



Borough of Chatham

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Dear Chatham Borough Residents and Taxpayers,

This newsletter provides a brief summary of the current state of the Borough, including an overview of the municipal budget along with an update on municipal initiatives and other matters, which may be of interest to you.

The chief goal of our municipal government is to maintain and enhance the quality of life for Chatham Borough residents. As elected officials, Governing Body members are responsible for making decisions of policy and law, which are duly implemented by the Borough's core professional staff. I am happy to report that through their combined efforts, Chatham continues to offer an excellent quality of life marked by a positive, friendly environment for residents and businesses alike.

More than two and a half years after the coronavirus outbreak first upended life in the Borough, we find ourselves in a situation at once greatly improved and frustratingly familiar. While the virus is still with us, it is significantly less pernicious than in 2020. And it is now spurring only limited restrictions on public activity. I am told the current *endemic* condition is likely to persist for the foreseeable future. Of some concern is the next stage of the evolving pathogen, which remains uncertain. Still, the present embrace of vaccines, boosters, and other therapeutics bodes well for a more normal existence going forward, which is satisfying news to all.

From a fiscal and operational standpoint, the unprecedented challenges faced by the Borough during the height of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021 are now largely behind us. Revenue shortfalls stemming from previous sharp decreases in daily parking permits, court fees, and interest on investments have substantially abated. Kudos to CFO Karen Fornaro, BA Steve Williams, and the Budget & Finance Committee for making the necessary budgetary and operational adjustments to guide us through this unsettled period relatively unscathed. Similar plaudits are due the entire Chatham Borough workforce for their diligent effort to maintain the same accustomed high level of municipal services throughout the public health emergency.

Two groups of volunteers deserve special praise for their extraordinary service to the community during the pandemic: the Chatham Borough Fire Department and the Chatham Emergency Squad. I am grateful beyond words for the courage and steadfast sense of duty displayed by the members of these two organizations, particularly before the arrival of a vaccine when every call entailed a heightened health risk to responders. These remarkable fellow residents personify the marvelously responsive and caring community I believe Chatham fundamentally is.

The return to near pre-pandemic normalcy is very much a characteristic feature of Chatham public life in 2022. A year ago, the Borough resumed in-person Council meetings and reopened Borough Hall to the public. This past year, we reinstated in-person Board, Commission, and Advisory Committee meetings as well. More enjoyable still is the return of many of our most cherished annual Borough events to their traditional, in-person, formats.

In April, for instance, a fully in-person municipal open house was convened for the first time since 2019 as part of New Jersey Government Week. In June, thousands of residents and visitors enjoyed outdoor festivities at the Borough's first regular Fishawack Festival in three years. This year's Fourth of July parade returned to its traditional Main Street route, and was capped by a spectacular evening fireworks display. In September, the Environmental Commission and Green Team held the most successful Sustainability Fair yet, replete with the ever-popular Electric Vehicle Expo, at the railway station.

Redevelopment, of course, has been a major focal point this year. This matter is frequently a highly charged one for small towns in New Jersey. Here in the Borough, the public divide has been chiefly over the question of scale. This is especially so for Post Office Plaza, situated in our charming downtown within one of two Borough historical districts. At issue this past spring were two competing approaches for satisfying the Borough's obligation to construct 15 affordable family rental apartments: a large structure containing at least 100 units, with at least 85 market-rate units and at least 15 affordable units; or a much smaller building containing just 15 affordable units.

To assist in the decision-making process, the Borough convened two public "town halls" in April for the purpose of detailing the options and entertaining the views of residents and other interested parties. Included in the presentations were analyses of the Borough's affordable housing obligation and the implications of the two options (with their several permutations) in terms of cost, size, number of units, amenities, impact on traffic and schools, etc. In addition, the Council members held a series of office hours for residents seeking further discussion. A special meeting of the Mayor and Council was subsequently convened on May 2 for public deliberation and a vote. The final tally was 4-3 (with me breaking the tie) in favor of the 15-unit, 100% affordable housing approach. In the period since, a Redevelopment Agreement has been signed with BC UW/Madeline Housing Partners, LLC, with an anticipated construction start date of March 2024.

The Borough's other redevelopment project, located at the intersection of River Road and Watchung Avenue, is under construction, with significant progress made over the past several months. Nearly one-quarter of the structure has been framed, with crews now moving to the next section of the building. The developer, BNE Real Estate Group, has indicated the work is ahead of schedule. Once completed, the building will contain 259 rental units, of which 36 will be affordable rental units in satisfaction of the Borough's court-approved affordable housing obligation. In addition to enhancing municipal revenues, benefits to the community will include environmental remediation, road improvements at the intersection, extension and improvement of sidewalks from the new building to adjacent properties, and the burying of power lines and communication cables. The expected opening is January 2024.

I turn now to this year's troubling rise in auto thefts. In this, Chatham is not alone, with many municipalities across the State experiencing a similar increase. However, the Borough was hit especially hard early on, accounting for roughly 21% of all stolen vehicles in Morris County in the month of January. Geography is partly to blame for this as we are the most southeasterly municipality in the county, with an access ramp to Route 24 right off of Main Street. But the failure of far too many car owners to properly lock their vehicles is a contributing factor as well. Fortunately, the percentage of local thefts relative to the county total is now just over 7%. Stated another way, while the Borough experienced 6 stolen vehicles in January, it has seen just 1 theft since mid-July. Thus far there have been 20 such incidents in Chatham Borough this year, one more than the 2021 total. These numbers

actually began ramping up late last year, with 13 vehicles stolen from August to December (2021). Even so, the monthly figures have now dropped significantly.

Chief Brian Gibbons and I attribute this sharp decrease, in part, to the Police Department's "Lock It or Lose It" messaging campaign initiated last March and expanded in April. Under this program, residents are notified of the presence of known or suspected car thieves in town, who are identified through license plate readers, strategically placed cameras, resident notifications, officer interdiction, and/or State, County, and local law enforcement alerts. Residents are also advised to lock their vehicles and report any suspicious activity to 911. The means of communication are the "Smart 911" text/email messaging system (also referred to as "Alert Chatham Borough"), and the emergency "Reverse 911" notification system. The program's goal is to raise public awareness of the problem in a sustained and consistent manner so as to foster greater cooperation from residents on the matter of locking their cars.

One very trenchant fact is that *every* stolen vehicle in Chatham Borough over the past two years was unlocked at the time of the theft, with the key fob and valuable personal identifying information having been left inside. This past year, a number of cars stolen in town had even been left running while the driver dashed into a local shop or pharmacy. These thefts are crimes of opportunity. There is a tremendous amount of money being made by criminal groups from the trafficking of stolen vehicles. These automobiles are often sold nationally or overseas; worse still, they are frequently used in violent crimes right here in New Jersey. The motivation, therefore, for thieves to "shop" for *easy* targets is huge. But the recent decline in the monthly theft numbers does suggest that Borough residents are becoming more mindful of the need to lock their cars. This is a decidedly positive development.

Another Police Department measure that appears to be paying off is its stepped-up cooperation with other law enforcement agencies. The goal here is to render intelligence gathering more effective, which can help *prevent* car thefts. The Borough recently joined a consortium of police departments composed of eight regional towns, the Morris County Sheriff's Office, the Morris County Prosecutor's Office, and the Morris County Office of Emergency Management, to jointly address the problem. State authorities, such as the NJ State Police and the NJ Attorney General's Office, along with federal authorities, such as the FBI, have also joined the effort. In addition, the Police Department has enlisted the use of its impressive data analytics platforms to help guide both its resource deployments (e.g. special enforcement details and directed patrols) and its shared services coordination (i.e. with other agencies).

The bottom line here is that the Borough has taken a number of concrete and sophisticated steps to combat what is being described in law enforcement circles as the most well-organized and determined set of car theft rings in recent memory. This unfortunate phenomenon is both cyclical and opportunistic. But now that it has grabbed everyone's attention, both in Chatham and statewide, we are beginning to see indications of improvement, at least locally. The key factor is to have residents embrace the Police Department's call for partnership in the matter. I believe that is now taking place.

I will close on a more uplifting note. Last January, Chatham Borough created a new Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Committee. Its stated purpose is to promote appreciation of the growing diversity in Chatham through community events, and to serve as a liaison between various cultural, ethnic, and social groups, on the one hand, and the Borough (including its array of departments, committees, and other such bodies), on the other. The committee has already surpassed expectations

with the hosting this year of such highly successful events as January's *Martin Luther King Day Service* (along with the Chatham Interfaith Council); March's *Culture, Coffee & Conversation* get-together; and September's *Cultural and Diversity Celebration* festival (in conjunction with Madison and Chatham Township).

The committee's genesis is, in part, a 2017 Resolution conceived and approved by the then Governing Body declaring Chatham to be a "welcoming community". Given this professed commitment to a simple but constructive idea, the current Governing Body felt it desirable to match the language and intention with a more substantive act, one promising more tangible results. In this way a new committee was born, whose purpose it is to embrace an evolving Chatham and help residents (and visitors) feel more fully at home in it.

And if there is any doubt as to the Borough's increasing diversity, consider the following. At the Library of the Chathams' *Many Cultures, Many Stories, One Community* event in April, I noted in my remarks how the library had, through its English as a Second Language program, confirmed the residency, across both Chathams, of native speakers of 15 different languages. I then added 11 more to the list, represented by Borough residents with whom I am acquainted. The result is an astonishing 26 different native tongues (and counting!) represented jointly in the Borough and the Township.

Chatham Borough's growing diversity, over the past decade especially, is both palpable and profound. I, for one, look forward to the Diversity Committee's continued efforts to embrace and celebrate this remarkable trend. I hope you do as well.

Mayor Thaddeus J. Kobylarz

This is an abbreviated version of the original newsletter. For the complete version, including 2022 budget highlights and information regarding various municipal initiatives and other matters, please go to: <https://www.chathamborough.org/government/news/482-mayor-kobylarz-annual-letter>