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**Testimony of Onondaga County Executive Nicholas J. Pirro
NYSDOB Executive Budget Town Hall
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I'd like to welcome you to Onondaga County and thank you for hosting this event.

I appreciate the fact that you're here to listen to comments at the beginning of your budget process--rather than the end. It shows a great deal of good faith on your part.

As a County Executive, I also appreciate the fact that in your initial budget--the 2007 State budget--you resisted the temptation to lower State costs and taxes by shifting burdens from the State to counties.

As you know, that time-honored Albany practice has resulted unacceptably in high property tax burdens throughout New York State.

While I won't say the 2007 budget relieved that burden, it didn't add to it either.

We in the counties are especially grateful for the retention of the Medicaid cap and the ramp-up of aid for public nursing homes.

As you start to work on next year's budget--which we understand will be much more difficult than this year's--I trust the Administration will continue to view local property tax relief as a top priority...

....and that you won't slip back into the practice of balancing the State budget on the backs of local governments.

As you begin to develop the upcoming budget, there are some things I'd strongly recommend.

First, it is time to cap the local cost of the preschool special education program.

In 2008, 8% of Onondaga County's entire property tax levy was raised to pay for a program designed by the State and delivered primarily by local school districts.

Without any connection between the delivery of the program and responsibility for its costs, it's not surprising that PreK costs are rising at a faster rate than any other part of our entire budget.

And if our costs are far outpacing inflation, so are yours.

The Governor's own task force has recommended changing the way the PreK program is financed. I suggest the first step in this transition be a cap on the County's contribution.

Second, I recommend you revisit the plan to ease local jail overcrowding by moving State parole violators out of local jails more quickly.

Your facilities have excess capacity. Ours are full.

Last year, you had a good idea to move State parole violators into empty beds in State prisons, freeing up space in local jails without having a significant affect on State costs.

It was a good plan that had strong support among the counties.

Don't give up on it. I'd ask you to bring it back again.

Third...and this won't cost you anything at all...it is time to change the local sales tax threshold to 4%.

Today, almost every county in the State has a local sales tax rate higher than 3%. Most are now at 4%.

But State law requires any rate about 3% to be re-authorized by the State every two years.

That, in turn, creates an unnecessary risk to local government finances and credit standings.

I'd ask you to recognize today's reality...and initiate legislation that will allow counties to levy a sales tax of up to 4% without prior approval or periodic reauthorization by the State.

In closing, as you look at your options to close a budget gap, I'd encourage you to consider all but one.

I'd ask that you declare any suggestion to shift burdens from the State to counties and other local governments off limits.

If there isn't money to sustain a program, have the courage to cut it or find new State resources to pay for it.

Don't follow the well worn path of solving the State's budget problems by transferring them to local governments and...ultimately....local property taxpayers.

We know where that path leads—to overburdened property taxpayers, the flight of business, and local government that must use its limited resources to pay for State programs instead of basic local services.

Again, thank you for this opportunity.