



NEWS FROM **ULSTER COUNTY** County Executive Jen Metzger

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Ulster County and Chernivtsi Region of Ukraine Kick Off 'Sister Community' Exchanges with Agriculture Forum

KINGSTON, NY - Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger and Chair of the Legislature Peter Criswell today hosted a virtual forum with representatives from the Chernivtsi Regional Council of Ukraine, marking the first official exchange between the two regions since signing a historic 'Sister Community' agreement in April 2025.

The forum marked the first meeting between Ulster County and the Chernivtsi Region focused on agriculture — a vital sector for both communities. The discussion explored agriculture's role in the local economy, opportunities and challenges facing farmers, and the ways local governments can support this essential work. The event launched what will be a continuing dialogue and mutual learning process, bringing together farmers, government officials, and cultural leaders from both regions to share insights, challenges, and best practices in agriculture, agritourism, and sustainable development.

"Agriculture is a key sector of the economy for both of our regions, and we have a lot to learn from one another in terms of the challenges and opportunities facing our farms and how we are tackling them," **said Ulster County Executive Jen Metzger.** "By connecting our agricultural communities, we're not only sharing knowledge and strengthening our local economies — we're building relationships that transcend borders. I'm grateful to our Ukrainian partners and to our local farmers and experts who came together for this productive exchange. I think both sides learned a lot."

The virtual forum included presentations from Ulster County farmers and officials, including County Executive Metzger, Peter Criswell (Chair of the Legislature), Dina Suggs (Chief Diversity Officer, Deborah DeWan (Agriculture Services Coordinator), Lisa Berger (Director of Tourism), and Sarah Kramer-Harrison (Director of Arts, Culture & Open Spaces). Participating farmers

included Wes Hannah (Solid Ground Farms), Oleh Maczaj (Founder of Rusty Plough Farm and Rondout Valley Organics), Jake Wedemeyer (Ulster County Soil & Water Conservation District), Olivia Petrocella (Rondout Valley Growers Association), and Charles Hurd (Hurd Family Farm).

Representatives from the Chernivtsi Region in attendance included:

- Yurii Bodnar, Head of the Department for International Relations and Cross-Border Cooperation of the Chernivtsi Regional Council
- Liliia Bortych, Chair of the Agrarian Party of Ukraine faction in the Chernivtsi Regional Council, Chair of the Association of Agricultural Producers, Member of the Board of the Agrarian Union of Ukraine
- Oleksandr Shkuridin, Deputy of the Chernivtsi Regional Council
- Mykhailo Khmelevskyi, Deputy Director of the Department - Head of the Investment Policy and Tourism Department of the Chernivtsi Regional Military Administration
- Hrytsku Yuliia, Servant of the People faction
- Fochuk Svitlana, All-Ukrainian Association 'Batkivshchyna'
- Dobrzhanskyi Serhii, European Solidarity faction
- Malyshevskyi Ihor, For the Future faction
- Skoreiko Petro, The People's Control Public Movement

"This agricultural and cultural exchange represents exactly what we envisioned when the Legislature unanimously supported our Sister Community partnership with Chernivtsi," **said Peter Criswell, Chair of the Ulster County Legislature.** "By bringing together farmers, producers, and cultural leaders from both regions, we're building meaningful connections that will benefit both our communities for years to come. I was particularly moved to learn about Chernivtsi's innovative programs connecting agriculture and farming to healing for soldiers — it's a powerful example of how working the land can restore and renew."

"It was wonderful to meet our counterparts from the Chernivtsi region of Ukraine and hear their stories, especially given the challenges they're facing," **said Deborah DeWan, Agriculture Services Coordinator.** "I was struck by how much we share when it comes to agriculture — from fruit and orchard production to small-scale farms nestled in mountainous terrain and valleys. Our similarities really highlight the potential for meaningful exchange and mutual learning. I especially appreciated that we were able to bring our farmers directly into the conversation, and I found the Chernivtsi region's approach to agritourism incredibly inspiring. The entire experience was deeply moving, and I look forward to continuing this dialogue in the future."

Ulster County's Sister Community agreement with the Chernivtsi Regional Council was signed in April 2025, making Ulster the first County in the United States to formalize such a partnership with a Ukrainian region.

This exchange marked the first in a series of planned collaborations between Ulster County and the Chernivtsi Region, with future forums expected to continue exploring agriculture as well as expand into additional sectors such as education, arts, and municipal governance. Today's forum was recorded and will be made available to the public soon on the Ulster County government website.

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