

Mayor's Annual Message

First of all, I'd like to thank Rabbi Lubin for his inspiring and encouraging words. I am confident I speak for all of Chatham Borough in expressing my gratitude for your eloquent call to instill in this Governing Body the requisite qualities and attitudes for advancing the well-being of our community and its residents.

If I may be permitted to expand upon this theme just a bit, I understand it to include such inherently *public* virtues as:

- the *wisdom* to govern amid the conflicting interests and issues that, in any form of government, can and will arise;
- the *unshakable commitment* to securing the welfare and needs of our community and its residents;
- the *unfaltering desire* to ensure justice and rightness in all our actions;
- the *unwavering determination* to work together in harmony, even (or especially) where there is honest disagreement amongst us; and (finally)
- the *overarching goal* to establish or guarantee that which is good, proper, and fitting for this community as a whole.

As I see it, recognition of these virtues amounts to a plea for good government and judicious governance, a principle this Governing Body shall endeavor to commit itself to, most fervently, in all of its actions, throughout the coming year.

Next, I wish to congratulate our newly sworn-in Council Members Frank Truilo and Len Resto. I know I speak for the entire Governing Body when I say that we look forward to working with each of you during your term in office on behalf of, and in the interest of, the residents of this wonderful borough. Frank and Len, welcome to the team! But prepare yourselves, as this will surely be a most demanding and effortful year. Of course, it's all for a tremendously deserving cause, namely our fellow residents.

At this point, I'd like to express my profound gratitude to all of the volunteers who make Chatham Borough the special community that it is: our Fire Fighters; our Emergency Squad personnel; the members of our various municipal Boards, Commissions, and Advisory Committees; and, of course, our library volunteers. We are grateful beyond words for your dedication and hard work during 2020, very often under trying circumstances due to the coronavirus pandemic. Moreover, the Council and I are immensely thankful for your willingness to step up to the plate once again in 2021. It is your steadfast and untiring dedication to this community that enables Chatham Borough to provide the extensive array of much-needed services that it does. Without you, many of these municipal services would either not be possible or would entail a hefty tax burden. Because of this, in my eyes you *personify* Chatham Borough and help make this the marvelously responsive and caring community that it is. For this reason, we thank you.

Last but by no means least, I wish to thank each and every Chatham Borough employee for your remarkable dedication and effort during the past extremely challenging year. Your uninterrupted

focus during this unprecedented public health emergency is both laudable and inspiring. It is said that local government is where the “rubber hits the road” in our nation’s multitiered system of governance. As such, there was really no choice this past year *but* to continue with delivery of the Borough’s most basic and essential services. This applied to everything from access to safe drinking water, a functioning sewage system, regular trash and recycling pickups, and well-maintained municipal streets, to a fully effective police force and municipal administration. You understood and embraced this principle. And despite such challenges as having to learn to work from a remote location or managing your responsibilities under the threat of possible illness, you stepped up admirably. All of Chatham Borough owes you a debt of gratitude for your exemplary display of “grace under fire” in 2020. In such an historically demanding year, you did not skip a beat. As such, you too *personify* all that is good and admirable about Chatham Borough. For this reason, we thank *you* as well.

Introduction

It is the tradition at Chatham Borough Reorganization Meetings to spend at least a few minutes describing some of our accomplishments during the previous year, and some of our priorities for the coming one. Accordingly, I will do so now.

The Coronavirus Pandemic

I begin with the coronavirus pandemic. Let us not mince words here: 2020 was one hell of a year. And the global pandemic was surely its defining theme. In retrospect, things started out ominously enough last January when the World Health Organization declared the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, China as a “public health emergency of international concern.” By early March, it had upgraded this to a “global pandemic.” At that point, New York City had already become severely affected. I recall vividly my discussion with our Borough Health Officer during that time in which she described the virus’s relentless spread from Manhattan into northern New Jersey via the NJ Transit commuter lines. It was clear that this region was directly in the crosshairs of the swift-moving contagion. Indeed, on March 14, Chatham Borough proceeded to close down its parks and playgrounds. By the end of March, all of New Jersey was essentially in shutdown. No one had ever seen anything like this before. And no one had any idea how long this increasingly dire situation would possibly last. Here in Chatham Borough, nine residents ultimately succumbed to the virus, all during the pandemic’s first two months. The outlook at this time was nasty, brutish, and bleak.

Across much of the region, the early response to the pandemic resulted in widespread social and economic disruption. It led to the postponement or cancellation of scheduled events, widespread supply shortages exacerbated by panic buying, agricultural disruption and food shortages, and a mass migration to online learning by educational institutions. Things were no different here in Chatham Borough. Public access to Borough Hall was vastly curtailed, limited to online or “appointment only” accommodation. Our public-school system went completely virtual. Retail stores and restaurants on Main Street closed. Recreational activities and sports leagues were

suspended. The early phase of the pandemic was marked by a considerable degree of uncertainty, dread, and hyper-caution.

An effort to return to some semblance of normalcy began in mid-May under Governor Murphy's direction. In the case of Chatham Borough's restaurants, outdoor dining was permitted, as was limited indoor dining. Ditto for on-premise access to "non-essential" local retail and service enterprises, which make up the majority of businesses in our two commercial districts. By June, outdoor swimming pools and tennis courts were opened. In July, recreational and league sports, albeit with restrictions, were similarly greenlighted. Notwithstanding the continued mandates pertaining to mask-wearing, social distancing, and numerical limits on indoor and outdoor gatherings, the summer soon acquired at least *some* of the feel of life as we knew it before the arrival of the contagion.

But then autumn hit. Daily numbers in new positive test results started climbing upward again. By early November, evidence of a dreaded "second wave" had clearly emerged. A new record for daily cases was set on November 14 (4,395), higher than anything seen during the "first wave" back in March and April. (The previous record had been 4,291, set on April 17). An all-time high (6,247) was then recorded on December 12. In the weeks since, the seven-day rolling average has fluctuated between 5,000 and 5,500 new cases daily. By contrast, the highest seven day rolling average during the spring was 3,669 (recorded from April 15 through April 21).

So where are we now? To put it succinctly, we're faced with much of the same. Although it is tremendously good news that we presently have a vaccine for this virus, the challenge of scaling up the supply and administering it to a sufficient number of people in order to establish "herd immunity" will confront us for a considerable portion of 2021. In fact, the state's public health officials fully expect the situation to "grow worse before it gets any better" in terms of daily infections, hospitalizations, and (sadly) deaths. Some models have New Jersey peaking in late January to early February at over 9,000 new cases per day. For this reason, it is imperative this year that we continue to take seriously (i) the warning against unnecessary social gatherings and (ii) the necessity of proper mask-wearing, social distancing, and hand-washing.

We *must* stay vigilant and do everything we can to avoid catching this virus or passing it on to others. While the vast majority of those who become infected do recover, the numbers who either succumb to it altogether or else suffer sustained compromises to their health is significant. That unfortunate "someone" could very well be either a friend or a loved one. This is a matter of not just personal health, but also of social responsibility. It is a vitally important, therefore, that we continue to take this virus seriously in 2021.

However, let me also note that the development of a vaccine is an indication that there is indeed light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, even if we are still months away from a return to whatever "new normal" awaits us. Hence, an end to this crisis *is* in sight. I therefore encourage you all to keep that in mind.

Chatham Borough Responses to the Coronavirus Pandemic

Let me say a few words now about the various responses to the pandemic here in Chatham Borough. Some of these efforts were conducted solely by Borough Hall. Others were performed in partnership with various local (non-profit) entities. In every case, they represent the very best of Chatham Borough. Here are a few examples:

- The stepped-up effort by the Borough's Health Department to carefully manage the Covid-19 crisis. Under the tireless effort and leadership of Megan Avallone, the Borough Health Officer, this department has proved to be *essential* in shaping Borough policy during the twists and turns of this evolving pandemic.
- The intensified focus and effort by our Borough Administrator and Department Heads to, again, manage the ongoing Covid-19 crisis. Last year was anything but "business as usual". The creativity and determination these leaders showed in adapting to an unpredictable and ever-changing set of challenges was key to ushering the Borough safely through an immensely difficult year.
- The very impressive and untiring effort by the Economic Development and Advisory Committee to find ways for the Borough to help our local businesses negotiate the increasingly perilous economic condition brought on by the continuing public health emergency. This includes arranging for short-term parking in front of eateries to facilitate takeout purchases, pressing the Borough for outdoor dining accommodations, sponsoring webinars to inform business owners about federal and state assistance and grant programs, promoting our local businesses via constant contact email and the Borough public access television stations, and more.
- The "Keep Chatham Thriving" campaign, run partly as a cooperative venture with the Economic Development and Advisory Committee, whose purpose has been to act as a grassroots marketing initiative on behalf of local businesses during this public health and economic emergency. On its website and social media pages can be found information pertaining to Chatham eateries and businesses, including takeout menus and special offerings.
- A Chatham Borough Courier Service, established in association with our Police Department and the Senior Center to provide for delivery of food, prescription drugs, and household supplies to Chatham Borough seniors and residents suffering from Covid-19 during this crisis.
- Tri-Town Cares, initially created in concert with Madison and Chatham Township to address the growing mental health issues associated with the shutdowns, job loss, and the multiple forms of stress due to the prolonged public health and economic crisis. The resulting group is composed of mental health professionals, clergy, and concerned community leaders. Its purpose has since evolved to include not just mental health issues

related to Covid-19, but also racial injustice, election-related stress, and (most recently) the challenge of separation from friends and family during the holiday season.

- The weekly food drive in association with the United Methodist Church, clergy from other Chatham churches, the Frontline Appreciation Group of Chatham and Madison (FLAG), the Helping Hands School Lunch/Food Program, the Chatham Borough Volunteer Fire Department, the Chatham Borough Police Department, the Chatham Borough Department of Public Works, and two wonderfully intrepid Borough Council members (among others). This is a program I am especially proud of. The fact that Chatham Borough has residents who are in economic need may surprise some. But the economic shock brought on by the coronavirus pandemic has permeated the Chatham community. The fact that neighbors have resolved to help neighbors in this caring and understanding fashion is, I believe, a testament to the very special character of this wonderful community. We should all be proud of this noble effort.

Budget and Finance

I will now say a few words about budget and finance. The total municipal operating budget for 2020 was \$15.3 million, of which \$9.3 million was funded through property taxes. This amounts to an average of \$2,996 per home going directly to municipal services, including police, public works, fire protection, engineering, health, and community services. (Chatham Borough also collects taxes for schools, the library, Morris County, and open space preservation. The municipal portion amounts to just 19% of your tax bill.)

In 2020 the Borough approved a budget for capital improvements amounting to \$1.6 million. These allocations ensure that our water and sewer infrastructure, our roads, and our public spaces are all maintained appropriately.

On a strategic level, work continued in 2020 toward a much-needed recalibration of our 10-year financial plan, a task that will be completed in 2021. We are committed to budgeting practices that minimize taxes and other fees while ensuring the Borough's long-term fiscal health. Happily, the Borough continues to maintain a solid AAA bond rating.

Technology and Public Communications & Services

I will 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. This overhaul of our communications framework continued apace through 2020.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, communication with the public emerged as an especially strong focus for Borough Hall in 2020. We had to adopt ways to connect with the public through means other than in-person meetings. For instance, the Borough's new Facebook page live-streams events (including Council meetings) and sends out regular updates regarding Borough

activities. In addition, an e-mail newsletter (via the platform “constant contact”) is now sent to every resident who signs up.

In fact, I urge all Chatham Borough residents to go to our website and sign up for both our emergency alert system (“Alert Chatham Borough”) and the aforementioned e-mail newsletter. I also encourage you to follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for news on everything from leaf pickup to police activity. Staying in touch with Borough Hall means that you will not just be better informed, but also better prepared in the event of an emergency.

In the coming year, we will see the establishment of a brand new, user-friendly website, as well as convenient online payable permits and licenses for everything from pets to parking.

Creating a more “user friendly” public communications/services framework for both Borough Hall and our residents will continue to be a top priority in 2021.

Environmental Matters

In 2018 Chatham Borough recertified as a Sustainable Jersey community at the Silver Level. We first qualified for Bronze in 2009, and were then Silver-certified in both 2012 and 2015. The Chatham Borough Green Team will be working again in 2021 to recertify at the Silver Level.

I should note that in 2012, 2015, and again in 2018, the Borough also received the “Champion Award” for having earned the most points for a mid-sized municipality. Word has it that the Green Team again has its eyes keenly set on receiving this distinction once again.

In addition to the above, Chatham Borough will also continue its effort on the new “Gold Star” program this year, which involves advanced actions in the areas of Reducing Solid Waste and Increasing Energy Efficiency.

Public Parks

In 2021 Chatham Borough will continue with its refurbishment of Garden Park, next to the Chatham Middle School. A new walking path has now been completed, funded by a grant from the Morris County Preservation Trust Fund. By Spring of 2021, the resurfacing of three tennis should also be done.

In addition, I am happy to announce the creation of a new “park-let” next to the Chatham United Methodist Church right off of Main Street. This mini-park will provide a safer and more pleasant walking area for students going to and from the Middle School. Benches, generously donated by the Chatham Interfaith Church Council from their “Plastic Bags to Benches” program,” will offer a pleasant, bucolic setting for community conversation and quiet reflection. We hope to officially designate the new park later on this year.

At Shepard Kollock Park, the new informational kiosks highlighting Chatham's rich Revolutionary War history have now been completed. I encourage all our residents to enjoy a rewarding stroll along the river for the purpose of relishing this Chatham gem.

Redevelopment

A few words now about redevelopment. In light of ongoing litigation involving AST Bradley Chatham, LLC, I will not be saying anything new or substantive tonight on this matter.

However, I do wish to remind you that the Borough has scheduled three Town Halls this month on the matter of the proposed River Road and Watchung Avenue redevelopment project. The first will take place this Thursday (January 7) at 7:30 pm. Details and the Zoom link are available on the Chatham Borough website.

Moving Forward In 2021

Of course, what I've just described barely scratches the surface of all that we achieved in 2020 or hope to do in 2021. The staff in our various departments are hard at work every day, ensuring that Chatham Borough continues to be one of the most desirable New Jersey communities in which to live. From the Department of Public Works to Engineering to Community Services to our General Administration, we will continue to strive 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 2021. These will be detailed, as is our custom, in early March. Please stay tuned.

Happy New Year to you all!