



NEWS

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Norristown, PA (February 16, 2017) – Dr. Valerie A. Arkoosh delivered the 2017 report on the State of the County at today’s Board of Commissioners Meeting.

State of the County Report **February 16, 2017**

As a physician my goal was always to keep my patients healthy. To help them avoid disease. And not pay later for illnesses that could have been prevented. Understand the science, but also understand the values and needs of the patient. This comprehensive, forward looking, and data driven philosophy, describes this administration’s approach to governing Montgomery County. Everyday our team asks what can we do in County government to build partnerships, anticipate and avoid problems, and improve efficiency. 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.

The County’s cross-cutting investments in economic development, public safety, transportation, infrastructure, open spaces, and trails are part of our MontCo 2040 Comprehensive Plan to make Montgomery County the place where people want to live and work, and where businesses want to set up shop.

While we are not primarily job creators – we support policies that encourage an environment that is ripe for economic development. By partnering with the private sector, our Department of Commerce offers a unique model that enables the County to provide a broad range of coordinated business solutions for employers and employees, including: real estate location and relocation services, state and county financing programs, and workforce development tools. In the second half of 2016 alone we provided assistance to more than 70 employers currently based or looking to be located in Montgomery County. MontcoWorks helped 592 individuals gain meaningful employment with an average wage of nearly \$15 per hour.

Montgomery County must be a pipeline for employers who need well-trained and educated workers. It is a priority for MontcoWorks that those workforce needs are met, and the Montgomery County Community College – with campuses in Blue Bell and Pottstown - is a key partner in that effort.

Our increased support of the College and making that support transparent to the taxpayer through the dedicated millage that was passed last year helps keep tuition affordable and helps the College to focus on those pipeline needs. For example, the College's new Health Sciences division will create a workforce of well trained technicians, nurses, and physical therapists to support the largest industry in the County: healthcare.

Economic growth also requires us to pay close attention to transportation and infrastructure needs throughout the County. In 2016 we completed Phase Two of the Lafayette Street extension and we did so under budget. When completed we will have more direct connections from downtown Norristown to I-76 and I-476 in Conshohocken, a direct connection to the Pennsylvania turnpike, and improved traffic flow along the County-owned Ridge Pike. We will launch Phase Three this year. We are also working with SEPTA and leadership in Norristown and Upper Merion to make the King of Prussia high speed rail project a reality. Completion of this rail spur will efficiently and reliably connect the three largest employment centers in the region: Center City, University City and King of Prussia. The project will also directly connect to Norristown to those regional hubs driving further investment in our County seat.

Our transportation priorities include aggressive plans to keep our more than 130 county owned bridges structurally sound. Over the last few years we've successfully replaced or repaired 16 bridges that were deemed structurally deficient and we have 34 bridge projects in our capital budget in 2017. Eight of those projects were added to the list as a direct result of the new \$5 dollar motor vehicle registration fee that was passed in 2016. Looking ahead, that fee will allow the County to keep our bridges and roads in a state of good repair so that future administrations are not saddled with the backlog of preventable problems that this administration inherited.

Governing is about our future and keeping current residents as well as attracting new people to the County. Young families and millennials value living close to public transportation. They want communities with open space, parks and trails and they want locally sourced, healthy food. And, while trails, parks and farms may seem like nice amenities, they are also significant drivers for home values, economic development, tourism and new residents to the County.

- Our trails, parks and historic sites attract more than 1.5 million visitors each year. Our MontCo Trail Challenge had more than 1,500 participants in 2016.
- The Schuylkill River Trail was voted the Best Urban Trail in America by USA Today. At today's meeting we will be voting to support continued expansion of the trail. If passed, we will almost completely bridge one of the last "gaps" on the trail between Philadelphia and Pottstown.
- Our Walk Montco plan, which the Commissioners adopted in 2016 as official County policy, will serve as a model for development of a Bike Montco plan this year.
- We successfully extended the Pennypack Trail and we have made significant investments in many of our parks and historic sites, including the John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove and at the Peter Wentz Farmstead.

- Montgomery County has 70 farmers markets, farm stands, and nurseries and more than 9,200 acres of preserved farmland. Our continued investment in our farmers is a priority and we have committed \$5 million dollars over the next five years which will leverage millions more from the state toward farmland preservation.

All of these efforts – from farming, to infrastructure, to economic development – require us to have very close working relationships with our 62 municipalities, our business leaders and our residents. Our staff understands this and regularly reaches out to the community for feedback, input and partnership. This year, for the first time, we invited the leadership from all 11 local Chambers of Commerce for a meeting to discuss our efforts to expand our economic base and learn how our Commerce Department can be most helpful to the businesses that they represent.

Our Planning Commission has established itself as a strong partner to support communities throughout the County. More than half of the municipalities in the County have contracts with our Planning Commission. With these contracts, we listen to each municipality's planning goals and help them design strategies to achieve those goals. And through our 2040 Comprehensive Plan implementation grants – 14 of which were awarded in 2016 - we provide direct financial support for projects focused on downtowns and community destinations.

The Planning Commission has also given priority to regional collaborations – with five underway this year. One is working to improve water quality in the Wissahickon Creek and involves 13 municipalities and 3 wastewater treatment plants along the Creek. This coordination is vitally important to reduce duplication of efforts and costs. As a result of this innovative, scientifically-driven and forward looking approach, the William Penn Foundation has awarded the collaboration a one million dollar grant to develop the plan.

For years, prior administrations put band-aids on problems that needed a long-term strategy and investment. The Courthouse and One Montgomery Plaza are visual reminders of that kick the can down the road mentality. The Campus Plan will center the County campus on Main Street and create a safer, more attractive and modern space for County employees, residents, new businesses and visitors to Norristown.

The comprehensive and thoughtful strategies we are bringing to infrastructure, economic development and planning are also apparent in the work of our public safety and health and human services departments.

- In 2016, the skilled 911 operators of our public safety department took nearly 800,000 911 calls and connected residents to the local police, fire or EMS help they needed.
- And while your township or borough manages your local police – our public safety department provides regular law enforcement trainings and our Fire Academy and EMS Institutes serve as both a primary and ongoing educational resource for all of the fire, rescue and emergency medical service provider agencies throughout Montgomery County.

- With input from police, fire and EMS units across the County, at the end of 2016 we started the process of distributing upgraded police radios throughout the County, working with local municipalities to ensure that the infrastructure was in place to support the new technology. This year, police and first responders will be able communicate across municipal lines with enhanced coverage in all corners of the County. This would not have been possible without a true partnership between County staff, our township and borough leaders, and our police and emergency responders.
- In the coming year, we look forward to enhancing the safety of our residents by implementing exciting new technologies, including PulsePoint, Smart911 and a countywide records management system.

I'm also proud and grateful to announce that as of last week all 49 police departments in the County have agreed to carry and dispense naloxone to prevent death from an opioid overdose. This has been a priority for our Opioid Task force. These local police join our EMS teams, the health department and local pharmacies on the front lines in providing help to those in danger of an overdose. In 2016, between our police and EMS, we've had more than 700 lives saved as a result of Naloxone. But that is just one part of an integrated approach to combatting the disease of opioid addiction.

- Our District Attorney, Kevin Steele, through the drug takeback program, has collected and destroyed more than 28,000 pounds of medicine.
- Our County Drug Treatment Court, under the leadership of Judge Steven O'Neill, offers treatment, rather than incarceration to individuals with substance use disorder.
- Two Montgomery County organizations Pottstown Health & Wellness Center and Montgomery County Recovery Center were each recognized by the PA State Department of Human Services with grants of \$500,000 to support efforts to connect persons with an opiate use disorder to treatment options and other support services.

The County's work to integrate service delivery into a single Montgomery County Health and Human Services Department will come to fruition this year and will result in a data-driven, better coordinated delivery of services to our constituents. Our Community Connections and Navicate program brings that coordination to life every day. Working at eight different locations across the County, our Navicates helped more than 5,000 County residents in 2016 access the services and resources they needed.

Our research-driven approach to tackling complex problems also drives how we allocate our resources, for example, research underscores the critical link between safe and affordable housing and positive health outcomes. North Penn Commons, which opened last October in Lansdale, is a unique private/public partnership that bridges those connections and brings non-profits, affordable housing and social services into one location to support low-income seniors.

We will continue to build on the 2040 Plan by collecting and incorporating real-world and real-time data to inform decision-making and resource allocation.

Finally, I want to discuss one of the most important and fundamental responsibilities of the County Commissioners – fiscal management. Under Commissioner Shapiro’s leadership the County was able to restructure County operations to stabilize our financial position and increase fiscal transparency. Through zero-based budgeting we determine spending based on what we actually need to fund our programs, rather than just moving forward numbers from the previous year. Our budgets, requests for proposals, and procurement policy are available online. Our focus on sound fiscal management will continue. I am committed to building on efforts to fund our employee pension obligation and maintain a strong fund balance. We must make certain that regardless of the fiscal times or uncertainty in federal and state budgets, we can continue to provide vital services to our constituents and pay our hard-working employees.

None of this work happens on its own. I am grateful for the fantastic team of dedicated professionals that comprise our County family, led with exceptional skill by Chief Clerk and COO Ms. Lauren Lambrugo. They work- often behind the scenes and without thanks- to serve the residents of Montgomery County each and every day.

A comprehensive approach to keeping our County fiscally strong. Coordination of efforts between agencies, municipalities and staff. Reflecting the needs of the businesses who want to grow here. Valuing the more than 2,000 employees who work for the County. Understanding what the families, millennials and senior citizens who want to live here care about. And using data to make smart choices that prevent problems before they occur. This is my approach to our County government and I am proud to declare the state of our County is strong and the prognosis for the future is bright.

Thank you.

A detailed update on the 2040 Comprehensive Plan for 2016 can be found [here](#).