

2019 State of the Borough

Today we gather to reorganize our local government. A byproduct of the sacrifice of our brave men and women who have served our country over the years to defend our freedom and the rights that many take for granted. Thank you to our residents, families and special guests who join us as we reflect on 2018 and prepare for the challenges of a new year.

Just over eight weeks ago the residents of our borough bestowed a great honor upon Councilman Bengivenga, Wolak and me. They entrusted each of us with another term of elected service to our fellow residents. I've known these gentlemen and their families for many years, and I couldn't be prouder of them or more eager to work alongside them for the next several years. Congratulations gentlemen on your hard work and dedication. A special thank you to my wife Kimberly, and my sons Joseph and Harrison for their love, support and dedication to our town.

This past year we continued to execute on our multiyear plan to invest in our hometown through targeted capital investment with a keen focus on stabilizing municipal taxes through sound financial policies and budgeting. The borough in 2018 adopted a municipal budget that held the municipal tax rate below the 2009 rate and kept municipal taxes flat for the second consecutive year. This is the portion of your tax bill controlled by this governing body. Thank you Councilman Bengivenga, Chairman of the Finance Committee and to our Chief Financial Officer and Administrator Glenn Cullen for your leadership. A special thanks to our borough Department Managers for their efforts in the financial management of their departments.

The borough continues to have one of the lowest tax rates in Middlesex County. It's important to note that these budgetary accomplishments are not the net result of layoffs or service cuts. Rather, they are the result of fair labor negotiations, a focus on health care costs and a desire to seek the best alternative to deliver basic governmental services through a mix of in-house, contracted or shared services. Once again, the financial ratings agencies reaffirmed the Borough's Aa credit rating and outlook.

The borough had its most aggressive road improvement program in recent memory. A total of 10.1 miles or roughly 10% of the roadways under the borough's jurisdiction were paved in 2018. This includes work in association with the Middlesex Water Company Renew program and PSE&G's gas main upgrades. Critical infrastructure upgrades were completed including the installation of storm sewers on Orchard Drive and Risoli Terrace. Hadley Road Phase 1 was completed with partial funding from a NJ Department of Transportation grant of \$330,000.

Our Department of Public Works through the efforts and leadership of Superintendent Len Miller designed, managed and assisted in the installation of decorative lights at borough hall and the library. The department continued to maintain all borough buildings, grounds and parks, including maintenance of the fleet of 95 vehicles, 100 miles of roadway and various equipment. With the assistance of a new garage truck, the department completed 2,053 bulk pickups and collected weekly yard debris from over 400 senior residents. The department also managed the borough compactor which handled an additional 160 tons of bulk debris over the expanded 2018 schedule.

Progress continued at Willow Park with the installation of inclusive play equipment, compliments of the South Plainfield Public Library. The PAL building saw the installation of a new digital sign and the completion of a large addition to the Wrestling room. Programs such as Travel Basketball continued to be well received. New programs such as the Buddy Ball program for special needs residents inspired residents of all ages.

Our Police Department saw the hiring of seven new officers including the implementation of three Special Resource Officers. Thank you to the Board of Education, the Borough's Public Safety Committee, Dr. Lishak and Chief Parker for your efforts in providing this vital service to our schools and community. The Council approved a multiyear, multi-agency investment in our police training range that will ensure top tier training of our officers. Combined with annual investments in training and equipment, this represents our commitment to ensuring the safety of our community and our children. Thank you, Chief Parker, for your continued leadership of both our Police Department and Office of Emergency Management.

Fire Chief Scalera and EMS Chief Laferrera continued their strong leadership of boroughs volunteer first responders. Our 50 active rescue squad volunteers donated over 21,000 hours of service and responded to over 800 calls last year and they remain one of the only squads in the county that does not bill for their service. The Fire Department remained active seeing an increase of 220 calls and hundreds of hours of firefighter training. These fine men and women continue to dedicate their time to train and respond to resident calls. We thank them for their dedication.

2018 was truly a transformational year for the building department. New computer terminals were installed at all employee desks with the inclusion of new Construction Manager and Zoning Manager software with shared access across all departments. The boroughs telephone system was replaced to allow for better functionality across the borough. In addition, the department continued to offer workshops to help residents prepare for popular home improvement projects. We welcomed new businesses such as Dollar General, Fit Body Boot Camp, Blue Fox Craft Beer Restaurant and we celebrated the reopening of the Motor Vehicle Agency with longer hours and additional parking. While we are sad to see Hobby Lobby go, highly anticipated new businesses for 2019 include Chick-fil-A and Ulta. Thank you to Councilman White for your continued efforts to showcase all that South Plainfield has to offer to our current and prospective businesses.

To quote Senior Center Director Tree Olano, "the Senior Center was super successful in 2018". Membership is up 10% and daily attendance is up 12%. New classes such as Advanced Healthy Bones, the book club, Diabetes Clinic and Gracefully Made art classes have been welcomed additions to popular classes such as Yoga, Zumba, billiards and knitting. The center fish tank is now almost a year old and has proven to be a focal point of relaxation and conversation.

Our Cultural Arts Commission and Public Celebrations Committee continued to host town wide events including our Labor Day Parade, Talent Show, Line Dancing, Art Showcase and Trunk or Treat. New events for 2018 included a Murder Mystery show and Holiday Lights contest.

A variety of challenges impacted the recycling program this past year, ranging from severe weather to geopolitical disruptions of secondary material markets. However, with the help from the Department of Public Works, the residential recycling program operated throughout the year and collected over 6,000 tons of recyclable solid waste. The borough received a record \$147,822 tonnage grant and a \$15,000 Recycling Enhancement Grant from Middlesex County. Residents continued to embrace the MyWaste app to receive information about pickup schedules and general information. 29,543 reminders about collection days and events were distributed. And finally, this past December we joined a new RecycleCoach initiative. This social media campaign is educating residents about important recycling practices.

The Environmental Commissions spring and fall litter cleanups saw 250 volunteers collect over 7 tons of litter. The Green Team received a capacity building grant from Sustainability Jersey. The team sponsored a town wide essay and video contest on how South Plainfield can become a more sustainable community. Lastly, the team utilized social media to reach the public with environmental news and conservation ideas.

The borough completed its Council on Affordable Housing 3rd round obligation through a court approved settlement. This agreement created overlay zones in the downtown district and a new multifamily site off Durham Ave. This agreement was bipartisan because it limited the boroughs exposure to high density housing. While this agreement fulfills the boroughs obligations through 2025, we must advocate for smart growth policies that put municipalities first, not developers.

Our goals won't change with the New Year. We must remain focused on delivering essential residential services while ensuring South Plainfield remains affordable. Starting with our borough budget, we must introduce a budget that funds the critical areas of investment needed to move our borough forward while maintaining our focus on property taxes.

Borough wide 2019 initiatives and investments include a new vehicle for our Senior Center, a computerized property card system and extended counter hours for our building department, digitized tax maps, additional Fire Prevention awareness training, continued investment in our recreation programs and parks. In 2019 we will complete Hadley Road Phase 2 funded with a \$881,550 grant from the NJDOT Municipal Aid Program. Our Capital Road Improvement Program will once again coordinate with utility companies as they complete their line replacement programs. We will invest in additional police and EMS vehicles and expand the critical K9 program with a 3rd K9 Officer made possible through a recently announced grant from Alpha Assembly Solutions.

2019 will also allow for unprecedented resident involvement in major borough decisions. Currently targeted for March, Democracy Week will seek resident input on three important issues facing our borough. First, our community pool requires major capital investment likely to exceed \$1.5 million dollars for structural repairs, decking and piping replacements as well as ADA enhanced access.

Second, with increased rail traffic and technological advancements, the potential for silent rail crossings has become a major desire for residents across the state and here in town. Preliminary designs to accomplish silent crossings in town

come with an estimated price tag to borough residents at nearly \$3 million dollars.

Third, while the state legislature has decided to forgo resident input through a ballot question concerning the legalization of marijuana, the governing body will seek resident input on whether to allow for retail marijuana distribution in town. To prepare residents for these three very different public questions, information sessions will be held with borough managers and professionals.

As I begin my third term as mayor, I remain confident that we have the necessary ingredients to meet our current and future challenges. Our active and giving residents, talented employees, dedicated volunteers and responsive officials will ensure we remain a desired destination for families and seniors. Best wishes to everyone for a happy, healthy and prosperous 2019.