

Good morning and welcome...

The success of any organization relies on the commitment and hard work of its members...often that starts with those that are willing to lead. The Chamber of Commerce has been blessed for years with dedicated and committed professionals...committed to their businesses and to the success of the Chamber. This past month marked the end of Tim Brennan's tenure as President. We thank Bederson for sharing him with us and I thank Tim for his valuable contributions...thank you Tim.

The end of one tenure, marks the beginning of a new one. Today is the first event for Sally Malech as Chamber President and I wish Sally the best of luck and, as always, offer the Township's full support for the continued success of our Chamber of Commerce. Best of luck Sally!

Hardly a day goes by that we do not find reason to celebrate and applaud the accomplishments of our students, the success of our schools or the teachers and staff that give so much of themselves to foster that success.

Once again, under the leadership of Coach Olivia Del Spina, the success of our Cheerleaders this season has qualified them for the UCA National High School Cheerleading Championships in Orlando, Florida beginning this weekend...best of luck girls!

Our celebrated Marching Band keeps rolling along...Band Director Lewis Kelly and Associate Director Erin Lagatic, and the hardworking band members keep piling on the awards, winning the North Jersey School Music Association Best Overall Band Championship...congratulations to the hardest working band in the state.

Congratulations to the Mountaineer Indoor Track & Field Team. In addition to several medals, the Girls won the Championship at the Essex County Indoor Relays. The girls have broken eight school records already this year. Led by Coach Jason-Lamont Jackson, we are joined today by seniors De'nae Hill, Kayla Robe, Alina Chant and Kathy Lopez-Jacobs...continued success to all of you.

We have been proud over the last many years, as a community, to celebrate the success of our High School's Boys Soccer Team...however, this past fall, our Girls Mountaineer Soccer team followed their first undefeated season in school history and league championship last season, by winning the North Section 1, Group 4 State Sectional Championship...the first in school history. This morning, we welcome Coach Sean DeVore, voted New Jersey Coach of the Year, and Team Captains Nyah Harper, Morgan Clark, Hannah Villasin and Kaitlyn Charles. In addition to the team captains, we proudly welcome Natalie Nevins, who was named Essex County Player of the Year for the second year in a row...Congratulations to our Mountaineers' Girls' Soccer team.

Whether as parents, coaches, and teachers or as a community, nothing makes us prouder than to see and to celebrate the successes of our children. We have a lot to be proud of in West Orange. Success in the classroom, on the athletic fields, on stage, in music, and in public service help to define our school system and speak to the promise we make to our children each and every year...to provide them every opportunity in their pursuit of achieving life's dreams. This morning, as every year, we take the time to recognize some of our high school students...young men and women that have worked hard to fulfill that promise.

Student Recognition:

Mya Bembry
Daniel Bradley
Wes RideauWinds
Morriel Kasher
Sessina Dani
Emily Sarrett
Max Dickman
Preggya Paromite
Jordan Broking
Ryan Retino
Daniel Feinblatt

Where ever life may take them, each of these students speaks to an inspiring school system that has achieved the objective of providing opportunities for young minds to flourish. These impressive young men and women offer each of us hope for our nation's future and remind other students of the unlimited possibilities presented to them each day in our schools.

A proud community offers each of you our congratulations and best wishes for all of life's adventures...Our West Orange High School Mountaineers.

The School System that provides the foundation for the success we have celebrated this morning is the result of a supportive community, hardworking and talented teachers, administrators and a Board of Education that works hard to provide each child of West Orange...a dream they can dream and the path to make it come true. To our Superintendent, our Board of Education members, our High School Principal and all those here that spend their day as part of the West Orange School System...we thank you.

This year welcomes two new members to our Board of Education. Elected this past November, Cheryl Merklinger and Terry Trigg-Scales both come to the Board with a lifetime of community service to children and to education. We look forward to all they will accomplish...

We are blessed with a school system that provides programs and opportunities for children of all interests. And we celebrate much of that success this morning. This year, a new, innovative program was introduced at our high school to add to that success. Virtual Enterprise International welcomed the first students this September. Virtual Enterprise is an active simulation of a business world environment where the classroom is converted into a business office setting. Students select their own management and work with a Board of Directors made up of local business leaders. They create their own business, learning ways to organize, finance and sell their idea.

This program was funded in part with a donation from the West Orange/Mountain High School Alumni Association as well as donations from our business community. Virtual Enterprises is currently offered in 19 states; our students join the only 15,000 students nationwide in developing virtual businesses and learning how to make them successful.

The business developed by our students in this inaugural school year is named EliaLife. This company develops quality, health promoting olive oil for customers while at the same time helping the farmers that grow the olives.

The student team recently competed at the New Jersey State Championships for Virtual Enterprise and were awarded 3rd Place for booth design and 3rd Place overall for their business plan. In addition to their success in this initial year, students were given an opportunity to speak with college professors and business executives providing real life lessons and opportunities as they work to reach their career goals.

This program was brought to our schools thanks to the work of Nancy Mullin, the Supervisor of Career Education and is coordinated by Maria Frangos, the Business Education Teacher. We thank both of you, and all those that made this possible, for your innovation and commitment to our children.

With each day, we live our lives against the back drop of the roads and neighborhoods we know as West Orange. And with each day, the more than 300 Township employees do all they can to make those neighborhoods home, making them safe, secure and in cleaning, paving and plowing the roadways that take us out in to the world in the morning, and when the day is done, bring us back home again.

In 2018, we welcomed over 1,000 new home owners to West Orange; new neighbors and partners in our own unique pursuit of life's happiness. And in the various catering halls, Country Clubs and houses of worship, over 320 couples came to West Orange to marry, and to start their life together.

We introduced the new James Sheeran Park into the Gregory neighborhood and purchased an old, vacant building, vacant for decades that will shortly become an important parking lot for visitors to Luna Stage, visitors to our Arts Council or simply those visiting the Valley. And, once again, organized by the Hispanic Foundation, we hosted the Hispanic Flag Raising, celebrating 21 Latin Countries, we celebrated the Jamaican Flag Raising and we celebrated our first ever, Indian Flag Raising all on the steps of Town Hall.

We sponsored our first Participatory Budgeting referendum, only the second township in New Jersey to offer this community involvement. In this initial offering, the voters overwhelming approved the construction of a new playground for children with Special Needs and we will shortly release the plans for the construction of this important addition to O'Connor Park and to our park system.

The Township hosted Shred It Day, Pet Adoptions and Rabbits Clinics, we welcomed dozens of children to the annual Juvenile Police Academy and the Fire Department's Open House. The entire community enjoyed the second annual Food Truck Festival, the Annual 4th of July fireworks and the premier of the Barktober Costume Contest for dogs.

We introduced a new parking lot for shoppers in Pleasantdale and the Downtown Alliance hosted Restaurant Week, the debut of West Orange Idol and brought two new murals to our Main Street. And speaking of Main Street...the long and winding road of Main Street Redevelopment has brought the Edison Village to life and, so far, over 100 of the luxury apartments are occupied with more being completed each week.

Our Senior Citizen's enjoyed the first planting season at the Vecchio Garden at Degnan Park, children of all ages are enjoying the new track and field installed at Joe Suriano Stadium at our High School complex and, after many years, and thanks to a cooperative effort of Essex County, the Board of Education and the Township Council, all residents and drivers are enjoying the safety of the new traffic light at Alyssa Drive.

From border to border, season to season we are blessed with great spirit, great strength and a conviction to our beliefs. We are surrounded with hardworking people, giving meaning to our small corner of the world, making a difference in people's lives and inspiring each of us to fulfill life's potential.

We all count on local government, as residents, businesses, homeowners and taxpayers...and government works best for all of us when we all work together...beginning with our Township Council. It is always my pleasure to work with each of these hardworking members of our community.

Each day, they work to see that West Orange remains a strong and successful Township, providing each of us, and our families, every opportunity to enjoy our lives. To Council President Jerry Guarino and Council members Sue McCartney, Michelle Casalino and Joe Krakoviak, I offer my thanks on behalf of our community.

This past month, the Township Council welcomed a new member to the Council. Councilwoman Cindy Matute-Brown was recently sworn in to serve this community after being elected this past November. The Administration looks forward to working with you Cindy and we all wish you the best of luck.

On this day, February 6th, in 1959, a traffic light was installed at the intersection of Pleasant Valley Way and Mt Pleasant Avenue for the first time. Local traffic was very different in 1959.

Today, traffic safety is perhaps one of the most talked about challenges for local government, and one of the hardest to solve. Traffic safety can come in many forms...from many directions. Even from an 8th grader. While still a student at Liberty Middle School, Soham Bhatnagar saw the potential danger in crossing Kelly Drive on his walk to school each day. And he did something about it. What started with him collecting hundreds of signatures on a petition, ended with the installation of a new crossing light, making it safer to cross, at the very location he believed most dangerous.

But he did not stop there, working with Liberty Middle School, the Board of Education and the Township, he lobbied the State of New Jersey to declare the section of Mt. Pleasant Avenue in front of Liberty, an official School Zone to encourage safe driving and that request was recently approved by the State Department of Transportation, ensuring safer driving conditions for years to come.

Soham is joined this morning with his parents, Saumya and Pooja. On behalf of all the people that will benefit from your contributions and look forward to all you will accomplish...we thank you Soham.

Like Soham, West Orange has always been blessed with people willing to give their time and talents. Among those many volunteers that have given their time to our Land Use boards, this morning, we recognize Bruce Buechler. Bruce served 20 years on our Zoning Board, several as Board Chairman. His expertise and professionalism have impacted countless applications, large and small, that have impacted our community.

Bruce recently stepped down from the Zoning Board as he was approved by the New Jersey State Senate to be appointed a Superior Court Judge and will be officially sworn in shortly. Congratulations Bruce and we thank you for your service.

A lot is asked of our Township employees. They are expected to provide a variety of services, to solve unique problems, to respond any time of day or night, to do it properly, do it quickly and to do it all with a smile. Michael and Giuseppe Elifani are the very embodiment of that expectation.

Michael and Giuseppe were born in a small town in Italy and moved to the United States when they were only a few years old; eventually settling in West Orange with their parents and grandparents while still young. They graduated the West Orange School System, and both began their careers with our Department of Public Works 35 years ago, in January of 1984.

In that time, they have been blessed with families of their own. Michael and his wife Margherita have two children, Kaycie and Michael Junior. Giuseppe and his wife Rosa have four children, Thanny, Danny, Ashley and Antonio. All products of the West Orange School System.

Their hard work and commitment to the Department and to the Township has driven the success in their careers. They have each climbed the ranks of our Public Works Department. From entry level positions to the boss of their respective Divisions; Michael serving as Supervisor of the Shade Tree Division and Giuseppe serving as Supervisor of the Sewer and Pump Station Division.

Both these Divisions require unique skills and a willingness to respond to frequent emergency situations, day or night; emergencies that often have residents at their most stressed. They have made careers of not only fixing the problem but restoring confidence in our residents.

They joined the Township workforce, following in the footsteps of their father Antonio who worked in Public Works for 27 years prior to his death. Their father instilled in them a fierce work ethic and a strong belief that each day, each task should be carried out to the best of your ability and with a smile. And they have lived up to that standard. I receive many complimentary letters, emails and calls about our employees and the services they provide to our residents but, without question, I receive more in praise and in thanks for the Eilifani brothers than anyone else. Their father would be proud.

For 35 years, Michael and Giuseppe have quietly gone about their responsibilities with the Department of Public Works, coming to work each day, and doing all that has been asked of them...and more...in serving our community.

They represent the best of local government and they have set a very high example of excellence for generations of co-workers. We offer them our thanks this morning, perhaps long overdue...I proudly present to you, our “Employees of the Year”, Michael and Giuseppe Elifani.

Each year at this breakfast, and throughout the year, we celebrate the success of our students and pride in our schools. Often blind to the countless people that contribute to that success each year.

For more than four decades, behind the scenes and in front, Rich and Linda Rizzilo have done all they could to see that each student has every chance to be a part of that success.

Rich is a product of the schools he has spent his adult life supporting; attending Hazel Elementary School, Roosevelt Junior High and graduating from West Orange High School in 1965. After graduating from Holy Cross and NYU Graduate School, Rich and Linda married in 1971. Linda, who was a recent graduate of Ithaca College, joined Rich in returning to West Orange to start their family.

They were blessed with three children who all graduated from the West Orange school system. Nick, class of 1998, Jim, class of 2001 and Andie, class of 2003.

From the onset, Rich and Linda committed to be a part of this community and to doing all they could to support their children, our school system and all the children that counted on it. In too many ways to mention, they dove in to the lives of their children, and the community they made their home. In addition to years and titles in PTA service, Linda was among the original organizers of Project Graduation, serving the program for more than a decade and served as the Director for many years.

Her efforts helped to insure a memorable, and safe, Graduation Night for thousands of our graduates. Linda would eventually spend 13 years working in our high school’s Guidance Office and has had a lasting impact on all the students who knew her.

Rich followed his years of behind the scenes support to eventually serving on the Board of Education from 1998 to 2004; helping to guide the District through successful expansion of our schools and the construction and opening of Liberty Middle School. Since 2001, he has served as a Trustee of the West Orange Scholarship Fund, first established in 1925, and currently serves as its President. Under his guidance, the Scholarship Fund has provided over \$700 hundred thousand dollars in scholarships to our high school seniors in this century alone.

They have been a fixture in school circles and in the West Orange community for more than 40 years. Their contributions in that time, and even today, remain immeasurable and we offer our thanks for a lifetime of caring. I ask you to help me in welcoming them, as we proudly honor Rich and Linda Rizzilo as our “Citizens of the Year”.

The Township is currently enjoying the nostalgia and the drama of the 14th Annual Classic Film Festival. The Festival was created by longtime resident, Ken Mandel in 2006. Since then, they have hosted nearly 150 events at the AMC Movie Theater, our Library, OSPAC and even our Arts Council Center.

Ken combined his talents, his passion and his energy to create this anticipated annual event. Having spent his life in filmmaking, his documentaries have earned him an Oscar Nomination, two Emmy Nominations and, in 1994, he was awarded an Emmy for his documentary, “George Marshall and the American Century.”

But his contributions have not been limited to the Festival. Ken and his wife Janet have been active members of our community for decades and their two sons, Artie and Tyler, are graduates of our school system. Ken has been a member of the Board of Trustees for the Edison National Historical Park for many years and currently serves as Chairman.

Ken recently retired from his role with the Classic Film Festival. But thanks to his efforts, West Orange will be blessed with what he started for many years to come. On behalf of a grateful community Ken...I thank you.

This March, the Township will celebrate our annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade for the 67th time. And for the 3rd year in a row, my wife Sheila will serve as the Parade Chairwoman... For almost seventy years, the Parade has provided us a rich and musical celebration of the Irish Culture. This year, a member of the Township family will once again be among the honorees. Since 2012, Joe Fagan, has served as the official Township Historian. But he has been counted on as the expert of our history long before that.

He has published four books on West Orange history, published countless articles on important facts, dates, people or even small, little known, stories that help to tell the story of who we are and how we got here.

Joe has been named a Deputy Grand Marshal of this year’s Parade...he has honored us for years, with his time, his energy and commitment to keeping our history alive...this year’s Parade, provides all of us an opportunity to honor him. Congratulations Joe.

It is never possible to discuss local government, and the impact it has on our daily lives, without discussing Property Taxes. Despite the constant struggle with taxes, and the almost curse-like aura the word itself evokes, we are not alone in this struggle and we have had successes in this never-ending battle. West Orange had the lowest tax increase in the Municipal portion of our property taxes of any Essex County town over the last 10 years. In that time, our Municipal tax increase was slightly over 10%, while the Essex County average municipal tax increase was over 30% in that same timeframe.

Our careful management of the municipal budget convinced Standard and Poor's to provide West Orange the highest Short-Term credit rating they award. And we have achieved this while continuing to provide important services and continuing to invest in our facilities and infrastructure.

But each year presents a clean slate, with no prizes and no consideration for previous success. And this year, and specifically, these next 24 months, will present challenges...maybe the most significant economic challenges we have had over this last decade.

In this coming here, employee contractual salary increases, coupled with increases in benefit and pension costs, represents a 3.6% increase in our Municipal Budget over the 2018 Budget. Factor in the increase in costs with garbage and recycling, and we are well over a 4% increase. This does not include any new employees, new vehicles, new programs, infrastructure investments or even any additional cost increases associated with our existing operational obligations.

All this while being limited to the 2% property tax cap in New Jersey...and more than any consideration for this legal tax increase limit, we must consider tax payers that are already tired with this annual, upward trend of increasing property taxes and a State unable to stop it.

We are still early in the budget process but facing difficult choices in this coming year and the year after. Budgetary choices that will have an impact on how we govern and with the services all of us as residents count on. We have overcome financial challenges before and are better for it. This process will be slow and deliberate, and despite the magnitude of the deficit, and the complicated factors that contribute, we will rely on input from the community as the process unfolds and we work together to find a fair resolution.

Despite the revolving door of financial struggles we face in West Orange...and in New Jersey...as a community, we continue to inspire investment...small and large, private and corporate. In 2018, our Construction Code Department issued over 3,000 permits for nearly \$60 million dollars in construction projects from our homeowners and business community.

This does not include the continued growth of the Edison Village on Main Street, with Phase I quickly filling up, Phase II of the approved project will begin this year, introducing new homes, affordable housing and bringing tens of millions of dollars of additional investment to this project and to our downtown.

The Valley's Central Avenue Redevelopment project is well on its way to completing the second building, which sits on the West Orange side of this joint project between Orange and West Orange. It will be completed this year and will provide much needed affordable housing. In this coming year, we will plan on the next phase of the Central Avenue redevelopment project and work to finalize plans for the two properties recently acquired by the Township that are adjacent to the existing construction.

With several acres of land ready for redevelopment, where old vacant buildings once stood, these next phases of the project will bring additional housing opportunities and public parking and, perhaps most importantly, will be the steps necessary to bring significant State investment to the Highland Avenue Station. This will provide an improved commuting option for our residents. Once completed, this project will bring new life to a stretch of Central Avenue that was covered with contaminated, vacant buildings for more than four decades.

Just up Northfield Avenue from the Valley, The Turtle Brook Hotel and the longtime vacant space adjacent to it, and the new ownership, will soon be before our Zoning Board, applying for approvals for a complete rebuilding of the property, providing retail space and luxury apartments. In addition to providing new support for the local businesses, with commuting options just across the street, it promises to be an attractive option for people looking to move to our community.

Essex Green Shopping Center, an anchor of our community, in the center of town, for more than fifty years, is currently before the Zoning Board, hoping to finalize plans for a more than \$20 Million Dollar renovation of the property. Providing additional square footage of retail space, better access to the complex and cosmetic renovations, preparing the mall to be a competitive, attractive and important corporate partner in West Orange for another fifty years.

Executive Drive, the second part of this redevelopment zone, is still in the planning stages and still has several open issues as part of this consideration. We continue to work to determine the viability of developing affordable Senior Citizen housing on top of our existing Library Building as well as determining the feasibility of moving the main Library to the Executive Drive site. There is much to consider in both and upon the completion of these pending studies, we will continue these public conversations as we work on finalizing a redevelopment plan.

The one office building on Executive Drive has already been approved for a major renovation and will remain office space in any new plan that may be developed. Whether the final plan will include a residential component, along with the library, Public Works or just a new dog park, remains to be seen.

But this project provides us an opportunity that may not present itself again for a generation; an opportunity to build much needed, new, Senior Housing, for the first time since the 1970s', the opportunity to seriously consider the building of a new, centrally located public library, something that has been looked into many times over the years, the space and opportunity to build a Senior Citizen and Community Center, the opportunity to construct a new and improved Animal Shelter and most importantly, an opportunity to develop a project that will serve each of us and this community for a long time.

Rock Spring County Club...a fixture on our landscape for nearly a century...now, a sign of changing times; but changing times we should embrace. The property, roughly 140 acres of land, is currently for sale. The Township has been discussing the sale with the owners, Essex County representatives and various developers interested in the property. After weeks of discussion and research, we believe it is the Township's best interest to purchase the property ourselves. The Administration has agreed to terms with the owners of the property and negotiated an arrangement to maintain it as a public golf course for at least the next two years.

At the next Council Meeting, we will make a full public presentation and ask the Council to consider a bond ordinance to begin this process and to purchase the property.

It is too early to commit to what the Township would, or could, do with the property in long term but regardless of what direction we take, it is best that we control the process and the planning. In addition to Township resources, our Open Space Trust Fund and State Green Acres funding are additional sources of revenue available to provide the resources necessary to complete this transaction.

Maintaining a golf component and catering, parkland, recreational space, walking paths, even small-scale development to maintain the tax base, will all be included or considered as we develop a final plan for this property and there are many steps still necessary to make this happen. The Administration is prepared to take these many steps as nearly 140 acres of land, and a willing seller, does not present itself often.

This property presents a special opportunity to our community. An opportunity that would have been hard to imagine a decade ago...but if we fail to act, a missed opportunity we may regret a decade from now.

New construction projects will not be limited to large redevelopment projects. The construction of the new entrance building to the Ginny Duenkel Pool is already underway at Colgate Park. This project will improve the parking lot providing additional handicapped parking spaces and will make it easier for patrons with ambulatory issues, as well as all patrons, to enter the pool grounds.

The public parking lot in Pleasantdale on Pleasant Valley Way will be renovated and modernized this year and a new dam at Vincent's Pond in Degnan Park will be constructed to help alleviate local flooding during heavy storms. The Township and our Schools have worked in partnership for decades for the betterment of our community and will partner once again this year on the installation of GPS technology on all school buses serving our children; providing easy tracking of the buses and ease in locating during storms or in emergency situations.

We will repave several miles of our 100 miles of roadways within our Township this coming year. We will make improvements to parks and install the first of the solar powered street signs approved last year at Stop intersections and to encourage drivers to slow down. Cambria Suites Hotel just recently opened and the historic St. Mark's Church, still recovering from the devastating fire a few years ago, will continue to make progress on the road to full restoration, having recently completed the construction of the new roof.

This new year, 2019, as in each new year, guarantees us nothing...but promises unlimited possibilities. Possibilities provided by new investment, new residents, new ideas, new projects and improvements to old ones. We will find new challenges, and together, as always, we will find solutions.

We are West Orange. We may be different, in how we look, how we got here, how we think, the way we live, in what we eat or how we pray. But we are bound in a commitment to this home and to each other. And though we may disagree at times, with each success, as with each failure, together we help to define what it means to be West Orange...for a success for any one of us is a success for all of us.

Beyond the familiar streets and neighborhoods, we share a responsibility...to the children that count on us, the businesses we count on, the public servants, serving our schools and the Township and to each neighbor...to each other.

The process can be hard. But difficult or not, that responsibility should not limit us in our hopes or in how big we dare to dream. We should be bold...in our own lives and in the dreams we dream for each other. We should commit that each year can be better than the last and that each new day is a step toward believing that.

Being a community takes work, requiring commitment, compassion, patience and a relentless pursuit for answers...to questions large and small or for the everyday, mundane problems that can be part of the framework of suburban life. But simply spending our day identifying the problems does not bring us any closer to discovering the answers.

We need to look away from our phones...a little more often...to see and touch the world, to see and touch our world, to see the people and the brightness that surrounds us...the brightness often blurred by our determined focus on life's small imperfections.

And if we don't...we may never realize our full potential as a community or as people...for a lifetime lived with an expectation of perfection is a lifetime filled with disappointment.

We are West Orange...there may never be perfection, but there is greatness all around us...in the students that inspire us, in the businesses that serve us and the people, the many people that bring pleasure to this journey and joy to our community.

Despite the challenges, despite struggles...and the imperfections so easy and tempting to focus on, each day ends here...at home, with family...so that with each new morning...we can rise...start again, and we can remember...just how lucky we are.

Thank you for listening.