



TOWNSHIP OF WEST ORANGE

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OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

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State of the Township Address- January 23, 2013

As people, the New Year means new goals, new dreams and means an honest attempt to improve on what the previous year had to offer...as a local government we look to each new year with the same hope and the resolve to meet what new challenges await us.

Local Government is a balance between services and the cost of those services. Balancing what may be a good idea, with what may be simply unaffordable. Trying to determine the quality of what we provide when compared with who benefits and how much it costs the taxpayers. As a township we struggle with the conflicting demands of the American tradition...wanting more government service but wanting to pay less in taxes. Government is the struggle of reconciling this age old conflict.

We all understand the difficulties, the shortcomings of government are well documented, and the subject of taxes can be exhausting...but we know, beyond the challenges, as we continue to work in defining what is important to us, we know, we will not surrender to the doubt, we will not relent on pursuing our goals and we will not quit in our attempts to highlight the strength of the West Orange community.

Storms may challenge the 100 miles of roads within our community, the 100 acres of town owned land, but power outages and blocked roads will not deter us. Crime may be a reality in modern society, but it will not distract us. Taxes may be a constant in our lives, but they will not discourage us.

We celebrated our 150th Anniversary as a community in 2012, and more than a number, it speaks to the tens of thousands of people who have contributed to our history and, maybe more than their sacrifice, it speaks to their example...we are brothers and sisters, sharing in that history, sharing in our address and in a common belief that we share too, in our towns' promise.

Everything we do as the Administration of Municipal government here in West Orange is with the guidance, support and input of our municipal council. I have enjoyed working with them and the Township continues to benefit from their leadership. Council President Victor Cirilo and Council members Patty Spango, Sue McCartney, Joe Krakoviak and Jerry Guarino...we will continue to work together to improve the service we provide our residents...I look forward to continuing to work with them; our Township Council.



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Employees are the backbone of our municipal government and during Hurricane Sandy our employees worked around the clock to return our lives back to normal as quickly as possible. Police, Fire, Public Works, all non-uniformed employees, regardless of which Township department, and the volunteer efforts of our CERT team and First Aid Squad, did whatever was necessary, for as long as it took, without complaint, for the residents of this community...and for that I offer my thanks to all our employees.

In many ways, our Main Street is the heart of this community. Tory Corner can trace roots all the way back to the American Revolution and a strong Main Street means a strong West Orange. That success has been under the direction of our Downtown Alliance for the last 14 years and for the last several years the Downtown Alliance has been under the direction of Denise Esposito. Unfortunately, Denise is leaving us in 2013. Not for retirement, not for another job, but as all things come home again, she is fulfilling her dream to return with her family, to her home, and the beautiful island of Hawaii...hard for us to compete with that...thank you Denise for all you have done for us and we wish you luck.

We have all heard the expressions, “doing more with less” or “multi-tasking” ...all the Township’s employees are stretched these days, not unlike employees everywhere...but no employee for the Township does more in so many different areas, than Nick Allegrino. Nick joined the township workforce while still in high school and would become a full time member of our Public Works Department after completing school in 1996.

Though he quickly mastered any task put before him, it was his willingness to do anything necessary to help the Township that has made him so valuable to our efforts. In addition to all his Public Works responsibilities, Nick accepted the challenge of coordinating the upgrade of the Township’s technology and communication systems and no project gets completed without his input. He has overseen the new radio tower site, the upgrades to our communication equipment, the upgrades to our Police Department’s internal network, the implementation of the state of the art E-ticketing system in our Patrol cars and the seamless relocation of our Emergency 9-1-1 dispatch center.

If that is not enough, Nick has served the West Orange First Aid Squad for the last 14 years and has been the Chief of the First Aid Squad since 2006. And with all that, he still finds time to spend with his family...his fiancé Sandy, their two children Sophia and Ava...and to round out the dinner table, Nick’s extended family, children, Kayla, Kerry, Kristen and Kevin. Nick is humble, hardworking and has earned the respect of everyone that works with him. He asks not for attention, but simply for what needs to be done. No task has been too small or too challenging. He is reliable & loyal, he is dedicated, and he is one of the nicest people I have ever met, he is our Employee of the Year, Mr. Nick Allegrino.

As a grade school student, the whole world seems confined to your family, your neighborhood and your school...as a young boy, for me, that school was Washington School. Many of the names and faces have faded with the years but among the names and faces I could never forget, is Marie DeMaio. I would know of Miss DeMaio before I ever entered Washington School as she would teach 2nd Grade to my older brother and sister and she has been a fixture there ever since. Miss DeMaio started at Washington School as a teacher in the 60’s becoming Principal of the school in the mid-eighties. Through changes in our society, changes in how we educate our children and even two renovations to the



school, Marie DeMaio has been the steady hand that has guided the young life of thousands and thousands of children. Her friendly smile and kind heart welcomes staff, parents and students alike.

She has served in leadership of the Education & Administrators Association, has helped secure grants for the district and has worked closely with me and the Township on any project that could benefit her school, the surrounding neighborhood or her beloved students...but beyond that, her impact will never be measured in titles or milestones alone. In any time, educating children is about connecting with a young mind in the classroom and having inspired teachers in front of the class. Miss DeMaio has insured that for decades and has earned the respect of her peers and the unwavering support and loyalty of the teachers and staff in her school.

Today, she is in her 51st year in the West Orange School District and it is impossible to imagine Washington School without her...ladies and gentleman, the heart of Washington School, our Citizen of the Year, Miss Marie DeMaio.

Whether political debate on the national level or discussing policy here in New Jersey, most conversations of government eventually come down to dollars, cents and taxes. Right or wrong, as people, we focus on quantitative measurements of all our favorite subjects. American's love statistics...they do not always tell the complete story, and can even be misleading at times, but they offer a good description in measuring success or even failure or simply enough...they let us know where we stand and what we need to work on. If we explore the numbers here in West Orange...the dollars, cents and taxes...there is a lot that begins to speak to our success and there is much for us all to be proud of.

2012 was the third straight year without a municipal tax increase. We have begun to reshape how we govern and have reduced our overall spending, returning spending to 2008 levels. But in doing so, we have made sacrifices along the way...we have reduced our workforce and we have eliminated popular programs and services. In the last five years, in looking at all municipalities in Essex County, West Orange has the lowest municipal tax increase of any municipality in the county...and lower than every municipality in several neighboring counties as well.

In fact, in the same three year period where West Orange has not raised municipal taxes at all, some neighboring towns have done so significantly. Livingston, for example, has raised municipal taxes 5% in the same time frame, Roseland 24%, Verona 16%, Millburn & South Orange 5% and Montclair 18% ...that is an average of a 12% increase in municipal taxes of several neighboring towns in the same 3 years West Orange has not increased our municipal taxes even one dollar.

Currently, two thirds of Essex County towns pay more in municipal taxes than we do here in West Orange. That is not to say, our work is done, we have accomplished all we hope to or that a town should even be measured by taxes. The regressive property tax system in New Jersey makes each and every year a battle in itself and the best of planning has little impact on future budgets as it is not always possible to predict or plan for large increases in necessary expenses. Though we are seeing a steady improvement in property values, though we have improved our tax collection rates, reduced our workforce and spending, 2013, as every year, poses a new set of challenges. Municipal Government in New Jersey has no memory...there are no rewards for success in the previous year as we all start back at the beginning each and every year. A revenue shortfall resulting from tax appeals and anticipated increases in obligations such as salaries, utility and sewer costs present us, once again, with budgetary challenges. It is too early in the process to know just how the



final budget will look but we have a lot of work ahead of us. As a government, we have certain obligations that are unavoidable. Despite the economic challenges of any point in time, we are charged with keeping residents safe, picking up garbage, plowing snow, cleaning up after storms and perhaps most frustrating of all...fulfilling the obligations the state and federal government impose on us. We are poised to face these challenges. We will determine as a community what will work and what will not work and we will once again finalize a spending plan that balances the needs of this community with the expectations of our taxpayers.

Beyond the dollars and cents, government provides structure, the order of life, to what we are able to do on our properties and how we expand our businesses. Most often, government makes small, incremental steps when it comes to reform, it can be slow and sluggish and more than anything, it is prone to creating rules that simply govern previous rules. Since becoming Mayor, it has been my hope, my intention, that each of the small steps we make be guided with a singular mission and focus and to have each step, made with purpose....that is, that government be a partner in our lives, not a burden. Much of what we have tried to accomplish did not garner much discussion after being approved but is no less important than anything else we have accomplished. Government has a role in our lives, not always easy to define, but an important one. We invested in a new Township website in order to make government more assessable for residents and to provide easier access to all information. After an exhaustive line by line review of our ordinances by the volunteer Zoning Ordinance Review Committee this past year, the Township Council approved dozens and dozens of amendments to our ordinances that will ease the unnecessary regulations and rules. It eliminated duplication in our ordinances and greatly reduced the regulatory red-tape that frustrates us all, business owners and residents alike.

As Chamber members, as business owners, you appreciate, perhaps more than anyone, the importance of having support from your local community...meaning your friends and neighbors, but also your local government. As a township we prioritize West Orange residents when we hire employees, we utilize West Orange vendors whenever possible and this year, we will introduce an innovative new way to encourage our residents to shop local. In 2013 we will introduce the Shop West Orange Card. This card, at no cost to residents, will provide discounts at participating West Orange businesses; however, unlike other discount cards...these discounts will be directly applied to the resident's property tax bill. Using existing debit and credit card technology, each discount from each purchase will be calculated and attributed to the specific block and lot of the resident. Even renters will be eligible to participate. The more you shop in West Orange, the bigger reduction on your property tax bill.

We live in the technology age...despite the advancements we have all seen over the course of our lives, at no time can we compare to the way we live today, that technology has infiltrated our lives. It has touched every aspect of everyday life...unfortunately; government has often been the last to catch up but we have worked over the last several years to close that gap. In addition to website enhancements, we plan in 2013 to make further improvements to the technology we utilize to more efficiently govern the community and serve our residents.

Many of these enhancements involve our policing efforts. Last year, we equipped each of our patrol cars with the latest in computer, audio and video equipment. This equipment provides each officer with immediate access to all important records as well as an audio and video recording of all interaction with the public...protecting our officers as well as the public.



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This year, we will be taking the next step in our use of technology. Security Cameras, recently approved by a majority of the Council, will be installed; starting first with the more densely populated areas of town and will be expanded to cover additional neighborhoods each year. This equipment will expand the reach of our Department by acting as an additional set of eyes as patrol cars, and headquarters, will be able to access and record the images at all times...enabling our police officers to patrol and monitor multiple locations at once.

This equipment, despite the best of technology, will never replace the quality policing of the men and women of our Police Department. Despite a reduction in force over the last two years, this department continues to strive for excellence in protecting our residents and our property. Even with an equal number of calls of service from the year before in our community, 2012 saw a reduction in crime from 2011 of 18%. This includes a 28% drop in robberies and a 10% reduction in motor vehicle theft.

We will be hiring additional officers in 2013, and continuing to expand our use of modern equipment, but even before that, our police department responded to the challenges they were presented in 2012 and for that, we offer our thanks.

We have learned a few times the last few years and especially following Hurricane Sandy just how important electricity is in our lives...in ways we had often taken for granted, but will not take for granted again. Whether a business owner, a home owner, in our schools or in local government, we need electricity to heat our homes, light our roads, power our computers and to power our lives. Though a necessity, for everything we do in our modern world, we should never be complacent in paying for these necessary utilities...in 2011, the Township joined other local municipalities in a consortium organized by Essex County in order to reduce our electricity costs, powering our street lights and municipal buildings...in 2013, working with the Energy Commission, we plan on leveraging the strength of our numbers, the thousands of households and businesses that count on electricity. Through newly approved legislation, we will explore energy aggregation and pool all home owners and electricity users in our township together for the purchase of our electricity. In turn, we will reduce electricity costs for each of us. After a careful review and public viewing, it is our hope to begin a program that will pass as much as a 10% savings of the cost of electricity on to each and every homeowner.

In one form or another, in large public meetings or small discussions among friends, the idea of redeveloping the Edison Battery Site has been talked about for a long time. Discussions over 15 years have encouraged many different ideas, passionate debate, outrage, hope...even lawsuits...but through it all, from one side of town to the next, it remains a source of great interest. Beyond the talk, beyond the debate, remains a site in need of redevelopment...and at the core, remains what has been lost in all the debate, and should be celebrated. Since the beginning, in an area many have dismissed as valueless, is a developer that has invested over \$50 million dollars on our Main Street with commitments for tens of millions more. Prism Capital Partners, since 2006, more than just promises, more than just rhetoric, have committed dollars...real dollars that so many others were unwilling to commit. After years of hearings and debate, this project has all the necessary approvals and is ready to begin. In a few short months, after years of discussion, redevelopment will officially start on Main Street, and that, this Administration sees, is a success for our Downtown and for our Township.

The challenge for any government, at any level, with all our demands, is to balance the needs of the community with the economic constraints at any given point in time...needs



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may change from year to year, but each budget cycle is limited by economic pressures. Most often, these constraints are driven by employee related costs. Services require people and people, and their related benefits, cost money. We have reduced our employee workforce by 17% since 2010...but that has not reduced the responsibility to serve the needs of our residents; to keep them safe, to protect them and help them when the need arises. With that, we are always exploring creative ways to expand and fund our services and extend our ability to serve this community, and find ways to do so while existing within the economic constraints that govern us...no better way to accomplish this than with grants. We have enjoyed great success in the last 12 years since contracting with a grant writer but we have seen most opportunities we once counted on, disappear these last few years during this economic downturn.

However, as a result of good fortune, support from the Federal Government and the hard work of our Grant-writer, Alicia Skinner, Fire Chief Pete Smeraldo and his staff, we were awarded a Safer Grant this year which will allow us to add 10 additional firemen to our ranks, This grant provides the funding to cover complete employee costs, salary and benefits, for two years and enables us to expand our fire and first responder staff, easing pressure on existing staffing levels. The funds from this grant will enable us to cover the cost for these new hires into 2015. We cannot say for sure what the governing body will determine at that time, or what may be in the Township's best interest, but we are pleased to take advantage of this opportunity in the meantime, both for easing staffing pressures and for the well-being of our residents.

Since 2002, in a 10 year period, the cost of benefits, pension and employee accrued time has increased from 14% of our total budget in 2002, to 27% in 2012. Though employees provide the services we all count on, the increases in employee related costs mean less money for other necessary expenses, less money for additional employees and growing stress on the budgetary process. The biggest contributor to these increases is the growing cost of retiree health insurance as our retiree population is close to surpassing our active employee population. These factors are a significant consideration in the collective bargaining process and were a major point of discussion when coming to terms with AFSME, the union representing the majority of our non-uniformed employees. We settled a four year contract this year and in addition to accepting no increase through the first two years of the contract, they agreed to eliminate retiree health insurance and accrued vacation time reimbursement for newly hired employees. This is a major step in beginning to control the cost of these obligations in the future. I would like to thank the leadership of AFSME and all the members of our non-uniformed employee union for agreeing to terms that protect the interest of the members but also provide the Township and the taxpayers the framework for easing the burden of these obligations in the future.

It has been a priority of this Administration to complete all approved projects, quickly and in budget. In 2012, we completed the Main Street Street-scaping as well as several road resurfacing projects. In the first few months of 2013, we will complete a major sewer improvement project that will alleviate years of flooding in the Mayfair Drive neighborhood and we will award a contract for correcting flooding on Mountain Drive.

We will continue our road resurfacing efforts, improving the Township's infrastructure, and, in addition to several improvements to our athletic fields, we will add a Spray Pad section to our town pool, adding to what already is the best kept secret in town, our Ginny Dunkel Pool.



In 2013, we will finalize purchases of additional open space as well as creating a passive, walking path park on the Ridgeway Avenue Property deeded to the Township several years ago.

And as part of a plan to improve both the recreational experience as well as the environmental impact, Vincent Pond, the anchor of Degnan Park, will undergo significant repair to correct years and years of erosion around the pond's perimeter.

Some projects may be larger than others, but every dollar we invest in our roads, parks and neighborhoods is a dollar well spent in preserving our community and protecting the investments our residents and business owners have made in West Orange.

This is our life...here, now...we are forever connected in time, at this moment...business owners, residents, moms and dads, daughters and sons...we work and we play with West Orange as the backdrop to our homes, our families and the special memories they create. Surrounded by beautiful settings, state of the art facilities and encouraged by the people, contributing in many different ways to the fabric of this community. We are inspired by students that amaze us...teachers that educate us and employees that care for us.

Criticism will not solve our problems, dissention will not encourage solutions and we should never wait for government to take the lead in our lives. Each of us has an obligation, to take care of our families, our neighborhoods and neighbors. We cannot blame government for litter on our streets or crime in our neighborhoods and we should never wait for government to pick us up when we stumble. I have been honored to serve in local government and honored to be your Mayor...but each of us has a role, an obligation to protect what we know and love, as our hometown...not to point fingers, but to take action, not to make excuses but to take responsibility. We are surrounded with all the opportunities we could hope for from life and regardless of the challenges, regardless of the frustration, there is much among us to celebrate.

This is our life...we live as neighbors; we live as friends...we live as partners in this wonderful community of West Orange. Celebrate with me...

Thank you for listening...



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