

## **2021 State of the Borough**

Residents, elected officials, board members, volunteers, family and friends. This State of the Borough will be unlike others that I have delivered over my tenure as mayor. Normally, we gather for our annual borough government reorganization at Borough Hall, or our Senior Center. This year, we gather virtually as the governing body has done for most of the past year. As we close out 2020 and begin 2021, we reflect on the effects of the pandemic, our recent accomplishments and prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

Today we welcome back to two public servants who have proven to be dedicated and talented governing body members. Councilwoman Faustini and Councilman White, the residents have renewed their trust and faith in you and your ability to move South Plainfield forward. You understand the tremendous responsibility that comes with your positions and so the charge is simple. Serve the community well and you will have a successful term. Congratulations to you and your families as you begin your new terms.

2020 quickly changed life as we know it. In early March, with COVID-19 cases rapidly rising, much of the country shut down. While many employers and workers shifted to a work-from-home posture, too many businesses could not operate in a remote environment. The resulting impact was a rapid rise in business closures and unemployment. Normal everyday life activities and milestone moments were altered, postponed or canceled. Graduations, weddings, birthday parties and even funerals were altered in various ways. Public gatherings and celebrations were nearly eliminated. This pandemic has affected every resident in the borough in different ways and varying degrees. Over 1,500 residents have had confirmed cases of COVID-19. Sadly, 45 residents died as a result of the virus. We owe a special debt of gratitude to our first responders, our nurses, and hospital workers. We extend that gratitude to the many workers in the retail and service industries including our very own municipal employees. Your dedication and perseverance have made life a little easier for each and every one of us during these trying times.

Many residents found the challenge of COVID-19 as a call to action to help others. Through the spring and summer, individuals and groups such as FLAG (Front Line Appreciation Group) and others raised funds and offered food to help those in need. Our Board of Education and the entire school community offered borough wide events to lift spirits and raise funds such as Light the Fight. South Plainfield residents' charitable ways closed out the year with a record amount of donations for the annual Toys for Tots campaign. We appreciate the many donations to the South Plainfield Food Pantry and the hard work of Heather Barry to serve our residents in need.

Although we are not yet ready to end the Daily Coronavirus Updates, we know brighter days lie ahead. Three vaccines are making their way throughout the state and the county. So today, I continue to urge you to adhere to the CDC guidelines to protect yourself, your loved ones and your fellow residents. Thank you for all that you have done so far.

The Pandemic aside, 2020 was a busy year across the entire borough. The Borough modified work processes to maintain as much normalcy in operations as possible. Through the leadership of Chief Financial Officer Glenn Cullen and Council Finance Chair Bengivenga the borough 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 less than 1% over the last eleven years. The borough's tax base continues to increase, poised for a nearly \$7 million dollar increase. Through a department wide focus on borough finances, 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 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 our in-house bulk pickup program, completing a record 2,363 pickups consisting of over 590 tons of waste in addition to 505 senior resident pickups. In addition to the normal maintenance of borough buildings, grounds and parks, the department maintained the boroughs fleet of 95 vehicles and various equipment. Throughout the borough, the Department of Public Works coordinated with our Traffic Safety department to install signage in accordance with revised borough traffic ordinances. Traffic signals were upgraded at Hadley Road and Corporate Boulevard to improve traffic flow. The borough has continued to make improvements to pedestrian accessibility for all residents by installing ADA curb ramps and sidewalks throughout the borough in association with our repaving projects. Thank you Councilwoman Mott and the entire department for your excellent work throughout the year.

Our Engineering Department assisted with the improvements and repaving of Corporate Boulevard, Cragwood Road and St. Nicholas Avenue. The Borough received a total of \$1.17 million in NJDOT grants to complete these projects. Additionally, the borough repaved approximately 2 miles of roadway in 2020 and made repairs to sanitary sewers.

Our Senior Center provided vital services and support to our seniors throughout the year. Even after closing in March due to the pandemic, the staff at the center continued their community outreach and planning of virtual events and welcome check-in calls. Many local businesses were eager to support our Center and our seniors, such as Twin City Pharmacy, Sals Spirit Shop, McCriskin Gustafson Home for Funerals and many more. They sponsored hybrid events throughout the summer months including a drive by barbecue. As our seniors grew more comfortable with the new virtual world, programs such as Zoom Chair Yoga and Zumba classes were implemented. Also, when there was a need to get out many seniors ventured over to the Community Pool to lounge in the vortex and socialize with good friends. Our Seniors are special and we will continue to look at ways to keep them engaged while we deal with the COVID-19 virus with the number one goal of keeping them healthy and safe.

The South Plainfield Library recognizing the important role they play in our community altered their programs to continue to offer our residents the vital services they provide. The staff

quickly worked to comply with state guidelines to re-open the building in mid-July. In addition to curbside services, the reopened building allowed for critical services such as access to computers, printers, copiers and notary services. While programs declined as a result of the pandemic, the decrease was minimal, less than 5%. 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 unprecedented paper ballot election for both the Primary and General elections. In addition, our Clerk executed a smooth transition of the Board of Health and Vital Statistics Office into the Clerks Office. The borough continues to keep residents informed via important tools such as Nixle and Facebook, with my assistant Anne Daley leading the effort. Anne is often the first contact for many of our residents and she was vital in implementing operating changes brought upon by the pandemic. Thank you to our Clerk 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 to enjoy despite the pandemic. Virtual events and drive through celebrations provided much needed relief for our residents. From Trunk or Treat, to the New Year's Eve Luminary display, from the Holiday Lights Tour to the virtual tree lighting, to the Labor Day March Down Memory Lane, the events were well attended and meticulously planned. Thank you for your tremendous efforts throughout the year.

Throughout the pandemic, Councilman Derryck White continued to work 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 such as Chick-Fil-A to small businesses such as Create That Party and Boss Hogg BBQ. We were also pleased to see current business renovate or expand in town, including the new Aldi's. Thank you to our Zoning and Planning Board members for your countless volunteer hours and your continued dedication to serving our community.

Our Building Department also adjusted to the pandemic by enacting residential service modifications that allowed the department to remain open. This included modifications to home inspection and homes sales to comply with the Governors Executive Orders. Our Tax Department implemented several software upgrades to streamline operations. The department remained available throughout the pandemic with enhanced protection protocols implemented.

Public Safety will always remain a key focal point. In 2020 the Police Department adapted to the ongoing public health crisis without impacting public safety. As frontline workers along with our EMS and Fire Department, our first responders continued to provide vital services to our residents while ensuring their personal health and safety. Our Office of Emergency Management oversaw the key procurement process for personal protective equipment through

their counterparts at the Middlesex County Office of Emergency Management. In partnership with the Board of Education, our School Resource Officers continued to play a vital role in ensuring the safety of our students throughout the year.

Fire Prevention completed all Life Hazard inspections as required throughout the pandemic. Office upgrades were completed and additional upgrades are planned for 2021 to enhance the efficiency of the department. The Fire Department continues to attract and retain volunteers while responding to over 900 calls throughout the year. Our volunteer EMS currently boasts 45 members who responded to over 700 call throughout the year. Thank you Councilman Wolak and Chiefs Parker, Scalera and Laferrera for your leadership. A special thank you to our volunteer first responders for your dedication to the borough.

After receiving public support during Democracy Day 2019, the borough began the process of reinventing the South Plainfield Community Pool. After several delays including COVID-19 operating guidelines, the pool was opened and provided residents with a small respite from the ongoing pandemic. This project received critical support from Administrator Cullen, Director Yarus, Superintendent Miller and Council President Faustini. The Engineering Department provided technical assistance during many phases of the project including management and coordination of various contractors. Specific involvement included the renovation of the pool house, the partial rebuilding of the pump house, the installation of concrete decking, curbing and shade structures. Recreation Director Yarus patiently worked with an eager Governing body to work within the state's guidelines and offer residents a pandemic shortened season.

The Recreation Department faced major challenges operating during the pandemic. After the initial shutdown in March, the department began operating in August under the State's new guidelines. They quickly partnered with the Board of Education to offer an outdoor movie experience for residents. Various youth sports programs and camps including soccer, cheer, field hockey, buddy and youth basketball were offered. While many Winter programs have been postponed due to further Executive Orders, the Recreation Department kept the season alive through their sponsorship of their very first snow man making competition.

After several years with significant vacancies, our Environmental Commission began the year with all volunteer positions filled. Our Clean Communities Program's Spring Cleanup was canceled as a result of COVID-19. However, the Fall Cleanup attracted 120 volunteers who collected over 95 bags of litter. In addition 9 Adopt a Spots contracts were renewed. Our Clean Neighborhoods Program Aide remained strong, clearing litter from 919 storm drain grates, collected 4 tons of roadside trash and removed 928 illegally posted signs from the boroughs right-of-way. Grant funds were used to pay for two part-time Recycling Groundskeepers and anti-littering signage. Our Green Team received support from the Governing body and advocated for adoption of Sustainable Jersey's Land Use Pledge, Green Building Pledge and the Companion Animal Management Plan. Councilman Smith has proven to be a tireless advocate for the department, working with employees and volunteers to move the agenda forward.

As we start 2021, 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.

We look forward to opening the Community Pool for the summer season. Based on the feedback from our residents, we know the community pool is sure to be an asset to the borough for many years to come. The abbreviated 2020 season has provided insight to enact further modifications and adjustments to make the 2021 pool experience even greater. I want to thank our residents for their patience and look forward to exciting 2021 pool season.

For 2021, our Recreation Department is looking to expand programs to include non-sports related activities and to expand our communication outreach to the community. Significant improvements to Putnam Park, Pitt Street Park, Cotton Street Park and Shadyside Park are planned.

Investments in our borough infrastructure will also remain a top priority for 2021. With the assistance of over \$438,000 in New Jersey Department of Transportation Municipal grants, we will complete improvements to the entire length on Durham Avenue. Improvements to the pool and PAL parking lots as well as the repaving of Cady Lane are planned. In addition, we will continue to coordinate our annual Road Resurfacing program with new utility company projects planned throughout the borough.

Investments will continue to be made in our police officers, 911 communication operators, firefighters and EMS personnel through additional vehicles, training, supplies and technology.

Phase #3 of the Home Town Heroes program will be implemented by the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. The newly added Veteran Banners will be displayed along Hamilton Boulevard, South Plainfield Avenue and Church Street. I'd like to thank American Legion Post 243, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Councilman White, Joe Sacco and all those that have come together and recognizing our veterans and their amazing sacrifices to America.

Deferred initiatives in our building department will be pursued in the new year. Initiatives include the introduction of card payments for services such as building permits and application fees. In addition, based on resident feedback, the department is looking to implement a late night to better meet their needs. Technology improvements are also planned for our Tax Department to streamline essential functions and digitize our tax maps. Our Clerks office will look to administer another essay contest for High School students, building off the success of the 2020 contest. In addition, the office will implement changes to the pet licensing process and continue to modernize Health and Vital Statistics systems.

Our Boards and Agencies will be working to oversee and provide exciting activities throughout the new year. Our newly created Human Relations Committee will work with key boards to assist them in ensuring our programming reaches our entire community. The Mayors Wellness

program will look to expand into the virtual world in 2021 by offering virtual events aimed at ensuring our residents wellness as we continue to navigate the pandemic. Among other initiative, our Senior Center is planning to bring the popular program, Healthy Bones to the virtual world for 2021.

On the Environmental front, the committee aims to make recommendations to the governing body in several areas including a comprehensive policy on signage and a revision of the Tree Protection Ordinance. We will continue to work with our curbside pickup provider to improve customer service and communication of recycling policy changes.

As we reflect back on 2020 and the challenges that lie ahead, I'm proud of our collective response to the pandemic and what we have accomplished. 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 2021.