

Mayor's State of the Township Address 2023

Every year Township Clerk Gay Huber after wishing me Happy New Year, reminds me of the need to give my State of the Township Address. Every year I think innovative reasons to push it later in the year. The list of reasons I have come up with in the last 5 years is longer than the reasons I used when I missed homework in high school. Trust me I was not the best of students when it came to homework.

It's not for lack of topics to talk about that I try to postpone the speech. In fact, there are plenty of things to talk about as I will do today. However, it's due to the admonition from two important ladies in my life. My mother reminds me that "actions speak louder than words" and my wife's simple message is "shut up and do it rather than talk about it."

Sometimes it's important to talk publicly about our accomplishments and acknowledge the people who make those possible.

Now on to the serious topics of Township government, issues that I get paid to deal with.

The biggest threat West Windsor faces is the statutory obligation resulting from the 4th round of affordable housing which starts in 2025, merely 18 months from today. I would like to address what we have done in the past and will continue to do to prepare West Windsor to face the challenge as best as we can, within our constraints.

Our approach in West Windsor is not different then what all responsible mayors in New Jersey have done for their respective towns. Be proactive and take a look at all available properties and potential options for the same. During the past four years I was optimistic the Governor and Legislators would realize the burden the 3rd round of affordable housing has put on every town in New Jersey and act to bring some sanity to the handling of the problem. Sadly, I have gotten more disheartened with every Statewide meeting I have attended whether at the League of Municipalities or the New Jersey Conference of Mayors. Every speaker has given the blunt message not to expect anything from the State government and to fend for yourself.

The Governor and legislators are happy they don't have to make tough decisions and the residents blame local elected officials. The Fair Share Housing Center is happy they got unprecedented deference from the courts and in the process collected money as part of settlement from several Townships. The lawyers are happy to collect fees for years of litigation. In short, the current system works for everyone except the common person in New Jersey. So why disturb the apple cart?

As our neighboring Township Mayor and President of the New Jersey League of Municipalities Janice Mironov lamented, "The State has not even adopted a methodology to calculate the affordable housing obligation for each Township." What that means is that we are left at the mercy of Courts and Fair Share Housing Center. It's anyone's guess what criteria a Judge may use and what number they will come up with. Sadly, there is no reasonable way even to appeal the Judge's decision because by law we have to first implement the decision before we could appeal it.

If this has not made you gloomier than Eeyore than I have more good news.

The laws in New Jersey are heavily tilted toward developers. To add insult to injury, the Governor just signed a law that will allow developers to get their projects inspected by a private company if the Township fails to meet some strict deadlines. There is pending legislation to even allow developers to get permits issued by a private company. If that law is enacted, it will remove complete control of local government over any development project except for approval by the Land Use Boards. Municipal law strictly limits powers of the Mayor, Township Council or the Land Use Boards.

Some people will claim that "the Mayor is against affordable housing" so let me address the affordable housing issue. The issue should be framed not as an affordable housing issue but really "affordability of living" in New Jersey because sadly each proposed solution and the way the State allocates their resources makes it less affordable for common people. The current system helps a few who are lucky to find affordable housing while making it more unaffordable for rest of the population.

There is certainly a great need for affordable housing in West Windsor and New Jersey. As of today, there are over 2,000 applicants on the list to purchase an affordable home in West Windsor and over 3,000 applicants on the list to rent an apartment in West Windsor. These numbers should be judged in the context that a person or family can put their name on multiple lists and thus there is no easy measure to judge the exact number. This is demonstrated by the fact that when a unit becomes available and people on the list are contacted, several of them have already found housing and thus are no longer interested. A single comprehensive region wide or county wide list would make the process more efficient.

When it comes to affordable housing, West Windsor is one of the most progressive towns. First, West Windsor requires 25% of all new development to be affordable. It's the highest percentage in New Jersey as most other towns have a 15% to 20% ratio. Second, we require all our developments to be integrated with affordable housing units distributed throughout the development. Third, anyone who has attended a Planning Board meeting will testify, Planning Board members spend a lot of time ensuring the affordable housing residents are

not discriminated against compared to market rate residential units.

Despite our record, developers will try to create an impression that they are the benevolent type and the elected officials are against affordable housing. The reality is the developers want to use the Affordable Housing issue only to get permission to build market rate units while paying lip service to affordable housing. They want to impose uncontrolled growth on towns to financially benefit themselves. West Windsor is currently dealing with one such situation.

Avalon got permission to build 848 units including 149 affordable units under our Court settlement. They have proposed to build 86% of affordable units with a windowless bedroom while only 3.5% of the market rate units will have a windowless bedroom. Clearly discriminatory contrary to West Windsor Affordable Housing principles. They were warned against it during the Planning Board hearing, but continued down that path none the less. The Township was forced to take Avalon to Court. Unfortunately, the Court ruled the New Jersey Uniform Construction Code allows Avalon to build windowless bedrooms. This in spite of the fact that Housing and Urban Development (HUD) prohibits a tenant from receiving Section 8 funding for affordable housing units without a window in every bedroom.

West Windsor is currently appealing the Judge's decision. This illustrates how the affordable housing issue is used simply to force uncontrolled growth on Townships for the benefit of developers.

As Mayor, it's my job to maintain living in West Windsor affordable for existing residents while at the same time welcoming new residents. With the help of the Township Council, we struck a good balance in the 3rd round. I assure you both the current Township Council and I are committed to maintaining that balance during the next round that starts in 2025. We started preparing for the 4th round as soon as we signed the agreement for the 3rd round.

A part of that 3rd round plan was to reluctantly allow warehouse construction on the former Howard Hughes site. That decision looks even better today. Given the current economic conditions, if we were doing the deal today, I am sure the developer would not have agreed to the warehouse option, thus exposing the Township to thousands of high-density residential units during the next round that starts in 18 months.

Last year the West Windsor Planning Board approved the Bridgepoint 8 application with a significant number of conditions to ensure the residents of West Windsor are protected from truck traffic as much as possible. We will continue to work with the County to ensure that trucks don't travel on Clarksville Road toward High School South.

As I have said in the past, commercial developments take a much longer time to develop compared to housing developments. They are influenced by many factors beyond Township or developer control. The project is currently pending County approval and has other hurdles before it becomes a reality. On the other hand, every housing development approved is under construction.

Elected officials sometimes have to make hard choices. In this situation, one choice was to allow warehouses as a use on a rundown commercial property at the edge of town and in an area already heavily commercially developed by our neighboring towns. The second choice was to be forced to accept high density residential development in 2025. The second choice would significantly change the suburban nature of our town, overcrowding our schools and raising our taxes. I made the first choice as the lesser of two evils to protect our future. I believe that most residents understand and respect that.

When I first got elected in 2017, for my first term as Mayor, I promised residents to work to control residential growth and minimize taxes by attracting commercial ratables to the town. We have controlled residential growth by negotiating a fair deal with Fair Share Housing Center and the Courts while at the same time planning for the future. We continue to attract commercial projects to town. The result is in spite of a drop-in assessments during Covid, our total assessed valuation has increased from \$5.97 billion in 2017 to \$6.11 billion this year for an increase of 2.3%.

In 2017 we identified 4 dilapidated properties around town that needed to be replaced. I am happy to say that 3 out of those 4 properties have projects that have been reviewed by the Planning Board. In no particular order, first, the property across from McCaffrey's which has abandoned houses has been approved for a restaurant and gas station. That project is pending County approval which is expected in near future.

Second, the blue eyesore behind Ellsworth that was never finished has been approved for housing under our affordable housing plan.

Third the Penns Neck Redevelopment area which is located at the entrance to West Windsor at the intersection of Rt 1 and Washington Road had a couple of hearings in front of the Planning Board. After gathering input from residents, the project will be back in front of the Planning Board for a final concept plan hearing the 2nd week of June. The only property that has proven tricky for development is at the intersection of Quakerbridge and Village Roads. Although we have talked to the developer, we have never found a proposal that works for the township. We will continue to work on it.

The result of attracting commercial ratables is a budget I am proud of. For the 3rd year out of my six budgets we have a zero municipal tax increase. Over the past six budgets, the municipal tax rate has increased from 0.40 to 0.428 per \$100 of assessed valuation; for an

average increase of 1.1% annually. At the same time, we have increased our budget surplus from 11.9% of the budget in 2017 to an anticipated surplus of 18.59% in this budget. This will certainly help us maintain our AAA bond rating keeping our borrowing costs down in the higher interest rate environments.

The result of the budget is an average annual residential household municipal tax bill of \$2244 or \$187/month. Those taxes pay for garbage & recycling collection, disposal of yard waste and leaves, police, fire and EMS, fixing of roads, parks and all other municipal services.

Like the years past, this budget includes necessary expenditures to maintain our infrastructure. Just a few examples, it includes over \$2 million for road improvements and over \$500,000 for bicycle and pedestrian improvements. Although we did run into issues with the bid package for Rabbit Hill Road, I want to assure residents the road is slated to be fixed this year. The budget includes money for design of Vaughan Drive Extension that is sorely needed to relieve traffic pressure on Washington Road. Finally, the Cranbury Road sidewalk, a project proposal that started under Mayor Hsueh and has been encouraged and implemented by myself and the current Township Council is slated to be completed within the next few months.

Although the budget is proposed by the Mayor, the budget to be voted on tonight is the Township Council's budget with their fingerprints all over it. It reflects modification made by the council to reflect community preferences in infrastructure and pedestrian safety improvements.

We live in a beautiful community. My wife Punit and I are glad we chose West Windsor Township when we moved to New Jersey 28 years ago. As I often point out, our current residence is one place on earth I have lived the longest so I feel most at home. The residents of West Windsor know what a great place it is but it doesn't hurt to be recognized by others. I am proud we received two such recognitions in the past year.

Fortune Magazine recognized West Windsor Township as the 11th Best Place to Live in the United States under their inaugural "Fortune 25 Best Places to Live for Families Ranking" in the nation. That is a high honor when you consider thousands of townships in the United States.

A new study from Niche, named Princeton Junction as the top spot, as the best place to live in New Jersey. Given over 500 municipalities in New Jersey, it's indeed a great achievement to be recognized as the best.

These recognitions are especially gratifying because we didn't audition for either of them. In fact, we were unaware such a ranking was being compiled until the ranking was announced. Such unsolicited recognition makes the hard work of being an elected official

worthwhile.

Reflecting both recognitions, I realize, what makes West Windsor Township special is our diverse community, respect for our differences and celebrations of our commonality. It's everyone who volunteers on township boards and committees. I wish I can claim sole credit for such high rankings but in reality, it's the result of contributions from many people from township employees, school employees, all volunteers, you the residents, and the elected officials at the podium. I want to thank and congratulate all of them for making West Windsor one of the best places to live.

Let's continue to work together to keep it that way.

I want to thank the council for their kind invitation to present my State of the Township Address and putting up with me today and all other days when I present them with tough choices. Thanks to all residents of West Windsor for your contribution to the community. It's my honor to serve as your mayor. Thanks for the opportunity.