

## Mayor's Annual Message 2020

Now on to the Mayor's Annual Message...

First of all, I'd like to thank Rev. Marie Bacchiocchi for her wonderful invocation. I thought it would be fitting that she do it this year in light of the imminent closing later this month of the Stanley Congregational Church. The departure of this body marks the end of a venerable institution in Chatham. The church was first founded in 1873, which means it predates the Borough itself by 19 years. It has long served our community, and has been a mainstay of the Borough on Fairmount Avenue since 1903. I know I speak for all of Chatham in saying that the Stanley Church and its community-minded congregation will be greatly missed.

Next, I'd like to thank the members of Girl Scout Troop 86647, Cub Scout Pack 6, and Boy Scout Troops 8, 28, and 280 for their participation in tonight's reorganization meeting. It is a cherished tradition in Chatham Borough for our scouts to present the flag and lead us in the pledge of allegiance. I think they do a splendid job, and I must tell you I look forward to their salute of our nation's colors every January. I'm sure you do too.

I'd also like to thank Council Member Dempsey for making the arrangements (yet again) for the scouts to be here tonight. Carolyn, you are the keeper of this wonderful tradition!

Naturally, I wish to welcome our newly sworn-in Council Members Irene Treloar, Karen Koronkiewicz and Len Resto to the dais. I'm sure I speak for the entire Governing Body when I say that we look forward to working with you in 2020 (and beyond). Welcome to the team folks. But prepare yourselves. You're about to become very busy indeed! All for a very good cause of course...

At this point, I'd like to call attention to fact that we are witnessing history being made tonight. That's because this is the first time ever that Chatham has had four women serving on the Borough Council at once. Given that 2020 is the centennial of ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment, I can't think of anything more appropriate than that. And I want to thank each and every one of you for stepping forward to serve your community. I've gotten to know all of you very well over the past few years and I can say with conviction that Chatham Borough is made better by your presence up here on this dais.

Next, because he can't be with us tonight, I'd like to give a shout-out to the newly elected mayor of Chatham Township, Michael Kelly. Mike and I have worked together for the past couple of years on the Chatham Joint Community Garden Advisory Committee. During this time, we've become good friends. I am confident this bodes well for an excellent working relationship between our two towns – much like the relationship I expect Chatham Borough to have with Madison in 2020.

Speaking of Madison, I'd especially like to thank my very good friend Mayor Bob Conley for administering my oath of office tonight. Bob, I am grateful for your sage advice with respect to municipal government matters as well as local lunch spots over the years. I look forward to working closely with you during the next four years on a number of collaborative projects in connection with

the two best towns in New Jersey. (Although you do know that the 2019 NJ Monthly ranking of best places to live in the state got the order of our respective communities reversed, right?)

Finally, I wish to thank all of the volunteers who make Chatham Borough the tremendously special community that it is – our Fire Fighters, Emergency Squad members, members of the many municipal Boards, Commissions, Committees, and our library volunteers. We are immensely grateful for all of your hard work in 2019. And we thank you greatly for stepping up to the plate once again in 2020. Without your efforts, Chatham would *not* be able to provide the extensive array of valuable – and necessary – services that it currently does. You personify Chatham and make us the wonderfully responsive and caring community that we have become.

### *Introduction*

It is the tradition at reorganization meetings here in Chatham to spend at least a few minutes describing (some of) our accomplishments during the previous year as well as our priorities for the coming one. Accordingly, I will do so now.

A word of warning: you will forgive the descent into wonkery here. But as will soon become clear, much of this is actually important stuff.

### *Budget and Finance*

Let us begin with budget and finance. In 2019 we kept the municipal tax increase to 1.87%, just beneath the mandated 2% cap. This, despite an array of unanticipated and atypical increases in our mandatory budget expenses, including such categories as pension payments, joint court costs, and sewage treatment expenses.

On a strategic level, progress was made in 2019 with establishing “best-practice” reserve funds (e.g. for covering (i) unanticipated or excessive storm recovery and (ii) accumulated absence costs). We also began work on a much-needed recalibration of our 10-year financial plan, a task that will be completed in 2020. Happily, our reward for these efforts was a continuation of our Aaa Bond Rating, which was assessed by Moody’s in early November.

### *Technology and Public Communications & Services*

We turn now to technology and public communications/services. In 2019 we began an effort to streamline many of the Borough’s internal and external processes using new technologies that improve communications and cut back on unnecessary paperwork.

As part of this initiative, in 2020 we will implement a new system for managing Council and Committee agendas, agenda packets, minutes, and videos. The public will have easy on-line access to all agendas and supporting documents in advance of Council, Board, Commission and Committee meetings. This will include site plans, architectural drawings, and other application materials for items before the Planning and Zoning Boards. Video and audio of meetings will be indexed by

agenda item so that at any future date residents can easily search an item or issue and watch the video of the related discussion.

We will also be moving many of our licensing and permitting processes on-line through our unique partnership with Madison. Our goal is to have alarm, parking, and pet licenses fully online by the end of this year, with all others (such as tree removal, road opening, and special event) to follow. As we move all of these services online we will make every effort to ensure that the processes used will be streamlined and efficient.

Creating a more “user friendly” public communications/services framework for both Borough Hall and our residents is a top priority for 2020.

### *Governmental Structure*

A third area of considerable activity in 2019 was the establishment of four new advisory committees.

Earlier in the year, the Undergrounding Advisory Committee was created to examine the feasibility (economic, legal, and engineering) of burying the Borough’s network of power and telecommunications cables. It was given a two-year mandate to study the matter and report its findings to the Governing Body in early 2021.

Towards the end of 2019, three more advisory committees were created: (i) the Chatham *Borough* Recreation Committee (in contrast to the currently existing Chatham Joint Recreation Committee); (ii) the Senior Citizens Committee; and (iii) the Economic Development Committee.

Among other things, the new Borough Recreation Committee will focus on recreation matters specific to Chatham Borough (e.g. looking after the tennis and basketball courts here in town).

The Senior Citizens Committee will address the needs of, and provide a greater voice to, a segment of our population that many will say (including me) tends to be overlooked. It’s our hope that this new body will help rectify this deficit.

Finally, the Economic Development Committee is an idea which, in my view, is long overdue. One of Chatham Borough’s most valuable “assets” is its downtown commercial district. As such, it is vitally important that we seek ways to nurture and grow this all-important asset. The function of this committee will be largely a facilitative one, and will include such tasks as: (i) branding Chatham as an attractive destination for merchants and businesses to set up shop, and (ii) devising ways to optimize the conditions for economic success of all local participants in Chatham’s private sector.

### *Startup/Moveup Chatham*

Speaking of “branding”, 2019 saw the acceleration of an initiative first begun in 2018, namely the formation of a unique partnership with the Morris County Economic Development Corporation (MCEDC) to stimulate economic growth in Chatham. The idea here is to attract technology and innovation economy firms to the Borough, thereby (i) filling the large amount of vacant office space

currently in town, and (ii) spawning a secondary “support” economy as well. Our overarching goal is to revitalize our commercial districts along Main Street as well as on River Road and Commerce Street.

The opening of The Station in July of 2019, an innovation economy co-working space, with tenants who eat and shop at our downtown restaurants and stores, illustrates the potential of this vision. Besides serving an array of solo entrepreneurs, consultants, startups, and young companies, The Station is now home to its first permanent resident, namely the innovative parking and transportation firm Boxcar. I hope you will agree that bringing new businesses like this to Chatham is in fact good business for Chatham.

In 2020 we will continue to build on this promise of commercial and economic success for Chatham Borough. A good portion of this task will fall to the newly formed Economic Development Advisory Committee referenced a few moments ago. In fact, the envisioned importance of this body may warrant elevating it to Commission status, something we will examine doing later on in the year.

### *Community Matters*

Chatham Borough is not just a municipality; it is also a community. And a community is defined by its people. As such, it is incumbent upon us to promote a maximal level of communication between Borough Hall and our people – the residents of Chatham. It is equally important to foster the flourishing of our community. This we shall continue to do in 2020.

Let’s talk first about the vital concepts of accessibility and accountability in government. We are committed to a thoroughly open and transparent Borough Hall. In 2018, I reinstated the practice of holding regular office hours for our residents. In 2019, two of my colleagues joined me in this effort. In 2020, this practice will be expanded to ensure that any resident who desires a substantive discussion on any matter will have the opportunity to do so with either the Mayor or a Council Member during just about every week of the year.

In my view, ample communication is essential to effective government. As such, I believe it is necessary to move beyond reliance on simply the Borough website and public-access channel “bulletin board” as a means of dispensing information. For this reason, the newly introduced Borough newsletter, which was included in your 2020 Borough calendars, will continue to be provided on a bimonthly basis. Furthermore, a new Chatham Borough Facebook page will soon be up and running, perhaps as early as tomorrow. Look for it. To paraphrase the old clothier Cy Syms, we believe that “an educated resident is our best citizen.”

In May of 2019 we held our first ever Borough Hall “open house” during NJ Local Government week. School groups and residents were provided tours of Borough Hall, a Q&A with Borough Department Heads, and a “touch-a-truck” opportunity with Borough vehicles parked outside. (I’m told the Fire Department’s hook and ladder truck was by far the favorite!) Other activities included “Coffee with a Council Member” at Drip Coffee and a guided walking tour of both Shepard Kollock Park and the Riverside Trail. In 2020 we will continue with these local government “outreach” programs and might even add a few new ones.

On the more social side, August of 2019 saw an experimental evening concert held at the Gazebo in Reasoner Park, which turned out to be a smashing success. As a result, we will be expanding this to a full outdoor concert series in the summer of 2020. Rock on Chatham Borough!

Finally, we will continue to promote such mainstays of the Chatham Borough social calendar as the Spring Clean-Up, the Memorial Day and Flag Day ceremonies, our beloved Fishawack Festival, the Farmers' Market, the Sustainability Fair, the PBA Halloween Street-N-Treat, the Shop Small campaign, the Holiday Tree Lighting, the Light Up Chatham event, Santa's Arrival, and the Community Menorah Lighting. (I'm sure I've missed a few here, which shows just how much we have to offer in festive Chatham Borough!)

### *Chatham School District*

Continuing with the theme of community, let me state that in 2020 we will remain committed to open communication and cooperation with our highly-valued school district. In addition to our downtown commercial zones, Chatham's top-flight school system represents another of its essential "assets". We must and will do all that we can to ensure that the School District of the Chathams (SDOC) continues to rank in the very highest tier of our state's public school systems.

In 2019, our commitment in this regard was manifested in, among other things, our DPW's assistance to the School District on various paving and maintenance matters that were beyond the capability of its own personnel. In 2020, our resolve to work with the SDOC will be further demonstrated by the sharing of benefits from any redevelopment projects that are approved.

### *Environmental Matters*

I would be remiss if I did not mention one of our biggest legislative accomplishments of 2019, namely the new single-use plastic bag ban which goes into effect March 1st. This policy was implemented in concert with a number of surrounding municipalities, including our good neighbors Madison and Chatham Township. It is a fine example of regional cooperation and environmental good sense. And it underscores the principle that responsibility for our precious planet begins at home.

### *Moving Forward In 2020*

Of course, everything I've just described barely scratches the surface of what we accomplished in 2019 or can be expected to achieve in 2020. The staff in our various departments are hard at work every day, ensuring that Chatham Borough continues to be one of the most desirable NJ communities in which to live. From the Department of Public Works to Engineering to Community Services to the Police Department and on to our General Administration, we will continue to strive in the coming year for both improvement and excellence in all Borough matters.

Over the next few weeks, I will be working closely with the Council and our Borough Administrator to develop more specific goals for 2020. These will be detailed, as is our custom, in early March. Please stay tuned.

## *Redevelopment*

Finally, I wish to turn to the topic of redevelopment. Chatham Borough is presently at a turning point in its 118-year history. The prospect of two new residential developments in town, especially the one designated for Post Office Plaza, has led to an outpouring of impassioned views on what is or is not appropriate for our downtown area. The most recent renderings of what *might* be built there has led to an expression of concern over the potential impact on traffic, our school system, and indeed the very character of Chatham itself.

We are, in a sense, being confronted by two fundamental existential questions: (i) How do we revitalize Chatham Borough's economy and ensure its long-term fiscal stability? And (ii) how do we keep Chatham *Chatham*? No one doubts the fiscal challenges we currently face given our largely flat-lined revenue stream and the projected rising costs in the years ahead of providing high-quality services to our residents. Equally, no one *should* doubt the scope and depth of the desire by our residents to preserve, in some definable sense, the Chatham that first drew us to this suburban gem with its historic homes and tree-canopied streets.

Some would have us believe that according equal weight to these two important questions is akin to squaring the circle, that is, a fundamentally impossible task. I strongly reject this proposition. Rather, I believe the solution lies in expanding our tax base in a way that renders it more diverse than presently constituted. We need to move beyond an exclusive focus on the addition of new residential units in town. Increasing the value of our commercial properties, particularly along River Rd and Commerce Street, can pay huge dividends if done right. In fact, this is part of the impetus of my initiative to draw technology and innovation economy firms to Chatham.

I do not want to get bogged down in detail at what is supposed to be a meeting celebrating the democratic process of seating newly elected public officials and reorganizing our governmental structure. But I do want to underscore the fact that, in 2020, Chatham Borough is faced with a weighty decision that will affect its character and composition for decades to come. Who said governing is easy?

For now, let me close with an announcement regarding our 2020 policy positions in the case of the Post Office Plaza redevelopment project:

- We are tossing out the previous delineated schedule pertaining to this project.
- Before we do anything, we will be seeking more information from our residents about their preferences through not just one, but a series of Town Halls (the number of which is still to be determined) beginning in February.
- We will use the month of January to bring our newest Council Members up to speed on this all-important matter.
- We will be hiring an independent financial analyst to examine a range of options regarding use of the Post Office Plaza.
- Among other things, this analyst will be tasked with constructing different financial models and performing cost-benefit analyses for each.

- This analyst will also take a long hard look at the present project in its most recent guise as presented by the current developer this past November.
- We will make every effort to compile the data and facts necessary to making a judicious decision, one that will result in advancing the twin aims of (i) ensuring economic vitality and fiscal stability in Chatham Borough, while (ii) preserving the preferred character of our suburban community.
- We will have more to say about this entire matter at our January 27 Council meeting.

We have a busy agenda ahead of us in the coming year. With a great team effort from our new Governing Body, I believe we can get the redevelopment issue right and accomplish a great many other goals.

I want to thank the residents of Chatham for placing your faith in me. And I wish you all a very happy and healthy New Year.