

THE CITY OF SUMMIT

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CITY HALL 512 SPRINGFIELD AVENUE SUMMIT, NJ 07901

News Release

January 8, 2018

Summit Mayor: Nora Radest (908) 273-6400
City Administrator: Michael F. Rogers (908) 522-3600
Media Contact: Amy Cairns (908) 277-9418

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Summit Mayor Nora G. Radest
State of the City Address

Good evening my fellow residents, members of Common Council, and city staff. Welcome to all of our honored guests. Thank you for being here.

Before I begin I would like to comment on the fire that occurred on 125 Summit Ave. on Sunday morning. Fortunately only two people suffered minor injuries, but the residents of 12 apartments lost everything. Our firefighters, Summit first aid squad and police were professional and swiftly rescued the residents and battled the fire. Pat Angelo, the manager of The Committed Pig called in his staff and opened the restaurant to feed and warm the fire victims. The restaurant was a staging station for the Red Cross who were assisting those in need. Pat did not open to the public, but rather kept the space quiet and reassuring for the residents. Pizza Vita also provided pizza. The outpouring of support from the community has been tremendous and the YMCA is providing a major service by distributing donated clothing and gift cards to the fire victims. Lastly, the Other Fellow First Foundation has coordinated a fund to provide needed assistance to the victims. Please go to cityofsummit.org for information about donating to the fund.

Tonight, it is my honor to stand before you as your Mayor and report that 2017 was a year of achievement for Summit. Together, we made a strong city even stronger through the implementation of a number of thoughtful and fiscally responsible civic improvements.

I am now at the midpoint of my term of office. Over the past two years, I have focused on the two areas I considered most important in protecting our current high quality of life: identifying opportunities to

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increase our tax base thereby stabilizing the burden for taxpayers, while preserving and enhancing the charm of our downtown; and using technological innovation to make it easier for people to live and conduct business here in Summit. I believe we have made excellent strides in both of these areas, and are poised to do even more in this regard over the years to come.

The members of Common Council and I have worked diligently to move the city forward while keeping an ever present eye on the bottom line. As in 2016, we worked together, regardless of party affiliation, for the benefit of our residents. Three members of council are retiring tonight and three newly elected council members will join us on the dais. I am confident that the 2018 Common Council will work together to accomplish great things and that council's tradition of robust debate and healthy discussion, leading to thoughtful outcomes, will continue again this year. There is much to celebrate when it comes to our city's overall health.

As many of you have probably noticed, our downtown is flourishing. Several new businesses opened this year reflecting the modern economy, which is focused on a mix of experience and traditional retail. Our retail vacancy is under 4% and the landlords of the larger vacant spaces are actively recruiting tenants. Simultaneously, the Planning Board is working toward a recommendation for more flexible ground floor space usage in the downtown in order to attract a wider variety of tenants. Our goal must be a user focus that draws people into our business district, through events on the Village Green, flexible gathering spaces such as the Parklet, outdoor music and similar experiences. Summit is a destination community in our area, and we will continue to work with Summit Downtown Inc. and other community leaders to build upon that reputation. It is an honor to attend each ribbon-cutting ceremony, and I look forward to welcoming many more businesses to our downtown in the coming year.

The construction office continues to be one of the busiest offices in City Hall; in 2017 revenue was \$1.3M, up 46% from 2015. Thousands of permit applications are processed each year and the code office made over 10,000 inspections in 2017. I am very happy to report that after much research and testing, an online building and construction permit portal was launched on January 2. This innovation allows residents to track a permit application's progress, research property information and obtain Open Public Records Act data, simplifying communication and resulting in fewer trips to City Hall. Additional features will be added later this year to make the service even more user-friendly. This practical and

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cost-effective service is a direct response to those in the community who called for a better way to do business with the city. We are proud of this first step, and are committed to making the permitting process nearly seamless going forward.

One theme of the past year has been nurturing and improving our public-private partnerships. Our ability to harness the power of our local corporate citizens, civic organizations, non-profits and businesses is a true strength of our city. As a fiscally responsible municipality, we cannot provide the level of service that citizens demand and expect without these critical partnerships. While it is impossible to acknowledge all of our partners, large and small, I must mention Celgene and Investors Bank for their generous support of the Community Center project. Investors Bank launched the fundraising with an initial gift and Celgene was crucial in getting us to the finish line. We are fortunate to have this level of cooperation enriching our entire Summit community.

The original Community Center building, nearly 55 years old and heavily used, needed significant repair (to an extent that simply addressing existing issues would not have been a cost-effective solution). We broke ground on the new building this fall and expect to complete it in about a year. When the \$6.5MM project was approved, the council challenged the community to raise \$1.2MM in additional funds. I am very proud of the residents and corporate sponsors who stepped up to the challenge--raising nearly \$1.5MM! The new building will have a dedicated senior lounge, a full-sized gym, and several other features that will enable more residents to take better advantage of the many programs offered by the Department of Community Programs. During construction, the DCP offices have been moved to Cornog Field House at Memorial Field and DCP programs are being held at various local houses of worship and other community facilities. We are grateful to these organizations and for the partnerships we have developed, which enhance quality of life for all of us.

One additional collaborative opportunity that we have successfully nurtured is our relationship with Union County. Throughout last year I met with members of the County government, in an effort to get to know them and to determine where we can be of help to each other. I am pleased to report that the County is paying for the re-turfing of Glenside Field, a cost of approximately \$500,000 and provided grants in the amount of \$150,000 to the Community Center project. Additionally, in the midst of controversy regarding mountain biking in the Watchung Reservation, the Union County Freeholders

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were very responsive to my calls and the concerns of our residents. I believe they better understand the needs of our community, but more importantly, they understand the need to support Summit. I am confident that we will continue to improve this relationship in 2018.

Another theme has been the completion of some crucial capital projects. Maintaining and improving our infrastructure is crucial to resident safety and public health. While this work is not generally very exciting, one project in particular did bring smiles to many residents and commuters--the reconfiguring of Springfield Avenue and the addition of a sidewalk on the north side of the street. For far too long, easy access to Springfield Avenue from eastern Broad Street and Morris Avenue was not available. Now, thanks to the vision and hard work of the Division of Public Works and our city engineers, pedestrians can walk safely into downtown. DCS also oversaw 10 other projects, including micro paving and repaving Blackburn Road, Summit Avenue, Elm, and Maple Streets. DPW completed several other paving projects saving our taxpayers over \$100,000. Additionally, we completed several drainage and sewer projects. Most of us only notice roadwork, but with miles of sanitary and storm sewers and thousands of sanitary and storm structures, a significant portion of the city's infrastructure is underground. As I said, these projects are not exciting, but good stewardship of our physical surroundings is a hallmark of what makes Summit such a well-run and desirable place to live.

I obviously cannot talk about roadwork without addressing the work on the Morris Avenue Bridge. New Jersey Transit began this major capital project in August 2015 and they currently estimate completion this coming spring. Because the bridge crosses a busy commuter train line, much of the construction in the first year could only be done between 2:00 and 4:30 AM. On top of that Governor Christie shut down work on state projects for four months, thus delaying the project. I know this disruption has been arduous for many of us, but the spirit of forbearance by residents and commuters has been remarkable. By spring we should be able to have a ribbon-cutting ceremony.

While it is important to maintain and improve the city's infrastructure, we are always mindful of demands upon our taxpayers. I am happy to report that we have kept our tax increase under 1% for each of the past two years, as thoughtful stewardship allows us to continue to improve our financial health. We face many pressures on our budget and council has endeavored to keep taxes as low as possible. I am committed to working with council to develop a stable budget this year.

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We are fortunate to have city staff and council members who are committed to innovative approaches in finding revenue and mitigating negative tax implications. In this era of reduced state aid, and a school funding formula that barely assists towns like ours, our constant vigilance is critical. In the last few years, we have challenged all of our departments to become more efficient; they are aware that innovation is a defining characteristic in their success.

We have had continued success in finding ways to reduce our costs. Recently, the city entered into an agreement with New Providence and Berkeley Heights to consolidate our municipal courts. This consolidation will save the city an average of approximately \$100,000 annually over the next five years. We have also completed the successful integration of shared state-of-the-art 911 dispatch services for New Providence, Millburn and Summit. Our efforts to partner with surrounding communities to increase efficiencies and decrease costs will continue in the years to come.

In other news regarding innovation and increased governmental efficiency, in 2016 we introduced a redesigned website and in November Rutgers University and the New Jersey State League of Municipalities recognized the website and our social media with a “best in class” award. Our traffic continues to grow and this past year we often exceeded 23,000 visits a month, reaching and engaging thousands of citizens.

As we discuss taxes, it is important to note that we have worked collaboratively with two of our largest corporate and non-profit neighbors regarding their tax obligations. In July, the city and Atlantic Health Systems agreed to a community service contribution of \$5.56 million through annual installments through 2023. Overlook Hospital is a valued asset to our residents and we deeply value our relationship as good neighbors. This settlement recognizes our joint partnership. We also successfully negotiated a long term agreement with Celgene on the assessed value of its west campus. When Celgene purchased this property, the assessed value did not reflect the current market value, and thus a reduction in taxes was necessary. As a good neighbor, Celgene agreed to a phased reduction in its tax assessment, in order to reduce the immediate impact on the city’s tax base. On the good news front, Celgene has development plans for the west campus; city officials and I, along with the Planning Board will work with Celgene in finalizing their plans. I am happy to report that these plans will eventually help to offset their current tax reduction as well as create jobs.

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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. Increasing our asset base is an important factor if we want to hold the line on taxes. We have a strong residential ratable base that has shown positive incremental growth in recent years; in 2017 we experienced an increase in construction value of 28%. But given the tax reduction negotiated with Celgene, we must look at other ways to increase our tax base. One of these is thoughtful redevelopment in transitional areas of our downtown.

As you probably remember, we engaged in a robust and exhaustive public Master Plan Re-examination process in 2016. One of the clearest mandates that arose was a need for balanced redevelopment. The national housing market now places a premium on the ability to live within walking distance of a vibrant town center with proximity to shops, restaurants, places of work and mass transit, and we are uniquely positioned to take advantage of this trend because we are a transit hub, 20 miles from New York City, with a thriving downtown and an excellent school system.

As a result, we identified untapped potential in the area bordered by west Broad Street and Morris Avenue. A recommendation was made that we consider whether this west Broad Street corridor could qualify as an Area in Need of Redevelopment, a designation that allows the city to offer tax incentives to potential developers. Over the past year, our planning consultants thoroughly researched this issue, speaking with all of the landowners and stakeholders in the area. After due consideration and review, the Planning Board recommended to council that indeed this area could be redeveloped.

There are multiple benefits to redeveloping the west Broad Street corridor. First, one of the major entry-ways into our city would gain the visual charm and bustling street life that epitomizes Summit, and which this area currently lacks. In addition, a thoughtful mixed-use development, combining residential and commercial space with parking, would provide a needed boost to our downtown economy, which has had to adapt to a drastically-changing commercial landscape. Finally, we can offer an array of housing options that we know are in high demand by our young singles, our working families such as public safety workers and teachers that serve our community, as well as our empty-nesters, while also including some of our court-mandated affordable housing units. We can be good neighbors, while enjoying the benefits that come with having a mix of people of all ages and stages of life living near our town center. This mix would add to the vibrancy of our downtown, increasing our volunteer base and our social capital. And finally, there is the significant economic benefit. Redevelopment will create new

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sources of ratable income that will put our city on firm footing for decades to come. This is just a rough outline of possibilities for this area. To make the project reflect the best of our community, we need to hear your ideas. During the next few months we will engage residents and business owners in a comprehensive discussion about the optimum character of the redevelopment, in a process that will resemble the one we used for the Master Plan re-examination. I encourage everyone to take time to be involved in this process; you will hear about the meeting dates in the next few weeks.

Last year the Common Council approved the Summit Police Department's recommendation to re-establish a traffic unit. This unit has been operational since the spring and while their duties include educating citizens as to the rules of the road, analyzing traffic patterns, and conducting traffic studies; its main function is to enforce "moving" violations, when necessary. To date they have written over 1200 summonses to motorists who are not heeding the rules of the road, particularly speeding and distracted driving. Unfortunately, many of those issued summonses have been to Summit residents. We must all be more careful, as well as be role models, as we navigate our Summit roadways.

In addition, we installed the first ever four-way stop at the intersection of Pine Grove Avenue and Blackburn Road, and the Public Safety Committee has discussed installing speed humps on certain roads in town where speeding is a common occurrence and the education and enforcement operations have not changed the behavior of motorists. Every member of council and I have received complaints about speeding in town, (some perceived and some a reality), and we are determined to take whatever steps necessary to address and decrease speeding issues that occur in our city.

While the police and city's engineering department can educate, enforce, and redesign roadways and intersections for safer travel for pedestrians and motorists alike, it is incumbent upon each of us to travel with deliberation and focus, whether by car, on a bike or on foot.

We have an outstanding fire department, one that is so well-trained that their work saved lives just the other day. The fact is we are grateful for their work on New Year's Eve, but we really do not want them to have to do that again. But they undoubtedly will, and it is our responsibility as stewards of this city, to make sure they are as well trained and well-equipped as they need to be. Training is a big part of a firefighters' duty, and while not visible to most of us, we supported our firefighters in this regard. In

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2017, the department welcomed Ladder Truck One, a major piece of equipment that was purchased because it was more cost effective to buy a new truck than make significant repairs.

The Parking Utility has embraced the use of innovation, with several offerings to increase revenues, address our downtown parking shortage, and improve the parking experience for residents. In 2016, we pioneered the promotion of ride sharing as a way to free up parking in the downtown. This year, after surveying users, we have expanded and enhanced the program. We have changed vendors, replacing Uber with Lyft in order to offer scheduled pickups, and have created a pick-up location right in front of the train station. The Parking Utility also launched a license plate recognition system that streamlines how people pay for parking and uses technology to increase efficiency in terms of collections and resources. We installed pay stations and removed parking meters in half of the downtown this year, and will be completing the other half in 2018. Although this system is in wide use in neighboring towns, making the transition has not been without hiccups, particularly for some of our older residents. In response to concerns, we held a workshop at the library, where the head of the parking utility and her staff demonstrated the system. Technological innovations are important, but we must be ever mindful of the needs of our citizens who are not tech savvy.

Many of you have heard me say that Summit's best asset is its people, and that continues to be true. Tonight we recognized 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. We are committed to engaging even more citizen volunteers to help create a plan for the future of our city; we are fortunate to have community members who have tremendous talent and are willing to share their expertise. Having been your mayor for two years I am here to tell you that in addition to the strength of our volunteers, our paid professionals--the men and women who work for the city--are top notch. They are focused on their jobs, they want to do their jobs well, and they care deeply when things go awry. Much of the innovation I have discussed tonight is the result of the hard work and creativity of these individuals.

Sadly, we lost a wonderful colleague last year with the sudden death of Detective Matthew Tarantino on May 30th. His death was a shocking blow to his fellow officers in the Summit Police Department, to every person who works for the City of Summit, and to thousands of Summit men, women and children who

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knew and respected Matt. His unbridled love of life, people and his job endeared him to everyone he met. In an unprecedented outpouring of love and generosity, our community came together to honor and support Matt's family. We have embraced his wife, Vicky, her two boys and their baby sister with our support. I have often said of Matt that he understood the rules of civility and that he knew that those rules applied not only to the people he served, but to him as well. He set a wonderful example to all who encountered him, and we miss him every day.

I want to finish by extending my sincere thanks to Dr. Robert Rubino and Patrick Hurley who are stepping down after six years on Common Council. Both gentlemen have given countless hours to the city at council and committee meetings and in engaging residents all around town. You have made strong contributions to our city and I am grateful for your hard work and dedication. I have enjoyed working with you. I also want to thank Richard Sun who is stepping down at the end of his 2-year term as Councilman-at-Large. Richard brought energy and a fresh perspective to his tenure and I know we have all enjoyed his presence on council. I want to welcome Beth Little as the new Council-at-Large representative, Matt Gould, representing Ward 1 and Marjorie Fox, representing Ward 2. You all worked hard in the recent election and I look forward to serving Summit with you.

Again, it has been a pleasure working with the 2017 council. 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 continue to be a wonderful place to live, on a firm financial foundation, flexible enough to take advantage of technological innovations and cost-saving practices, and visionary enough to meet any future challenges that may arise.

Thank you and Happy New Year.

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