

2015 State of the Borough Address

Thank you for joining us today as we reorganize our local government, reflect on the challenges and triumphs of 2014, and look forward to the start of a new year. I am honored to begin my second term as mayor of this great borough. As I stated four years ago, you have my word that I will do everything in my power to ensure South Plainfield remains a community we can all be proud to call home.

Today, we welcome back Councilmen Barletta and White after their successful re-election to the borough council. Just as they did three years ago, the residents of South Plainfield have bestowed upon you a great honor that comes with great responsibility. Continue to listen to their concerns, leverage your strengths and keep an open mind and you will fulfill your responsibility. Congratulations and best wishes on your new term.

Throughout 2014, we benefited from our multi year plan to stabilize municipal taxes, control spending, maintain a beneficial mix of residential and commercial development and continued investment in our borough. Led by Councilman Rusnak, Chief Financial Officer Glenn Cullen and the administration and finance committee, the borough adopted a 2014 budget that held municipal taxes flat and kept them below the 2009 rate. The borough's overall tax rate once again remained the second lowest in Middlesex County. Additionally, municipal spending and borrowing remained tightly controlled. The financial community recognized the successful efforts of this governing body's plan to ensure a strong financial foundation by reaffirming the borough's AA bond rating. In addition to our efforts, I would like to recognize and congratulate our borough department heads for their commitment to strong financial management.

South Plainfield remained a desired destination not only for families but also for new and existing businesses. We welcomed Planet Fitness, Corner Bakery, Advance Auto, Book House Day Care and Nu Salon just to name a few. Corporate expansion remains robust with Royal Coffee New York and Genewiz expanding operations within the borough. When Restaurant Depot outgrew their current location, their options throughout the state were numerous. We are happy they have chosen to remain in South Plainfield and will be opening shortly on New Durham Avenue. Perhaps nothing better illustrates our desire to balance a business friendly focus with responsible, controllable growth then the reconstruction of the intersection of Durham Ave, Bushwick Ave and Helen Street. McDonalds Corporation, in conjunction with our zoning board, borough council and borough engineers led the \$400,000 realignment of the intersection at no cost to the borough. We have already seen improved traffic flow through this vital corridor.

In 2014, we broke ground on new library expansion project that will double the size of the current building. Thank you to the entire staff of the library and to past and present members of the Library Board of Trustees for all of your hard work and dedication. This new library will be a tremendous asset for all South Plainfield residents to enjoy for years to come.

Our Public Works Department continues to receive the investment required to ensure that they can deliver the most efficient, flexible and resident focused service anywhere in the state. In 2014, we made capital investments in vehicles and machinery designed to provide year round benefit to our residents. The purchase of pavement striping equipment has

enabled the department to maintain crosswalk, stop bar and other vital road markings in-house, more timely and less expensive than outsourcing. The department's 'Pick Ups on Demand' service maintained its year round availability to our residents.

Our Recreation Department continues to experience impressive growth in resident participation and new programs. Our travel basketball program expanded from 3 to 7 teams. The PAL Weight Room took delivery of thirteen new cardio machines and we saw increases in popular programs from the annual Easter Egg hunt to memberships in the community pool. In 2014, the Recreation Commission honored Tom McCreesh and Ed Devine as the latest recreation program volunteers to earn the Cappy Award.

Our Senior Center continues to build upon the impressive accomplishments over the last several years. Membership is continuing to grow, up 11% over 2013. With assistance from the Rutgers Cooperative Gardeners Club and the SPSHS Honor Society, the Senior Center launched the first Senior Garden, located at the Senior Center. In addition, we continued to see excellent participation in Senior Trips, Mayor's Wellness seminars and foundational programs.

Our Mayor's Wellness program also built on the successes of the last several years. In 2014, we held our first Annual Spring Health & Safety Fair in partnership with JFK Medical Center as well as our fourth Annual Fall Health & Safety Fair in partnership with St. Peters. In addition to continuing other annual programs, we launched our first Step It Up South Plainfield challenge. This program, which aims to showcase the benefits of walking and an active lifestyle, recorded over 6 million steps in a five-week period. A special thank you to the Mayor's Wellness Committee who helps to make all of this possible.

The South Plainfield Recycling Department, Environmental Commission and Green Team also had a successful 2014. The Green Team earned the Bronze Level Certification in the Sustainable NJ program that will enable the team to seek grant funding to expand their efforts. Our Recycling Department recorded over 64,000 tons of solid waste, thanks to the efforts of local businesses and residents. In addition, the department received a recycling tonnage grant of over \$111,000. Our Borough Clerk's office continued to enhance the daily operation of our local government. The department implemented a new tracking system to manage boards, agencies and commissions. Our borough codebooks electronic application was expanded to provide a more comprehensive resident information source.

The Office of Emergency Management continues to play a vital role in ensuring our borough and schools are prepared. In addition, the department has applied for and received over \$1.2 million in FEMA grants and reimbursements over the last several years. Our EMS department responded to 813 resident calls, logged over 19,000 volunteer hours, and expanded training for all 40 active members, including 15 new volunteers. South Plainfield EMS remains one of the few volunteer EMS agencies that does not bill residents for services rendered. A special thanks to the South Plainfield Elks who funded the replacement costs for the squads AED devices. Our Fire Department responded to 935 calls and continued to maintain a focus on training and fire fighter readiness with various training sessions including Flashover, Ice Rescue and Live Fire training. Thank you to the 53 residents who volunteer their time and talent to serve our community.

Our Police Department welcomed four new officers in 2014, established a Fatal Accident Response Team equipped with cutting edge crash reconstruction software and leveraged

the K9 unit to keep South Plainfield safe. When a rash of home invasions in Middlesex County and Texas found its way to town, South Plainfield's finest played an integral role in developing leads to the identification and ultimate arrest of the four individuals involved. On behalf of the entire South Plainfield community, thank you for all that you do, each and everyday.

As a governing body, we take our commitment to public safety seriously. While we are business friendly, we will not sit idle when a business violates the law and puts residents and police officers in frequent danger. With the closing of Liquid Assets, we look forward to welcoming a new business that will be a better fit for the neighborhood.

As we begin 2015, first and foremost we must remain focused on delivering essential residential services while ensuring South Plainfield remains one of the most affordable communities in the state. To that end, it is our challenge to adopt a 2015 borough budget that keeps municipal taxes below the 2009 rate. I ask Councilman Rusnak and the Administration and Finance committee to seek savings where possible and identify key areas of capital investment.

Councilman Barletta, I ask that you work with our Public Works Department and Borough Engineer to seek ways to maximize our infrastructure investment and to finalize the 2015 Road Resurfacing Program. For 2015, the borough has applied for a Department of Transportation grant to resurface Franklin Avenue. The maintenance of our borough trees, parks and facilities should remain a key priority for the department in 2015.

We expect to see a continued focus on the Durham Avenue corridor into the borough. While slightly delayed, we expect the expansion of Quick Check to further enhance this gateway into town. I look forward to expanding on the progress of our economic development activities with newly elected Council President White. In addition to the work done with large corporations, we will seek to showcase small businesses by leveraging platforms such as Restaurant Week, Small Business Saturday and our "Focus On" series that highlights both new and existing South Plainfield businesses. As we welcome a new building official, we look forward to launching new resident directed informational seminars to make navigating the local government building process as seamless as possible.

Our Green Team is eager to partner with the school district as the Board of Education joins the Sustainable Jersey Schools program. Our Recycling department will be busy preparing for the launch of "MyWaste.com", which in conjunction with the borough website will allow residents and businesses to get immediate answers to their solid waste questions. A companion mobile application will allow residents to conveniently access the service as well as include automatic reminders for the curbside recycling program.

I ask Councilman Richkus to continue working with the Recreation Department as they look to submit applications for Open Space funds to provide for new lights at the PAL Memorial Field, new gym floors and the development of the former New Market bus terminal for recreational use. 2015 initiatives for the Senior Center include plans for outside picnic tables, the creation of a Walking Group and Summer Swim Days at the Community Pool.

As expected, Public Safety will continue to be a focal point for the borough in 2015. I ask Councilman Bengivenga to work closely with the Chiefs of our departments as they work through their plans to ensure South Plainfield's safety. Notable initiatives for 2015 include

the hiring of three police officers, the welcoming of JFK Medical Center as the new support partner for the South Plainfield EMS and the filing of FEMA grant applications for the South Plainfield Fire Department.

Lastly, we expect to make further progress on legacy issues with the opening of the expanded South Plainfield Public Library. After years of debate and inactivity, this project is underway and on target for completion in 2015. In addition, we anticipate the completion of the bid specification phase of the Hollywood Avenue project and the creation of an internal task force to seek the necessary funding to see the project through to completion. While we have made great progress with this initiative, perhaps some of the most challenging months and years lie ahead. I look forward to working with our Council and borough Engineers to continue to move this project forward.

As I begin my second term as Mayor, I remain excited about our future. South Plainfield is a model for how government can work effectively and efficiently. We are a desired destination for both families and businesses alike. We can't take our successes for granted or believe that tomorrow will come without challenges and sacrifices. We have the ingredients for success – an active and giving community, talented employees, dedicated volunteers and responsive officials. I look forward to working with the Council, borough employees and our residents to ensure our collective success. May God bless you and your loved ones. Best wishes for a happy, healthy and prosperous 2015.