

## **2023 State of the Borough**

Residents, elected officials, board members, volunteers, family and friends. We gather today for our annual reorganization of the boroughs governing body. As we close out 2022 and begin 2023, we reflect on our recent accomplishments and prepare for the challenges that we know lie ahead.

I would like to thank the Borough residents for once again putting their trust in me. Today marks the start of my fourth term as Mayor. I am honored and humbled to once again serve the town where I was born and raised. Additionally, the residents welcome back Councilwoman Mott and Councilman Smith. Your re-election renews the bond that you made nearly three years ago. Today, you formally accept the responsibility bestowed upon you by our fellow residents to govern the town in a responsible and fair manner. Congratulations to you and your families as you begin your new terms.

We have come a long way since March of 2020. Even though the final chapter of this pandemic has not been completed, we know brighter days lie ahead. So today, I continue to urge you to protect yourself, your loved ones and your fellow residents. Thank you for all that you have done so far.

In 2022, the Borough led by Chief Financial Officer Glenn Cullen and Council Finance Chair Bengivenga introduced a budget that once again put residents first and kept municipal property taxes in check. The municipal portion of your tax bill is up slightly over 1% over the last thirteen years. The borough's tax base continues to increase, poised for a nearly \$9 million dollar year over year increase and a nearly \$30 million dollar increase over the last three years. As a result, the borough has experienced a decline in borough tax appeals for 2022. South Plainfield continues to enjoy one of the lowest tax rates on real value in Middlesex County. We continued to balance capital investment against a responsible debt burden. Thank you to our Council members, Department Heads and borough employees alike who through a laser focus on borough finances, enable us to achieve the most benefit for each tax dollar received. Your continued efforts and accomplishments are appreciated by all of South Plainfield's tax payers.

The Department of Public Works continued to support the borough and our residents in numerous key areas. The department completed 2,180 bulk pickups, consisting of over 508 tons of waste in addition to 450 senior resident pickups. These services remain extremely popular and valued by residents across the borough. The department ensured the borough buildings, grounds and parks were maintained in addition to boroughs fleet of 95 vehicles and various pieces of equipment. Due to the high cost of asphalt, the borough scaled back the road improvement program for 2022, resurfacing an additional 1.5 miles of roadway, including the installation of storm on Cedar Ave. Thank you to Superintendent Miller and Councilwoman Mott and the entire department for your excellent work throughout the year.

Our Senior Center completed it's first full year of operation since reopening after the Covid 19 restrictions were relaxed statewide. Membership growth remains strong, up 15 percent in 2022. Popular classes and activities such as Yoga, Health Bones, Exercise with Greg and Zumba continue to flourish, averaging 55 participants per class. Programs such as billiards, crocheting, the book club, the veterans club and Gracefully made also continue to garner solid support. Vital programs such as the Congregate Meal Program and Meals on Wheels remained strong in 2022.

The South Plainfield Library returned to fully in-person programming in 2022 while continuing to offer a hybrid option. Annual circulation numbers held steady at 140,000 items borrowed. Nearly 800 programs were offered for children, teens and adults with over 20,000 attending. All full time library

staff were trained and certified in CPR/AED by the American Heart Association. The library also had 3 AED units installed in various places around the building. In addition to staff training, they hosted several training programs that were partially subsidized by the Friends of the Library to give our patrons the opportunity to be certified as well.

Library staff members were invited to make a presentation to the Libraries of Middlesex County regarding the hybrid meeting room capabilities due to its status as one of the more sophisticated setups in the area. We also had several visits from other library staff to come and see it in action. Thank you to Library Director Hansen, staff members and our library board of trustees for all of your hard work and service to our residents during this tough period.

The Municipal Clerk's office continues to provide necessary services to our residents in a timely and organized fashion. The office administered an election that introduced technology changes at both the voting booth and the check-in process throughout the County. The borough continues to keep residents informed via important tools such as Twitter, Nixle and Facebook, with my assistant Anne Daley leading the effort. Anne is often the first contact for many of our residents as they visit borough hall. Thank you to our Clerk, Administration and Finance employees who ensured residents continued to have nearly uninterrupted access to complete vital services throughout the year.

Our Public Celebrations and Cultural Arts Committees continued to provide town-wide popular events for all residents. The Labor Day Parade returned to South Plainfield, on Labor Day after a couple of years. Trunk or Treat continues to be one of the committees most popular events, welcoming over 1,000 residents. Working with our First Responders, the Committee orchestrated the second annual Holiday Light Parade and Tree Lighting event. Thank you for your tremendous efforts throughout the year.

Throughout 2022, Councilman Derryck White worked with our Building Department and the business community to showcase South Plainfield to prospective new businesses. We continued to attract new businesses of all sizes to town, from national chains to local operations. We were pleased to see the opening of LA Fitness at Oak Park Commons and the announcement of a new Sakar ShopRite to anchor Middlesex Mall. These are only a few of the latest additions to the South Plainfield business community. In addition, we continue to focus on improving the operation of the boroughs building and zoning process for residents with the goal of implementing online department forms and permitting applications. We also offer a sincere thank you to our Zoning and Planning Board members for your countless volunteer hours and your continued dedication to serving our community.

Public Safety will always remain a key focal point. In 2022 the Police Department continued to protect and serve the borough, maintaining key staffing levels. While the borough experienced a number of retirements, the department hired four additional officers during the year. In addition, the department expanded the Juvenile division and hired five Special Law Enforcement Officers who will provide security for all of the borough schools.

The department held the popular National Night Out celebration, partnering with a number of borough organizations, committees and private businesses. As frontline workers, our first responders continued to provide vital services to our residents while ensuring their personal health and safety. Our Office of Emergency Management continued to oversee the key procurement process for personal protective equipment through their counterparts at the Middlesex County Office of Emergency Management. The

department has begun to receive reimbursements from FEMA due to Tropical Storm Ida, with over \$300,000 in additional funds anticipated to be received in 2023.

The Borough continues to work with our Board of Education on a number of issues with none more important than school safety. In 2022 the Borough and Board of Education fostered a shared service agreement that enabled the Borough to hire special law enforcement officers in every elementary school. I want to thank everyone involved with the Shared Services Committee. They worked hard to come up with a plan that further ensured the upmost security at our schools.

Fire Prevention continued to meet the needs of borough business and residents throughout the year. The department completed all required annual fire inspections throughout the year. The Fire Department continues to attract and retain volunteers while responding to over 900 calls throughout the year. Thank you Councilman Wolak and Chiefs Parker and Scalera for your leadership. A special thank you to our volunteer first responders for your dedication to the borough.

The New South Plainfield Community Pool followed up it's initial record setting year with a nearly 11% increase in individual visits to the pool to 30,622 visits. Over 1,000 memberships were sold in addition to over 2,400 daily passes. Revenue increased nearly 18% to almost \$470,000. The pool offered swim lessons, the swim team, senior only hours and specialized swim times for families with special needs. In summary, the pool operated at a profit for the first time this century. Thank you Council President Faustini and our Recreation Director Yarus for all of your hard-work in making our beloved Community Pool one of the best in the State.

In 2022, the Recreation Department brought back all of their previous programs plus new offerings. The Recreation Basketball program welcomed over 400 children to complement the popular Recreation Wrestling and STEM programs. In March, the department was pleased to offer the Second Annual Bunny Hop, the pandemic inspired program which replaced the Easter Egg Hunt. This fun and free event provided over 600 South Plainfield children and their families a chance to hop down the bunny trail at Putnam Park. During the summer, the department offered Summer Parks, Safety Town, STEM, Lacrosse, Cheer and Sport Camps. Fall offerings included STEM, Adult Aerobics, Buddy Ball, Field Hockey among others.

The Recreation Department was also instrumental in supporting resident Kristy Lowry on the design, implementation and unveiling of the COVID Memorial at Putnam Park. This memorial honors those who lost their life to COVID and offers residents of the borough and surrounding areas a beautiful area to reflect and remember love ones lost during the pandemic. Thank you Mrs. Lowry, Mrs. Yarus and Councilwoman Faustini and all of the businesses and organizations who helped make this idea into a reality.

The Environmental Commission and Green Team continued to successfully implement their programs and initiatives during 2022. The Green Team worked with the High School Environmental Science Club on the Anti-Idling campaign and on raising awareness on the Plastic Bag Program implemented by the state. The Clean Communities Advisory Board successfully planned and implemented the annual Spring and Fall Town Clean Up events. The Highland Woods Nature Reserve was awarded funds for deer fencing to protect additional acreage. The Reserve continues to remain open seven days a week, from dusk to dawn for the enjoyment of residents. The Green Team received it's Bronze Certification Award and successfully petitioned the Governing Body to pass a Solar Friendly resolution in April. After years of research and debate, the Historical Sites Preservation successfully recommended to the governing

body to correct the boroughs date of incorporation on the borough seal. Thank you Councilman Smith for your dedicated work with both the Environmental Commission and the Historical Society.

As we start 2023, our foremost priority will not change. We remain committed and focused on providing essential services to our residents while keeping taxes and spending under control. This means adopting a municipal budget that adequately funds municipal operations while ensuring our residents get the maximum return for each municipal tax dollar and maintaining our existing credit rating. The Finance Department will continue to make investments to upgrade and enhance the financial operations of the department.

Our Recreation Department will look to further expand programs and seek out new programming opportunities. The department is seeking to implement a 10 week Full Day Camp to meet community needs. Upgrades and new structures are planned for Walnut Street Park. The department will oversee the implementation of the Putnam Park Revitalization Plan, financed in part through a \$595,773 Middlesex County Open Space Fund Grant. Improvements will include new tennis and Pickleball courts, a ½ mile paved walking path, a pavilion, playground and workout stations. In addition, upgrades including the installation of turf replacement is planned for the Memorial Field.

Investments in our borough infrastructure will also remain a top priority for 2023. With the assistance of over \$417,000 in New Jersey Department of Transportation Municipal grant and the design phase nearly complete, we will repave New Market Ave. Norwood Avenue is also planned for reconstruction during the summer, financed through an additional NJDOT grant in excess of \$600,000.

Investments will continue to be made in our police officers, 911 communication operators and firefighters through additional personnel, vehicles, training, supplies and technology. Through a \$370,000 Homeland Security Grant, work will begin in 2023 to upgrade the boroughs 911 System and Dispatch Center.

Our Boards and Agencies will be working to provide exciting activities throughout the new year. The Mayors Wellness program will look to re-introduce Wellness Fairs that were popular in the borough prior to the pandemic.

On the Environmental front, the commission aims to fence an additional two acres at the Nature Reserve to protect against deer damage. The Clean Communities Advisory board will look to implement “Bash the Trash” and recruit adopters for vacant “Adopt a Spot” locations. We will continue to work with our curbside pickup provider to improve customer service and communication of recycling policy changes. Lastly, the commission looks to obtain historic Native American artifacts from the Colonial Oaks Development through gift or loan.

As I begin my fourth term as Mayor, I’m proud of what we have accomplished through difficult time during the last several years. I remain optimistic about what lies ahead for South Plainfield and our ability to meet the challenges ahead. May God bless you and protect you. Best wishes for a healthy, happy and prosperous 2023.