

2022 State of the Borough

Residents, elected officials, board members, volunteers, family and friends. Once again, we find ourselves gathering in a mostly virtual state as a result of the continuing effects of the pandemic and the latest Omicron variant. While great strides were made throughout 2021, opening once shuttered businesses, welcoming residents back to Council meetings and our Seniors to their Senior Center, the latest surge in cases reminds us that we must remain vigilant to protect ourselves, our loved ones and our fellow residents. As we close out 202 and begin 2022, we reflect on the effects of the pandemic, our recent accomplishments and prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

Today, our fellow residents have renewed their trust in Councilman Bengivenga, the borough's longest serving Councilman and Councilman Wolak. Congratulations on your new term of office. Councilmen Bengivenga and Councilman Wolak, you understand the tremendous responsibility that comes with your positions and so the task is simple. Listen to the residents and be responsive, serve the community well and you will have a successful term. Congratulations to you and your families as you begin your new terms.

While 2020 quickly changed life as we knew it, 2021 began with a new surge in cases. With vaccines becoming more readily available, a new hope spread throughout the country and the borough. Crippling restrictions placed on business slowly loosened and eventually were removed. Work from home slowly transitioned into a return to the work environment. Normal everyday life activities and milestone moments began to transition back to a pre-pandemic state. This pandemic continues to affect every resident in the borough in different ways and varying degrees. Nearly 4,000 residents have had confirmed cases of COVID-19. Sadly, 72 residents died as a result of the virus. We owe a special debt of gratitude to our first responders, our nurses, and hospital workers. We extend that gratitude to the many workers in the retail and service industries including our very own municipal employees. Your dedication and perseverance have made life a little easier for each and every one of us during these trying times.

Even though the final chapter of this pandemic has not been completed, we know brighter days lie ahead. So today, I continue to urge you to adhere to the CDC guidelines to protect yourself, your loved ones and your fellow residents. Thank you for all that you have done so far.

The Pandemic aside, 2021 was a busy year across the entire borough. The Borough modified work processes to maintain as much normalcy in operations as possible. Through the leadership of Chief Financial Officer Glenn Cullen and Council Finance Chair Bengivenga the borough introduced a budget that once again put residents first and kept municipal property taxes in check. The municipal portion of your tax bill is up less than 1% over the last twelve years. The borough's tax base continues to increase, poised for a nearly \$13.5 million dollar year over year increase and over a \$20 million dollar increase over two years. Through a department wide focus on borough finances, South Plainfield continues to enjoy one of the lowest tax rates on

real value in Middlesex County. We continued to balance capital investment against a responsible debt burden. Thank you to our Council members, Department Heads and borough employees alike who enable us to achieve the most benefit for each tax dollar received. Your continued efforts and accomplishments are appreciated by all of South Plainfield's tax payers.

The Department of Public Works continued to support our in-house bulk pickup program, completing a record 2,473 pickups, up 5% and consisting of over 523 tons of waste in addition to 493 senior resident pickups. In addition to the normal maintenance of borough buildings, grounds and parks, the department maintained the boroughs fleet of 95 vehicles and various equipment. The department was instrumental in the borough's response to Hurricane Ida, completing 835 bulk pickups and contracting outside providers for an additional 288 pick ups tied to the storm. Thank you Councilwoman Mott and the entire department for your excellent work throughout the year.

Our Engineering Department assisted with the improvements and repaving of Durham Ave and Metuchen Road. The Borough received a total of \$1.06 million in NJDOT grants to complete these projects. Additionally, the borough repaved over 6 miles of roadway in 2021 and made repairs to storm and sanitary sewers. Improvements include the repaving of Cady Lane, re-engineered and paved parking lots at the PAL Building and Community Pool, including a new crosswalk and speed table to improve pedestrian safety. Public Service Electric & Gas paved an additional 8.8 miles of roads associated with their gas main upgrade program.

Our Senior Center remained closed for the first half of 2021. In July, we greeted members back to the Center with a Grand Re-Opening. Classics such as Zumba, Yoga, Healthy Bones, the Book Club and Craft Classes were offered. The Center, in coordination with the Recreation Department utilized the outdoor turf field to provide additional classes while the building was closed. With the recent COVID surge, we have temporarily halted indoor activities. However, our Seniors are special and we will continue to look at ways to keep them engaged while we deal with the COVID-19 virus with the number one goal of keeping them healthy and safe.

The South Plainfield Library recognizing the important role they play in our community altered their programs to continue to offer our residents the vital services they provide. In 2021, annual circulation numbers grew considerably, up 26% year over year. The Library hosted or participated in some of our popular events that were canceled in 2020, including the Fall Fest and Hispanic Heritage Month. We thank the Library for their purchase of the new Main Entrance Sign for Borough Hall, the Library and Willow Park. Thank you to Library Director Hansen, staff members and our library board of trustees for all of you hard work and service to our residents during this tough period.

The Municipal Clerk's office continues to provide necessary services to our residents in a timely and organized fashion. The office administered an election that introduced technology changes at both the voting booth and the check-in process throughout the County. The borough continues to keep residents informed via important tools such as Nixle and Facebook, with my assistant Anne Daley leading the effort. Anne is often the first contact for many of our residents

and she was vital in implementing operating changes brought upon by the pandemic. Thank you to our Clerk and Finance employees who ensured residents continued to have nearly uninterrupted access to complete vital services throughout the year.

Our Public Celebrations and Cultural Arts Committees continued to provide town-wide popular events for all residents to enjoy despite the pandemic. The Labor Day Parade returned to South Plainfield, almost on Labor Day. Trunk or Treat returned to an in-person event, welcoming over 1,000 residents. Working with the Fire Department, the Committee executed a miraculous Holiday Light Parade and Tree Lighting event. Closing out the year with the help of Anne Daley, the Committee once again organized the distribution of hundreds of luminaries for the Christmas Eve Event. Thank you for your tremendous efforts throughout the year.

Throughout the pandemic, Councilman Derryck White continued to work with our Building Department and the business community to showcase South Plainfield to prospective new businesses. We continued to attract new businesses of all sizes to town, from national chains such as Claire's as well as innovative new businesses such as Jeff Works to small businesses such as Fade Mansion. We were also pleased to see LA Fitness resume their construction on their location at Oak Park Commons. These are only a few of the latest additions to the South Plainfield business community. In addition, we look forward to upgrading our building and zoning department forms and permitting applications to include an online option. We also offer a sincere thank you to our Zoning and Planning Board members for your countless volunteer hours and your continued dedication to serving our community.

Our Building Department also adjusted to the pandemic by enacting residential service modifications that allowed the department to remain open. This included modifications to home inspection and homes sales to comply with the Governors Executive Orders. The department remained available throughout the pandemic with enhanced protection protocols implemented.

Public Safety will always remain a key focal point. In 2021 the Police Department continued to protect and serve the borough while adapting to the ongoing public health crisis. With a decline of cases over the Spring and Summer, the Department was able to bring back the popular National Night Out celebration, partnering with a number of borough organizations, committees and private businesses. Through a partial grant of \$120,000, Body Worn Cameras were implemented during September. Three officers completed their service to the borough, retiring after strong careers supporting the borough and it's residents. In December, we joined the department and families as four new recruits were sworn in as the newest officers in the borough. As frontline workers along with our EMS and Fire Department, our first responders continued to provide vital services to our residents while ensuring their personal health and safety. Our Office of Emergency Management continued to oversee the key procurement process for personal protective equipment through their counterparts at the Middlesex County Office of Emergency Management. In partnership with the Board of Education, our School Resource Officers continued to play a vital role in ensuring the safety of our students throughout the year.

Fire Prevention continued to meet the needs of borough business and residents throughout the year. Through altering work hours and being adaptable, the departments completed all required annual fire inspections throughout the year. The Fire Department continues to attract and retain volunteers while responding to over 1,000 calls throughout the year. Our volunteer EMS currently boasts over 40 members who responded to over 700 call throughout the year. Thank you Councilman Wolak and Chiefs Parker, Scalera and Laferrera for your leadership. A special thank you to our volunteer first responders for your dedication to the borough.

After a short initial season, the South Plainfield Community Pool opened for it's first full year after receiving public support during Democracy Day 2019 to revitalize the pool. During 2021, the pool recorded 27,657 individual visits to the facility and over \$400,000 in revenue. The Recreation Department continued to face major challenges operating during the pandemic. Working within the Governors Executive Orders, the department was able to introduce Wrestling and Youth Basketball in modified formats. A new STEM program was introduced, initially virtually but then in-person at the PAL. Participants were able to try their hand at coding and have their creations move about the PAL building. In March, the traditional Easter Egg Hunt was revamped and introduced as the boroughs first BunnyHop. This fun and free event provided over 150 families a chance to hop down the bunny trail at Putnam Park and gather treats in a safe and structured format. During the summer, the department offered Summer Parks, Safety Town, Multi-Sport and Sport Camps. In cooperation with the Board of Education, we accepted over 1,000 registrations for the 5 week program.

For the second year in a row, our Environmental Commission began the year with all volunteer positions filled. We were excited to offer our Clean Communities Program's Spring and Fall Cleanups after having to cancel the Spring event last year. The events attracted over 370 volunteers who collected over 365 bags of trash. In addition 8 Adopt a Spots contracts were renewed along with 2 new contracts signed. Our Clean Neighborhoods Program Aide remained strong, clearing litter from 703 storm drain grates, collected 3.2 tons of roadside trash and removed 834 illegally posted signs from the boroughs right-of-way. Grant funds were used to pay for two part-time Recycling Groundskeepers and anti-littering signage. Our Green Team received support from the Governing body and advocated for adoption of Sustainable Jersey's Land Use Pledge, Green Building Pledge and the Companion Animal Management Plan. Councilman Smith has proven to be a tireless advocate for the department, working with employees and volunteers to move the agenda forward.

We implemented Phase #3 of the Home Town Heroes program. The newly added Veteran Banners have been displayed along Hamilton Boulevard, South Plainfield Avenue and Church Street. I'd like to thank American Legion Post 243, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Councilman White, Joe Sacco and all those that have come together and recognizing our veterans and their amazing sacrifices to America.

As we start 2022, our foremost priority will not change. We remain committed and focused on providing essential services to our residents while keeping taxes and spending under control. This means adopting a municipal budget that adequately funds municipal operations while ensuring our residents get the maximum return for each municipal tax dollar and maintaining our existing credit rating.

Our Recreation Department will look to further expand programs and seek out new programming opportunities. We will formally unveil the new playground at Ponytail Park. Security enhancements are planned for the PAL, including a new camera system. As always, we will look for grant opportunities to enhance our parks, playgrounds and program offerings.

Investments in our borough infrastructure will also remain a top priority for 2022. With the assistance of over \$417,000 in New Jersey Department of Transportation Municipal grant, we will repave New Market Ave. Progress will be made on a new fueling system at the Department of Public Works yard, a shared service with our Board of Education. In addition, we will continue to coordinate our annual Road Resurfacing program with new utility company projects planned throughout the borough.

Investments will continue to be made in our police officers, 911 communication operators, firefighters and EMS personnel through additional vehicles, training, supplies and technology. We will look to expand the Police Departments traffic cameras installed throughout the borough. In addition, along with the Fire Department we look to take ownership of the newest Fire Engine.

Our Boards and Agencies will be working to oversee and provide exciting activities throughout the new year. Our Human Relations Committee will continue to work with key boards to assist them in ensuring our programming reaches our entire community. The Mayors Wellness program will look to expand into the virtual world in 2022 by offering virtual events aimed at ensuring our residents wellness as we continue to navigate the pandemic.

On the Environmental front, the commission aims to make recommendations to the governing body in several areas including solar panel installation permitting and a revision to the Tree Protection Ordinance. The Commission will look to promote the state-wide Bag Up NJ campaign through publicity and through the distribution of free reusable bags. We will continue to work with our curbside pickup provider to improve customer service and communication of recycling policy changes.

As we reflect back on 2021 and the challenges that lie ahead, I'm proud of our collective response to the pandemic and what we have accomplished. I remain optimistic about what lies ahead for South Plainfield and our ability to meet the challenges ahead. May God bless you and protect you. Best wishes for a healthy, happy and prosperous 2022.