

# Essex County State of the County Address

## ESSEX COUNTY EXECUTIVE DIVINCENZO PRESENTS

### 2024 STATE OF THE COUNTY ADDRESS

**Cedar Grove, NJ** – Essex County Executive Joseph N. DiVincenzo, Jr. presented his 2024 State of the County Address at the Essex County Hospital Center in Cedar Grove on Thursday, February 29<sup>th</sup>. The speech is an opportunity for the County Executive to share accomplishments of the past year and outline initiatives planned for the coming year.

Prior to the speech, a short video highlighted the impact that Turtle Back Zoo, Watsessing Park, Independence Park, Branch Brook Park, South Mountain Recreation Complex and the Donald Payne School of Technology have on children and were narrated by children who have special connections to those places. In addition, a video message of congratulations from Congressman Donald Payne, Jr. was played.

“Essex is a government that is anticipating needs and always evolving. From newborns, to children, to families, to seniors – at every stage of life we are always there to help people. We are improving the landscape for today and tomorrow” was how DiVincenzo began his speech.

He highlighted that the sound fiscal practices he has followed have enabled the ECUA to pay off \$102 million of debt and be debt free, ECIA to reduce its debt in half, and for the County to pay off the \$405 million for the Correctional Facility and retire all of the \$58 million of debt for our Hospital Center. “Our decisions will prevent future generations from being burdened,” he said.

Over the last six years, each of the Essex County Schools of Technology District’s have been modernized – Donald Payne School of Technology and Newark Tech in Newark and the West Caldwell School of Technology in West Caldwell. Students in the district also are excelling, taking classes at area colleges with some earning an Associate’s degree at the same time as their high school diploma. The Essex County College Satellite Campus also was redone with a new school building, soccer field and parking deck.

“Preparing for the future does not look the same for everyone. Our new continuing education and employment training program at our jail is helping to create lasting skills that can help inmates transition back into the community and workforce,” the County Executive said. He also spoke about a new initiative – the Restorative and Transformative Justice Hub Pilot Program – “to address the real issues that are negatively impacting the lives of our juveniles and hopefully keep them from ending up in our Juvenile Detention Center,” he added.

“Since the beginning, we have been laser focused on revitalizing our Parks System and providing recreation facilities that meet the changing needs of our residents,” he said. Among the many improvement projects were the opening of the Wally Choice Community Center in Glenfield Park in Montclair and the Cherry Blossom Welcome Center in Branch Brook Park in Newark. The Ronald Rice Sport Complex in Vailsburg Park in Newark was opened with

new football, baseball and softball fields and running track and Francis Byrne Golf Course received a comprehensive update.

“These projects immediately transform our landscape. But they have long-term impacts that benefit the community by giving youth up-to-date, safe fields where they can play with their friends, learn the game and understand the importance of sportsmanship,” he added.

Turtle Back Zoo also enjoyed a historic year and set a new attendance record of almost 980,000 visitors. Another highlight was the opening of the new Island Giants Exhibit featuring alligators and Komodo dragons. This exhibit was named in honor of Commissioner Patricia Sebold for her support for the zoo and Parks System.

DiVincenzo outlined a multitude of capital improvement projects that will be conducted this year. The list includes updating softball, baseball and soccer fields and tennis and paddleball courts, renovating the Parks Administration Building, modernizing Weequahic Golf Course and the two-mile rubberized walking path in Weequahic Park, completing construction of the new Bilal Beasley Community Center in Irvington Park and the new Sheriff Armando and Mary Fontoura Community Center in Independence Park, starting construction of the community center in Monte Irvin Orange Park and building the new Barry Ostrowsky Animal Welfare Center in Turtle Back Zoo and continuing the construction of the Essex County Wynona Lipman Family Courts Building in Newark.

“Modernizing facilities and opening new buildings are important but naming them in honor of past leaders builds confidence, pride and passes their legacies onto the next generation,” DiVincenzo said. The Samuel Okparaekwe Career Exploration & Technology Room was dedicated at 50 South Clinton to remember the former director who worked to empower and help others rejoin the workforce. Three bronze busts were added to the lobby of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Building to honor Supreme Court Justices Sonia Sotomayor and Thurgood Marshall and Civil Rights activist Rabbi Joachim Prinz. The County Executive added that a bronze bust of the late Lt. Governor Sheila Oliver will be dedicated in the spring.

“We have press conferences, open new facilities and dedicate buildings. All of this would not be possible without our 3,600 employees, collaborative partners, constitutional officers and agency chiefs,” DiVincenzo said. “When I look in the faces of our children and grandchildren, I see our future. They are why we do what we do. And I want to make it better for them. Our vision for the future is always about *Putting Essex County First!*”