

Thanks to the Council for your kind invitation to deliver the State of the Township address today. Like many immigrants, I have been fortunate in life to have some “firsts” in my family. I was the first to come to the U.S. for higher education, first to get a doctorate degree, and first to get both parking and speeding tickets — on the same day.

Today I add another first to the list: I am the first West Windsor Mayor to give two State of the Township addresses within six months. Last December I spoke about how well the Township had addressed the pandemic, thanks to all of our employees who worked tirelessly every day to take care of residents and keep the Township functioning. Today I would like to thank a few other people who helped during the pandemic and made things easier for West Windsor.

As a Township Mayor you are fairly low rung on the ladder. I am happy to say that whenever I reached out to our County or State Legislators with an issue, they were eager and happy to help. I want to thank County Commissioner Lucylle Walter, who is in the audience, and the other Commissioners and the County Executive.

During the early days of the vaccine rollout there were many questions about vaccine distribution and delivery. When I had questions about the State’s plan, I reached out to our Assembly people, Verlina Reynolds-Jackson and Anthony Verrelli and Senator Turner. They were happy to advocate for our town and resolve all our issues. That allowed us to vaccinate virtually all residents of West Windsor.

When Building 8 in Avalon caught fire, once again the County and State Representatives were eager to help, especially Senator Turner. People ask how I managed to get the NJ MVC to West Windsor to process motor vehicle related issues for fire victims and other West Windsor residents. The credit for that belongs to Senator Turner who managed to work her magic. She spent hours in the municipal parking lot talking to residents about their concerns. Thank you, Senator Turner.

I would also like to acknowledge an individual who is not an elected official but still very instrumental in my role as the Mayor. Rob Fields is my contact in the Governor’s office. He gets to hear all of my frustrations, whether they deal with vaccine distribution or the DEP requirements for the Cranbury Road sidewalk. He is my advocate in the Governor’s office for getting things done. Thank you, Rob Fields.

You often read or hear about political fighting among elected officials, especially when they are from different political parties. Based on my experience I can tell you, thanks to the people I acknowledged, a lot of cooperation happens behind the scenes. I will continue to seek their help to get things done for West Windsor.

I have completed 3 ½ years of my term as Mayor. As you may appreciate, things have not turned out exactly as I had imagined. I often wonder if I would have run if I knew what was in store for us. Throughout all this, my philosophy on governance has not changed. For example, I believe that that our Township committees and boards should focus primarily on our town and on projects that benefit West Windsor.

Early in 2018, one of the first people I met was Melissa Hager since she was up for appointment to the Human Relations Council. She mentioned something that had bothered me for a long time: the fact that West Windsor didn't have a food pantry. West Windsor is considered a wealthy town so people in need are often forgotten. I encouraged her to set up a private pantry and promised to help her. Working with Mercer Street Friends she has done a wonderful job of creating a "self-help" pantry by the West Windsor Arts Center. Her work was never more necessary than during the pandemic. Thanks to Melissa and dedicated volunteers who have made that possible.

Having an effective environmental policy is important to me. I had encouraged the Environmental Commission to focus on projects that we can do locally. This year, under the leadership of Dr. Ephraim Bukhs, they have started undertaking local projects which would have immediate impact on West Windsor. One such project was the West Windsor native plant pollinator garden at the West Windsor Community Park. Thanks to Green Team members Paula Bal and Angela Diez and Commissioner Elliot Gordon in taking the lead. Thanks also to the many volunteers that make the beautiful garden possible. If you are in the community park, please take a look at the garden right by the main road. A rain garden is planned near the pollinator garden by the skate park. That area will become an educational environmental showcase for residents and businesses to see firsthand how attractive native gardens and natural storm water management can be. I hope this is only the first among many that will be planted throughout the township.

I want to thank all the volunteers who serve on township committees that make West Windsor a special place. I want to give a special shout out to Ron Slinn, who retired from the Shade Tree Committee at the age of 90 after serving 15 years on it.

With the pandemic almost under control, I have the opportunity to look at other priorities: among them providing better customer service to residents, improving the efficiency of government, and continuing to upgrade the infrastructure in West Windsor. Let me illustrate with an example of each.

One of the most often heard complaints from both developers and residents is how long it takes to get a permit in West Windsor. We have some ways to go, but we are making progress. We have moved a lot of processes from paper-based to electronic. We now have a new SDL portal by which people can make payments and check the status of their permit applications. In the near future we will have the ability to submit permit applications electronically. We are actively working to make the process more customer friendly.

West Windsor has one of the most generous policies in the state with regard to leaf and brush pickup. As such, the DPW staff is always playing catch up, especially after each storm. The budget just approved by the Council includes a new leaf truck that would permit one-person operation for a job that currently takes three or more people. It will reduce trips to the dump site, reduce worker fatigue, reduce blockage of storm drains, and reduce maintenance of both sewers and trucks.

Starting with my first budget, I doubled the budget for road improvements and sidewalk repairs. That has allowed us to repave more roads such as Millstone, Bennington, and Hendrickson Drive this year. It has also allowed us to do improvements, such as the addition of two new traffic lights on Cranbury and Millstone, a new right hand turn lane from Village Road West to North Post Road, and a lighted stop sign at Baxter and Village Roads, a site of many accidents, just to name a few. We have fixed twice as many sidewalks in the last three years as were fixed in the previous three. I continue to discuss with Council a long-term solution to our sidewalk issue.

When I took over as Mayor, the biggest challenge facing West Windsor was how to deal with the affordable housing lawsuit and attract commercial ratables to the Township. At the time, five large developments were planned for West Windsor. With transparent, honest but firm negotiations with the developers and the Fair Share Housing Center, I was able to eliminate one large development of 500 homes along Southfield Road across from McCaffery's. In approving our affordable housing plan, Judge Jacobson praised West Windsor for the thorough job we have done.

Settlement of the affordable housing lawsuit, allowed me to focus on commercial development, both replacing dilapidated sites and attracting new development to West Windsor.

I am happy to report that two eyesores that have existed for over 25 years will be replaced by new structures within the coming year. The never-completed structure behind the Ellsworth Center will be replaced by apartments which are within 400 steps of the train station. The unoccupied homes across from McCaffery's along Route 571 will be replaced by a restaurant and a QuickChek gas station and convenience store.

We have settled the lawsuit with the new owners of the Howard Hughes track, viz. Atlantic Realty. They have not only agreed not to pursue housing on the site but to build commercial ratables on it. Their application for warehousing is expected to go to the Planning Board within the next few weeks.

Our willingness to work with developers to attract commercial ratables to town doesn't mean we say yes to them all the time. We are currently in two active litigations with developers, because their proposed developments are not in the best interest of West Windsor.

First, when the current owner of the old Acme site proposed expansion of the mall into the Acme Woods, I firmly but unequivocally said the woods are protected. We are currently in litigation with the owner to preserve the woods.

Second, when the Zoning Board rejected application for 440 affordable housing units across from McCaffery's, the developer sued the township. Since we could not agree on an acceptable alternate use of the property, we are aggressively defending our right to zone properties in town.

The next few years are going to be pivotal in deciding how West Windsor will look 20 years from now. Each of us has a preferred use for each open land parcel in town. As Mayor, I have to strike a delicate balance between what I desire and what is possible. My philosophy has been to engage each open land parcel in the best possible commercial use so that it's not available to build more housing when the next round of affordable housing comes along in 2025, which is just around the corner. As the Planning Board considers projects for West Windsor, please remember that even if that's not the ideal development you would like, it's better than 500 homes that would

occupy that land if left vacant. I want to take this opportunity to thank Planning Board Chair Gene O'Brien and all Planning Board members and their professional support staff who are meeting almost weekly to hear applications and review revised land use ordinances. The latter are a result of a new Master Plan that will facilitate more commercial development. Just last week they worked until almost midnight to approve Tractor Supply, a hotel, and potential urgent care along Route 1. Thanks to their families for sharing their loved ones with us. This Wednesday they will review an application for drive through Starbucks at the Lowe's shopping center.

I want to thank the Council for working with me on a budget that has no tax increase for a second year in a row. With their cooperation, West Windsor is on a solid financial footing. Thanks for working with me on various rezoning ordinances that will come for a vote. Thanks for doing the right thing and passing an ordinance tonight to opt out of allowing cannabis businesses in town until the State comes out with clear guidelines. It's prudent for West Windsor not to commit to an unknown.

Lastly, I want to note that West Windsor will soon be a university town like our neighbor to the west. Princeton University was granted a 20-year General Development Plan in 2020. This provides a conceptual overview of how over a hundred acres of land adjoining US Route 1 southbound and Washington Road will be developed. This year the Planning Board approved various structures, athletic facilities, a very innovative thermal exchange utility system, and an even more innovative storm water control system.

Nobody could have predicted the pandemic and its effect on the Township. I am proud to lead a town that handled it as well as it could have been handled. As we struggled through the Pandemic, I had promised that we will throw a big party when we come out of it. I am happy to announce that we will host both the National Night Out and the Community Day this year.

I am humbled by your faith in and support of me. Thanks for the privilege of being a Mayor of West Windsor. God bless West Windsor, God bless the State of New Jersey, and God bless America.