

MAYOR CHARLES KAHWATY REORGANIZATION SPEECH

Tuesday, January 2, 2024

Ladies and gentleman, Happy New Year and welcome to the Franklin Lakes Annual Reorganization Meeting. I would like to quote author Hal Borland who said, “year’s end is neither an end nor a beginning but a going on, with all the wisdom that experience can instill in us”.

For me, as a new mayor, 2023 was an impressive learning experience which, I hope, will continue throughout my term. It has been my great fortune to meet with many of our residents in this wonderful town, and to work with our gifted employees who continue to amaze me with their dedication and knowledge. It was a challenging year in which we were faced with the major development of the former IBM / CIGNA property, compelling us to deal with the Mount Laurel mandate imposed by the New Jersey Supreme Court. The title of the movie “No Way Out” aptly summarizes what few options we had in our discussions to reduce the number of market and affordable units imposed on us, but I believe that we have been as successful as any community in meeting our obligations, while endeavoring to preserve the quality of life for which Franklin Lakes is known. But it is worth noting that there are many other things that took place this year which are worthy of acknowledgement and represent steps forward in the history of our borough. Following is a summary of some of those accomplishments:

- **Key new hires for new positions** – Hired a septic engineer instead of contracting for that service, and a “Quality of Life Enforcement Officer” to handle code enforcement including property maintenance.
- **Focus on tree preservation** – Hired a new Tree Specialist and amended the Borough’s tree ordinance to impose stricter requirements and increase penalties.
- **Improve school security** – Worked with the schools to hire two new school resource officers, who will be dedicated to improving school security.
- **Police Department** – The Police Department initiated or responded to over 29,000 service calls including over 600 medical emergencies and 350 motor vehicle crashes. Officers initiated over 6,200 motor vehicle stops and issued nearly 7,000 summonses. Most significantly, through proactive efforts, the department was able to reduce motor vehicle burglaries by 69%, motor vehicle thefts by 87%, and thefts by 31%.
- **Adoption of 2023 budget** – The governing body continued the Borough’s conservative fiscal policies of minimizing tax increases (still the second lowest tax rate in Bergen County), controlling debt and maintaining our Aaa bond rating.
- **Borough finances** - The Borough took advantage of rising interest rates by securing a financial agreement with its bank to provide interest payable at the rate of 4% on all borough funds on deposit. The rate of tax collection was well over 99% for the fourth quarter.
- **Tax Assessor** – Over \$41,000,000 was added to the ratable base via added assessments. Assessed values were placed on 17 new dwellings in the Reserve - with every property in the

Reserve now fully assessed the development has a total of over \$293,000,000 in assessed value generating over \$5 million in taxes.

- **Public Records requests** – Borough Clerk’s office handled nearly 900 public records requests as required by the Open Public Records Act.
- **Implementing technology** – In the Construction Department, a new online portal was implemented which allows residents and others to do public records requests and research open permits online, as well as schedule inspections. Inspectors are now equipped with iPads to enter inspection results in the field.
- **Playground renovations** – the Muni playground, behind Borough Hall, was renovated, with further additions anticipated in early 2024.
- **Public Events** – Most recently, the Borough won the Bergen County Parks “Winter Wonderland” town tree decorating contest. The prize for winning is a Free Ice-Skating Day at Van Saun Park. Residents can enjoy free ice skating on Friday, February 2, from 4:00 to 8:00 pm. The Franklin Lakes Festival and Lion Club’s Carnival was moved to Parsons Pond Park which attracted a record number of attendees culminating in a fireworks show finale.

There is much to be said about what has been accomplished and much to accomplish in the years ahead. I hope that this summary provides a small indication of the work of our department heads, employees and governing body, ensuring that Franklin Lakes continues to be one of the leading residential communities in this state, if not the country, and continues to attract newcomers who wish to live and raise their families here.

Going forward, in 2024, we will strive to consolidate the gains we have made, particularly with respect to our budget and fiscal solvency. We also will have a new Police Chief, who will continue the improvements in Public Safety achieved to date. We have plans to continue the gains we have made in recruiting new members for the Ambulance Corps and Fire Departments, along with improvements to recreational facilities. And finally, we are exploring ways to improve the Franklin Avenue commercial area, to make it more friendly to pedestrians, cyclists, and shoppers.

I thank you for the honor and privilege of being your mayor and hope to continue working hand in hand with you, our residents and employees, for years to come.