

December 14, 2020 – Mayors Township Address

Thanks to the council for the invitation to give the State of the Township address. I don't like giving speeches. I was hoping one silver lining of the Pandemic would be to get me out of this annual requirement. Of all the executive orders Governor Murphy signed, I don't know how he missed waiving this requirement for mayors. This should have been a no-brainer.

To say 2020 has been a challenging year would be the understatement of the century. No one was prepared to handle a Pandemic like COVID-19 especially small towns like West Windsor. We reported our first case on March 19th. As of last Friday, West Windsor had 508 positive cases and 32 deaths. Sadly, a majority of the deaths have occurred in our two assisted living communities. Our condolences and prayers for the deceased.

When you look at the big picture, West Windsor has handled the pandemic as well as any other town in New Jersey and perhaps the US; especially considering the number of cases New Jersey had in Spring and early Summer. We have done well both on the health measures and operation of the township. The credit for that belongs to the township professionals and residents who followed guidelines and co-operated with us.

Our health department is responsible not only for West Windsor but also for Robbinsville and Hightstown under shared services agreements. They have worked 24 X 7 including on holidays and weekends. The majority of residents don't know them by name so I would like to acknowledge each of them individually

Jill Swanson is our health officer.

Geetanjali Jain public health nurse

Doug Davidson environmental health services

Gret Guttadora and Nikita Patel are state licensed health inspectors

Deonna Amos-Whitfield, Jean Ward, Jake Stouch, and Eileen Lang provide support.

In addition, a number of individuals have helped us and continue to help us in temporary capacity – Stephanie Cabrera, Jeremy Whaley, Rosa Rodriguez, Sharon McNellis-Kissel, Maryann Giambagno, Dorothy Gustafson and Ashley Merritt.

Ken Jacobs and Noreen Tenaglia provided administrative support to the Health Department.

These individuals helped us keep safe. I want to thank each of them on behalf of all residents.

The staff of the senior center accepted food and other donations, distributed food to residents in need in early days of the pandemic. Senior center also conducted two blood drives in the middle of pandemic.

Even during the worst of pandemic, the township was open for business. Even though the township building was closed to the public, the employees continued to work both in person and remotely. It's to their credit that township business was done as close to normal as possible. The police, fire & emergency management services and the Department of Public works interacted with public on a daily basis and continue to do so.

Construction, code enforcement, engineering and land use employees continued to process applications and permits. The land use department continued to get applications to the zoning and planning boards which were approved keeping the projects moving forward.

The rec department offered as many opportunities for West Windsor youth as they could safely offer. They have arranged a holiday house decorating contest, a first for West Windsor to put holiday cheer in everyone's life.

The township clerk Gay Huber and her department dealt with myriad challenges on all fronts to serve the public. Despite the unprecedented conditions and constantly shifting rules, she still filled every OPRA request while successfully organizing and running two elections.

Thanks to our IT department we upgraded our entire website and telephone system during the pandemic.

The facilities department kept the work environment safe for employees and ensured employees workspaces were equipped with protective barriers to permit social distancing.

Mayor Hemant Marathe

The business administrator Marlena Schmid, human resources assistant and finance departments made sure we managed our employees and our budget as close as possible to the one approved by council and at the same time prepared us well for the upcoming budget for 2021. Given the restrictions on commerce imposed by the pandemic, it's to their credit that the township is in sound financial shape in spite of a significant reduction in revenue this year.

Even during the pandemic, we continued our pursuit for commercial ratables. Thanks to efforts by Sam Surtees, our land use manager the zoning board approved applications for a Wawa, hotel and restaurant along Rt 1. The planning board approved a number of applications as mandated by our affordable housing settlement, as well as totally redoing major elements of our Master Plan

On the land use front, the most significant achievement of this year was the settlement of Howard Hughes lawsuit with the new owners of the property, Atlantic Realty. The settlement removes the threat of significant housing development on the property permanently. Tonight, the council will approve an ordinance to rezone the property for additional commercial uses. When fully developed the property will generate significant ratables for the township. We expect to receive some development application for the site during 2021.

We continue discussion with developers to replace some dilapidated structures in the township. I hope to announce some agreements early next year.

The Government employees often don't get the credit they deserve. They came through with flying colors during this pandemic. On behalf of every resident of West Windsor, I want to thank each and every employee for their hard work.

In addition to township employees, to make these accomplishments possible, co-operation from other branch of government the Township Council is necessary.

It's tough to believe that except for Linda Geevers, the remaining four council members are rookies. This is their first state of the township address. I am glad they didn't know what they were getting into when they decided to seek the office. It has been baptism by fire for them. I appreciate all the support they have given me in dealing with this pandemic. They have been one of the most active councils and in addition to their

council duties have volunteered outside with community activities such as food drive and blood drive.

I want to thank Andrea Mandel who got thrust into council President role when Virginia Manzari resigned, Linda Geevers, Michael Stevens, Sonia Gawas and the newest member Andrew Hersh who volunteered for the role in the middle of pandemic. I also want to thank Virginia for all her support as a friend, council member and council President. Trust me they continue to ask hard questions to protect the taxpayers, but work constructively with me to get things done.

Finally, I would like to thank all residents who have been very understanding and cooperative throughout this crisis. Many residents also contributed in others ways such as running a food pantry to making masks for first responders. I believe West Windsor must have one of the best records on health front among towns in New Jersey, largely due to residents following guidelines and helping their neighbors.

In closing I wish everyone Happy Hannukah, Merry Christmas, Happy Kwanza and every other holiday you celebrate. The diversity of this township makes it a great place to live.

As if our plate was not already full, we are expecting our first snow storm of the year. Please sign up for nixel alerts and be careful if you have to get out. With the first administration of the Pfizer vaccine today, we are closer to the end of this pandemic. Please continue to follow precautions. I look forward to throwing some big celebrations next year.