



## CITY OF RYE

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### 2011 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Douglas French -- Mayor, City of Rye

January 12, 2011

Good evening -- It is a privilege to represent Rye as Mayor and to once again deliver the State of the City Address.

Tonight, I will take a brief look back and look ahead in laying out a plan for Rye for the coming year. The decisions we make in 2011, on top of the ones we made last year, will then put Rye in a position where once again we can begin to control our own destiny, create momentum and plan a vision for the future.

2010 was a year of transition and challenges as the City had to transform its manner of doing business in response to one of the worst recessions in our lifetime. One year ago, I stood at this podium in my first address and said: *"Just as you, your family and those around you have been tested by today's economic times -- in 2010 our government will be tested."*

And we were. Not just financially, but on many fronts. We accomplished a great deal, and Rye passed those tests.

There are three pillars of good government, not all of which you find in many communities – but they are all here in Rye.

1. First, we have sound fiscal management practices that guide how we operate.
2. Second, we have transformed our government organization structure to more effectively and efficiently provide core services.
3. And third, we have created an environment that encourages public participation to help shape our policies – and the people have responded.

For those 3 reasons, I stand before you tonight and say the State of the City is strong.

## I. SOUND FISCAL MANAGEMENT

We began 2010 with no money in the bank – just \$1.5M above our chartered minimum, no ability to borrow without public referenda, and a \$5M IOU on a building that dropped in value. But the biggest challenge we faced was the unexpected healthcare legislation. Our employee benefits line grew 14% in one year. Let me say that again. One quarter of our annual operating budget, which is pension and healthcare but not salaries, went from \$6.5M to \$7.4M in one year. The math simply does not add up – and the days of passing the tab onto the taxpaying public who can no longer afford it had to change.

So, last year we made the hard decisions:

1. First, in 2010 we held spending flat to 2009 levels, saving about \$500k from what was budgeted.
2. Second, in the 2011 budget, we held spending levels to about 1% over 2009 actuals or roughly ½ percent per year for 2 years. Last January, on this night, I called for a 5% reduction across City departments and in December the council voted unanimously to adopt all of the proposed cuts by the City Manager – \$170,000 (6%) from the \$2.8M Recreation budget, \$150,000 (2%) from the \$8.6M Police Department budget, \$75,000 (6%) from the \$1.1M Library contribution, and \$285,000 (3%) from the \$9M Department of Public Works budget. Operational decisions were made by the City Manager and Department heads, but the Council established clear goals.

The result has been a 1% increase in the 2011 tax levy – one of the lowest if not the lowest around. The budget reflects our commitment to balance conservative revenue expectations and maintain expected levels of service.

As we look to 2012, we must continue to recognize all of our constituents are part of an economically diverse community with moderate to high-income, fixed income, under-employed and unemployed. Whether you are single, a family or a senior we want you to be able to afford to live here.

1. I call on our City Manager to identify the top 2 cost-savings initiatives for 2012. The 2011 budget was a time where we had shared sacrifices across all groups. Now we need to turn our primary focus on the biggest cost drivers.

2. I will be forming a property tax relief commission to study the situation and identify new revenue opportunities to offset the ongoing burden of property taxes. In my research, other communities across the US have taken this approach and now it is time for Rye. I will ask someone from our Citizen's Finance Committee to chair this working group.
3. Healthcare is under local control so I am asking the City Manager to do an immediate review of our future healthcare liability and identify potential solutions.
4. Together as officials and residents we need to continue to push for pension reform with NY State.
5. Last December, we came to agreement with our largest union -- local 1000 DPW. We still have 3 expired labor contracts with our Police, Fire and Clerical unions. A negotiated settlement is the best option for all and I am hopeful the unions will come to the bargaining table.

## 2. TRANSFORMING OUR GOVERNMENT

With the ongoing municipal recession, we had to begin to transform our City operation in order to efficiently provide municipal services and maintain our quality of life. A lot was accomplished. We started in the City Manager's office.

### **City Management**

This year marked 50 years since Rye established itself as a City Manager form of government, yet with recent turnover – we had to stabilize that position. The City Council conducted a thorough search and interview process and in the end, unanimously appointed Scott Pickup. His 5 years in the assistant position and living in the community, his knowledge of municipal government and the inter-workings of the City, and his overwhelming endorsement of surrounding municipal officials and peers, made him the right person at the right time.

### **Litigation Management**

For a small city, Rye has a full docket of cases. The focus of our legal services has to meet the ongoing demands on municipalities and accomplish three objectives:

- Provide in-house staff support and advisory to prevent litigation where possible.
- Provide a range of municipal law expertise and practice-area specialization to effectively manage the variety of matters the City faces.
- Incorporate cost-containment measures and management.

The changes we implemented in our law department meet all of those objectives and provide the City with effective legal representation in today's litigious environment.

In addition, we were able to provide continued rent protection for 99 out of 102 residents at Highland Hall, negotiate competitive water rate increases with United Water, pass "No-knock" legislation, and we are no longer in dispute with our neighboring community, Rye Brook.

Most importantly, after the court ruling, I am very pleased to have come together and worked with School Board President Josh Nathan and Osborn Chairman Jack Miller to come to agreement on the long-standing Osborn Home dispute and avoid further litigation -- and instead look toward the future and partnership opportunities.

### **1037 Boston Post Road**

This year we made good on the \$5M IOU. The staff and council have worked hard on discussing next steps and will be issuing a plan in the coming year.

### **Public Safety**

In 2010, burglaries, coyotes and other threats including storms were met head-on by our professionals. The charge to our City Manager and Commissioner has been to maintain our level of public safety and optimize deployment of personnel where needed with the priority on patrol. Two patrolman vacancies were sworn in this week. Like other communities, there will be a modification in our DARE program and Marine patrol.

The other side of public safety is an informed and alert public. The Commissioner has successfully instituted our public notification e-mail and text system – nixle.com to complement the reverse 911 phone calls. One of our key priorities in 2011 will be to expand this program. Every Rye resident should sign up for this notification service to stay informed of emergency, public safety, weather and traffic issues around our City.

With coyotes, our strategy will continue as one of controlled co-existence through trapping and relocation to instill fear of humans, and education of the public to be on alert. We will continue regional coordination with surrounding communities, Westchester County, the New York State DEC and the Federal government.

### **Pedestrian safety**

The City, the Schools, our Traffic Commission, the YMCA and the Police all came together to heighten community awareness of safe walking and distracted driving. Improvements to sidewalks and crossings all around Rye were started and completed last year. An increase in

police presence and enforcement around schools improved overall compliance. The Boston Post Road diet was designed and implemented around Osborn school to reduce speeds. Stop signs for safer walking in the downtown were tested and adopted. In short, the public narrative has changed -- cell phones, speeding, and texting are no longer tolerated, and pedestrians – and youth – need to learn safe walking and riding habits as part of a shared responsibility of the road.

### **Future Capital Investment**

The City normally funds capital improvements through surplus. There is none. 2011 will not be the year of no, but it will be the year of not now – except for basic maintenance or projects that have already been funded. We will continue to work with the new Governor and our local legislators to release the funding on our approved grants – especially for long overdue projects like the Central Avenue Bridge, Sluice Gate and Bird property.

We have a flood mitigation plan in place that focuses on upstream -- now it is working through government bureaucracy and funding in order to get it implemented. It starts with the sluice gate at Bowman dam, the expansion of the upper pond, and legislation for County coordination in regional planning and enforcement.

Flood mitigation, pedestrian safety and downtown are the primary infrastructure improvements that will need priority and funding through capital investment planning for 2012.

### **Recreation**

We need to explore opportunities to get more activity out of the restaurant and catering facilities at Rye Golf, and identify ways to get more residents using Rye Golf or Pool. The key though is *without* impacting the revenue contribution the Club makes to the City. The club has been very successful at delivering value back to the community and offsetting property taxes. In addition, we need to explore cooperative recreation programming across Rye's organizations and Recreation Department that are open and affordable to all but leverage the unique strength of each these institutions.

## **3. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION THAT SHAPES POLICY**

People Make a Difference. In Rye, the strength of our City and its success is not just City Hall, but our residents and volunteers who give their time and expertise to make Rye a better place. We have made a commitment to open up our government – as a representative government – to establish committees to help us tackle some of the biggest strategic issues facing our City. The approach worked and the people have responded.

## **Rye Town Park**

There were many quality of life issues being felt by surrounding Rye City neighborhoods. It was time for Rye City to restore its voice and build a partnership with Rye Town. Public forums and planning committees helped inform Rye Town Park commission policy to improve the overall user experience that have included improvements in public safety, pedestrian safety, parking, environmental improvements and continued financial stability.

## **Preserving History**

Our history is what ties our generations together and we have continued to make it a priority of who we are as a community. We celebrated our 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a Town throughout the year. We were honored to accept the 9/11 memorial gazebo. Last Fall we made a public-private partnership to restore the Friends Meeting House to open up this year after 10 years of being dormant.

## **Sustainability**

In response to public interest, we established an environmental sustainability committee to put together a sustainability plan for the City to look at our community carbon footprint, recycling improvements and community education.

## **Shared Roadways**

Much of the pedestrian safety work you saw around the City this year was based on the work by a pedestrian safety committee established in 2007. We have created an extension of that work for the next round of planning and new projects with the new Shared Roadways committee.

## **Citizens Finance Committee**

We expanded the size and scope of this committee and they have delivered. They have taken head-on very tough and sensitive financial issues and provided both the council and citizens the proper context to make better informed decisions.

## **Government Policy and Research**

Legislative actions impact us just as much as financial decisions. We formed a citizens group to provide oversight on pending legislation at the Federal, State, County and even City level to inform and empower the public on these potential changes.

## **Expanded Cable Committee**

We expanded the size and focus of our cable committee to include all methods of communication delivery and to broaden the communication footprint and strategy of the City.

### **Playland Strategic Committee**

The future of Playland can bring great opportunity to Rye and Westchester families. As the host community, the City needs to make sure it has done its due diligence and gauge resident sentiments. The Playland strategic committee has done a solid job in framing the issues, getting citizen feedback and will report back to the Council its findings next month when the Council will discuss and adopt a resolution.

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And so on this night, we look back at last year and a lot has been accomplished. We look ahead and there is much still to do.

So thank you to our City Manager Scott, his management team and the City employees. Kristen – thank you and welcome officially.

Thank you to our many committees, groups, and organizations -- the volunteers who spend hours advocating for their organizations, serving government committees and planning for the future.

A special thanks to my colleagues. Let me be the first one this year to say thank you for your public service to Rye. Our role as Mayor and Council is to bring it all together and make decisions – sometimes very tough ones. We have done that and will continue to do so.

So, on behalf of the Council, we look forward to 2011, ready to represent you, work with you and ready to serve. Thank you.