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LOCAL & NEW YORK STATE

From Covid to Micron, Ryan McMahon steered county in historic times. It took a toll.

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Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon on the site of the future Micron semiconductor factory in Clay Tuesday, October 17, 2023. N. Scott Trimble | strimble@syracuse.com

By [Michelle Breidenbach](#) | mbreidenbach@syracuse.com

On his first adventure in his first full term as county executive, Ryan McMahon visited Microsoft in Seattle, then flew to a Washington, D.C. conference to talk about the county's work on early childhood intervention.

The county executive from Kings County, Washington, was supposed to appear with him on the panel.

"He got a phone call and abruptly left," McMahon said. "And what that call was was the first cases of Covid in the nursing homes in Seattle."

Before he left Washington, McMahon dropped by an event for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee — a who's who of New York politicians. Another guest would later be identified as "patient zero," a lawyer whose early case of Covid superspread throughout Westchester County and Manhattan.

That moment launched McMahon into a very different four-year term than he ever expected — one marked by wild ups and downs in his professional and personal life.

The pandemic gave McMahon unusual executive powers, exerting unprecedented control over every resident's daily life. A 40-year-old politician was deciding whether people could go to work, a wedding or the St. Patrick's parade.

The moments piled up in public as McMahon livestreamed daily briefings. Personal stresses also built up in ways few people saw. All that pressure took a toll on his health and his marriage.

At the same time, McMahon was moving forward on an entirely different track. He was quietly introducing a vacant Clay business park to site selectors for high-tech industries. In the second half of his term, he landed the biggest economic development project in New York state.

McMahon, a Republican, is asking voters to return him to office for another four years. He is challenged by Bill Kinne, a Democrat in the county legislature.

Kinne is hoping to win support from the variety of people McMahon disappointed along the way. Democrats, and some fellow Republicans, grew tired of McMahon's exertion of power and his insistence on spending millions in public money on tourism, including a new aquarium.

McMahon has little to say against Kinne.

"This is a referendum on me," McMahon said.

Losing our neighbors

McMahon's first full term as county executive can be split into two parts: Around-the-clock attention to a deadly virus. Then, intense negotiations to draw high-tech industry to the Syracuse area.

Syracuse Mayor Ben Walsh said he was watching a basketball game at home and texting McMahon – two Irish guys trying to decide whether to stop the St. Patrick's parade, one of the biggest days of the year for downtown bars, restaurants and hotels. There were no confirmed Covid-19 cases in Syracuse, but there had been an uptick in flu patients. The hospital was getting stressed.

"Given our respective roles, we felt it was important that we be on the same page," Walsh said. "And I think that really set the tone for the rest of the pandemic, we tried to respect each other's roles and responsibilities."

After that, the shutdowns got serious. McMahon said he asked schools to show their plans to continue educating and feeding students in the case of closure. Businesses sent workers home. Weddings were called off.

At one point, McMahon suggested people should stagger trips to the grocery store based on the year they were born.

Onondaga County would lose more than 1,000 people to the virus. Day after day, McMahon announced to a live audience how many of "our neighbors" had died.

Walsh said McMahon told him about the number of people complaining to him over shutdowns and masks. Walsh said he started to worry about McMahon.

"I was impressed with how often he was responding directly to those (emails), but you know, I could tell it was weighing on him," Walsh said. "I did worry about his health and wellbeing. But at the same time, I was really impressed with his strength as a leader."



Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon demonstrates how to wear a face mask on May 5, 2020.

Pandemic stress

McMahon, whose formal name is John Ryan McMahon II, grew up in Syracuse's Strathmore neighborhood.

He went to Bishop Ludden High School and graduated from Le Moyne College in 2002 with a bachelor's degree in political science and business administration. He has worked in marketing and mortgage banking.

McMahon was 23 when he first ran for public office. His first race for Syracuse city council is the only race he's lost. Two years later, in 2005, he ran again and won. McMahon served as one of only two Republicans on the city council.

In 2011, he won a seat on the county legislature. On the first day, he was elected chairman – the youngest person to ever hold that job.

McMahon became county executive in November 2018 to finish the term left vacant when County Executive Joanie Mahoney took another job.

He was elected to his first full term in 2019 with 55% of the vote over Democrat Tony Malavenda.

McMahon, then-wife Caitlin and their three children moved out of the city to the town of Onondaga in 2018.

As the pandemic dissolved, so did McMahon's marriage. He said he and his wife decided to co-parent and let go.

"Like everybody else, we have the same pressures," he said. "In many ways, more pressures than other families."

About one month ago, he proposed to his girlfriend Alicia Turner on Oneida Lake, near their new house in Cicero. Her picture is included in his campaign literature.

McMahon said he decided to be transparent about the toll the pandemic was having on his own life, in part, because he couldn't hide it.

The stress, combined with high blood pressure and an underlying thyroid condition, landed him in the hospital with nerve damage in his eye. He calls it a "vascular event," or a mini-stroke.

The illness happened around the same time vaccines were rolling out. He said it was the most stressful part of the whole pandemic.

"People could figure it out if you looked at me. My left eye, I couldn't control it because the muscle ripped off my nerve," he said. "I couldn't see."

The only way to keep working, he said, was to talk about it.

"I ended up the next day getting hundreds of emails and calls to the office saying 'This is what happened to us' and 'I had this problem. I think this is what you have'," he said. "I still have a box of notes and cards that people sent me throughout that period of time. Really meaningful."

The illness wore off a layer of steel McMahon said he had built up during the pandemic.

"No matter how tough and how devastating the information was, you could absorb it and you would react in a common, methodical way," he said. "After I got sick, I lost that adrenaline."

McMahon said he probably had the virus at one point, when he had back pain and other symptoms. He set an example by staying home in quarantine, he said. But even as he was telling others to test, he was not doing it himself.

“I was definitely scared of the PCR test,” he said. “Because they go up your nose. I’ve got a big thing with needles, too.”

After the pandemic, McMahon said, he lost a sense of purpose. Micron brought that back.



Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon is running for a second term. N. Scott Trimble | sttrimble@syracuse.com

Fish and microchips

The pandemic put on hold [Microsoft's plans](#) to build a tech hub in Syracuse.

But McMahon would make up for that loss several times over.

In October 2022, [Micron Technology](#) announced plans to spend up to \$100 billion to build a mega-complex of computer chip plants on land the county had hoarded under McMahon's leadership.

About two years ago, McMahon started courting site selectors for high-tech companies to consider setting up shop at White Pine Commerce Park, a 1,200-acre business park in Clay.

The county signed non-disclosure agreements with three possible tenants. They were also meeting with Gov. Kathy Hochul and U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer. The deals hinged on state and federal funding.

Executives at Micron, the company that said yes, also needed to be convinced that its thousands of highly paid workers would want to live in Central New York.

Micron CEO Sanjay Mehrotra visited the site on a frigid day in January.

“He challenged me. ‘What are you going to do on a day like today?’,” McMahon said.

Mehrotra shook his head at the suggestions to go skiing or snowmobiling, McMahon recalled.

“That’s when I started talking to him about the aquarium,” he said.

McMahon had asked a reluctant county legislature to spend \$85 million in county cash on a new aquarium at the Inner Harbor in Syracuse. It was a hard sell. He even cut a deal with one legislator – Democrat Charles Garland – offering \$4.5 million for new housing in his district.

Plenty of opponents are firm in their opinion that that kind of money should be spent on better housing, social services, health care and mental health – needs compounded by the pandemic.

At the time, McMahon said the county needs amenities like the aquarium to attract jobs. But he couldn’t reveal what he knew about Micron’s interest in the region.

McMahon also argues that adding jobs and increasing sales taxes is the solution to bringing people out of poverty. He says the county can do both. It was his first campaign promise.

“We don’t need to fund one set of priorities at the expense of other priorities,” he said.



U.S. Senator Chuck Schumer and Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon during the Micron announcement. Oct 04, 2022. Dennis Nett | dnett@syracuse.com

Unrest

In January 2022, the county legislature grew tired of being left out of decisions over spending millions of dollars sent by the federal government to stimulate the economy after the pandemic.

Democrats had a list of other grievances. They did not appreciate McMahon's heavy hand in redrawing district boundaries. They did not want the government to get into the aquarium business.

Three of the most conservative Republicans and the six Democrats formed an odd alliance and suddenly overthrew Chairman David Knapp, who was aligned with McMahon. They voted in Legislator Jim Rowley, a Republican who was angry enough to threaten a lawsuit over McMahon's pandemic spending.

Rowley said the two never resolved the issue. It would have taken a judge to say who was right. But Rowley is supporting McMahon in the November election.

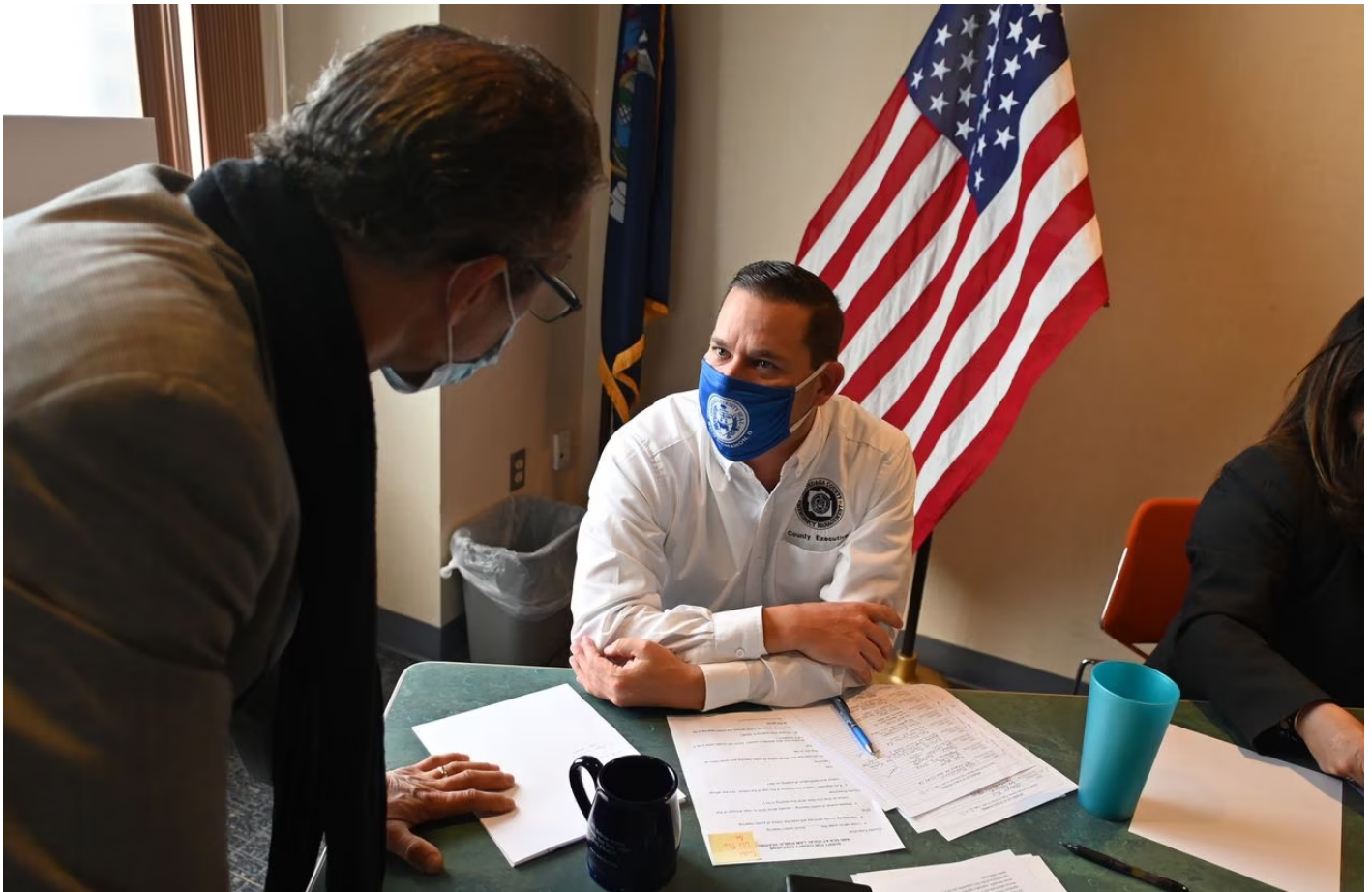
"He's done quite a bit in his short tenure as county executive and we need him at the helm as Micron kicks off here," he said.

He agrees with McMahon that Micron is Central New York's "Erie Canal moment."

"We wouldn't be on the map if he didn't stick his neck out and take a risk, expanding White Pine and staying focused," he said.

Rowley said, however, he thinks McMahon could be better at tipping his hand to legislators.

“He’s a busy guy and he runs all over the place,” Rowley said. “I think he could communicate with legislators a little bit better and help us understand how he’s leading the county so that we can either get behind him or not.”



Charles Garland, a Democratic county legislator, spoke to Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon (right) about redistricting on Nov. 19, 2021. Garland said the changes in his Syracuse district are “racial gerrymandering.” Katrina Tulloch | ktulloch@syracuse.com

Along with objections over the spending, detractors have also criticized McMahon for a lack of transparency and lack of urgency on their priorities. They also say McMahon has developed some arrogance. County employees, for example, scoff at the number of times his picture appears in county employee newsletters, throwing out the first pitch at the baseball game and delivering Meals on Wheels.

McMahon’s answer to concerns about social services, health care and housing don’t always satisfy activists.

In September, after a [Syracuse.com](#) story explored [high rates of lead paint poisoning in children](#), McMahon [announced \\$1.5 million more](#) for home repairs. Earlier, the county purchased a van to start testing kids at neighborhood events.

[Advocates were disappointed](#) in the slow rollout.

Jackie LaSonde, a South Side neighborhood activist, called the van a “snazzy new toy” that looks good on paper.

“Ryan McMahon is problematic because, although he’s aware of certain things he reads in the news, he’s oblivious to it,” LaSonde said. “It’s about the plan as he sees it.”

McMahon acknowledges there are things he needs to work on:

If the lead paint van is not testing enough children, he said, he would try to figure out why. The answer is probably because they want to make sure they are screening and testing children who want and need to be tested under state and federal guidelines.

“We need to reassess our outreach on site when we’re at these sites and quit acting so bureaucratic,” he said. “If they need to figure out a better way to interact people-to-people to get kids tested, then that’s what we need to do.”

He also said he needs to be a better manager. He oversees thousands of employees and a \$1.5 billion budget. But he said he is no good at delivering bad news, instead relying on his deputies to do it.

He said he needs to ask the legislature for money in smaller chunks.

He also knows he will have to prove himself.

He has promised to add thousands of new residents to a region with a housing shortage. He’s promised to remake the tax-delinquent dead malls Shoppingtown and Great Northern into centers of economic activity. He’s promised a new aquarium will spur more development at the Inner Harbor.

People have suggested McMahon’s next step could be a race for governor. Others joke that he could go work for Micron.

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” he said, laughing. “You never say no to anything, but I’m more valuable to Micron where I am, to get this thing through.”

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