



# WEST WINDSOR TOWNSHIP

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**HEMANT MARATHE, Ph.D.**  
**MAYOR**

## State of Township Address 2025

June 16, 2025

Thank you, Council President Mandel and Council Members, for your kind invitation to give my State of the Township address. I don't like to give long speeches. However, over the years I have realized that the topics Mayor and Council deal with are complex and can't be explained in a short social media post or can be easily misrepresented by a sound bite. This year is no different. I would like to talk about multiple topics, taxes which are ever popular, affordable housing and of course growing pains for our Township.

I had written an exceedingly long speech and was ready to set a record for length of a State of the Township address in West Windsor. Well, you can thank the NBA for saving you from the trouble. They scheduled game 5 of the championship tonight. I had to cut my speech in half in order to get home to watch at least the fourth quarter. As good as I was in academics in college, it was always the second priority. I am glad I passed on that love of sports to my daughters, one of whom after graduating with an MBA from Wharton, will start working for the NBA in two weeks.

Since my wife and I moved here in August 1994, the Township has grown substantially from roughly 18,500 residents to more than 30,000 today. We face the same growing pains as any organization; losing a sense of community, people not acting neighborly, speeding through neighborhoods, not stopping for a school bus, not picking up after their dog on a little league field or your driveway - just to name a few.

Township Council just approved the 2025 Budget. I am pleased to say the municipal budget has no tax increase. During the budget we always get requests for safety-related improvements: more street lights, cross walks, flashing beacons, road diets and so on. As Mayor with Council support, we have again been able to incorporate many safety initiatives in the budget. We do our part and I would like to request the community to do theirs. The Police Chief tells me that the majority of drivers who get tickets in town are West Windsor residents and 100% of people who don't pick up after their dog are Township residents. That is not a neighborly behavior. People engaging in these behaviors are our friends, neighbors and sometimes we ourselves.

West Windsor is a special place. Independent organizations pick our town as one of the best places to raise a family not only in New Jersey but the entire United States. That is

because we care about each other as individuals and our neighborhoods. It's up to each of us to keep it that way, treat each street as our own street, each playground as our own yard, each resident as our friendly neighbor. In short, we each should take care of our Township as if it's our own house.

Some of the non-neighborly behavior is due to unfamiliarity of traffic laws or ignorance of our own behavior. I am happy that the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance is undertaking a campaign to educate residents about traffic laws. I have talked to quite a few high school students to start a campaign among their fellow students to foster a neighborly responsibility in all of us.

The government can't enforce good neighborly practices alone. It must come from every resident to be successful. I encourage each of us to take a pledge to do our part.

That brings me to the topic of affordable housing obligation.

One part of being a special place is to ensure everyone can afford to live in West Windsor. The developers with the help of state politicians would like you to believe affordable housing is only about how many new houses they are allowed to build. Real affordable housing policy is much more comprehensive and an important part of it is to ensure residents who live in West Windsor can afford to stay here.

West Windsor has been one of the most progressive towns in terms of affordable housing. We require the highest percentage of affordable housing built as a percentage of any new development; 25% or 1 affordable house per every 3 regularly priced homes. We always require integrated developments and do not allow the developers to discriminate against people who live in affordable housing. We have approved all projects that we agreed to in Round 3 and most of them are well on their way to completion. Don't let anyone fool you. West Windsor has one of the best records on affordable housing.

With the Fourth Round of affordable housing now upon us some builders may sue us to allow them to build a higher number of houses to increase their own profits. This uncontrolled growth leads to higher taxes thereby putting a squeeze on seniors on fixed income and middle-class residents. This hardship forces individuals to simply move out of West Windsor, resulting in replacing one group of people who need affordable housing with a new group of people.

During the last 8 years since I became Mayor in 2018 municipal taxes on an average home in West Windsor have increased a total of \$61.42 or \$7.67 per year. Our residents don't realize their municipal taxes are stable because during the same time County taxes have increased by \$776.66 while school taxes have increased by \$1,438.73, an annual increase of about \$98 and \$180, respectively.

When people complain about taxes, I point out that it's not because of municipal taxes which have been mostly flat for the last 8 years but due to school and county taxes.

Their response is - what are you going to do about it? It's futile to explain Mayor and Council have zero control over County and school taxes and we only collect and pass funds through to those entities. They want solutions from anyone who will listen. I listen.

What I as Mayor can do about your County and school taxes is to take a two-prong approach. First, by controlling the number of new housing units that are built in West Windsor thus reducing the pressure of school kids and resulting school taxes. Second, by increasing the ratables so we can spread school district and county taxes over a larger base thus reducing the financial impact on homeowners.

Let me talk about the increase in commercial ratables first. Since becoming Mayor, our total assessed values have increased from \$5.973 billion to \$6.153 billion for a total increase of about 3%. The increase may sound small, but that is despite the decrease in assessments for various commercial properties during Covid and lack of demand for office space. The fact is unlike housing, commercial properties get reassessed every year and their owners are not hesitant to challenge for a lower assessment. Despite those challenges, we have managed to increase our assessments by 3% resulting in a lower tax burden on individual home owners.

This brings me to the favorite topic of my critics "the warehouses." To date and for the near future there will only be one 300,000 sq. ft. warehouse built in West Windsor. It is small compared to over 2.5 million square feet of 5 new warehouses either already built or under construction in East Windsor less than 1 mile from our border. Our neighboring Mayor, while joining my critics, forgets to mention the fact that she is building a complex many times larger than our one small warehouse exactly on the same road about 1 mile from our small warehouse. It is half the size of the proposed warehouses that my critics claim is the largest in NJ. The difference is our project is in the future but the East Windsor project is already here.

On the positive side, the small warehouse has already contributed \$1,027,555.48 in just the affordable housing fee, 50% of which is already collected. This fee allows us to help people living in affordable housing as either a direct subsidy towards rent or by paying for improvements to their homes. When completed later this year, this warehouse is expected to contribute \$1,000,000 in taxes, of which approximately \$600,000 will be school taxes helping residents with their school & County tax burden.

This brings me to the first thing I can do as Mayor, to help residents with their school and County tax burden – control growth in West Windsor. In January, the State legislature passed a new affordable housing act A4, which required the Department of Community Affairs (DCA) to come up with required number of affordable housing units for each town during the Fourth Round which starts this year and runs through 2035. The DCA was required to use three criteria one of which is available land.

The DCA came up with a number of 661 units for West Windsor. We immediately realized that the DCA had used faulty data, and included land that had an approval for warehouses on the large 600+ acres Atlantic Realty site. We challenged the number

and the Council passed a resolution which stated we believed our requirement was only 392 units.

As expected, we were sued by the NJ Builders' Association and Fair Share Housing Center. During the rushed process of the resulting court case the judge forced us to accept a settlement of 480 units as proposed by the Fair Share Housing Center. Sadly, during the court proceeding there was no arguments about the law or actual data but a forced settlement due to time pressure on the judge to resolve all of the lawsuits in her court within a short period of time.

However, the law does provide us an opportunity to file our Fair Share Housing Plan based on vacant land analysis, a right which was recognized in our settlement with the Fair Share Housing center. That is exactly what we plan to do before the end of this month. Our Housing Element and Fair Share Plan, that is posted on the website, will be voted on by the Planning Board and endorsed by the Council on June 25<sup>th</sup>.

As the plan states, using an analysis of available land in West Windsor, we should be required to build only 236 affordable units during Round 4. The plan as will be presented to the court goes well beyond that and hopes to build a total of 300 units including credits; 241 actual units plus 59 units' credit. Even the small number means West Windsor will be welcoming 964 new families to town in addition to about 2700 that we will welcome in Round 3. Most of the development in Round 3 is either completed or well on its way to completion.

The plan is structured, new development will support existing commercial tenants while at the same time keeping traffic impact in town to a minimum. Each project was chosen to help a specific issue to benefit the Township.

To my warehouse critics, by occupying the land with an approved project we saved almost 425 affordable units to be built during Round 4, the difference between the DCA calculated number of 661 and our actual number of 236. This will result in almost 1,700 fewer houses being built in West Windsor. Allowing such development would have overwhelmed the school system and caused traffic gridlock in town. It was a difficult decision to make. I was happy to take criticism over the past several years because I knew it was the right decision for West Windsor.

The warehouse project is currently on hold waiting County approval. If and when it's fully built, it is expected to contribute about \$14,000,000 in taxes resulting in a much lower school tax burden for residents.

West Windsor is considered a wealthy town and it is true when you compare it to many other towns in New Jersey. However, more than 40% of households in West Windsor earn less than \$150,000 a year while 28% of households earn less than \$100,000 a year. The amounts may seem large and go a long way in other states. They don't go far in New Jersey and especially in towns such as West Windsor. In fact, \$100,000 will qualify you for a median income affordable housing unit even as a 2-person family.

Neither the developers nor the Fair Share Housing Center care about these 40% of households who find it increasingly difficult to cope with the increasing tax burden. As Mayor I feel it's my moral obligation to care about all residents.

The three issues: development in Township, affordable housing and tax burden are all inter-related. The critics have the luxury of offering a solution to one of them without worrying about the effect on the other two. As Mayor I must strike a balance among all of them. It's a difficult balancing act that I believe we have done well.

The Fair Share Housing Plan we will present strikes a balance between the economic needs of all existing residents while trying to encourage new people to move into town. I accept that not everyone will be happy with every development decision I make. I can assure you it's made with the best of West Windsor's interest in mind.

In face of challenges West Windsor continues to make progress. The downtown is taking shape with completion of the Avalon project. Mercer County has once again delayed improvements to CR Rt. 571 but we expect the project to be bid next year. We are working with the Parking Authority to rehabilitate the old school district bus garage. It will be turned into a West Windsor Pocket Park and a parking lot where community events with food trucks can be held over the weekend. Just last week we installed the plaque at Nash Park, a project that was envisioned by my predecessor Mayor Hsueh.

The first part of Vaughan Drive extension should open any day now while we continue to plan for a permanent Vaughn Drive extension. I am committed to the Penns Neck bypass whenever the SRI property is developed.

We continue to attract many small businesses. I have been privileged to attend several ribbon cutting ceremonies around town. For a number of years people have been asking for a high-end restaurant. I am happy to note that Eddie V's, a high-end seafood restaurant, for dinner by reservation only, opened in Market Fair Mall a few weeks ago. A new Brazilian steak house is planned on the north side of Rt. 1.

All in all, West Windsor continues to be a great place and envy of others.

I wish I could claim all credit but running a township is a team sport. I would like to acknowledge many groups that help West Windsor succeed.

First, many of the decisions in the Township are done by committees & boards starting from the Affordable Housing Committee to Zoning Board. In addition, there are organizations such as the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance, Friends of West Windsor Open Space, the Historical Society of West Windsor and two volunteer fire companies which work closely with the Township. Every member in these organizations are volunteers and participate due to their love for the community. Some like Planning Board members take occasional abuse from residents because of the tough decisions they are forced to make.

Second, nothing can be done in the Township unless Township Council approves my recommendations. Based on experience I can tell you they may be personal friends but they are a tough bunch to deal with when policy decisions are made. Some weeks I argue with Council President more than I argue with my wife. What's important is at the end of the day we come up with a solution that works for the betterment of West Windsor.

Third, the Township professionals who are responsible for day to day functioning of the Township. Starting with Marlena Schmid to the last employee in township they are all professionals and experts at what they do. They keep me out of trouble by worrying about every decision faced by the township. The commitment and professionalism of West Windsor employees has allowed me to present a flat budget for 8 years while at the same time increasing our surplus from \$900,000 when I assumed office in 2018 to almost \$10 million this year. The praise I hear often from residents about our township employees makes me proud.

Last but not the least, the residents of West Windsor make our school district and Township successful.

I thank all of you for your commitment and contribution to West Windsor. This year I will complete 8 years as your mayor. Before that I served on the Township Council for 2 years and the School Board for 12 years. It's has been a privilege and honor to serve West Windsor in various capacities. I am thankful to all who have given me an opportunity to serve. I hope to continue my volunteer service for at least a few more years.

Thank you