

# Westchester County can do more

By KITLEY COVILL

Our communities in northern Westchester currently face numerous challenges, yet many are not aware of the role county government plays in helping to address them. County government provides critical

## Guest COLUMN

infrastructure needed in an emergency, highway law enforcement

and sophisticated intelligence services supporting local police. It trains first responders, law enforcement, firefighters and volunteers that support town services. It investigates reports of neglected or abused children. It prosecutes juvenile-delinquency proceedings and operates a regional detention center. It administers the foster care system. If a resident is bitten by a wild animal, it provides the rabies vaccine. It operates wastewater treatment plants and the airport, owns parks and watersheds, funds the District Attorney's office, and operates van and bus fleets. On a strategic policy level, it is our liaison to state and federal government, representing a 1 million person constituency.

Of the approximately \$1.8 billion Westchester County budget, about two-thirds (\$1.2 billion) are for federal- and state-mandated services and the other third (\$610 million) is discretionary money used for such services as transportation, parks,

golf courses, Westchester County Center, public safety, labs, mental health, emergency services, planning, employee benefits, administrative services and debt service.

What does the County Legislature do? They review and approve the budget, approve county executive appointments, make important laws and respond to, and advocate for residents in their districts.

Here's the question: What else could the county government do? It could be a leader in the environment, in planning, in modernization of systems, in finding new energy sources, in shared and consolidated services, in providing resources to the towns. New challenges cannot be solved with old ideas. It's time to move toward a more active and innovative philosophy of county government and away from a culture of cuts and deteriorating services.

We can be fiscally responsible and socially caring. New approaches don't mean automatic tax increases.

County government can innovate while adhering to the 2 percent county tax cap, especially considering that county taxes make up the smallest percentage of our property taxes, consisting of only 15 cents of each dollar; yet currently our county tax dollars are not buying us a good

and innovative government.

How can technology, revolutionary design and planning improve suburban life? My years in government have shown me that innovation saves money and creates new opportunities. We should establish task forces to look at solving long-standing traffic problems in the district, and work with state, county and local officials to develop efficient solutions and eliminate waste and duplication of services. We need to serve our more rural areas with better transportation alternatives

and improve cellular and broadband coverage. We need to support and grow both our small and larger business districts, and encourage millennials and

young families to move or stay in our communities, thereby increasing the attractiveness of each town.

How about establishing solar farms throughout the county, which will save money and reduce our carbon footprint? Or multi-town biking Sundays in the summer, perhaps through our county parks? Why can't an Innovation District be established in northern Westchester to speed development of new technologies and create economic opportunities? What should we be doing to leverage new technologies, such as autonomous vehicles, digital cur-

rencies, ridesharing, workplace automation and e-commerce? How do we prepare for an aging population and changes in demographics? What innovations — such as electric buses and trucks, micro grids, solar streetlights, state-of-the-art drainage and recycling systems, wind power, and other 100 percent renewable energy solutions — should we be exploring both to cut costs and proactively address the accelerating threat of climate change? Shouldn't the environmental initiatives of local groups like Bedford 2020 be expanded into policies and legislation that will benefit our entire county?

We need innovation and collaboration to preserve what we have and to grow sensibly. We have amazing talent in this district, and when we ask people to help solve an issue, they put forth incredible, innovative ideas. There are many nonprofits and academic institutions eager to provide us with intellectual capital, yet our current county government has a "cross our fingers and hope" attitude. The budgeting has been irresponsible, based on short-term fixes while they kick the can down the road on major improvements.

Westchester County can do more. It's time for an advocate in our Board of Legislators seat — one whose vote and values will make a difference. It's time to change for the better.

*Kitley Covill is the Democratic candidate for Westchester County Board of Legislators' District 2.*

---

*"I feel a responsibility to complete what I have started."*

---