

THE CITY OF SUMMIT

N E W J E R S E Y

CITY HALL 512 SPRINGFIELD AVENUE SUMMIT, NJ 07901

January 5, 2017

State of the City Address by Summit Mayor Nora Radest

Good evening ladies and gentlemen, members of Council, and city staff. Our state representatives, Senator Tom Kean, Assemblyman Jon Bramnick and Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz are joining us this evening, as well as County Freeholder Mohamed Jalloh. Thank you. I appreciate the open line of communication we shared this past year, particularly regarding the Morris Avenue Bridge. Fortunately, construction is underway again.

It is my honor to stand before you tonight as your Mayor, to inform you that the state of the City of Summit is indeed strong. And when you drive through the downtown it is impossible not to notice how lovely it looks. Tonight, I want to speak a bit about my experiences this past year, to share some of the projects and highlights of 2016, and to convey a vision for the future of Summit.

First of all, I am so proud of our community as an island of calm in a turbulent world. I ran on a platform of communication and bipartisanship. I believed that we, as a city, could continue to build bridges to connect with one another, and that together, regardless of political party affiliation, we could accomplish great things. I have found both of these things to be true.

People from all areas of Summit have engaged with me personally, during my office hours, at civic events, and at my monthly *Meet the Mayor* sessions around town. Communication is central to the connection between the city and the community; this year the city made great strides in the frequency and variety of ways we interact with residents and businesses. Our new website, launched in March, received an average of 7000 weekly visits and our Report a Concern module, a quick way to report non-emergency issues, received and resolved nearly 1800 work orders from city staff and from the public. We continue to post on the city's Facebook page and twitter several times a day, and of course we send all news items to all of the online and print media in our area. I said last year that communication is a two way street; much of the successes in 2016 stemmed from strong communication between the city and the community.

Our Common Council, while benefitting from a variety of points of view and vigorous debate, has worked closely and harmoniously, to provide the best services possible, find and implement new ideas, and, well, get things done. We may not always agree on everything, but we have never let a minor disagreement get in the way of progress. Thank you for the collegiality we enjoyed last year and I look forward to more hard work and progress this year.

One of the major accomplishments of this past year was our community's work on our Master Plan Re-examination. We engaged in a robust public process that reached a broad spectrum of residents, businesses, workers, local officials and stakeholders. Over 70 people were involved in seven subcommittees, two public meetings were held with nearly 200 people attending, and the community participated in two surveys, both online and in person. In addition, we launched an interactive online site to maximize public input; the planning team posed questions and we received hundreds of responses. In fact, the city received an award from a state-wide organization, the League of Municipalities, for our planning process. Hundreds of people were involved in the process, collectively

giving thousands of hours to this crucial project. I am grateful to all of you for your time and thoughtful participation; we have a very strong road map for the next 10 years because of your efforts.

Several themes emerged from the Master Plan. One of the clearest mandates to come out of the planning process was a need for balanced redevelopment in and around our downtown. Increasingly, the desire to live close to a town center, ideally one with quick and easy access to New York, is a very real trend that has been growing for the last decade. Summit is uniquely positioned; we are a transit hub twenty miles from New York City in the center of a suburban metropolis. In this regard, we are quite fortunate as we already hold a Transit Village designation, a model for smart growth. We were awarded this designation because of our already existing downtown infrastructure and public transit. It is our goal to develop our Transit Village status, bringing housing, businesses and people into our downtown and encourage them to walk, bike, and utilize our excellent transit options. This is good news for us as residents, as it maintains our property values.

In addition, this shift in the way we want to live offers the City of Summit an opportunity. With thoughtful redevelopment we can offer an array of housing options that we know are in high demand, providing walk-to-town residential options for our young singles and our empty-nesters. Not only are we being good neighbors by making sure people of these demographic profiles are able to live here in Summit, there are practical benefits for us all as well. These residents will add much to the vibrancy of our downtown, our volunteer base, and our social capital. At the same time, there is a significant economic benefit. Redevelopment will create new sources of ratable income that will put our city on firm footing for decades to come. We are very fortunate to live in a city that offers first class services and amenities, which we both enjoy and have come to expect. We face many pressures on our budget and Council endeavors to keep taxes as low as possible. Increasing our asset base is an important factor in continuing to provide these services. We have a strong residential ratable base that has shown positive incremental growth in recent years. However, we must balance this growth with the negative impact on the commercial ratable base as a result of the sale of Merck's property on western Morris Avenue to Celgene. We are confident there will be positive developments at that location in the future.

Potential redevelopment is a win-win for us, as we are fortunate to have some transitional areas close to downtown that could benefit from such growth. Areas such as the Broad Street corridor could be revitalized by mixed use development, combining residential and commercial space with parking. One of the major entry-ways into our city could gain the visual charm and bustling street life that should epitomize Summit and which we all would like to see. This increased street life will also provide a needed boost to the economy of our downtown, which has had to adapt to a drastically changing commercial landscape. It is a symbiosis. The ability to live, work, and play in Summit will create residential demand, and the young singles and retired folks who move in will provide a needed boost to our downtown merchants.

This can be accomplished without encroaching upon existing residential areas. In fact, another central feature of the Master Plan is the desire to maintain and encourage effective transition zones between commercial and residential areas. Using a careful approach, we can increase our tax base while keeping the character, charm and tone of our town. Doing this will ensure that we can continue to enjoy the services that make this town special, and add so much to our quality of life. Working with Common Council, I intend to do my best to make this vision a reality.

Historically, Summit residents have recognized the need for affordable housing, and the city has done a very good job in providing such housing. Unfortunately, well-meaning state regulations had the adverse effect of slowing the creation of affordable housing. After yet another set of twists and turns in the complex saga of New Jersey's regulation of affordable housing, this year Summit entered into a new 10-year agreement regarding its affordable housing commitment. As a result, we have both avoided

painful litigation, and provided several opportunities for public input as potential developments come before the Council and the Planning Board. It is my hope and intention to continue our tradition of providing housing for our residents who need assistance, while also making sure to adhere to the guidelines for development as delineated in the Master Plan.

Connectivity. For many of us what first comes to mind is our internet connection, but a reading of the Master Plan shows that residents have overwhelmingly stressed the need for safety improvements in the pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in Summit. Of particular concern are gaps in the sidewalk network throughout the city. The growth of the sharing economy, the increased number of people interested in biking and a renewed focus on walkability are forcing us to think about how we move about our city. The Environmental Commission, along with the Engineering Department and the Summit Police Department is developing a Bicycle Plan for the city, and Common Council has already adopted the “Complete Streets” program; these are important first steps, and I believe we must incorporate them into all future planning decisions.

Hand in hand with improving the transportation infrastructure is improving safety on our streets and sidewalks for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. To that end, Common Council approved Summit Police Department’s recommendation to re-establish a Traffic Unit in our police department. There will be four officers involved in this unit and you will notice them in town, both educating citizens as to the rules of the road, and enforcing them, when necessary. Council members and I have received numerous complaints this year regarding traffic issues – speeding, distracted driving and distracted walking. In the fall we participated in a program called Street Smart, funded by the New Jersey Department of Transportation; the results clearly showed that Summit residents and visitors are not being careful enough. While the police can educate and enforce, and the city can make engineering changes such as pedestrian lights at crossings, it is incumbent upon each of us to travel with deliberation and focus, whether by car, on a bike or on foot.

Not surprisingly, parking in the downtown was a topic of much discussion during the Master Plan process. The city took some steps to address this issue in 2016, but it must receive additional attention this year. As part of the milling and paving of our downtown streets we were able to add 14 parking spaces. In the fall we launched the pilot Uber ride share program that freed up 100 spaces in the downtown commuter lots, allowing more people to park in town to shop or do business. We began to implement the License Plate Recognition System for ease of payment and more effective enforcement, and we will expand it throughout 2017. Lastly, to assist employees and shoppers, we permitted valet parking in the Springfield Avenue tier garage, and did not charge for parking at the 90-minute meters throughout the holidays. Common Council and I are committed to creating a parking plan in 2017 and will rely upon some of the action steps proposed in the recently approved parking assessment. The issue of parking is fraught with emotion and we can find solutions, but they will require creativity, technological innovation, compromise and honest communication among all of us.

Technology. It is important that we leverage technology to prepare for 21st century economic development. Summit is home to cutting edge industries and I am committed to foster and support this innovative energy. A key component of the city’s strategy should be to continually promote innovation with city policy, infrastructure and investment. To that end, while repaving the downtown streets this summer we built a conduit and we intend to pursue the installation of fiber optic cable to attract and retain businesses. Additionally, we will be implementing an online permitting system that will make it more efficient to establish a business in Summit. We will continue to find ways to use data and technology to drive policy decisions that increase the efficiency and effectiveness of city systems.

Throughout last year I made it a point to meet with members of the County government in an effort to get to know them and determine where we can be of help to each other. My overtures have been well

received and I have had several productive conversations with freeholders and County officials. I believe they understand some of the needs of our community, but more importantly, they understand the need to support Summit. I am confident that we will continue to improve our relationship in 2017.

Many of you have heard me say that Summit's best asset is its people, and tonight we recognize the many men and women who have volunteered on various boards and committees. They are all committed to making Summit the best that it can be and their hours of service are invaluable. Thank you very much.

I want to finish by taking a moment to extend my sincere thanks to Sandra Lizza, who is stepping down after three years on Common Council. I cannot say enough about Sandy's dedication and love for our city. She has consistently been one of the hardest working volunteers in this city, and she brought her intelligence, discipline and unwavering commitment to getting the correct answer and the best result. Sandy, you will be greatly missed by all of us. In addition, I want to welcome to Council Steve Bowman, recently elected to represent Ward 2. I have enjoyed getting to know you, and look forward to working with you. I want to reiterate what a pleasure it has been working with this Council as a whole, and with all of the wonderful people who work in city government in Summit. It truly has been an honor and a privilege. And finally, I want to thank the residents of Summit for being caring, upstanding, and engaged citizens. Working together we can ensure that Summit will not only continue to be a wonderful city, but one that is flexible enough to meet all of the challenges of the future. Happy New Year.

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