

MAYOR BIVONA'S ADDRESS JANUARY 2, 2020

Happy New Year to all, wishing you a happy and healthy 2020!

I have been working with this Council, which is largely the same group, over the last ten years to “turn the ship” around. A decade ago, we were nearly broke, laden with a mountain of debt, workers on furlough and putting off capital investment in our capital goods and infrastructure. This was not unusual in a municipal environment constrained by 2% caps on taxation, growing costs and increasingly less support from the State who has its own fiscal problems. New Jersey, like most of the tri-state area is suffering from population decline, lack of investment in infrastructure, the loss of deductibility of taxes, and the rising costs of employee benefits.

I am proud to say that after a decade of hard work and strong focus on our goals, we have turned the ship in the right direction and are steaming ahead. Franklin Lakes population and assessed values have grown with new investments in our housing stock, revitalization of our downtown with many new business openings. People are investing in Franklin Lakes and that is a great sign. We have quadrupled our investment in basic infrastructure – roads, recreation facilities, buildings and equipment, fire engines and park improvements. We have done this while reducing debt by over 40% and eliminated our need to borrow to fund long term capital investment. Our surplus is robust, and we carry a triple-A bond rating. Franklin Lakes saw the highest addition to assessed value in all of Bergen County and it is still growing. We have more employees serving our residents and taxpayers in important essential areas. All this and more, all while municipal property taxes have risen less than 1.8% during that period. In fact, the last two years, property taxes in Franklin Lakes have actually declined due a higher percentage increase in assessed values versus cost increases. Our tax rate remains the second lowest in Bergen County. Our financial house is in order and we are well prepared for the decade ahead.

Some of this prosperity has come at the expense of denser zoning and the loss of High Mountain Golf Club. Affordable housing laws in New Jersey are arcane and unfair putting municipalities at a disadvantage versus developers who look for profits as opposed to good community planning. We support affordable housing and recently added to our stock with McCoy Place, a 40-unit condo project for those with special needs, one of the largest in the State. We also negotiated and fought many legal battles over the past decade to meet our statutory obligations while doing our best to preserve the beauty of Franklin Lakes. This past year we achieved settlement in the courts and we now have protection against further development. Our Planning and Zoning Boards, Construction Department and Engineers work hard to ensure that that development conforms to our zoning ordinances preserving who we are.

Having financial security has afforded us a greater ability to provide increased public safety, the most important thing we do. We now have a long-term contract with our police and better staffing levels and more promotions of talented professionals. In the

times we live in, there is greater demand for their services in the schools and religious organizations. Police respond to over 29,000 calls each year and write over 5,000 summonses that our court processes. We have and will respond to that growing need. Our Volunteer Fire, Ambulance and OEM groups are incredible people who work day and night to protect us. Fire and Ambulance respond over 1,300 calls combined each year. We have worked with these volunteer groups to increase incentives and improve facilities and equipment. We need to do more to increase the number of volunteers during critical hours of the day.

Our Municipal Alliance, Board of Health and Juvenile officer work hard with our schools and to address drug addiction and prevention, impact of social media, Stigma Free and mental health training. This is a long-term battle that will be a growing focus in the years ahead.

Protecting our environment is the focus of our Environmental and Shade Tree Commissions. We must make progress toward decreasing our carbon footprint in the years ahead. We were awarded bronze level Sustainable New Jersey and Tree City designations once again. We are recycling more, planting hundreds of trees, supporting the ban of single use plastic bags, encouraging electric vehicles with a new charging station at Borough Hall, improved our recycling center, and cleaning up our town litter more aggressively. We have also acquired over 100 acres of parkland that will be forever preserved.

Our Department of Public Works keeps our infrastructure sound. Road paving, patching roads, snow plowing and salting, pond dredging, playground upgrades, park improvements, upkeep of all buildings, parks and recreation facilities, new plantings and holiday decorations throughout town and the servicing of 80 borough vehicles. Improvements to our public areas over the years have been their focus and it shows.

Last year I formed an ad hoc Community Advisory Group from a diverse group of residents to explore ways to make Franklin Lakes and even better place to live. The main theme of the recommendations was to create a greater sense of community. Parks and recreation are a huge part of any community. That is why we established a new Community Director role this past year with parks, recreation programs and community events all under one umbrella. We have greatly increased our community events while working with partners like the Wyckoff Y and other businesses in town. Our sports and recreation programs are very successful but our focus going forward will be to add more activities for a wider array of age groups and interests. We also hope to improve are already award-winning communication programs by exploring better uses of social media that highlights the wonderful virtues of our town for current and prospective residents.

With the support of the Borough, Bergen County, The Franklin Lakes Parks and Recreation Foundation we have made great strides in improving our facilities over the last few years. This past year we replaced the turf field at Pulis Avenue, one of the best all purpose facilities in the State. We also hired a consultant to help us with concept plans for the potential development of Parsons Pond Park. We envision that this facility could be a gathering place for families, friends and support additional community events.

We also moved our commuter lot to Parsons Pond. Although this has caused some short-term inconvenience to some, it has been beneficial in many ways. We now have less congestion in our highest traffic area, a new and safer drop off/pick up lane for FAMS, double the amount of parking spaces for commuters, greater parking for seniors and emergency workers. Also, this spring we will complete the landscaping to greatly improve and beautify this important downtown area while dedicating the park to our Veterans.

So, the State of the Borough is strong and growing, but we must continue the momentum and not rest. Keeping our fiscal strength while investing in our community will lead to keeping Franklin Lakes as a top choice to live, raise a family and do business for decades to come.

We couldn't do any of these without the hard work and dedication of an incredible groups of over 70 employees, hundreds of volunteers, and Borough professionals. The leadership and direction of Borough Administrator Greg Hart over the past decade has been essential to our past success and his leadership will pave the path going forward.

We also are fortunate to have leaders in our public safety areas that are experts in what they do and help keep our residents and taxpayers safe and secure around the clock. Police Chief Pezzuti leads our outstanding police force. Fire Chief Ryan Dodd, Ambulance Captain Mike O'Brien and Office of Emergency Management Leader Craig Goldman lead an incredible group of volunteers who give their time and expertise and, at times, put themselves at risk to help our residents. We are so fortunate to have them.

I also want to recognize our Committees and Commissions who are all led by volunteers who serve in the best interest of our community and provide valuable essential services. In 2019 they were led by Olivia Voellmicke, Board of Health; Joe Pullaro, Planning Board; Robert Bavagnoli, Zoning Board of Adjustment; Michael Tulp, Shade Tree Commission; Rob Miller, Recreation and Parks Committee; Carole Holden, Environmental Commission; Henry Wasserstein, Municipal Alliance Chair; and Joseph Leone, Library Board of Trustees.

The New Year is filled with challenges and I look forward to an open dialogue with residents and taxpayers. I invite your comments, suggestions and involvement. Of course, my door will always be open and my cell phone on 201 788-8039. I am usually available, so please stop by or make an appointment to be assured of getting me.

Finally, I want to recognize the families of the governing body, who support us throughout our long tenures serving this borough. And, I thank you, taxpayers and residents, for supporting us which allows us to better serve our community.

Thank you and God Bless Franklin Lakes.