

State of the Town Address

January 25, 2016

by First Selectman Mike Tetreau

Thank you Madame Moderator, members of the Board of Selectmen, members of the Board of Finance, members of our Representative Town Meeting, other elected officials and members of the public for the opportunity to provide this update on our town. It has been quite a year.

I want to thank all those that have contributed so much this past year: my former colleagues on the Board of Selectmen – Kevin Kiley and Sheila Marmion. I also want to welcome our two new Selectmen Laurie McArdle and Chris Tymniak. I look forward to working together through the years ahead.

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 and are dedicated to helping our town be the best in the state.

This has been another year where our Town Department Managers and employees have distinguished themselves with their dedication to helping raise service levels and our productivity to keep Fairfield a great value for all. I would like to give a special welcome to our new management in the Fire and Conservation Departments – Chief Denis McCarthy, Deputy Chief Kyran Dunn and Conservation Director Brian Carey. To all, welcome aboard and thanks for joining our team.

Thank you to the Board of Education, Central Office, our Teachers and our Administrators. Your consistent excellence in delivering a top quality education to our students should never be taken for granted. You keep our students engaged, learning and reaching new heights. You are one of the key reasons our population is growing – in fact, we are one of the top five fastest growing towns in our state over the last five years.

I am proud of what my administration has accomplished in these turbulent economic times. I am proud of how we have worked together to build Fairfield into the best value in the state.

Finances

This past year was a stellar year for our town's financial performance. One of the accomplishments I take pride in is delivering the lowest tax increase in over fifteen years at 1.6 percent. I kept the town-side increase at less than one percent. We fully funded the Board of Education's request at 3.29 percent. I kept my promise to fully fund pension contributions and other long term obligations. This record low tax increase included increases to Senior and Disabled Tax Relief, enhanced school security, investments in paving and sidewalks along with continued strengthening of our financial reserves by making an additional contribution to surplus. This is the best definition I have for a budget that combines a vision for meeting long

term needs and balancing reasonable taxes. I promised not to “kick the can down the road” and I didn’t.

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. In each of the contracts I have signed, we have lowered our long term liabilities.

Moody’s Investors Service reaffirmed our coveted Aaa rating. They provided the following assessment of my administration:

- Fairfield has a stable and improving financial position
- Fairfield has strong management
- Fairfield continues to fully fund their pension plans
- Fairfield’s management employs conservative budgeting and financial management as evidenced by stable reserve levels, formal fiscal policies and long term planning for capital expenditures

Again this year I would like to recognize our Chief Fiscal Officer Bob Mayer and the Finance Department for their effort and dedication.

We also completed our Property Tax Revaluation. The July 1, 2016 tax bills will be using these new valuations. I wanted to make this process as transparent as possible. We held a series of public information systems to make the process more transparent and understandable. We are one of the first towns in the state to hold these public update sessions. Special thanks to Town Assessor Don Ross and his staff for managing the process so smoothly.

Economic Development

I believe Economic Development is critical to our future prosperity.

We are a Aaa rated community, with a top quality school district, a strong local economy with strong demographics and a great location. I believe we are experiencing one of the strongest periods of economic growth in our town in years. Let’s look at some of our ongoing economic development projects:

The Exide Factory Redevelopment – The Mill River clean-up was just completed. The dredging equipment has been removed from the river. The bags of dredged material will begin being carted off site next month. In about 12 months, the new developer should begin work on a major complex for this site and will be a welcome addition to our tax rolls.

The Fairfield Metro Center – I am working with the new leadership at Blackrock Realty. The majority owners have taken control and are moving the development forward sooner rather than later. They will be preparing a new approach to this site and will be looking to present their vision to our town and key stakeholders. I will keep you updated on this important project as we move forward. It will be another big boost to our Grand List.

In the meantime, the new leadership wanted to take some steps forward. Here’s what they have done:

- They have repaired the walkway through the Open Space.
- They are taking steps to meet their obligations for landscaping and maintenance.

And perhaps most importantly, at least for commuters, I am working with Blackrock Realty to obtain DOT approval to install portable luxury rest rooms on site. Mr. Mermelstein – a big thank you! DOT appears amenable to this request. More details to follow....

While these are two big stories, there is a lot more going on in our Town. Here is a sample of some of the projects I think will show you why I am so optimistic:

- FTC's new warehouse with 600 seat capacity, a huge boon to our downtown economy
- Plan B Restaurant and the new bfresh market on the same Post Road property
- Bankwell on Sasco Hill and Black Rock Turnpike
- Bright Horizons on Commerce Drive
- New Country Lexus on Kings Highway
- Honda on Linwood
- Renovations at the Fairfield Circle Inn on Post Road and the Hi-Ho on Black Rock Turnpike
- Walgreens on Kings Highway
- Bright Beginnings on Black Rock Turnpike
- Garelick & Herbs on Post Road
- OSG Medical Offices on Commerce Drive
- New Medical Office on Unquowa Place
- Land Rover Dealership on Commerce Drive
- Mixed Use Development on Commerce Drive – former Fitness Edge
- Assisted Living Facility on Mill Plain Road behind the Carolton

And there are quite a few more in early stages of proposal or approval. I see this list as the best indication of how strong our local economy is and how bright our future is.

General Electric - GE has announced they are leaving. While they have been a valuable corporate citizen, I believe their departure can create opportunities for our town. Within 72 hours of this announcement, Kleban Properties stepped up to voice their interest in the GE site.

The Klebans have some very exciting plans for this site that will play an important role in Fairfield's future. They are proposing a Corporate Technology Complex to be developed on this site. This redevelopment could lead to more jobs, more growth and more tax revenue from this site.

In addition, the Economic Development Commission is working on a long range plan to target strategic growth opportunities.

Increased support for Tourism is one of the current focal points. Mr. Barnhart, our Economic Development Director, has been working with the Fairfield Museum, FTC, the Audubon Center and both Universities to take better advantage of existing resources and assets.

Our town was one of the first to respond to a statewide initiative targeted at increasing access to ultra-high speed internet services. A valuable resource to attract new businesses and add value to services for existing businesses.

Next let's take a look at the Fairfield Museum. I see the town and museum working together on a common vision for sharing our heritage with our residents in more ways than ever before.

I am encouraged by the museum getting funding for:

- Completing renovations at the Sun Tavern and the Victorian Cottage
- Planning a new landscape & layout for the Town Hall campus
- Completing work on much overdue deferred maintenance on Burr Mansion

I support these projects to make our historic campus much more of a tourist destination and easier to navigate, encouraging bike & pedestrian visitors from our downtown center. One of our strategic advantages is that our historic campus and buildings are closer to downtown and our train station than other communities.

As you expect we will continue with our fabulously successful Restaurant Week along with our Holiday Shopping Stroll, our Spring Shop and Stroll and our Summer Sidewalk Sale. It was great to see one of our newest community members – Save the Children – step up to sponsor this year's Holiday event. A big thank you to Save the Children for joining our community.

Sustainability

We continue to be recognized for our efforts on improved Sustainability. We were recently recognized by the State's Clean Energy Communities Program. This award highlights are numerous clean energy programs and our leadership in this area. As always, special thanks goes out to Asst. DPW Director Ed Boman for his vision and leadership. He has helped our town receive over \$8 million in grants over the last 20 years. Through his efforts and the hard work of the volunteers on our Clean Energy Task Force, our town is saving millions of dollars every year.

Some highlights:

We will soon be producing over 25% of our electric needs with green, solar power.

Fairfield was the first town to bring a microgrid project online through the statewide pilot program. We received a grant for \$1.1 Million to help fund this project. During a power emergency this microgrid will power our Police and Fire Headquarters along with nearby cell towers and the Operation Hope shelter.

Our sustainability initiatives now help us to:

- Reduce emissions of greenhouse gases by over 60,000 tons
- Eliminate of 100% of chlorine and 65% of nitrogen discharges into Long Island Sound
- Compost and eliminate 2.7 million pounds of solids from Long Island Sound
- Prevent 1.0 million pounds of algae discharges

Fairfield maximizes recycling and reuse so that there is zero landfilling:

- Our town produces 75,000 tons of waste each year.
- 53% is now recycled and 47% is used to make green power.
- Our new Regional Waste and Recycling contracts now save over \$425,000 per year.

I value these sustainability efforts because they are good for the environment, good for the economy and are saving our taxpayers millions of dollars.

Seniors and Social Services

I think we should all be proud of how much has happened with our senior center!

It has a new name – The Bigelow Center for Senior Activities. Thank you again to the Bigelow Family for all that you have done for our town and our seniors. The Center now proudly boasts of over 2500 members. Terry Giegengack and our team are beginning the National Accreditation process that takes over a year but establishes quality service standards so we can assure our seniors they are joining one of the best programs in the nation.

There is a new lunch program that has lunch attendance up 20% over last year. And thanks to the Rotary Club for providing a grant to make improvements to the dining room. I was at a recent lunch program provided by and served by members of our police union. It was a packed house and set a record of over 160 meals served. Special thanks to our dedicated police officers.

To help work off some of those calories, there is an expanded exercise program with 30% more classes than last year – just to make sure our membership is growing but our members are not!

Also of note, I want to let you all know that our firefighters have been replacing batteries every October and installing new smoke detectors if needed for our seniors for the past ten years. Nothing says we care about your safety than installing new batteries in your smoke detector! Just another way they go above and beyond to serve our community. Thank you to our brave firefighters.

This year the Center provided 14,205 rides to seniors for medical appointments, shopping and of course, rides to the Bigelow Center.

Some additional highlights: the first Holiday Tree Lighting was held, Snow Shoveling for Seniors signed up 50 seniors, the first Veterans Day Breakfast and celebration, over 30 days trips to various sites around our State and nationally recognized comedian/author Charles Grodin presented “an hour of comedy” performance.

Moving on to some of our Social Service highlights:

- There was \$16,000 collected in donations for the Holiday Giving program which provided support and assistance for over 200 families.
- United Way provided a grant for \$5000.
- A new Operation Fuel grant was also provided for another \$5000.

- Heating and Energy assistance was provided to over 200 Fairfield families totaling over \$70,000.
- A new program of Snow Shoveling assistance was provided to 48 seniors. This programs matches seniors that need assistance with volunteers will to lend a hand and a shovel.

The Center is also now collaborating with the CT Department of Veterans Affairs in providing monthly office hours for veterans and their families.

School District

Our school district is without a doubt one of the most important assets to our town. I know how much it has meant in my life. Our Superintendent, staff and teachers have provided consistent quality education year in and year out. This standard of excellence in education is why many people move to Fairfield with their families.

Fairfield Schools have:

- Been named to the College Board’s AP Honor Roll for the 3rd consecutive year
- Received awards from Connecticut Association of Education for excellence in communications, including district budget presentation
- Athletic teams and individual Athletes winning State Championships in various sports on a frequent basis
- Multiple National Merit Scholars recognized for scoring in top 1% nationally
- Several Gold Medal winners on National Latin exam
- Been recognized as being in top 5 for career and Technical Education Assessment performance
- Won First Place in State Culinary Competition
- Multiple students have earned chairs in the Connecticut Music Educators Western Region Music Festival
- National media regularly rank our two high schools among the best in the state

All this and a great value – Fairfield is ranked 81st in the State for cost per pupil.

On top of all this, we ask that the district keep our children safe. This request has never had more meaning. We are spending several million dollars in increased security measures. This investment is not only in hardware and facilities but also enhanced police presence and continuous training for staff and students. It was just three months ago that we saw the need for this effort and investment when we were “swatted” and made to believe our schools were threatened.

Our police, fire and other first responders demonstrated the highest level of training and professionalism. Our teachers and administrators showed they were up to the task, up to a part of their job that wasn’t covered when they were getting their education degrees. And most importantly, our students showed us they learned their lessons very well and made us all proud with how they responded to the potential crisis.

Thank you to everyone for adapting to this new world and these new risks so well. Thank you for keeping our schools safe.

Town Plan & Zoning

I worked hard to get the FEMA funding restored for this Flood Mitigation program to help residents elevate their homes when it was cut. I met with the Department of Housing along with towns up and down the coast. I am very glad the funding was restored and that it has made a difference in Fairfield.

Our TP&Z team led by Joe Devonshuk and Jim Wendt has gone above and beyond to help our residents in the Beach Area. The TPZ office is administering 68 grants made on behalf of homeowners seeking financial assistance to raise their homes above the FEMA flood elevation. These grants include a total of \$9.1 million in federal aid.

The Department is also moving forward on an application to FEMA to qualify for the CRS or Community Rating System program. This program awards flood insurance premium discounts to flood insurance holders in communities that can document certain standards above and beyond FEMA minimum requirements.

Parks and Recreation

Special recognition for Gerry Lombardo and the Parks & Rec staff , Chief MacNamara and our Police, Fairfield University leaders, the Fairfield Beach Residents Association, our Fire Department and the students living at the beach for coming together to solve the long, long lasting problem of Clam Jam. I am impressed to see how we came together to talk, listen and look for creative solution. We found an answer. Clam Jam was held this year and we had no arrests, no complaints and no calls. Thank you again to all involved.

We have all been involved in the detailed discussions and review of plans for the rebuild of Penfield Pavilion. The project is moving forward and should be completed in the fall. We will have our Pavilion back at minimal cost to the town. We really owe a big thank you to the Penfield Building Committee, Bob Mayer in Finance, Gerry Lombardo in Parks and Recreation, Joe Michelangelo in Public Works and Twig Holland who recently retired from our Purchasing Department for the long hours, dedication and patience they demonstrated throughout this entire process. Special thanks again to Senator Blumenthal, Senator Murphy and Congressman Himes for your help in getting FEMA to stop and listen to us. Your help saved our town several million dollars. Thank you.

Storm Resiliency Grants

I want to give special recognition to DPW Director Joe Michelangelo and his team. Thanks to their efforts, we received over \$5 million in grants for improved storm preparedness, \$4.8 million in two grants for the Water Treatment Facility and \$225,000 to be used towards rebuilding Penfield. It takes vision, initiative and lots of paperwork to bring these funds back to our town. Joe – Thank you and your team for saving our taxpayers this very significant amount of money. We will be much better prepared for the next big storm.

The Challenges Ahead

Our community spirit and our commitment to work together will be needed in the years ahead. It will take creativity and skill to find solutions that work for our entire community.

I believe it is important to address our long term issues. I am committed to:

- Working for more affordable and senior housing
- Keeping our schools and town safe
- Moving forward on plans to expand Sewer system capacity to support continued commercial growth
- Finding creative solutions to parking for downtown and other commercial areas for commuters, shoppers & employees
- Finding creative solutions for traffic congestion in town
- Continuing economic development and expanding our commercial tax base
- Bringing the Community Theatre back to life
- Managing expenses to keep Fairfield the best value in the State

There isn't a better time for us to embark on our town-wide Strategic Plan. We will be getting started in the next few weeks. We will need everyone's input and help. I am more excited than ever to face and solve the challenges ahead.

As I stated last year - As First Selectman, it is my mission to serve all the people of our town, from the students who need a safe environment for an excellent education, to the seniors on fixed incomes who wish to stay here, to the taxpayers who want high quality services and reasonable taxes. I am committed to maintaining Fairfield as the best value in our State.

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.**