

2020 State of the Borough

Welcome residents, elected officials, board members, volunteers, family and friends. This afternoon we gather for our annual borough government reorganization. As we close out one decade and begin the next, we reflect on our recent accomplishments and prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

Today we say goodbye to two public servants who have given their all over the past three years. Councilman Dean and Vesce have been active members of the governing body who sought to use their backgrounds and skills to move South Plainfield forward. We appreciate their efforts in working with the entire governing body to tackle important challenges and foster new growth throughout our borough. A special thank you to your families for their sacrifice during the last three years. While you may be leaving elected office today, I know that you will both remain active residents.

We also welcome two newly elected residents to the governing body. Congratulations to Councilwoman Mott and Councilman Smith. As parents and active residents, I know you will leverage your abilities to continue to move South Plainfield in the right direction. The residents have bestowed upon you a tremendous responsibility, that of a public servant. Listen to their concerns, keep an open mind and draw upon your strengths to improve the borough for all residents. Serve the community well and you will have a successful term. Congratulations to you and your families as you start this new chapter of public service.

2019 was a busy year across the entire borough. Our Environmental Commission continued their hard work and dedication through active participation across all of the standing committees. Our Clean Communities Program conducted Spring and Fall Litter Cleanups with over 260 volunteers collecting over 2 tons of litter. The Clean Campus Program provided litter-education assembly programs for over 1,650 students. In addition to residents and businesses maintaining 21 Adopt a Spots, our Clean Neighborhoods Program Aide cleared litter from 1,305 storm drain grates, collected 3.4 tons of roadside trash and removed over 900 illegally posted signs from the boroughs right-of-way.

Our Green Team completed a Sustainable Jersey capacity building grant project, held a public screening of their Sustainability video and launched their website and Facebook page. The team remained active in our Mayors Wellness Campaign events, offered technical advice for the High School Green Teams new greenhouse and initiated resident outreach for the New Jersey Clean Energy Program's Home Performance with Energy Star.

The boroughs Recycling Complex completed a multi-year initiative to improve the residential grass drop-off service with updated signage and new fencing funded through a Recycling Tonnage Grant. Our Paper Shredding event drew a record 528 individuals shredding and recycling over 21,600 pounds of paper. Overall, recycling efforts across the borough diverted over 6,000 tons of recyclable solid waste from the landfill. Residents continued to leverage the My Waste/Recycle Coach app with an additional 671 residents signing up in 2019. Throughout the year, the app handled over 136,000 interactions and sent over 90,000 reminders for collection days, events holidays, storms and other news.

Our Engineering and Department of Public Works oversaw the improvements and repaving of Hadley Road - completed in two phases with a total of \$1.21 million in New Jersey Department of Transportation grants. Thank you, Superintendent Miller, for your efforts throughout every phase of this project.

The Department of Public Works continued to support our in-house bulk pickup program, completing over 2,300 pickups consisting of over 560 tons of waste in addition to nearly 500 senior resident pickups. Our compactor site schedule was increased to 7 Saturdays throughout the year resulting in an additional 200 tons of bulk debris. In addition to normal maintenance of borough buildings, grounds and parks, the department repainted the wrestling room, locker rooms and bathrooms at the Police Athletic League. Investments were made with the implementation of a new fuel management system at the facilities fuel pumps to provide better management and record keeping.

Throughout the borough, the Department of Public Works coordinated with our Police Traffic Safety department to install signage in accordance with recently revised borough traffic ordinances. Crosswalks were restriped around borough schools and wire vehicle loop detection systems were upgraded to video cameras at the Hadley Road intersections. The borough has continued to improve pedestrian accessibility to all residents by installing ADA curb ramps and sidewalks throughout the borough in association with repaving projects.

The boroughs partnership with the Plainfield Area Regional Sewerage Authority has expanded to include jet cleaning of the sewer system. In 2019, PARSA cleaned over 20% of the system in accordance with DEP requirements. Sewer repair and improvement projects were completed near Hadley Road, New Brunswick Road and Putnam Park.

Our Senior Center continued to reach new heights. Membership continues to rise and classes and trips are routinely at full capacity. The senior gardens were a big success and yielded fruits and vegetables into early October. The Center has two new vehicles to transport seniors as well as a new Facebook page and digital sign. New programs such as Meatball Monday, Tailgate Tuesday as well as a new exercise programs are becoming fan favorites.

The South Plainfield Library continues to pay dividends from earlier investments. Librarian Hansen along with the entire staff and our Board of Trustees continues to validate the library as a focal point for residents of all ages. The statistics tell the story. Circulation up 9.9%, total programs up 11.4% and attendance at programs surpassed 24,000 individuals, up 24.4% from 2018. From the popularity of the Peer tutoring program to the installation of new self-checkout machines to the hiring of Mrs. Jessica, the new Children's Librarian, great things continue to happen at the South Plainfield Library.

The Municipal Clerk's office continues to evolve and provide necessary services to our residents in a timely and organized fashion. The borough continues to keep residents informed via important tools such as Nixle and Facebook, with my assistant Ann Daley leading the effort. Our Public Celebrations and Cultural Arts Committees continued to provide town-wide popular events for all residents to enjoy. This is a true example of resident volunteers delivering for their community.

Our Building Department continues to leverage new technology to better serve our residents, business owners and contractors. The department has been updated to the new Code Cycle, received Flood Management Training and Certification for Municipal Use, enabled front office clerks to receive Technical Assistant Certification and continues to hold resident forums. Councilman Derryck White continues to work with our Building Department and the business community to showcase South Plainfield to prospective new businesses. When a new broad-line wholesale fine food distributor, Patriot Fine Foods, was looking to establish their corporate home, South Plainfield stood out as a conveniently located, business friendly community and we are proud that they now call South Plainfield home. Throughout 2019, we continued to attract new businesses of all sizes to town, from national chains such as Ulta Beauty to small businesses such as Angelina's Tavern and Charlie's Cheesesteak. We were also pleased to welcome the area's finest and newest wedding and special event venue - The Park Villa. A truly breathtaking facility sure to become the destination for Central New Jersey. We were also pleased to see current business renovate or expand in town, from Kobe and Five Below to Prolong Pharmaceutical. Thank you to our Zoning

and Planning Board members for your continued dedication and the vital role you play in showcasing our borough to the business community.

Public Safety will always remain a key focal point. In 2019, the Police Department saw eight officers graduate from the academy keeping staffing at key levels and qualifying for a Safe and Secure grant. In partnership with the Board of Education, our School Resource Officers continued to play a vital role in ensuring the safety of our students.

Our Fire Prevention/Office of the Fire Marshall implemented “Fire Is”, a new educational program for 5th and 6th grade students. The program incorporates both the student and their family in a five-month learning journey. The Fire Department continues to attract and retain volunteers, responding to over 950 calls throughout the year.

Our Emergency Medical Service continued to support the residents of the borough with over 16,700 volunteer hours logged throughout the year. In June, the department accepted the keys to two new ambulances to complement their efforts. With generous support from Columbia Savings, the department was able to complete their radio and security camera projects.

Democracy Day returned in 2019 with residents approving a multi-million dollar investment in the reconstruction of the Community Pool. Through multiple town meetings, residents were afforded the opportunity to review concept plans to revitalize a popular borough facility. The Recreation Department continued to offer vital programs across the board for our youngest residents. Parks throughout town, including the Southside Dog Park and recently expanded Willow Park continued to provide recreational opportunities for all residents. In September, the Recreation Commission hired Elizabeth Yarus to lead the Recreation Department.

In 2019, led by 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. Over the last ten years, municipal taxes are nearly flat. The borough’s tax base continues to increase, poised for a nearly \$12 million dollar increase. Through a focus on borough finances, South Plainfield continues to have one of the lowest tax rates on real value in Middlesex County as well as a low debt burden. It’s important to note this record isn’t the result of layoffs or avoidance of investments in the borough but rather a singular focus shared by Councilmembers, Department Heads and borough employees alike to achieve the most benefit for each tax dollar received. Thank you for your continued efforts and accomplishments.

As we start the new decade, 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. This major investment is sure to be an asset to the borough for years to come. I thank our residents for their patience and look forward to welcoming them back for an exciting season.

Investments in our borough infrastructure will also remain a top priority for 2020. With the assistance of over \$1.17 million in New Jersey Department of Transportation Municipal grants, we will complete improvements to Corporate Boulevard, St. Nicholas Ave and Cragwood Road. I would like to thank our local State Senator Patrick Diegnan, as Transportation Chairman, he was able to secure for South Plainfield the largest Department of Transportation grant for the 18th legislative district for 2020. In addition, we will continue to coordinate our annual Road Resurfacing program with new utility company projects planned throughout the borough. Lastly, we will complete an examination of our sewer system to identify and address groundwater infiltration within the system.

Upgrades to the 911 Communication Center as well as the implementation of traffic cameras within the borough are planned for 2020. Investments will continue to be made in our police officers, 911 communication operators, firefighters and EMS personnel through additional training, supplies and technology.

Recognizing that we are a large customer service organization, our building department will follow the recreation departments lead in introducing card payments for services such as building permits and application fees. In addition, the department is looking to implement a late night to better meet the needs of our residents. Technology improvements are also planned for our Tax Department to streamline essential functions and digitize our tax maps.

On the Recycling front, we will look to design and implement a tagging program to enforce Recycle Right guidelines at the curb and work with our curbside pickup provider to improve customer service. We will look to prevent contamination of all yard waste and recyclable materials to ensure we are able to move them to market at the lowest possible cost. Our Green team will seek recertification and look to develop a Home Performance with Energy Star campaign for the residential sector.

I continue to be proud of what we have accomplished and remain optimistic about what lies ahead for South Plainfield. I look forward to working with the Council, our Department Heads, borough employees and our residents to ensure South Plainfield remains a vibrant community for our fellow residents and a model for effective government. With a solid foundation laid, talented employees and active residents, there is nothing we can't accomplish. May God bless you and protect you. Best wishes for a healthy, happy and prosperous 2020.