



NEWS

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State of the County Address

Norristown, PA (February 21, 2019) – The Montgomery County Commissioners delivered their State of the County Address at today’s Board of Commissioners meeting.

Report of Commissioner Chair Val Arkoosh:

Today, I am pleased to report to you that the state of Montgomery County is strong. We ended 2018 with a budget surplus. We’ve made tangible progress toward the ambitious goals in our Montco 2040 Comprehensive Plan which envisions a vibrant economy, sustainable places, and connected communities across Montgomery County. I’m grateful for the opportunity today, together with my fellow Commissioners, to share the details of some of these accomplishments with you.

Montgomery County’s financial health has never been stronger. For the second year in a row, we adopted a budget without a tax increase. This same budget invests in our priorities including increasing our General Fund reserve to \$88.5 million, a full 21.1 percent of the overall budget. We’ve come quite a long way from seven years ago when our county faced a \$10 million dollar budget deficit and a depleted reserve fund.

We’ve done this by making hard choices and sticking to fiscal priorities, investing in long term capital planning and fixing our aging infrastructure. We created a dedicated funding source for the Montgomery County Community College, a critically important investment in the county’s workforce and overall economic health. We have made these investments, and many more that you will hear about this morning, while continuing to have the lowest county property tax rate among the four counties surrounding Philadelphia.

The strength of our finances is also directly related to why Moody’s raised Montgomery County’s bond credit rating to triple-A in 2018, the highest credit rating a government can achieve. That enables us to borrow money at the lowest interest rates possible, reduces debt service and gives us room to continue investing in the critical infrastructure that improves the services we offer the residents of Montgomery County.

We’re committed to providing our residents with high-quality services and to do so, we need to attract the highest level of talent in the region to work for Montgomery County. We are the first suburban county in the Southeastern region to offer paid parental leave of up to six weeks to all eligible Montgomery County employees, regardless of gender, during the 12 months immediately following the birth, adoption, guardianship or foster care placement of a child. We know this benefit will help employees, families, and communities and will improve our ability to recruit and retain high quality employees to better serve our residents.

Infrastructure improvements and the services we provide our residents are a key component to the robust and vibrant economy we enjoy here in Montgomery County. A strong infrastructure is at the core of the quality-of-life factors that attract so many people to the County.

We have helped create places where people want to live, work, and open a business, and keeping Montgomery County sustainable is one of my top goals. Guided by the priorities in our Montco 2040 Comprehensive Plan, we continue to build our farmland preservation program, preserving over 9,500 acres of farmland so far. This represents nearly 1/3 of the farmland in Montgomery County and we are on track to preserve another six farms in the coming year.

Traffic congestion has an enormous impact on our residents' quality of life. We've taken a number of steps to reduce and better manage traffic and these efforts are ongoing.

During 2018, we broke ground on Phase 3 of the Lafayette Street Reconstruction through Norristown and that work will continue through this year and into 2020. This project will reduce congestion on Main Street, Ridge Pike and Conshohocken Road, and it is expected to draw private development along the Schuylkill River in Norristown - a key component in the future growth of Norristown.

We used revenue from the \$5 annual motor vehicle registration fee we adopted in 2016 to partner with 13 of our municipalities and fund 17 projects under the Montgomery County Transportation Program in 2018. The county provided nearly \$1 million (\$968,361) to match the municipalities' contributions toward PennDOT's Green Light-Go projects for traffic signal upgrades and improvements. You will hear more about how this fee has enabled us to advance many bridge repair projects from Commissioner Lawrence.

We also partner with our municipalities through the Montco 2040 Implementation Grant program. This program helps communities implement our comprehensive plan at the local level by assisting with projects that meet the plan's goals. From its start in 2016 through 2018, the Implementation Grant program has funded 41 grants totaling \$3.9 million. The 2019 cycle of the program is underway now. The deadline for municipalities to apply for a total of \$1.5 million in grant funding is March 1st.

One major goal of the Montco 2040 plan is improved transportation options for our county residents and workers. Toward that end, we have been working with SEPTA for the past several years on the King of Prussia Rail project. This project will extend the Norristown High Speed Line to King of Prussia and is projected to create between 4.3 million and 8 million square feet of new development, and between 17,000 and 29,000 new jobs over 20 years. It will create numerous economic opportunities in Norristown and reduce Vehicle Miles Traveled each year by nearly 18 million miles.

As a physician, focusing on the health of our communities is part of my daily work. No single public health issue has received more attention than the epidemic of opioid overdose which has impacted families in every neighborhood in this county. While much remains to be done, we believe we have turned a corner when it comes to the number of lives lost to an opioid overdose in Montgomery County. In the first three quarters of 2018, the number of fatal overdoses in Montgomery County dropped 17 percent compared to the same period in 2017. Fatal overdoses from heroin were down 42 percent and deaths from Fentanyl were down 19 percent in the first three quarters of 2018.

Montgomery County took an early lead in combatting the opioid epidemic by forming a countywide Overdose Task Force to provide a coordinated, comprehensive, and community involved approach to fighting opioid use disorder. And we are seeing that coordinated effort produce results.

One tool in this effort is making sure that the life-saving medication naloxone is readily available across the county. Where previously only EMS units carried Naloxone, using grant funding, we now have all 50 police departments and some fire companies in the county carrying the life-saving drug. We also provide Naloxone kits, free of charge, to eligible nonprofits and schools, and distribute free Naloxone kits at all of our health clinics.

This year, the Department of Public Safety will use \$1 million in grant funding to develop an overdose surveillance system. It will compile data about drug use patterns of both non-fatal and fatal overdose victims in real-time. This will give our team the ability to quickly focus our resources on communities and individuals at greatest risk for drug use and overdose and implement data-driven responses to further reduce drug overdose deaths.

Most importantly, we need to help individuals with a substance use disorder get connected to treatment. Our Drug Treatment Court has been highly successful in this effort with individuals who are justice involved. I am working closely with our Department of Health and Human Services to improve the process of "warm-handoffs" across the county to connect someone who has just survived an overdose to immediate treatment.

These are just a few examples of the steps we have taken to ensure that our county will continue to grow and thrive, be welcoming to anyone who wants to live or work here, and be able to provide the high-quality services that you expect and deserve.

None of these successes would be possible without our dedicated and professional county workforce, led by COO Lee Soltysiak. I want to thank each and every one of you for your public service, and for continuing to make Montco an inclusive, vibrant community to live, work, and play.

Report of Commissioner Vice Chair Ken Lawrence, Jr.:

For the past two years, I have had the pleasure to serve as a Montgomery County Commissioner and we should all be proud of the work that we have done to make Montgomery County thrive.

But we also need to be cognizant that, as Commissioner Arkoosh said in her remarks, despite all that Montgomery County has to offer with a vibrant economy, high employment, educational opportunities and quality of life amenities, we still have intractable problems that we must work hard to address.

Val and I recently participated in Your Way Home's Point-In-Time count during which volunteers go out and count the number of people who are homeless and living out in the elements or living in shelters on a given day. I have to say, I found it very disturbing to see people at night under bridges and on playgrounds here in Montgomery County.

Your Way Home Montgomery County is a public-private partnership that works to improve the housing stability, economic security, and health of people who are experiencing homelessness or are at imminent risk of becoming homeless.

And their efforts have proven highly successful. Since its inception in 2014, the annual Point-In-Time Count has gone down 47 percent. That includes a 50 percent reduction in homelessness among families with children. That compares to just a 5 percent reduction in homelessness in the rest of the state over the same time period.

This past year, Your Way Home launched its EPIC program. EPIC stands for Eviction Prevention Intervention Coalition. This program is a court based program that includes representatives of the bar association and Legal Aid to provide pro-bono representation to tenants facing eviction and connects them social services so they can regain housing stability.

Your Way Home's success shows that when non-profits, the government and philanthropic groups work together, we can keep people housed and we can prevent intractable problems like homelessness from occurring in the first place.

Serving as your County Commissioner has given me a new perspective on everything that county government does to improve and protect the health and safety of our residents and to make sure they have educational and economic opportunities. As elected officials, it is at the heart of what we do. And that is why it is vitally important for us to provide a long-term voting system that is both safe and secure for our residents.

At our last meeting in December, we voted to purchase a new "voter verified paper ballot system" that will accommodate our 425 polling locations and nearly 600,000 registered voters. Our Voter Services department and senior staff are working diligently to have the new system ready for the May 21st Primary Election.

The new system's reliance on a simple paper ballot will deliver the highest degree of confidence in our election process. Voters will mark their selection on a paper ballot or an ADA accessible touch screen, which will print the voter's ballot selections. They will have the opportunity to review their choices and then cast their ballot privately and anonymously by entering the paper ballot into a scanner that will be located at the voter's precinct. This system is ADA accessible and meets all state and federal security requirements and will provide a paper trail that can be audited to ensure accurate results.

We are dedicated to providing a smooth, seamless, and transparent transition to the new voting system and we have an extensive and robust public outreach campaign planned. The public will have several opportunities to try out the new system before the May 2019 primary.

The long-term safety and security of our residents is also at the heart of our County Campus plan, a 10-year construction project to renovate our court house and government offices in Norristown and build a new Justice Center. The first phase of that project, securing One Montgomery Plaza, is complete and has dramatically improved the safety of our employees and residents who come here to do business. The second phase is currently underway. One Montgomery Plaza has been sheathed in scaffolding for years because the exterior façade was literally falling off. Work is now underway to peel that façade off and replace it with a far more attractive, modern and energy efficient "skin."

We're committed to keeping the costs of the County Campus renovation as low as possible, while also meeting the needs of the County and our residents for the next 100 years. That includes creating an energy-efficient county campus that will contain costs and serve as a catalyst for the revitalization of downtown Norristown.

We are also committed to maintaining and improving what are arguably our greatest assets. Over 2 million people visited our seven parks, four historic sites and over 90 miles of recreational trails Montgomery County offers in 2018. Our Bike Montco Plan aims to improve bicycle mobility and safety and connect our residents and visitors to bikeable places.

In the coming year, we plan to fund additional trail projects to improve mobility, reduce pollution and congestion and spur additional economic growth. We will finalize the design of the Chester Valley Trail Extension, which will connect to the Schuylkill River Trail, begin design of the Cross County Trail, begin construction on the Pennypack Trail from Byberry Road to Bucks County and complete Phase 2 of the Schuylkill River Trail in Pottstown.

We've made great progress repairing another aspect of our aging infrastructure, our bridges. Montgomery County owned 62 structurally deficient bridges in 2012. We have repaired or replaced 20 of them and funding from the vehicle registration fee that was adopted in 2016 has accelerated the process. There are now 35 bridges under construction, in pre-construction or in the design phase. When we've finished fixing or replacing all of them, revenue from the registration fee will provide funding to keep our bridges in repair so that we don't see the same thing happen in the future.

There's a lot going on in Montgomery County and we've only touched on a few things here. None of it would happen without the more than 2,000 county employees who work hard each and every day, often without recognition, to serve the residents of Montgomery County. I also want to thank them for their dedication.

Report of Commissioner Joe Gale:

I think one of the most important things county government can do, or any government for that matter, is foster a strong economy. By any measure I have looked at, Montgomery County enjoys a strong and thriving economy.

We continue to be home to more jobs than resident workers, making us a net importer of workers. Montgomery County has more manufacturing jobs than any other county in Pennsylvania and our unemployment rate is consistently lower than both the state and national averages.

Our Commerce Department has a loan program for companies that want to relocate or expand their operations here and provides strong workforce development program through MontcoWorks. They work with manufacturers to develop apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs and will be holding their sixth annual ManuFest on March 12th at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center in Oaks. ManuFest brings high school students and their parents together with over 70 employers who will showcase the high paying and in-demand opportunities they have to offer.

The Montgomery County Community College works in tandem with those efforts. In addition to its degree programs, the college has certificate programs, career training and professional development classes at its Central Campus in Blue Bell and West Campus in Pottstown.

An abundance of employment, job training and educational opportunities are key to why so many people want to live and work in Montgomery County and why so many businesses want to be located here.

My colleagues mentioned some of the ways county government partners with our municipalities. One of the most important ways we do that is through the services provided by our Public Safety Department.

Our 9-1-1 call center fielded nearly 800,000 calls in 2018 and dispatched the police, fire and EMS responders as needed. In light of recent events, and as part of its mission to promote a safe community, the Department of Public Safety also hosted a Safety and Security Symposium to provide faith leaders with tools and information to better prepare their houses of worship and congregations for any type of violent or disruptive event.

Public Safety also conducted a county-wide fire services study to help municipalities and the fire companies that serve them develop strategic planning for the challenges they are experiencing and will likely face in the future, including dramatic reductions in volunteerism. The Department of Public Safety spent \$1.63 million of Homeland Security grant funding on planning, training and equipment in 2018. In addition to the fire study, it prepared plans for hazardous materials response, mass care and debris management.

The department implemented the first county-hosted Records Management System in 2018 that allows 33 law enforcement agencies in Montgomery County share information and intelligence in real time, all at no cost to the municipalities they serve.

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.

I'm proud to serve in a government that works hard to provide the residents of Montgomery strong employment opportunities and communities that are safe to live in.