Mercer County State of the County Address
Mercer County Executive Brian M. Hughes, Thursday, Jan. 26,

Commissioner Chair Walter and members of the Board, thank you. Each year I am pleased to come before you to discuss the state of our great county. My past two State of the County addresses focused heavily on the global pandemic that dominated our lives. I'm happy to say that while we continue to monitor community levels and work with our health care partners to offer and promote vaccinations, boosters and test kits to the public, the worst of COVID-19 is behind us. As a County Government, we acted swiftly and comprehensively to meet the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic, and now are well positioned to move forward.

Before I go on, I must address a report issued Tuesday by the Office of the State Comptroller. Six months ago, I was made aware of concerning information about the county's Chief Fiscal Officer, even though his and the County's fiscal practices are subject to independent annual audits. The CFO was someone that I, the Commissioners and other County officials trusted and relied upon for many years. He betrayed that trust, and the bottom line is how we respond to that betrayal. We took swift action. We immediately informed the County Commissioners, suspended the CFO, launched an investigation through outside counsel and referred the matter to law enforcement. Integrity matters, and this Administration holds itself to the highest standards. To say we are disappointed in the CFO's actions is an understatement; as the OSC said, the County was a "victim of the CFO." We will take every legal measure available to us to hold the CFO accountable, and to ensure something like this never happens again. We are cooperating fully with law enforcement and have been since the Administration first uncovered the problems in August.

I would also like to take a few moments to speak candidly and personally with you about a "whispering campaign" I have heard as I travel around the county.

I've never shied away from discussing my health condition, trigeminal neuralgia, or TN, which can inflict severe pain to the nerves along my jaw. But recently, some people are making up stories about my illness and saying I'm not up to this job. I have come to accept both the hidden and obvious stigma for having a chronic pain condition, a condition I did not choose and would not want anyone else to experience.

TN has never prevented me from doing the job I was elected to do. If anything, it has steeled me with determination. I am blessed to have the support of my family, friends and caring physicians. I also know I'm not alone. While the whisperers see weakness, I see myself as a symbol of those who face challenges every day and overcome them. When they disparage me, they disparage everyone who faces health and physical challenges. I am regularly inspired by friends and residents right here in Mercer County, people many of you know and have worked with, who have opened up about their own experiences with TN and other serious illnesses that may require medication but do not stop us from doing our jobs and contributing to society. I have been transparent about my battle with TN, as I have been about my more than 40 years of sobriety.

So, yes, I take medication to control the pain, and sometimes I have a bad reaction to that medicine, but how I may present does not affect how I lead. But I know that I'm not alone because people of goodwill often share with me their own experiences of challenges and perseverance.

I'm certain that everyone here would raise a hand if asked whether we ourselves or someone we care about copes with a long-term condition – diabetes, M.S., migraines, Parkinson's, sickle-cell anemia, lupus, seizures…

But their illness doesn't define them, just as my illness doesn't define me. What defines me is my record of making Mercer County a better place for its people. We all have challenges in life, but in our individual journeys, we carry on, as there's more work to do, and I won't be defined by the "whisperers" who hide in the shadows and only want to tear down rather than lift up.

Despite our challenges, the state of our county remains strong. We are pushing ahead with projects that were held up by the pandemic; launching new initiatives; and staying true to our mission by continuing to deliver the programs and services that our residents rely on.

And while there is an abundance of great news about Mercer County, **there's more work to do.** I believe the best days of Mercer County are still ahead of us. Let's go there together.

First, I'd like to provide updates on several major projects that are moving forward:

- **Replacement of the outdated and undersized passenger terminal at Trenton-Mercer Airport in Ewing.** I am thrilled to report that yesterday we signed a Project Labor Agreement for construction to proceed on the proposed Trenton-Mercer Airport Terminal! We've always had a solid relationship with the men and women of the trades. During construction this project will create hundreds of union labor jobs, putting people to work. Once completed, it will help strengthen the regional economy and overall transportation network, which are part of Mercer's appeal as a desirable place to live and work. The pandemic put us and the FAA a little behind, but we are now in phase 2 of design, and we anticipate design completion by the end of 2023 or very early next year. Concurrent to the terminal project is the design and construction of a new 1,000-space parking garage.

- **Park improvements at Miry Run in Hamilton, Robbinsville and West Windsor.** Mercer County is on the map for its abundant, accessible trail network, and this project will build on that reputation. Hikers, cyclists and pedestrians will find a network of trails around the lake, along with parking areas and a primary access drive from Old Trenton Road. Engineering and permitting for the first phase of improvements at this passive-recreation park are continuing. In addition, plans for dredging the lake have been designed and will proceed upon approval from the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection.

- **Moores Station Quarry park development plan in Hopewell Township.** The quarry is adjacent to the county-managed Ted Stiles Preserve at Baldpate Mountain, which boasts more than 1,000 positive reviews, and outdoor enthusiasts are excited for us to move on this project. The Park Commission is working with Trap Rock Industries to execute the terms of the reclamation plan for the 166-acre site ahead of the county's acquisition, which

is anticipated this spring. Once the Park Commission takes possession of the site, it will begin a multi-year process of transforming the open-pit quarry into a park.

- **Fishing Wharf improvements in Trenton.** The Wharf Park – which has been closed to the public for years due to structural deficiencies -- is a treasured fishing spot and its restoration is important for **reconnecting Trenton residents to their riverfront**. This project is a collaborative effort between the City of Trenton, the County of Mercer, and three state agencies to design and create an improved flood-resilient park that also will serve as flood protection for Route 29. A flood wall has been designed and is currently being built at the site by NJDOT. The Wharf Park Improvement Project will immediately follow. The Park Commission is overseeing the design of park improvements and will eventually assume responsibility for maintaining the park once it is constructed by NJDOT.

There's more work to do. Let's make these investments together.

We've learned so much from the challenges of the past few years, most importantly that we must be adaptable and that we need to plan. Our residents and businesses want a flourishing economy, access to good jobs and job training, and a clean and healthy environment.

With that in mind, tonight I present to you our **Mercer Forward** plan. This plan will guide our efforts over the next several years. It will require collaboration with this board to be successful, and will make a real and measurable impact on our residents' lives.

Thriving and Inclusive Economy:

Since the onset of the pandemic, our Office of Economic Development has worked closely with federal, state and local partners to connect struggling businesses with COVID-established grants and loan options. In addition, we created the **Mercer County Business Lending Services** program in 2020 – an initiative that provides lending opportunities to Mercer County businesses and has infused over $500,000 in low-interest loans since its inception.

New investment is essential to economic development. It creates jobs, drives new business and strengthens communities.

To continue this momentum, I recently announced two new initiatives for our business community -- the **Mercer County Small Business Grant** and the **Small Business Investment** programs. The Grant program, which dedicates $3.5 million in American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, will provide direct aid to Mercer County small businesses that have likely experienced pandemic hardship. The focus will be on businesses that have physical storefronts in Mercer with a maximum amount of $10,000 allocated per grant.

The Small Business Investment Program, brought to us by John Harmon, CEO of the African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey, would set aside half a million dollars in funding for Mercer County businesses. While the details are still being finalized, the potential programs will reduce interest rates on loans and assist underfunded businesses in finding the capital they need to grow and flourish.

Mercer County boasts of one of lowest unemployment rates in the State of New Jersey at 2.5 percent. **However, there still are significant employment opportunities in and outside the County**.

Mindful of increasing costs and overall inflation, I have allocated over $1 million in ARPA funds toward expanding our transportation options for residents in Mercer County over the next several years. This expansion will complement the Route 130 Connection bus route and will be a free transportation service to local residents who work at newly developed warehouse and retail business parks located in East Windsor and the Cranbury area.

Having a criminal record can create serious barriers to everyday events we might take for granted, things like finding a job or housing. While New Jersey has made it easier to apply for record expungement by opening an online filing system, there are still citizens who find the process daunting. Tonight, I announce **Mercer Path Forward**, a program we are developing that would facilitate a clean start for individuals with certain criminal records, and I look forward to working with the board on the Path Forward program.

This program is the logical next step to our grant-funded Re-entry Program for people leaving incarceration, announced this time last year. Our re-entry team works to ensure that such people, like every other citizen, can find employment, access stable housing, support their kids and families, and become active contributors to their communities. In Mercer, we also support giving people a second chance, including career counseling, on-the-job training and hiring. Employment is essential to securing other major needs such as food, shelter, and clothing, and helps prevent relapse into criminal behavior.

I received an email recently from someone who, long ago, got caught up in the criminal justice system at age 20. He asked me not to use his name, so I'll just call him Michael.

Michael was with a couple of friends who shoplifted a few sodas and candy bars from a convenience store. They were caught on videotape and stopped by police a few miles from the store. All were charged and Michael took a plea deal giving him probation.

In his own words, Michael said, "For over a decade this charge followed me, preventing me from getting a decent job. Through research I found out my charge was expungable, but I had no idea how to get it done. Luckily, I was referred to Mercer County, who helped at no cost to me. Because of this, I now have a job earning over $75,000 and I can provide a better life for my family. More importantly, something from my past no longer has a hold on me."

We thank Michael for his candor and will continue to fight the stigma surrounding those who've made mistakes in life. We know there are many more people who need help getting their record cleared, and I'm excited about Mercer Path Forward.

Lastly, around a **Thriving Economy,** I am pleased to announce our new digital Small Business Directory. The online directory is an effort to support the business enterprises of women, minorities and veterans, along with small businesses. Small businesses are the lifeblood of our

local economy, and our goal is to create and identify ways to increase business traffic to certified small businesses and encourage others to become certified. This online directory, managed by our Small Business Outreach Office, is another tool to support our business community.

I'd like to recognize Job One Lawn and Landscape, a Woman and Minority-owned small business in Ewing. Owned by Jocelyn and Stan Tucker of Ewing, Job One recently won a county contract for $75,000, and are just one of our many success stories. Let's give them a round of applause!

Healthy Residents

Community health impacts everything -- educational achievement, public safety, people's ability to work and be financially healthy, life expectancy, happiness and more. As part of our long-range plan, we are continually creating and improving our physical and social environments and expanding community resources so that people can live their best lives.

One of the ways we have promoted community health is through our highly successful Mercer at Play program, which has resulted in dozens of recreational projects across every one of our towns using county capital funds matched by outside contributions. Among the completed projects are the creation of a skate park in Princeton; renovations at Moody Park in Ewing that included the addition of two lighted basketball courts; and a four-town project to redevelop 51 acres of the former Twin Pines Airport in Lawrence into athletic fields.

And during the COVID-19 pandemic we formed effective partnerships with the City of Trenton, Capital Health, the Trenton Health Team, Henry J. Austin Health Center, Penn Medicine Princeton Health and other health care entities to make vaccinations, test kits and information available to our residents. We also hired critical staff including two full-time public health nurses and a full-time epidemiologist. Over time, as the Division has grown its services and programs, and through the COVID-19 crisis, it is clear that operating and storage space is insufficient.

With that in mind, we plan to use ARPA funds to expand the Division of Public Health so that it can continue to adequately meet the needs of our residents, including storing vaccine, PPE and other equipment, and have enough office space and parking to continue to conduct various health clinics, while supporting the needs of our municipal partners as well.

One of the lessons from the pandemic, coast to coast, state to state, was how taxing it was on our health care systems. Mercer County's Division of Public Health and our Office of Emergency Management were dauntless, and we owe them and all first responders a debt of gratitude.

In October, I collaborated with the Commissioner Board on a $3 million grant shared by our 12 towns. This $3 million set-aside is specifically for projects benefiting older adults, veterans and people with disabilities. Among the requests were generators, HVAC systems upgrades, design for a new senior center, an inclusive playground, transportation service and health care services. Like our collaborative Mercer at Play program and Mutual Assistance efforts, I'm looking forward to seeing the project outcomes so that we can move **Mercer forward** together.

Another way we are strengthening our community is by addressing the ongoing public health crisis of opioid addiction. All our communities have been affected by opioid-related overdoses, and many of us know a family that has lost a loved one to overdose. Let us not forget those souls.

Let me highlight a new initiative in this area:

Our Office on Addiction Services awarded a contract to the Rescue Mission of Trenton to provide Mobile Recovery Support Services, which was made available through county and Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services funding.

The new mobile unit will offer Narcan kits and linkage to local treatment services, and will travel around the county, focusing on the hardest-hit neighborhoods, to help prevent overdoses. As we await the arrival of the mobile unit, the recovery support staff have been out in force, providing Narcan trainings, and distributing naloxone and other needed resources throughout the community.

But there is more work to do. Any life lost to overdose is one too many.

Environmental Sustainability:

When it comes to sustainability, every little bit counts. From conserving water to recycling to driving less, there are a number of things each of us can do to help make a difference. Sustainability is something that we have prioritized through initiatives such as land preservation; tree plantings and reforestation; grants to our municipalities for park infrastructure; creation of pollinator habitats; sustainable farming practices at Capital City Farm, and our solar array at Mercer County Community College, which was ahead of its time. These efforts improve biodiversity, help with flood and drought control, reduce urban heat and improve air quality. We've also taken a Complete Streets approach to transportation planning and developed a Bicycle Master Plan to guide the installation of bicycle facilities on county roadways and expand people's ability to forgo their cars and safely get around.

In addition, we are working with a grant consultant to find solar funding opportunities for the county and are looking to install solar benches at our parks. We put 22 new electric vehicle chargers into operation at county facilities last summer and are seeking to add 13 new charging stations, for a total of 48 chargers. Our Economic Development and Planning offices recently hosted two Clean Energy Workshops aimed at the business community to discuss sustainability and cost-savings opportunities available to reduce their energy consumption.

Our combined efforts with those important projects go a long way toward reducing our carbon footprint and reliance on fossil fuels, **but there is more work to do,** and the opportunity to take a more cohesive approach. Looking ahead, we will continue to identify potential funding sources and create a monitoring process that outlines how we measure the success of each sustainable action and plan as a whole.

As part of our new **Integrated Climate Action Plan,** we will create an internal advisory board, which will consider adaptation and resilience measures in county infrastructure, transportation including motor vehicle fleet, waste management and community engagement.

Then, as a next step to the energy audits we have performed on more than 25 county facilities, we will commission a sustainability audit of all county operations to evaluate our progress.

A long-term goal is to turn over our motor vehicle fleet, and a first step toward that effort would be to evaluate the fleet to identify which vehicles would offer the greatest reduction of carbon dioxide emissions, as well as the cost associated with replacing them with green vehicles. Another long-term goal is to retrofit lighting, lighting fixtures and HVAC systems to the most efficient available.

Looking toward the future, Dr. Deborah Preston, our new President at Mercer County Community College, and I are discussing new programs and courses in the area of Sustainability, and exploring collaborations in urban or vertical farming to eliminate food deserts and promote "green" careers in the City of Trenton.

Our discussions included an exploration of hydroponics and aquaponics, and although these conversations are just beginning, the concepts are forward-thinking and on the cutting edge of progressive means to address hunger and sound nutrition. Let's give President Preston a round of applause.

With the support of our residents and businesses, Mercer County will continue to be a leader in making government operations more sustainable. We understand the scale of the challenge, and we are passionate about the need to preserve the planet and create a cleaner, greener future.

I want to briefly touch on <u>just a few</u> of the many other things our county government has been busy with during the past year.

- Among the myriad projects that improve the safety and efficiency of our **transportation infrastructure**, we completed three bridge reconstruction projects, all on budget; four roadway and intersection construction projects; and the building of an 80,000-square-foot hangar for FlightServ, a fixed-base operator at Trenton-Mercer Airport.
- Our award-winning **Share the Harvest Program** at Howell Farm and Capital City Farm yielded more than 12 tons of a variety of foods grown on those farms that were donated to the Trenton Area Soup Kitchen and various Mercer County food banks to help people in need.
- Our Human Services Department, in conjunction with the Mercer County Board of Social Services, continued to provide **emergency rental assistance** to Mercer County residents impacted by COVID-19, successfully managing more than $20 million in federal funding and helping more than 1,800 households prevent eviction.
- We saw exceptional growth in the **golf and tennis operations** at our county facilities, which now include the Park Commission's newest acquisition, the Hopewell Valley Golf and Country Club.
- We continued to support our **military veterans** with special events such as the Holiday Basket Giveaway that provided holiday meal packages to 100 veterans and their families, in addition to the daily assistance that Mercer County Veteran Services provides.
- After a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic, we safely reopened our county nutrition sites for congregate dining and were able to hold our annual senior picnic, which was attended by more

than 500 people, while our Office on Aging continued to assist **older adults** all over Mercer County through phone calls, emails and in-person visits.

- Our **County Connection** office in Hamilton — which serves all county residents — completed an expansion in 2022 that doubled its size to about 4,000 square feet, and now features a large community room that can accommodate up to 50 people for various programs.
- The **City of Trenton** faces unique challenges that none of our other municipalities share. With Mayor Reed Gusciora, we are identifying a number of new supports for Trenton. When our Capital City thrives we all benefit, and the Mayor and I will share our developments on an ongoing basis.

I've learned over the years that governing isn't easy. But I'm proud of what my administration has accomplished with the guidance provided by my Chief of Staff Kelly Ganges and my other esteemed cabinet members; the support of the Board of Commissioners; the dedication of our department managers and section chiefs; and the determined efforts of a county workforce that -- without fanfare -- serves the public each and every day. But no matter how good a job I think we're doing, we'll always strive to do better. To complete another task. To solve another problem. To extend another helping hand. And we'll be back at work tomorrow trying to do just that. **There is more work to do.**

Thank you, board members, for your time tonight. I am proud to be County Executive of the Greatest County. I look forward to working with you to continue moving this County forward and improving the quality of life for our residents and visitors. Thank you.