

McClure: Northampton County Rose to the Challenges Caused By Pandemic

By Colin McEvoy

Acknowledging the difficulties faced in the past year, Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure commended county officials and staff for their efforts to keep citizens safe and small businesses afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic, while also looking ahead to what he expects to be a more positive future.

"While 2020 was not a good year, I think we can all agree it won't be forgotten anytime soon and, most importantly, despite all its difficulties, it didn't stop us from rising to the challenge and continuing to make progress," McClure said during his State of Northampton County address on April 13.

Held virtually this year, McClure's annual address was hosted by Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation. It can be viewed on LVEDC's Facebook page and YouTube channel, https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7g1SaVMnPa_QXoN7vIwR0Q.

McClure discussed how Northampton County responded to the COVID-19 crisis, acting quickly with the county Department of Community & Economic Development (DCED) to protect public health and mitigate the effects of the pandemic on small businesses, particularly those in the hospitality industry.

Out of the \$26.7 million Northampton County received from the CARES Act, more than \$10 million was put into small business assistance grants, proving them up to \$15,000 to help cover payroll, rent and other operating expenses.

Northampton County assisted 767 small businesses with these grants, McClure said, and the county is planning to put another \$10 million from the American Rescue Plan into this program again in 2021, McClure said.

"We need our small businesses to stay afloat until the pandemic ends and the economy begins to improve," he said. "I encourage everyone to support our small businesses by shopping local. The pandemic won't last forever, but its economic impacts will be extended if we have to rebuild our shops, stores and services from scratch, so please support them now so they can serve us later."

Also in 2020, using \$650,000 in funds from the federal CARES Act, DCED provided funding for broadband for K-12 students and veterans, McClure said. Every school district in Northampton County received grants to purchase hotspots for students who didn't have internet access at home, as well as software for teachers to use with remote instruction.

Since 2019, Northampton County has decreased expenditures by 17% through investments in technology, increased efficiencies, reduced travel, and by negotiating new contracts with vendors, McClure said.

Additionally, over the past three years, the county has invested \$12 million more in funds to preserve open space, farmland or environmentally sensitive areas, he said. A total of 216 farms covering 17,669 acres have been preserved.

"I've often said the future of Northampton County is green," McClure said. "One of the many lessons the pandemic taught us is the value of our recreational areas. During lockdowns, parks and trails were one of the few places residents and their families could go to relax and exercise."

McClure also discussed public works and infrastructure improvements in 2020, the opening of the county's first forensic center, how the Northampton County Prison operated during the pandemic, the Gracedale Nursing Home, and how county election officials handled the 2020 elections.

"This has been a hard year and it may not be over yet," McClure said. "However, I know that if we persevere we will overcome the ravages of COVID-19 and return to lives where we spend our weekends at an Iron Pigs game, or at Musikfest or at a farm show."

The State of Northampton County address is sponsored by Gross McGinley, Workforce Board Lehigh Valley, BSI Corporate Benefits, and Lehigh Valley International Airport.



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