improve the chances of survival for people who go into sudden cardiac arrest. More than 2,000 CPR-trained people have downloaded the PulsePoint Respond app to their phone. Along with it, we launched the PulsePoint AED app, which our residents can use to easily register the locations of Automatic External Defibrillators. There are already over 300 AEDs registered in the database, thanks in large part to a high school scholarship contest generously sponsored by Simon's Heart.

In September, we introduced Smart911. Our residents can use this free service to create a profile to provide important information about their home before there is an emergency – medical conditions and medicines, the number of people that live in a home, pets, emergency contacts – anything, really, that you would want emergency responders to know.

Getting that help to our residents is something our Department of Public Safety does regularly. Our 9-1-1 call center fielded over 760,000 calls in 2017 and dispatched the police, fire and EMS response that was needed and, in some cases, talked residents through administering CPR or naloxone while waiting for the responders to arrive. In addition, our public safety department provides regular law enforcement trainings and our Fire Academy and EMS Institute serve as both a primary and ongoing educational resource for all of the fire, rescue and emergency medical service providers throughout Montgomery County.

But we cannot talk about public safety without addressing one of the most dangerous issues facing communities across the country. Montgomery County is on the forefront of fighting the opioid epidemic. The county's overdose task force has a coordinated, comprehensive approach to educate the public about all aspects of substance use disorder, increase awareness of extremely dangerous opioids, and provide resources for those in need.

County data shows that our policies and initiatives are starting to work. Drug-related deaths increased 50 percent across the eight-county Philadelphia region during the first half of 2017, compared with the same period a year earlier. But here in Montgomery County, over that same time period, our drug-related deaths actually decreased 4 percent. We are still awaiting our final numbers from 2017 so this is by no means a victory lap, but it does show that our county identified the problem of opioid overdoses early and has been able to slowly but surely make a difference.

I want to thank the hard working men and women in Montgomery County - in law enforcement, EMS, and health and human services - who are on the frontlines of fighting this disease every single day. I'm proud to note that all 50 police departments in the county are carrying the opioid overdose reversal drug Naloxone, and in 2017, our police alone administered Naloxone 367 times, resulting in 358 overdose reversals, or a 97 percent success rate. We also saw first time saves in 2017 in our Adult Probation department, and more of our county's fire companies are also carrying Naloxone. Our Overdose Task Force has already held two of the four scheduled new Naloxone

Education and Distribution events in partnership with the Health Department to distribute no-cost Naloxone kits to community members.

I am particularly pleased at our success in bringing new resources to this fight. The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency awarded Montgomery County two grants totaling \$313,800 to help us in our fight against the opioid epidemic. The first grant has allowed us to distribute 137 boxes of Naloxone to police departments and human service providers throughout the county to date, with distribution ongoing.

The second highly innovative PCCD grant has been awarded to the Montgomery County Correctional Facility to test the impact of enrolling a group of inmates in a medication assisted treatment program prior to release from the Correctional Facility and whether that will help prevent relapse or recidivism after these inmates return to the community.

Our county also is fortunate to house two Centers of Excellence, the Montgomery County Recovery Center (Norristown) and Community Health and Dental Clinic (Pottstown). These Centers of Excellence were created and funded by Governor Wolf to increase the availability of comprehensive treatment resources to individuals struggling with substance use disorder.

In addition to focusing on this fight against the opioid epidemic, our Health and Human Services Department achieved the monumental goal of becoming fully integrated during 2017, providing a more streamlined network of services to all of our constituents. Our Community Connections Navigates helped nearly 10,000 county residents last year access the services and resources they needed.

Your Way Home, the county's public-private partnership to end homelessness, has reduced homelessness by 37 percent since it launched in 2014. The county also launched its first program to help tenants facing eviction, EPIC (Eviction Prevention and Intervention Coalition). This program is the result of a transformational partnership between Your Way Home, the Montgomery Bar Association and Foundation, and Legal Aid and will provide tenants with pro bono legal services and financial assistance to prevent evictions and stabilize their housing.

As you have heard, each department of our county government works every day to improve the health, safety, and economic opportunities for all of our county residents. This is the work that you elect us to do. It is, therefore, of fundamental importance that the county continues to maintain the long-term security of our voting system.

Toward that end, we will be purchasing new voting machines this year. With 425 polling places requiring new equipment this is no small undertaking and I am proud of and want to thank our staff, who are working tirelessly to accomplish this goal by the end of this year.

We need your input to accomplish this goal and are inviting the public to an Open House on Saturday, February 24 at the Montgomery County Community College's Health Sciences Center Gym. We will have voting machine vendors on site with machines that have been certified, or are currently in the process of being certified, for use in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. We are looking forward to your input as we take this important step toward purchasing the most secure and user-friendly voting machines that include a paper ballot.

These are just some of the examples of the forward-thinking, data-driven approaches that your county government uses to tackle the complex issues facing our residents. I am grateful for and want to thank our dedicated employee workforce. Our entire county family is committed to meeting the needs of our constituents each and every day. I am proud to declare the state of our county is strong. I remain committed to always looking forward with the goal of keeping our county a safe, healthy, inclusive, and vibrant place for people to live, work, and visit.

Report of Vice Chair Ken Lawrence, Jr.:

It has been a little over a year since I've been sworn in, and I wanted to take a minute to reflect on some of the critical infrastructure and transportation projects that are ongoing in Montgomery County.

The most visual reminder that we have of our aging infrastructure is right here at the county seat in Norristown. For years, officials talked about the need to renovate our county campus to meet the needs of our employees and our constituents, to make our facilities more secure, efficient, accessible and welcoming for our staff and our visitors. Out of that need, we developed the County Campus plan, a 10-year project to renovate the Courthouse and government complex in Norristown.

The first phase of the project, securing One Montgomery Plaza, was completed last year, and has dramatically increased building safety for our visitors and employees. We are looking forward to the next phase – renovating One Montgomery Plaza – beginning next month. This part of the project addresses long-standing building integrity issues that have resulted in poor exterior conditions and water and air infiltration to the building interior. OMP's entire exterior will be removed and the scaffolding that has long marred the sidewalks of our campus will be replaced with an attractive, modern, energy-efficient "skin."

When the County Campus project is complete, we will have a new, state-of-the-art Justice Center, and a safer, more attractive and modern space for county employees, residents, new businesses and visitors to Norristown. We are also focused on improving transportation access to our businesses and communities at a local level, by removing traffic bottlenecks, improving access to businesses and other attractions in our county, and making sure that our residents can travel our roads safely.

We've spent years maintaining and improving our county-owned 130 bridges and 75 miles of roads. In 2012, the

county had 62 structurally deficient bridges. Today, 18 of the 62 structurally deficient bridges have been fixed and 33 bridge projects are currently underway. This progress means more than just numbers. Each one of these bridges repaired helps ambulances and fire trucks find the fastest route to an emergency. It creates a safer commute for every driver who uses it. It allows children to spend less time on a school bus and more time learning, or spending time with their families.

Last year, we created an interactive map for the public to see this progress being made on county-owned bridges, which we update quarterly, www.montcopa.org/bridgeinfo. People can also email bridgeinfo@montcopa.org if they need information on a specific bridge project.

This year, Montgomery County is establishing a new grant program utilizing revenues from the motor vehicle registration fee to achieve the transportation goals of the county's comprehensive plan, Montco 2040: A Shared Vision. Approximately \$1 million will be available each year to fund local transportation projects throughout the county. The inaugural 2018 round of grants will assist our municipalities in matching PennDOT's Green Light - Go program funding, which is a statewide program designed to allow municipalities to access state funds for traffic signal and equipment upgrades.

Our Planning Commission has also been working with the Turnpike Commission, PennDOT, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, and municipal officials on the Turnpike Corridor Reinvestment Project. The project will reinvigorate businesses and communities through improved access to the turnpike between Valley Forge and Willow Grove by developing new turnpike interchanges and rezoning development areas along the corridor. We can already see tangible results from investing in this corridor, like the popular Village at Valley Forge in King of Prussia and the Ridge Pike Improvement Project.

This year, the county will begin construction of Phase 3 of the Lafayette Street Extension Project, the next phase in what is considered the largest local infrastructure project in the Commonwealth. The Lafayette Street Extension Project will provide a transportation framework to spur economic development in the region by improving access to Norristown and its Main Street and riverfront as well as Plymouth Township's Ridge Pike and Conshohocken Road corridors.

I'm also pleased that the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed King of Prussia Rail Project was completed in 2017. The KOP Rail will extend the Norristown High Speed Line to the King of Prussia area, linking Center City, University City and King of Prussia – the region's three largest employment centers.

The thing that has impressed me most as a commissioner is our county employees, and I say it every chance I get. We have such a dedicated group of employees at every level of this county government. So I just want to take this moment to thank you. We report on these things, you all make them happen. The citizens of Montgomery County

should feel very proud of the county government that they have.

Report of Commissioner Joe Gale:

I would like to begin by providing the public with a brief overview of some of the positive economic development efforts underway due to the effective impact of our county's Commerce Department.

As of the latest figures, the largest industry in Montgomery County is the Healthcare industry, with approximately 77,795 employees working at 3,660 healthcare establishments throughout the county. We have the third highest number of jobs in the healthcare industry throughout the State, following Philadelphia and Allegheny County.

Our second largest industry is the retail industry, with 56,327 employees working at 3,145 Retail establishments. We have the second highest number of jobs in the retail industry throughout the state, surpassing Philadelphia but following Allegheny County.

The third largest industry in Montgomery County is the professional and technical services industry, with 55,435 employees working at 4,111 establishments throughout the county. In this industry, we have the third highest number of jobs in the state.

Our fourth largest industry is absolutely booming. While it may be fourth on our list, Montgomery County is home to more manufacturing jobs than anywhere else in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with approximately 44,398 jobs. As commissioners, we have had the pleasure of touring some of these businesses, and learning what employers are looking for in terms of developing their workforce. To fill that demand, job seekers are encouraged to attend the annual ManuFest – a one-day event featuring an expo of local and regional manufacturers seeking new employees to grow their company. Previously it had been held at the Montgomery County Community College, but this year it will be in Bucks County on Saturday, March 10 at William Tennent High School in Warminster.

Next, I'd like to touch on a few success stories we've had throughout the year. All too often, we hear of friends or family members who may have lost their job at some point through no fault of their own. Sometimes, this person has worked for decades with the same company and suddenly, they need help putting together a resume, preparing for an interview or even getting pointed in the right direction to connect with employers.

For example, Leonard came to the CareerLink to brush up on his job search skills after losing his job of 15 years. He was connected to a career coach, took full advantage of the Career Resource Center, attended workshops and had a solid resume formatted. His career coach assessed Leonard's skills and experience, and referred him to the Business Services team where he expressed an interest in continuing his career in manufacturing. Leonard felt

apprehensive and unprepared for interviews because he had not been on an interview in over 15 years. His career coach encouraged him to participate in a series of interview skills Workshops and conducted several mock interviews to try out the new techniques he learned and to build his confidence. The extra work paid off and Leonard was able to secure full-time employment in the manufacturing industry.

Another success story is that of Bonita. She came to the CareerLink after being laid off as the Vice President of a banking institution. She was devastated but knew that she had to re-learn the ins and outs of a job search, which was foreign to her due to her steady work history. Bonita enrolled in, and completed, the computer training courses offered at the CareerLink. Her Career Coach assisted her with resume writing and interview preparation while also connecting her to job referrals through JobGateway. Bonita was committed to the process and was able to use the job readiness skills she learned to land a position earning \$80,000 per year.

The final story I would like to share is about Luke. After graduating high school, Luke enrolled in the United States Army Reserves. During his time in the Army, he worked in fence installation. He contacted our Commerce Department to find out how he could transfer skills acquired in the military to secure employment as a civilian. Luke met with a business services representative who thought he would be a great candidate for an on-the-job training position with Premier Contracting because of his military background and prior work experience. Luke interviewed for the position and was hired full time as a weatherization technician. I mention Luke to highlight the Veterans Program offered through CareerLink.

The Veterans Program provides a full range of employment services to assist veterans in their search for work. Specially trained Employment Representatives located at the Montgomery County CareerLink provide veterans with a full range of employment services including referral services, job development, referral to training, and referral to government and community veteran service agencies.

The representatives help veterans match their job skills to employer job openings and contact employers on their behalf for consideration in hiring.

These statistics and success stories highlight just a few of the powerful impacts our Commerce Department has made. Since our county boasts a low unemployment rate of 3.8 percent, a rate lower than the state and national levels, our Commerce Department is a huge success story in its own right.