



2020 Annual Message

John Cohn, Mayor

January 22, 2020

Residents, Councilmembers and City Staff:

I am pleased to have the opportunity to share my thoughts now two years into my time as Mayor. In general, I will be describing a City in very good shape, though facing serious infrastructure challenges. Before I do so, though, I have to attribute much of that “very good shape” status to the constant and continuing efforts of our City staff. Our City Council over the past two years has asked a great deal from staff, and staff have given the City a great deal in response. My thanks to them. My thanks as well to our still new Interim City Manager. Greg Ustry is approaching his role with enthusiasm and intelligence.

I can’t begin to touch on all that your City Council and City government are doing in what would be a reasonable amount of time. Please consider the following to be highlights and forgive me if I leave out any additional topics that leap to the fore in coming days.

Capital Expenditures and Infrastructure. Over the past two years, we as a Council have worked hard, with the aid of staff and the Finance Committee, to put together a realistic though very challenging program of capital projects responsive to the City’s most acute needs. We focused on the most pressing needs of a City that had not been able or had chosen not to invest in deteriorating infrastructure and equipment for some years. Creating that program of projects and putting it in motion was an accomplishment in itself. The first fruits of this labor, our fleet of new garbage trucks, can be seen on City streets.

Watching these gorgeous, yellow vehicular nymphs in action is gratifying, but the acquisition of new trucks is relatively simple compared to our other projects, all of which require complex planning. One new emergency project in particular has preempted some of the planning time our other projects need. What is this new Job #1? As those of you who follow our meetings know, our hugely popular Rye Recreation day camp suddenly found itself at a loss for facilities for some of its programs as a result of Rye’s public school buildings closing for the next several summers to allow the renovations approved by voters last year. Understanding that school facilities will not be available to the camp again for years, we decided to renovate and upgrade facilities at Rye Rec so as to no longer be dependent upon the schools and so as to provide more welcoming and useful facilities for all the non-camp functions that Rye Rec hosts. City staff scrambled to plan the work at Rec, and now is going back to work on our State-required courthouse renovation, our sewer upgrades, our DPW facility renewal and our upgrade of City Hall mechanical and utility systems.

An early mover among these projects will be the Central Avenue pump station and related sewer line that will allow the abandonment of the temporary work-around to the crushed and leaking sewer pipe paralleling I-95. The work on this project will commence this summer.

The grant-supported Forest Avenue pathway project is in a particularly laborious planning process dictated by the terms of our grant funding. These terms require that the City work with the State's Department of Transportation. We anticipate that planning will be concluded this year and that we will reveal plans to the public as they firm up.

Those new garbage trucks of ours are plying what we hope residents agree are steadily improving roads. We are maintaining a level of annual investment in paving nearly double that prevailing before we took office. We have had all City roads reviewed and rated for prioritization in repaving. We will again in the coming paving season tackle worst first, distributing our efforts across the City so that all neighborhoods will share in the improvement, though no neighborhood will be repaved all at once. The County will be doing its part, too, with work anticipated on Midland Avenue and Theodore Fremd, both County roads. We have had some additional paving bad news/good news, with Con Ed first tearing up our streets, but then complying with our new City rules which require the utility to repave whole streets in many cases.

I will describe shortly other initiatives we will undertake. We as a Council, however, must maintain our focus and staff focus on the City's infrastructure needs. This fundamental renewal of our City cannot wait.

Finances. The City's financial condition is good, although our financial discipline must be better than good in order to accomplish the many things the City needs to do. The City gets to draw on only 16% of the total property tax yield and the City's costs, like our own individually, are constantly rising. Even so, we have held our City tax increase this year to 1.87%, well below the tax cap. At the same time, we are carefully earmarking any annual savings for capital investments. To be plain, we don't yet know how many millions of dollars it will take to resolve the Save the Sound sewer lawsuit, but we must plan nonetheless. We have spoken in years past about the creation of a sewer fund resourced from collection of a sewer fee based on water usage. A sewer fund will by no means finance all our needs, but given our needs it makes sense to continue to study the benefits of such a fund, as we are doing.

Despite the great care being taken with our finances, and despite our winning grant support for certain projects, we will need to bond to accomplish our goals. It is likely that we will do so early next year.

Union Contracts. The City had the good fortune this past year to find thoughtful partners in the union bargaining for our DPW workers and our clerical workers. We were able to sign agreements that we believe constituted wins for the City and the City employees upon whom the City's welfare depends. We were able to find a similar mutual victory for the City and the PBA in 2018. We have for ratification later this evening a parallel agreement with our paid firefighters. For the first time in years, we have contracts with all our union employees.

Boat Basin. The gradual accumulation of silt in the municipal boat basin, a perennial problem, now threatens the boat basin's viability as a result of substantial increases in the cost of dredging. The boat basin is treasured by those who use it. It is a key element in the democratization of access to Long Island Sound in our City on the Sound. In a sense, the boat basin is emblematic of life in a Sound shore community. In fact, a whole neighborhood's well-being is implicitly connected to the health of the boat basin. Even so, the boat basin is operated as an enterprise fund, owned by the City, but intended to be financially self-sufficient.

In the past year, the Boat Basin Commission has not found the means to support the anticipated cost of periodic dredging to restore and maintain adequate depth in the boat basin itself and the channel through Milton Harbor. Even as the Commission plans, however, the means of dredge spoil disposal and related cost remains unclear – and in the hands of consultants and government agencies. In an effort to crystalize the problem, we have organized a special committee, comprised of key City staff and members of the Boat Basin Commission, Planning Commission and Finance Committee. This committee is charged with pinning down the facts and offering potential resolutions for the City’s consideration.

Major Real Estate Matters. In the past year, the Council gave the green light to the Rye Y’s plan to lease what was most recently Mrs. Green’s. In doing so, the Council is helping an important City not-for-profit expand its services to the community. The Council is also providing greater locational opportunities to group exercise class facilities elsewhere in Rye. We will soon continue our examination of The Osborn’s request to reconfigure some of its property use. The Avon property has been purchased and the owner group is approaching with its request to change permitted uses. We are cognizant of the fact that each of these discrete projects will have effects beyond their property boundaries. We are working carefully, as we trust is the Planning Commission, towards mutually beneficial reckonings of the private and public interests in these projects.

United Hospital Redevelopment. Starwood, which bought the United Hospital site years ago and took its plan for a massive multi-use project through the environmental review process in Port Chester, sold the site to other developers. We have been told by Port Chester that the new developers will not be substantially changing the Starwood plan. The new developers have not, however, put their own plans on the table. Why should the City of Rye care? We care because the planned development on our border is sure to have an important effect on traffic on nearby streets, including those that traverse a Rye neighborhood that juts out against Rye Brook and Port Chester immediately adjacent to the site. This neighborhood has been living with tremendous uncertainty for years. The Council has been in prolonged and continuing conversation with the neighborhood as to how best to respond to this uncertainty.

Parking. Our City’s parking problem can be divided into two principal parts. One part is railroad station parking and the other is central business district parking. We approached renewed study of this venerable problem last year by first seeking improved enforcement of existing parking regulations. This allows us to understand what our actual present capacities are. Following from this, we intend to undertake a new study that will reconsider structural improvements and other options. We are aware that there have been prior studies that have not resulted in substantial action. We cannot simply accept the status quo, however, and will once again seek to find means to diminish this problem which reduces customer traffic in our stores and restaurants, and weighs upon sales of homes distant from the railroad station.

Nursery Field. In the first half of 2019, a group of Rye residents approached the City with the thought of privately raising funds to donate to the City to convert the soccer field on Milton Road from natural grass to artificial turf. The group’s purpose is to diminish the incidence of field cancellations that now result from the field’s poor ability to recover from rain and its overall poor condition. A number of neighbors and others in the community have raised concerns that must be examined and evaluated. We intend to do so with great care. Soon we hope to schedule a first Council public “work session,” during which the Council will hear staff and retained expert advice. This work session will be followed by one or more “workshops,” which will welcome public

participation in consideration of the issues. We will be posting informational resources on the City website.

Rye TV. We are making progress in our effort to find a welcoming home for the public access functions of Rye TV outside of the City government. We hope that the transition will bring additional energy to this community asset. At the same time, we are looking at improving the governmental coverage of Rye TV, which coverage will remain a City endeavor.

Tree Law. Last year, we reclaimed our official status as a “Tree City.” That has not, however, diminished the clear cutting of properties in anticipation of building. We all recognize the importance of our trees, from their beauty to their shade, to their soil and water retention capacities and their atmospheric benefits. We intend to review again the possibility of municipal action that might protect trees valuable to us all while remaining sensitive to individual property rights.

Solar Energy. Moving away from fossil fuel use is a primary means of reducing our contribution to climate change. Embracing solar power is a means of doing this by incremental and local efforts. The City has joined a County program that will evaluate our government buildings for installation of solar panels. We will seek the assistance of Sustainable Westchester’s and other public programs. We will also work with our Board of Architectural Review to adopt guidelines for residential solar panel installations intended to make such installations more accessible to residents. We will ask the Sustainability Committee to consider once again providing residents with advice on solar equipment installation and financing. We understand that there may be large-scale solar “farm” developments in New York that may at some point provide bulk power that we might access. In advance of such developments, however, we will look for cost-efficient, local improvements.

Census. The City of Rye has created a committee to ensure that a complete count of our residents is conducted in Census 2020. Making sure Rye is accurately counted is critical in ensuring that we receive fair funding for our community and that we are properly represented in government.

Master Plan. We know the many discrete things we would like to do in moving Rye forward. We intend to persist in moving those things forward despite the many obstacles that progress charms into being. That said, we also recognize the need to comprehensively plan long term --managing the planning effort so that it doesn’t impede our progress. Accordingly, we will review and reignite the master plan process that began a few years ago. We will insist, however, that this process be a comprehensive look at the directions this City may take – respecting, but not bound by, choices made in the past.

Staff. We have a small City staff, reduced by the City’s financial limitations, and I must state again our gratitude for its efforts. When the majority of this Council took office two years ago, we noted the lack of an assistant city manager and resolved to consider whether this was appropriate. The City Manager is the City’s chief administrative officer and both the Council’s and the public’s primary interface with City staff. We have realized that with the number of projects we wish to undertake and with the daily challenges faced by the City, we hamper the City’s progress by not having a good assistant manager more than the savings of salary and benefits is worth. We also have recognized that our City Engineer and DPW chief (one man – two hats) bears a great burden that can be eased by an assistant. We are looking forward to the hiring of these two assistants, which we believe will be a boon to staff and residents alike.

I am speaking now with two years in as mayor. It is half-time in my four-year term and a moment ripe for reflection. What, you (or I) might ask, have I learned in what has been a pervasive learning experience? Most importantly, I have learned, on the one hand, that community is the work of many, and that, as important as government may be to the community, it is the community that ultimately and rightfully drives policy and manifests the City's character.

On the other hand, I have learned the power of individuals to shape outcomes for better or worse, but most often for better and for the underlying benefit of the community.

I have also learned how many small, finite acts are needed to make municipal progress, and that things, especially good things, take time, far more time than one might imagine. Municipal governments are subject to great distraction in the form of intervening crises and political moods. It is vital that this Council persist energetically in the projects it has undertaken, or else progress will falter. We must recognize that though our ambitions may be unlimited, our capacities are finite. That said, however, and although Ms. Murphy's law rings as true in municipal affairs as elsewhere, we must recognize that with persistence and a talented staff we can achieve our goals.

Thank you.