

State of the Town Address

January 30, 2017

by First Selectman Mike Tetreau

Thank you Madame Moderator, members of our Board of Selectmen, members of our Board of Finance, members of our Representative Town Meeting, our State Delegation, other elected officials and members of the public for the opportunity to provide this update on our town. A tremendous amount has happened in the past year.

As always, I want to give a big thank you to all the volunteers serving on our Boards and Commissions who give so freely of their time. These citizens are dedicated to helping our town be the best in the state. A special thanks to those members who have volunteered on the Penfield Building Committee and its Chair, Jim Bradley.

I am grateful to our Town Department managers and employees for their professionalism in raising service levels, productivity and overall efficiencies.

I am deeply appreciative of the Board of Education, Central Office, our teachers and our administrators. Their excellence in delivering a top quality education to our students should never be taken for granted. They have kept our students engaged, involved, learning and reaching for new heights. If anyone has any doubt about the magic they work with our students, I would ask that they just attend one of our high school holiday concerts. I attended the Carillon concert at Fairfield Warde this past December. It was truly amazing. I was in awe of the talent, skill, dedication and precision demonstrated by all our students!

I am proud of what my administration has accomplished. We have worked together to overcome many challenges. It is the teamwork of our boards, commissions, volunteers, and Town and school managers that has been, and will continue to be, the hallmark of Fairfield government.

We live in a time of great uncertainty at the Federal Government level and at the State Government level. We even have a certain amount of local angst with the prospect of a special election. There is certainly more than a little bit of controversy! We have to find a way as elected officials to work together to fashion a budget over the coming months. We owe it to our citizens to provide the best demonstration of teamwork. We should be setting an example for our State and Federal governments on how working together produces the best results for our residents. This is really in the best tradition of Fairfield government.

Finance

This past year was another solid year for our town's financial performance.

We delivered a budget for Fiscal Year 2017 with a decrease in town side expenses. This budget did not reduce or defer any services. The budget included full funding for the annual pension costs, full funding for the annual retiree medical costs (or OPEB), increased paving investment, increased sidewalk maintenance, more Public Works equipment, increased snow clearing allowance, increased Senior Center support, a supplemental contribution to surplus to support our AAA credit rating and continued funding for school security personnel.

The combined budget for Town and BOE represented a .79 percent increase representing the second lowest budget increase in the past twenty years.

Last summer, we issued just over \$20 million in bonds. We have the highest possible credit rating from all three national rating agencies. Our AAA rating that we have worked so hard for really paid off. The winning bid offered a 2.026 percent interest rate. This is the lowest interest rate in our town's history.

One of the biggest challenges we faced was the State's reduction to our Municipal Aid of an estimated \$3-4 million. This included close to a \$2 million cut in ECS funding. Working with our Board of Finance, our Board of Education and key Department Managers, we were able to use surplus from FY 2016, excess BOE healthcare reserves and reduction in town budgets to minimize the impact on our town.

Again, I want to recognize and thank our labor unions for their support and cooperation as we look for creative ways together to manage future costs.

We could not have achieved these goals without the exceptional effort and dedication of Chief Fiscal Officer Bob Mayer and the Finance Department team.

Economic Development

Economic Development has been a key focus this past year.

Sacred Heart University has purchased the former GE property. This purchase will move the property into the tax exempt status and reduce our tax revenues. This does create some short term challenges. We are in discussions with Sacred Heart to look for creative ways to minimize the loss of this revenue. However, in the long run, this dynamic, growing university should be a real benefit to our town and a driver for our local economy.

Fairfield is unique in having two top quality universities in Sacred Heart University and Fairfield University. We are working with both universities to align our strategic goals and maximize the impact on our local economy.

Commercial building activity surged in 2016 eclipsing the \$64 million mark. This is nearly double the prior year and the third highest total in the last 15 years. Our Economic Development efforts are paying dividends. A prime example is the 130,000 SF mixed use development on the old Fitness Edge property taking advantage of our zoning regulations promoting TOD development.

The Economic Development Commission has spent the past year working on a long-range plan that is near completion. This effort involved much research, interviews with key stakeholders and several public hearings. This plan will provide direction in how to grow our Grand List in the years ahead.

Our Economic Development Department is busy tackling some current obstacles to continued development. The Department helped the town obtain a \$375,000 grant for a planning, engineering and pedestrian safety study for Black Rock Turnpike. This business corridor is a key area for future growth.

In addition, there are two pending grant applications for funding to make pedestrian, roadway and streetscape improvements to both Southport and the Grasmere neighborhood.

Everyone should be excited about the projects we are collaborating on with the Fairfield Museum, including the much needed improvements to the Burr Homestead. This historic landmark has suffered too long from deferred maintenance and is now undergoing significant renovations to make it much more attractive to visitors and functional for special events. Mike Jehle and his Fairfield Museum team didn't stop there. They are also completing renovations on the historic Sun Tavern and the Victorian Cottage.

There have been numerous other projects and initiatives from the downtown Farmer's Market on Sherman Green, to DPW's collaboration with the Fairfield Board of Realtors to create a new pocket park, to teaming with the Fairfield Museum and the Chamber of Commerce to launch Halloween on the Green. Several thousand visitors to Halloween on the Green have confirmed this is a new Fairfield tradition.

In the ongoing effort to promote Fairfield, the department unveiled a new tourism website. This new site, www.experiencefairfieldct.org, is mobile device friendly. It also complements the new Fairfield Town Map and Guide that is being distributed at more than 280 locations.

Our fabulously successful Restaurant Week is going to be expanded with a spring edition called "Dine Out Fairfield". This will be held February 27th through March 5th with over 30 restaurants participating. This is another opportunity for residents and visitors to explore Fairfield.

The newly renovated FTC Warehouse has had a major positive impact on restaurants and businesses in our downtown area. Our thanks to John Reid and the team at FTC for their award winning project and for helping make Fairfield known far and wide as an Arts and Culture destination. FTC is a key engine driving our local economy.

When you look at that has been accomplished to keep Fairfield vibrant and growing during a very turbulent economy, I believe Mark Barnhart and his team are the most productive Economic Development team in the State.

Sustainability

Fairfield continues to be a leader in sustainability.

In 2016, we saved almost \$1 million and over 5 million kWh through energy conservation.

We are currently working to convert most of our facilities to LED lighting with the goal of saving another \$110,000 per year.

Our Solar Projects are expected to generate over 4.5 million kWh saving \$375,000 per year.

The cogeneration facility at Police Headquarters will generate 440,000 kWh and will save \$50,000 per year.

Our largest user of energy is the Water Treatment Facility. Our goal is to achieve Zero Net Energy by 2018.

- A new fuel cell will produce 3.5 million kwh and save over \$450,000.
- A 1.4 million kwh solar generator will be operational on the landfill.
- The methane produced will be used to heat the Treatment Facility.
- Waste heat from the fuel cell will be used to heat the compost facility.

- A new \$2.5 million microgrid will insure that the Water Treatment Facility operates during major storms and power outages.

As always, special thanks to Ed Boman in Public Works for his leadership.

Seniors and Social Services

The Bigelow Center for Senior Activities continues to thrive and grow.

There are 3,127 registered Senior Center members with an astonishing 1,792 signed up to receive the Center's weekly email announcement.

The Bigelow Center, with the help of volunteers, the Economic Development Department and the Chamber of Commerce, published a new brochure filled with discount programs and services for seniors. This is the first such guide to be published by a senior center in Southwest Connecticut. It contains over 100 businesses offering discounts for seniors. This is a great example of an initiative that is good for seniors and great for our local businesses too.

Pickleball continues to grow and expand. The Center boasts nine statewide medal winners. Next step the Nationals! Our Parks and Recreation Department is very supportive of the sport and is dedicating four new Pickleball courts at Tunxis Hill Park.

As a special note, there is a newly formed Friends of the Bigelow Center for Senior Activities, Inc. dedicated to fundraising to help support enhanced services at the Bigelow Center. You will be hearing more in the near future.

Our Social Services team received a total of \$22,000 from Operation Fuel to help over 60 families with heating and utility assistance.

The Social Services team has taken responsibility for the Municipal Veterans Service Contract. The team now plays a key role in providing services to our veterans including vocational training and re-employment, rehabilitation, adjustment to peacetime life and assistance in applying for services.

School District

Our school district is without a doubt one of the most important assets to our town. It is important that we do not take this excellence for granted. Our Superintendent, staff and teachers have provided consistent quality education year in and year out. Our schools are the number one reason people are moving to Fairfield and keeping our town growing.

We have made significant progress on a number of school projects:

- Riverfield Elementary School renovation
- Mill Hill Elementary School roof replacement
- Dwight Elementary School roof replacement
- Fairfield Woods Middle School roof replacement
- Fairfield Warde High School roof replacement
- Osborn Hill School renovation and walkway project
- Fairfield Ludlowe High School renovation
- Holland Hill Elementary School renovation

- A district wide project of enhanced school security

Our schools continue to be a great value.

Town Plan & Zoning

The town has qualified for FEMA's National Flood Insurance Community Rating System (CRS) program. This means residents qualify for a ten percent discount on their NFIP Flood Insurance premiums as of October 1, 2016. This applies to both new policies and policy renewals. This is an estimated combined savings of \$433,000 per year to our residents living in a flood zone. The ten percent discount is one of the largest available in our State.

The update on the FEMA grants used in raising homes shows 27 projects completed so far with \$3.6 million distributed in reimbursements. Our neighbors in the beach area are still not fully recovered and are struggling every day to get their lives back to normal.

Special thanks to Jim Wendt for the extra effort he put in completing the mounds of paperwork on a timely basis to keep the affected constituents' checks flowing.

Parks and Recreation

The Parks and Recreation Department continues to offer an amazing array of programs for young and old, indoors and out. Here are a few highlights from this year:

- Penfield Pavilion is now complete and the committee is pointing towards a ribbon cutting in the next few weeks.
- Smith Richardson Golf Course took top honors as the best in the State.
- A restructured Summer Playground Camp Program allowed for one thousand more children to participate.
- Rentals at Penfield 1, Penfield 2 and the Beanery Recreation Center have increased by allowing reservations to be made two years in advance.
- The Halloween Haunted House produced by the combined efforts of the Fairfield Fire Fighters, DPW and Parks and Recreation raised \$9,000 for the Fairfield Fire Fighters Charitable Foundation.
- Clam Jam once again went off without a major impact on the neighborhood. This is a result of the teamwork with Fairfield University, our Police, our Fire Department and Parks and Recreation. Thank you.

Department of Public Works

There is so much that DPW is involved with that I couldn't list it all. But here are a few highlights.

We received a STEAP grant that will enable us to work on alleviating chronic flooding in the downtown area. This spring a drainage system will be installed under Sherman Green to capture runoff from the Post Road.

Major projects at Jennings Beach, Southport Beach, Sasco Beach, Ye Yacht Yard and South Benson Marina/the fishing pier achieved much improved ADA access including new sidewalks and renovated ADA compliant restrooms. This goes a long way to making our recreational amenities available to everyone.

Improvements at South Benson Marina included channel markers, expanded kayak racks, dock improvements and enhanced Wi-Fi service.

Our Tree Warden continues to work with UI on its Enhanced Tree Trimming Program. In the initial Pilot Program, 250 trees were removed from public right of ways and an additional 230 were trimmed. Jeff Minder is doing a great job of balancing the need for improved resilience with maintaining our scenic neighborhoods.

The Fairfield Public Library

It is so easy to take our libraries for granted. We have a remarkable library system. Over half a million people visited our libraries last year. Our residents check out books at an astounding rate – twice the state average. Over 44,000 people participated in library programs.

Our library is recognized for excellence. It received national attention when it was featured in Country Gardens Magazine and Connecticut Parenting.

This is a real tribute to Karen Ronald and her team.

The Health Department

Our Health Department is really thinking outside the box. They used a grant to launch a pilot BikeShare program with Zane's Cycles. The first season results show real promise – 250 riders from 12 different states participated.

They have also obtained funding and then collaborated with our Bicycle & Pedestrian Committee to create a series of bike routes around town including a Shoreline Bike Route. Public Works and Engineering also pitched in to complete these projects.

Conservation Department

Our Conservation Department is extremely active. They have been keeping track of the Exide factory and Mill River clean-up project as it nears completion. The dredging is done and the bags of contaminants have been removed. We now have a year of monitoring before development can begin.

Conservation Director Brian Carey obtained grant funding to evaluate flood protection options such as walls, berms, dikes, and dune ridges to prevent flooding from Ash Creek and Long Island Sound. The grant provides one hundred percent of the funding needed for the study. There are a series of public meetings planned. The Flood and Erosion Control Board is also assisting on this project.

Town Clerk

Our Town Clerk is using technology to improve service levels. Thanks to a new records management system, more of our land records are accessible online. This is a major service upgrade in convenience for users.

This system has also replaced the antiquated dog licensing program. Licenses now print out at the point of purchase. Animal Control can access the application from their office and also while on the road.

In addition, our Town Clerk Betsy Browne was elected President of the New England Town & City Clerks Association. Betsy is the first Town Clerk in Fairfield history to have this honor.

Overall Service Levels

Our Constituent Service Request System tracked over 3,500 constituent requests for service last year. We have resolved or answered 3,220 or 92 percent. The top three requests come into the following subject areas: Trees, Highway and Parks.

The Challenges Ahead

As we have for the last 377 years, we must work together to overcome the challenges ahead.

This year we are facing unprecedented reductions in revenue. We are facing significant cuts to our state municipal aid. We have suffered significant cuts to our state educational funding. We will have a loss in tax revenue due to the Sacred Heart purchase of the GE property.

The major component of the revenue shortfall is caused by instability at the State level. This instability is leading to dramatic and immediate reductions in aid leaving us with little time to adjust. As the state develops a new approach to educational funding it will most likely have a major impact on our Town.

How we choose to make up these losses will impact our quality of life. This is a critical time in Fairfield's history. Fairfield has a strong financial foundation as validated by our AAA credit rating. We are better positioned than most towns in the state to withstand reductions. It is crucial to plan properly for a future that has so much uncertainty.

To that end, the Board of Selectmen has recently taken up discussions on an approach to a town wide Strategic Plan. It is crucial for all stakeholders to be involved. We must develop a plan in which we all have ownership. We must take the time to get it right.

This is a critical time. There are important decisions to be made on how we handle the revenue shortfalls. How much do we cut? What services do we reduce? How much do we ask our community to replace in lost revenue? We all have witnessed the sometimes unseemly political discourse that is taking place at other levels of government – the name calling, the political rancor, etc. As we face our challenges, we need to commit to following a different path.

Our schools work hard to set standards for a positive “climate” for our students. They work to teach our students how to resolve disagreements without fighting, without name calling, without bullying. They teach our students to talk, to listen and above all to be respectful. It is up to us to set an example for our students. They will be watching. We need to show the voters that we are working together for solutions that work for everyone.

This is our opportunity. This is our time. How we choose to come together will define who we are as individuals, as leaders, as a community. Everyone will be watching more closely than ever. How will they judge us? It is up to us.

Thank you to everyone for your involvement, your volunteer spirit and your support of our Town. **Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you tonight.**