

2009 State of the Town
By Kenneth A. Flatto, First Selectman
1/26/09

RTM members, Officials, and Fellow Citizens:

Last week, the world listened as an historic Presidential address ushered in a new American era. These are remarkable times. Remarkable because of the challenges and worries facing our country, but equally extraordinary and historic because of the promise and hope we have in our nation and our new national leaders. Last week, I joined municipal leaders from all over the country in civic spirit, united in our desire for a renewed national focus on community needs and issues.

I am pleased to report to the RTM and our town that Fairfield and indeed all communities now have a committed partner in Washington. The public servants we have entrusted in the White House and Cabinet understand local needs. After meetings with Congressional leaders and some of the new officials in the White House, it is clear Fairfield will receive some allotment of limited funding from federal stimulus package legislation. At a time when our next municipal budget faces daunting issues, I commit that any new dollars in federal aid we get for Fairfield will go to two key concerns: 1) keeping our tax rate as stable as possible and 2) public infrastructure needs.

New federal initiatives should be met with positive local efforts. We have a proud record of helping Fairfielders and accomplishments which

sustain Fairfield's quality of life. 2008 witnessed some notable successes. Senior affordable housing was created along Villa Avenue. We helped coordinate the final community plan to preserve the Army Reserve Center site for future public use and received full approval from this RTM. Hundreds of Fairfield citizens and families with financial worries accessed minimal cost bus transportation through a new dial-a-ride grant. Income-eligible residents have been able to bring household waste to the dump at a big discount. This RTM worked very hard to meet our goal of giving every income-eligible senior citizen a larger tax credit to reduce property tax payments. We expanded public safety with more traffic enforcement and free smoke detectors for neighbors in need. Our wonderful Senior Center is back under town management, as our restructuring saved \$100,000 per year from reduced overhead while simultaneously strengthening service delivery. Our appreciation of town history has been strengthened through town's partnership with the Fairfield Museum and History Center. We continue to save vital open spaces from development; the latest accomplishment was the 9-acre Parsells property enhancing town's inventory of parkland. We enabled a farmers' market to open downtown and installed more green energy features in various town buildings.

This Administration is always striving to do more while saving taxpayers money. My wonderful colleague Selectman Sherri Steeneck is helping me work hard at putting Fairfield first, as is our fellow Selectman Ralph Bowley. We all miss Selectman Dougiello very much, but this Board of Selectmen carries on doing our best. I would like to take a moment to recognize the positive contributions and commitment from Board of

Finance and this RTM, along with the Board of Education and TPZ and all town boards who work very hard for the community. I would like to ask those members of elective Boards and appointed officials here this evening to please stand and be acknowledged. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your service to Fairfield.

These challenging times call for the kind of decisive, positive leadership town officials provide for Fairfield. Citizens ask government to do more to help them, and given that many are worried and some friends and fellow residents have lost jobs, the best way we can help is to maintain services while keeping local taxes stable. Meanwhile we try to keep town reserves ample and meet rating agency requirements. In order to meet the expectation of our citizens, we must constrain government spending. In 1999, I provided Fairfield with its lowest tax rate budget since 1976. In recent years, town has had a spurt of infrastructure priorities and spending needs, especially in schools. That era is done. In 2009, I am pleased to say that my proposed budget will provide the lowest tax change in a decade.

It is not easy to do this without hard choices. To offset shortfalls in revenues, I have taken tough steps necessary to cut expenses now as town managers reduced spending by \$800,000. The school district has accepted our request to keep nearly \$1 million unspent within their current budget and we appreciate it very much. Next week, the results of my employee restructuring plan will be finalized. There will be significant savings from abolishing some town employee positions. This has to be done to confront the fiscal crisis and reduce the rate of

spending for next year's budget. These hard measures will rein in spending. Most municipal and school employees understand that they should share in keeping town operations lean and efficient. I am asking for shared sacrifice as we try to minimize painful choices.

Fiscal discipline is being tested, even in the most unexpected ways. Fairfield's retirement system is absorbing a painful shock. Fairfield was victimized by a terrible fraud as stock markets collapsed. Most Fairfield pension fund investments have been successful, better than 80 % of other public pension funds. Twelve years ago, Fairfield's Pension Board was unfortunately given a bad recommendation and many false statements since then with regards to this now evident fraud. Legal efforts are pending to seek to recoup losses. I wish I could give the RTM a full report on this issue. Outside counsel advice precludes that. However I can tell you in fact that the 35 citizens who served during this period as Pension Board members, including a large number of well known Fairfield Republicans and Democrats and union leaders, worked hard for town's retirees. As a member of over 40 Town bodies, I attend a huge number of meetings. I vouch that at the meetings I attended every member did their best, just as members do on the RTM and other Boards. The Pension Board relied on consultants and experts hired to perform due diligence. Rest assured their Board is determined to recoup losses where ever possible. To paraphrase our new President, it will not be easy but we shall overcome all obstacles thrown our way.

During this difficult year, we will continue to focus on top priorities. Tonight the rehabilitation of Stratfield School is on the agenda. This

vital project deserves final approval. Stratfield School has the oldest HVAC, lighting and plumbing systems of any municipal building and an urgent need for better core spaces for today's special education and student needs. Work costs will be phased in. Town's debt service will remain stable thankfully as the cost from this particular project is offset by a reduction in old debt fully paid off after next year. The Boards of Finance and Selectmen appreciate the RTM's careful scrutiny of this project. We hope you see fit to pass this crucial bond resolution tonight as the Building Committee is ready to proceed.

Similarly we are committed to rehabilitating our most deteriorated bridges to protect public safety. I was able to save our town nearly \$1 million in costs by getting a special federally funded designation for the bridge replacements at Mill Plain and Brookside which you are voting on tonight. We should not defer vital safety or infrastructure needs. But we must address only essential items and save money as we bid projects. We did this in town's recent bond refinancing and saved taxpayers \$300,000. This typifies action to keep budgets manageable.

2009 is also a key year for turning Fairfield's 3rd train station and its new 1500 commuter parking area and 9 acre parkland into a reality. Construction is moving ahead. Remaining core site work activities are scheduled to start by spring. I met recently with State Commissioners and with Fairfield's state Legislators. The State is a fully committed partner with the Town. The parties will all do what it takes to ensure this pivotal public project gets completed. There are economic difficulties facing the privately owned portion of the site. I support their office park

and expect this economic revitalization, though temporarily slowed, to generate future grand list growth and town revenue and area jobs. We would be pleased to give the RTM a status report next month, if you desire, as I did for the Board of Selectmen. Our priority train station is the catalyst for this entire plan and I am very pleased the State is ahead of schedule with their work.

Finally, 2009 is a priority year for seeking more clean energy and further environmental progress. As you know, a study for assessing wind power will soon be performed. Similarly, school infrastructure will be engineered to LEED's standards reducing future energy costs. If the stimulus package allows, I will seek a grant to recover methane from the town's old landfill to generate power for DPW facilities. We are very proud of our Public Works department and the many historic environmental and conservation achievements Town has achieved.

Fairfield, 2009 is a year to focus on the basics with strong measures to protect our citizens and their interests. We will continue to work together across political aisles, as town officials, to reach common goals. Town and school officials will protect our children's educational standards and programs because we always have. Fairfield's progress and hope for a healthy, happy future will endure because our traditions are founded on this. The state of our town is secure and stable, even during this perilous economy. The backbone of our people, of our neighbors, and of our merchants is so very strong and so cohesive. Fairfield will always be a vital, conscientious and spirited community. Every citizen plays a role in this community. Of the people, by the

people, and for the people, Fairfield will always be a democracy in the truest sense. This is aptly demonstrated each month in this room with the RTM. Let's carry on, Fairfield, with gusto and determination to succeed for all our residents.

Thank you all for helping. Thank you very much.