

NEWS

TOWNSHIP OF WOODBRIDGE



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Mayor John E. McCormac Reports 2020 ~ "State-of-the-Township" ~ 2020



MAYOR JOHN E. McCORMAC
13th ANNUAL
STATE OF THE TOWNSHIP



2020

We would first like to thank the Woodbridge Chamber of Commerce for allowing us the opportunity to present the State-of-the-Township address for 2020 here today. Thank you to Executive Director Karen Barnes, Chairwoman Angie Tsirkas of Northfield Bank and Membership Director Nancy Drumm for your stewardship of the Chamber. Our relationship with the Chamber sends a very important message to companies in town and to companies considering locating here about the terrific pro-business environment we have here in Woodbridge.

We are fortunate in Woodbridge to have a terrific Legislative branch of our government in the form of our Township Council. Our Council At-Large team recently achieved an overwhelming election victory and is led by Lizbeth DeJesus, who was recently elected by her colleagues as Council President, along with new Vice President Brian Small and Councilmen Kyle Anderson and Greg Ficarra.

Our Ward Council team will repeat that success in 2021 with Nancy Drumm in the First Ward, Howie Bauer in the Second, Cory Spillar in the Third, Viru Patel in the Fourth and Debbie Meehan in the Fifth. All nine Council persons have helped establish Woodbridge as a stable government that is respected throughout New Jersey. Each of you has championed your own personal causes for the betterment of our Township from wellness to job creation to the environment to Township history and the Arts. You have each advocated for your gender and your ethnic backgrounds and you represent a very diverse cross section of Woodbridge. Your passion for helping people in need is remarkable and Woodbridge truly appreciates the effort that you put in each and every day.

Vito Cimilluca assumed the title of Business Administrator just a few weeks ago and his impact has already been felt in a very positive way. Vito is a 37 year employee of Woodbridge who left a career in Public Works ten years ago to run the ice rink at the Woodbridge Community Center. Recognizing his organizational ability, we quickly put Vito in charge of the entire WCC and then shortly thereafter he was named Recreation Director where he oversaw the purchase of The Club at Woodbridge and the construction of the Avenel Performing Arts Center and Curtains Restaurant.

Woodbridge has seen more economic growth and expansion than any other suburban municipality in New Jersey because of the efforts of Caroline Ehrlich who leads our Redevelopment Agency while also serving as Chief of Staff. Carol has overseen dozens of projects which have cleaned up brownfields, eliminated eye sores, brought in thousands of new jobs and brought millions of dollars in new tax ratables to Woodbridge.

Not many Mayors have a Township Clerk like John Mitch whose resume includes time as an elected Councilman and an appointed Business Administrator. John's tenure with Woodbridge Township predates most of us back to 1989 and as a lifelong Woodbridge resident his institutional knowledge of Woodbridge and our people is an amazing asset.

John Hagerty came to Woodbridge from a career in State government where we met in Trenton nearly two decades ago while working on some joint projects. John was a talented and respected Communications Director so we were thrilled to have him join us in that same capacity. No municipality can be successful without a concerted effort to inform the public and our business community about all aspects of our government from a recycling schedule to our official legal actions to our outstanding programs and services for seniors and families and children. John has mastered written and oral communications strategies and has capitalized on social media to get the word out about Woodbridge.

On January 1 we all expressed our gratitude for the employees of Woodbridge Township who are the most professional, dedicated, courteous and caring group of individuals in any government in New Jersey. Everybody watching this address already knows how good our Public Works Department is at snow removal, garbage and recycling collection and park and playground maintenance. Everybody knows we have a nationally accredited Police Department with 210 highly trained officers which by the way will increase to 215 in the next budget and 220 in the budget after that. Everybody knows no town treats its seniors better with an ever expanding array of programs and services. And everybody knows that there are more recreational opportunities for our children than in any town around us. Our libraries are State-of-the-Art and our arts initiative has been dramatic. It is easy to deal with Town Hall for building permits and licenses and our employees who directly interact with the public do so in a very friendly manner to help people get what they need from our local government.

We closed out the decade in Woodbridge Township with a very strong 2019.

Our Sesquicentennial 350th Anniversary dominated much of the action last year culminating in a giant picnic in Merrill Park where we honored ten people with keys to Woodbridge Township – Eric LeGrand, Pat Trombetta, Frank St. Marie, Ray Miller, Peter Barcellona, Albert Jasani, Jack McGreevey, John Eberhardt, Phil Hall and Stu Brandow. That event proved to be so popular that we are bringing it back on June 6 this year as the first anniversary of our 350th anniversary – and we're calling it SUMMERFEST 2020. We will again pack Merrill Park and we have already booked the Outlaws and the B Street Band which is a tribute to Bruce Springsteen and Real Diamond which as you can imagine is a tribute band to Neil Diamond.

Last year, we proudly opened our fourth Senior Center in the old First Aid Building in Fords. Special thanks to the ladies of the Fords Women's Club for their partnership with us in getting this Center opened. The new Hickory Center compliments the Evergreen, Sycamore and Five Branches Senior Centers and we will soon open each Center on a different night each week to give our seniors more opportunities while attracting new participants who are otherwise unable to attend during the day.

We added busses to our Senior Transportation fleet and are likely to add more due to the program's popularity. The Red Oak Senior Housing project replaced the 60 year old Stern Towers building downtown with beautiful and spacious apartments just a short drive away, and we are constantly looking at new opportunities for senior housing.

Our Office on Aging continued to be an incredible asset in Woodbridge although it is really known only to the homebound seniors who are assisted by these terrific social workers. Even with bussing, many seniors cannot get out of the house so we bring our programs and services directly to them.

We expanded our Young Marines program and we already have dozens of middle and high school-aged children signed up for this year. Our veteran's groups not only help veterans in need, but they are blazing a trail for the next generation of young men and women who will carry the torch and protect us all. Parents tell me that programs like these literally have changed their kids' lives for the better.

And speaking of lives... we continue to save lives of people struggling with addiction through our Peer Recovery Coach Program under the leadership of Dr. Bonnie Nolan. Our coach's help people find housing and help them find the right programs and services available. Our program is so good that seven other towns contract with us to help their residents. The Township also has a grant to help people in recovery find jobs and it provides funding for child care, transportation and even clothing for interviews. There is a goal of 100 placements by the end of this year and the program is well on its way as 40 people have been hired so far.

We started renovations on the old Colonial home at 86 Green Street to turn it into the Woodbridge History Museum which we hope will open at least to some extent in 2020. A Key-to-the-Township was presented to Frank and Audrey LaPenta to recognize their tireless efforts to get a history museum in Woodbridge.

We celebrated the opening of The Greens at Avenel, a 100 unit housing complex where 25 of the units are dedicated to the Developmentally Disabled population. The other 75 units are being marketed to other special needs citizens who can take advantage of the health care services already in the building. If we could find another few acres of land we would build another and if you walked through that building you would know why.

We continued the Jacob's Landing housing project on Bunns Lane which will soon be renamed Veterans Way. The new units are stunning and only a few of the old buildings from the 1950s remain. Property values in the area are already showing the results of that terrific project.

We worked with the Federal Emergency Management Agency to obtain a high score under the Community Rating System which will save our residents in flood zones significant sums on their flood insurance policies. And, in 2019 we were again the most Sustainable municipality in New Jersey for the tenth time.

On April 10 we opened the Avenel Performing Arts Center and Curtains Restaurant to rave reviews. We have Broadway caliber shows and a terrific menu and we have really hit our stride after only nine months. We hope that companies in Woodbridge take advantage of our various promotional packages and support our home town theater.

The Avenel section of town continues to see improvements. Dr. Kenneth Swan, our official school orthopedist, signed to open new medical offices with several other professionals on Route One North. A new restaurant called Feed Ya Soul, a new hair salon and of course a new Dunkin Donuts have all opened near our theater. The Hollywood Motel had a beautiful and much-needed facelift and will soon become a name brand facility. The City Motel and the bar in front of it will soon be razed for another new upscale motel. A coffee shop will soon open next to Curtains and New Jersey Transit added 38 weekly stops at the Avenel train station as a result of increased activity.

Last year, the Board of Education opened the beautiful new Ross Street School in September and will start the addition soon for a new gymnasium and other amenities. The Woodbridge Middle School opened a few weeks ago and it is also spectacular. Our teachers, parents and students were very patient and accommodating during the delay and now they have a phenomenal state-of-the-art school to call their own.

We started work on the outside of the Cypress Recreation Center where we will have a level playing field for softball, baseball and soccer for our special needs population including the clients of the Our House program for adults over 21. There will be basketball courts, pickle ball courts, a track and a greenhouse provided by Columbia Bank where our students can learn skills to help them obtain employment in the future.

And, speaking of learning skills, Mayor Mac's Café officially opened in September and it has been terrific. Every day from 10-2 there are four special needs students between the ages of 18 and 21 who work as greeters, servers, cooks, dishwashers, custodians and cashiers and the menu is great. And if there is a municipality more welcoming of the special needs population anywhere – we haven't seen it yet. Special thanks to Investors Bank for your allocation of resources to help our special needs population.

The entire Cypress complex was made possible partially by a \$1.5 million grant secured by our State Legislative team in the New Jersey state budget. Senator Joe Vitale, Assemblyman Craig Coughlin and Assemblywoman Yvonne Lopez are always on the lookout for opportunities to bring funding back to their district and Woodbridge is fortunate to have them representing us.

We are just about finished with our Scout Camp off Omar Avenue in Avenel just across the street from the Ernie Oros Wildlife Preserve. Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts have already visited the site and they are looking forward to camping and hiking opportunities right in their own backyard. The Preserve includes hundreds of species of wildlife, birds and insects on 100 acres along with a lake for canoeing and kayaking.

We constructed a traffic light at Lake Avenue and Westminster Road and another at Inman and Delaware Avenues, both in Colonia, and another one at Port Reading Avenue and Old Road in Sewaren.

We started a flood mitigation program to identify and deal with areas that chronically flood during heavy rains which are becoming more commonplace. We will fix our infrastructure of storm drains and catch basins to alleviate problems as much as possible in the future.

We installed adult-friendly exercise equipment at LeGrand Park in Avenel and will soon do the same at Tanzman Park in Woodbridge and we will continue to look for opportunities to put more equipment throughout additional Township parks.

We had a groundbreaking for a new Super Fresh supermarket in Hopelawn on the Pathmark site.

The Forge became the Lake Chateau and the old motel behind it was demolished and a new hotel is under construction.

This year in 2020, perhaps our most important effort will be advocating for the passage of an \$87 million bond referendum to provide for the continued advancement of our school infrastructure. A 2017 referendum passed 4 ½ to 1 and provided funding for the new Ross Street School, the renovated Woodbridge Middle School, the refurbished St. Cecelia's School - which became Oak Tree Elementary School 29 - and full day kindergarten in all Township schools. The referendum also provided for enhanced technology and improved security in all of our school buildings.

This new referendum will provide for a brand new Avenel Street School 4/5 which is now the oldest school in Woodbridge at over 100 years old. Major additions will be made to Matthew Jago School 28 and Lafayette Estates School 25 and individual buildings at Lynn Crest School 22 and Kennedy Park School 24 will be connected so kids do not have to travel between buildings. STEM labs will be constructed in all middle schools and interior infrastructure and technology will be improved at all schools.

The most important element of this plan, however, is the commitment of additional millions to enhanced school security. Our schools are safe, but we can make them safer. The Board of Education has always prioritized school security and we as a municipality will help them in any way we can.

Speaking of the Board of Education, we would like to thank the Board members and School Administrators for another fantastic year of working together with the promise of another decade of cooperation and partnerships that benefit all of Woodbridge Township. Superintendent Dr. Robert Zega is here today and we would like you to relay our sincere thanks to your entire staff for allowing us to be your partners in improving our Woodbridge Township schools.

Following our recent history, the 2020 referendum will not be paid for by burdening our taxpayers. The Township completed \$40 million of community facility improvements on school grounds from 2013-2017 and paid for them with money generated from economic development projects in our town like warehouses and power plants and not from everyday taxpayers. Similarly, the financing from the 2017 referendum is being paid by downtown development projects which are getting underway as we speak and not general taxpayers.

The 2020 referendum will be paid by one project – a one million square foot warehouse on the site of the former Woodbridge Developmental Center which the Township purchased from the State of New Jersey for \$5 million in June. We also purchased land next door from Conrail for \$2 million and we will soon close on the sale of both parcels to The Morris Companies who were selected in a very competitive process over 15 other contenders. The Morris group will provide a substantial cash payment to the Township which, when coupled with tax payments over 30 years starting at \$2 million and ending at \$4 million, will be enough to pay the debt service on the entire \$87 million referendum minus approximately \$13 million which will be reimbursed by the State of New Jersey through its aid program. That's one project which can provide substantial improvements to our school infrastructure and free up millions of dollars that otherwise would have been spent on buildings that now can be spent in the classrooms. The project's impact on our community will be minimal because of its location on the outskirts of town and because all truck traffic will be prohibited from making right turns onto Rahway Avenue. Morris also is contributing six acres of land at the Premiere Die Casting site on Rahway Avenue which will be used for the new School 4/5 building.

We will need everyone's help to pass this referendum on March 10 and we plan on visiting every PTO and every senior club and any other entity that we can think of to garner support for this effort which will continue our progress in investing in our schools. The help of our businesses is welcomed and we ask that you work with us to inform your employees who are Woodbridge residents about this fantastic effort. The property values of their homes, and the values of your business land and buildings, will be greatly enhanced by this effort as well.

Our tax incentive efforts, called Payments in Lieu of Taxes – or PILOTs – helped attract such intense interest in the future warehouse site. PILOTs are criticized only by those who do not understand them or who have politically motivated agendas. All of the companies we attract to Woodbridge pay taxes but at a slightly reduced rate. The discount is provided usually because of exorbitant costs in cleaning up brownfield sites and because of our intense interest in attracting more jobs for our residents. Within a few years we will have \$30 million in annual revenues from PILOTs in our Township budget – more money than we get from the State of New Jersey. This money is used not only for payment of debt on the aforementioned school projects, but also on Township infrastructure like roads, sewers, parks and buildings that our residents enjoy.

There are several warehouse development and redevelopment projects that will be in progress in 2020 including:

- A new 190,000 square foot warehouse on nine acres of vacant land on Paddock Street in Avenel, along with the renovation of another Paddock street warehouse - both by Duke Realty;
- Another renovated warehouse also on Paddock Street and a new 122,000 square foot warehouse on the Proctor & Gamble site both by The Black Creek Group;
- A new warehouse on South Inman Avenue in Avenel by Old Dominion;
- Three warehouses totaling a million square feet on Pennval Road in Sewaren by two different companies;
- Three warehouses totaling 120,000 square feet on the Gintempo site in Keasbey on Smith Street; and
- A new 101,000 square foot warehouse on New Brunswick Avenue in Hopelawn by Woodmont.

At least three additional major chemical plants are being analyzed for warehouses as slowly but surely all of our contaminated brownfield sites are being cleaned up. Companies have really recognized the strategic importance of Woodbridge as the Crossroads of New Jersey with all of our major highways and proximity to Newark Airport and the ports of Newark and Elizabeth.

The office building at 200 Wood Avenue in MetroPark will undergo a major renovation by SJP Properties and there is a plan for a comprehensive review of traffic flow around that train station by New Jersey Transit. We will continue to work on our Woodbridge River Walkway and our Waterfront Park behind the CPV Power Plant this year in our partnership with Epic and Federal Business Centers. Speaking of CPV, we remain hopeful that there will be a second power plant started soon right next to the enormously successful plant which opened a few years ago. A power plant that provided \$2.5 million in tax revenue in this year's budget with no increase in the appropriations side.

We also recognize the strategic importance of downtown Woodbridge. Towns all over the State on commuter train lines are planning for the future and we are too. Demolition has started at the Riffy's and Stern Tower sites in downtown Woodbridge and other projects are in various stages of approval. We cannot let Main Street fail and absent any investment in bringing people downtown who spend money it will. We know it is controversial and we know that people are sometimes reluctant to see changes. But we also know that we will have failed in our responsibility as elected officials if we don't keep moving Woodbridge forward.

The main complaint about housing projects is that the schools cannot handle additional children. First, it has been proven that transit village developments simply do not produce school children like housing projects away from mass transit. The School District Administration reports that there are only 58 students in 500 apartments so far at Station Village and The Grande – both of which are renting quickly by the way.

Secondly, there are actually less students in our schools now than 13 years ago when we took office. The Ross Street, Woodbridge Middle and Oak Tree Road school projects have increased capacity by well over 500 students. The new projects in the 2020 referendum will add capacity for another 500 students. Classroom capacity is simply not an issue.

The next argument against downtown development concerns traffic. The number of cars per housing unit is significantly less in downtown housing than in other areas, but undoubtedly there will be more cars on our roads. We already planned for that by taking trucks off Main Street and Green Street and by restriping areas to make traffic move better and to make the roadways safer. We also have funding from the State for a massive project to reconfigure the Main Street/Route 9 intersection – arguably the most congested intersection in town. A newly engineered design will greatly improve the flow of vehicles through that area.

We are taking other steps to make downtown Woodbridge successful. We expect to close on our purchase of the bank building at 106 Main Street next month which we will market to restaurants. We are also in negotiations to purchase additional lots for parking off Main Street. We engaged a restaurant/retail broker to help attract the right mix of companies to locate within our borders. We plan to keep Woodbridge moving forward and a healthy and vibrant Main Street is essential if we are to be successful with these plans.

We have also passed an Ordinance to purchase a lot on New Brunswick Avenue in Fords for more shopper parking. We provided funding to extend the very successful Middlesex Greenway further into Fords. And, we absolutely love the murals on Main Street under Route 9 and we are looking for more places to paint more murals.

We have had discussions with the Middlesex County Freeholders about obtaining open space funding to expand our Township marina by purchasing properties adjacent to us. We have three train stations, but a waterfront is just as valuable of an asset to provide great attractions to our residents. Our Freeholders, led by Director Ron Rios and with our very own Charlie Kenny, have been great partners with Woodbridge Township over the years, especially with our Avenel Performing Arts Center which would have never opened without their help.

Sixty years ago the Township sold a large piece of property on Port Reading Avenue to the Hungarian Club for a discount price of \$500 which then built a large building for meetings and social activities. The Club agreed to give the property back if it ever ceased operations and that time has come. We expect to start work in the spring to turn a portion of the building into another Youth Center much like the one at the Evergreen Senior Center. It will be called the Acacia Center – continuing our trend of naming buildings after trees - because acacia trees are very popular throughout Hungary.

We all know the importance of providing programs and activities for our young teen population and we will continue to do so. We will also get the soccer field behind the Club - which at one time hosted semi-professional games - to add to our inventory of recreational venues for our children.

Of utmost importance in 2020 will be our efforts to ensure a complete and accurate count in the upcoming CENSUS 2020. Future Federal and State aid and grants depend on this and our last count was 99,585 and the 100,000 threshold is very significant.

You will always hear us talking about taking care of our children, our families and our seniors. Today I want to remind you that we really appreciate the role that all of you as representatives of Woodbridge businesses play in helping us achieve our goals. So many people here are directly responsible for our Township success through your generosity and assistance in helping so many Woodbridge organizations, and the Township itself, and we thank you for that. Your companies in Woodbridge contribute so much to the quality of life that we cherish. You send crews to work on Tooling Around the Township homes and you help our food drives, including the Have-a-Heart effort which is now underway. Special thanks to Sansone Route One Auto Mall and RSI Bank and Northfield Bank for your large donations.

Your companies sponsor summer concerts and floats in our parades and teams in our youth leagues. You participate in the Taste of Woodbridge and Taste of Colonia and you open your checkbook when we have a drive to help someone in need. The recent plane crash proved this as you all helped us collect over \$50,000 in less than a month to help those three families. You do this often without notoriety. You do it because you care about the town you work in. You want us to succeed just as much as we want you to succeed. We all owe you a debt of gratitude for your contributions toward making Woodbridge a better place.

We also thank our various other organizations in Woodbridge. Our more than 50 houses of worship. Our dozen veteran's organizations. Our nine fire companies and our four first aid squads. Our civic organizations like the Elks and the Woodbridge Senior Billiards Club. Our Community Emergency Response Team and our Mayor's Advisory Committee.

We thank the hundreds of people who volunteer on our Boards and Commissions – Planning, Zoning, Library, Environmental, History, Arts, Wellness, and many more. We give out proclamations and certificates before Council meetings to so many worthy residents, but many of you work quietly and without recognition. You all are part of our team. A team of municipal and school employees, elected officials, businesses and community groups that are taking us not only into a new year, but into a new decade. You are part of a team that has worked together in Woodbridge like no other town in the State.

And we will keep working, because we still have more to do. We will have more groundbreaking and ribbon cuttings. More jobs and more cleaned up properties. More new schools and more renovated schools. More technology and more school security. More police officers and more public programs and services. More facilities, programs and services for our seniors. More facilities, programs and services for our children. More of the events that Woodbridge has become known for like fifty free summer concerts, the New Jersey Senior Olympics, the Paranormal Expo, the Ghost Walk, the Bike Tour, 5K races, the St. Patrick's Day and Veteran's and Holiday parades, fireworks, pancake breakfasts, spaghetti dinners, youth and adult sports leagues, essay contests and painting contests, ethnic days, tree lightings, toy drives and so much more.

We are not going to slow down at all, and we hope that you all can keep up with our pace.

Ladies and gentlemen, the State of Woodbridge Township is EXCELLENT.

Now, the Mayor has turned on the FASTEN SEAT BELTS sign. Please sit down, buckle up, and enjoy the ride through Woodbridge – THE BEST TOWN AROUND.

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