



CITY OF RYE

**CITY HALL - RYE, NEW YORK 10580
TELEPHONE (914) 967-5400**

2015 STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

Mayor Joseph A. Sack

January 14, 2015

In one respect, 2015 is beginning just like 2014. For the second year in a row, this traditional State of the City address by the Mayor has been upstaged – and rightly so – by the swearing-in of Councilmembers Richard Mecca and Richard Slack.

But in another way, the start of this year is actually much different than the start of last year.

This time, we, the members of this Rye City Council, are not just offering the promise of restoring trust and confidence in our City government. After a solid year of hard work, perseverance and a healthy dose of humility, it can be fairly noted that we have delivered on that promise.

Consequently, the state of our City is stronger now than it has been in recent memory. As we remain united, and as we continue to advance the interests of Rye in a straightforward and business-like manner, the state of our City will only get even stronger.

The members of this Council – which also include Laura Brett, Julie Killian, Terry McCartney and Kirstin Bucci – have worked together and with others to get the City back on track. And we have done that by respecting all points of view, working through differences, and building consensus. This fresh approach has contributed to better solutions and stronger outcomes.

So in the span of just 12 months, Rye has racked up a string of notable accomplishments.

First and foremost, we ended our relationship with a City manager who by his actions and inactions had unfortunately contributed to the public's waning faith in the way our City was run.

We replaced that person with an upstanding and solid City manager, an old friend who helped steady the ship and navigate us through turbulent waters.

And regardless of who happens to be serving as City manager, we strengthened our oversight tools, giving all Council members for the first time the right to request, receive and inspect the books and records of the City.

We enhanced our checks and balances with respect to the appointment of one of the most important and high-profile City employees, by obliging the City manager to offer his or her choice for Police commissioner to the Council for our advice and consent.

We brought back the process of requiring Council approval of the City's outside auditor, and we took that opportunity to shake things up and retain a new, experienced and well-regarded auditing firm. Thank you to City Comptroller Joe Fazzino and the Finance Department team for their hard work in making that happen.

We opened a brand new chapter at Rye Golf Club, by hiring a new caterer and a new club manager, both with essential input from golf club stakeholders. Thank you to GM Jim Buonaiuto, Mack Cunningham and all the club commissioners and volunteers for keeping the bottom line in the black, and drastically improving the overall member experience.

Regarding Rye Playland, we took proactive steps to ensure that Rye had a role in the decision-making in connection with the County's proposed development plans. Thank you to Steve Vasko, and all the advisory committee members and local citizens, who helped keep this issue in the forefront.

We crafted creative legislation to address a long-simmering conflict at Rye Town Park, and officially allowed dogs off leash in a designated area before 9 a.m., while providing for stricter enforcement at other times of the day. Thank you to Supervisor Joe Carvin, Bishop Nowotnik, and all of our friends in the Town of Rye for being such good partners. And thanks to City Clerk Dawn Nodarse for helping to implement the registration component to this new law.

We set a new tone in our labor negotiations, and settled long-standing talks with our police and public works unions by entering into agreements which were not only fair and equitable to City workers, but which also contained unprecedented provisions to protect the long-term interests of Rye taxpayers. Our greatest City asset is our City staff, and we are grateful for their fine service.

We applied vigorous due diligence to the senior affordable housing proposal at the intersection of Theo. Fremd and North Street, which resulted in a thorough review of environmental and other impacts, and which – after over two decades of talk – finally brought the tangible result of a new zoning district to the site. Thank you to City Planner Christian Miller and the Planning Commission for helping us to see that through.

We instituted pilot projects on the Milton Point “Loop” with regard to a reduced speed limit of 25 miles per hour, and the removal of dangerous rocks in the City right-of-way. We will learn from these pilots and we will expand them if they prove successful. Thank you to Brian Dempsey and all the members of the Traffic and Pedestrian Safety committee, as well as interested citizens, for supplying us with very useful information on this.

We passed a new law which was geared towards preserving the essential character of our City by trying to save the Smoke Shop. With its iconic green façade and with its welcoming atmosphere as a central meeting place, Peggy and Tony's quintessential retail store is as much connected to our identity as any other place in Rye. I sincerely hope that the landlord becomes our partner in this effort and takes advantage of this unique opportunity.

These are just the highlights. There are many other accomplishments, both large and small, which have made a positive impact – from reversing the gravelling-over of the Central Avenue parkette, to approving new retail-friendly 15-minute parking spots at various places around town.

Perhaps the achievement for which I personally received the most positive feedback was the re-surfacing of the train station roadway which runs through the MTA-owned parking plaza.

What a difference a year makes.

But we are not content to rest on our laurels. Working together, this Council aims to keep the momentum, to resolve unfinished business, and to take on newer and bigger challenges.

In 2015, we will for sure recruit our next City manager, the person who will finally succeed Mr. Culross in the true Rye tradition of honest and effective leadership. We are glad to have assistant manager Eleanor Militana to provide continuity during the transition.

Regardless of whom the Council hires as City manager, we should also continue to strengthen our ability to perform our oversight role, by allowing all Council members to speak directly with City department heads. Currently, this basic interaction is remarkably not allowed to take place, based on the way the Charter appears to be written.

However, we ought to be able to consult with them, not for the reason of directing them in the performance of their duties, which should remain solely the function of the City manager, but simply for the purposes of gaining information. Ironically, any ordinary citizen can speak with a department head, and this happens on a regular basis.

Let's not forget that our inability to do this prevented those of us who were suspicious earlier on about the Rye Golf Club situation from conducting an inquiry at the source, once our initial requests for information were ignored. If we had been able to do this, the City potentially could have avoided hundreds of thousands of dollars in investigative fees, not to mention immeasurable grief.

We have seen the peril which may befall our City when the Council does not fully embrace its necessary and proper oversight responsibilities. We should heed the lessons of the recent past and make this sensible change.

We are thankful to Commissioner Bill Pease for his steady hand, but we ought to start thinking about our need to permanently fill the top leadership position at the Police department. However, this will have to wait until a new City manager is in place, so that he or she can initiate and guide that process.

We ought to review the organization and staffing needs at the Fire department, which we began to address in this year's budget, but which we must consider in much greater detail. As part of this effort, we should apply additional effort and resources towards recruiting, training and retaining volunteer firefighters. This public service has a rich tradition dating back many generations in Rye, and I hope and believe that it will continue to be a tremendous source of community pride.

Importantly, we will need all parties involved – professionals and volunteers alike – to put aside historic differences for the greater good of the entire City. I am confident that everyone will rise to the occasion.

If possible, we ought to apply the model of success we developed in negotiating other collective bargaining agreements, to our talks with the unions representing our firefighters and clerical workers.

We ought to continue to press our insurance claim with regard to the fraud at Rye Golf Club, to get the best recovery possible for the City, and we should also closely monitor the litigation regarding the Whitby wait staff gratuities.

Unfortunately, there's a raft of other litigation matters which we need to stay on top of, including the Beaver Swamp Brook and the Tiki Bar matters. We will continue to rely on the good advice of City attorney Kristen Wilson as we move forward. Thanks also to City Assessor Noreen Whitty for her important role in our tax cert litigation.

We ought to be prepared to reaffirm our rights if and when the County of Westchester comes forward with a new plan, or a variation on an old plan, for the revitalization of Rye Playland. We want to be partners with the County whenever possible, and we invite the County to work with us.

We ought to continue to pursue flood mitigation strategies, including the re-calibration of the Bowman Avenue sluice gate, and the options developed by the Governor's "New York Rising" task force, among which is the possibility of up-stream retention on the State University of New York campus in Purchase. Thanks to Holly Kennedy and Bernie Althoff and all the citizen volunteers for applying themselves to this ever present issue.

We ought to continue the conversation which we started about rock chipping and other building issues, and institute better regulations, while always striving to strike the right balance between the desires of those who want to limit new construction, with those who wish to preserve property rights. We appreciate the input of our concerned citizens, and we will continue to turn to Building Inspector Maureen Eckman for her expert technical advice.

We ought to consider taking steps to revise our City of Rye Development Plan – the so-called "Master Plan" – which has not been updated in three decades. I have here an original edition from 1985. Our good friend John Carolin served as the capable Chairman of the Planning Commission at that time. Today, we need the same type of equanimity, nobility and foresight exemplified by Mr. Carolin thirty years ago. Let's make the needed investment and get the ball rolling to plan for our future.

We should begin to implement the infrastructure projects which were approved in 2012, but which were delayed because we came to realize that the projects were not sufficiently planned out at the time when they were submitted to referendum. As always, we could not embark on these projects without the solid leadership of City Engineer Ryan Coyne and the DPW staff.

We also have no shortage of new projects to undertake, including potential reconfiguration at Disbrow Park involving the Little League field to provide for safer routing of traffic. Recreation Superintendent Sally Rogol, together with Bart Dinardo and the entire Rec commission, will as always play an important part in getting this done right.

We ought to address the complaints about the deer population by our neighbors in the Greenhaven and Manursing Island areas especially. To that end, we will enlist the advice and input of the State and County, as well as our neighboring communities, and Rye will convene and host a deer management summit in the first quarter of the year.

Having hit the re-set button on the long-standing Hen Island controversy, and having invited all interested parties to submit material and join a constructive dialogue, and having even travelled by boat out into Milton Harbor for a tour, we need to digest this disparate and complex information and ultimately weigh in with our perspective.

With regard to the Rye City Schools, we ought to continue the improved communication which we have tried to cultivate. Although we are separate organizations with discrete roles, there is often much overlap in our missions, especially since we predominantly serve the same constituents. These intentions would also hold true for the Rye Neck schools, although on a much smaller scale. But thank you to Rye School Board President Laura Slack and her colleagues for stepping up and being our close partners.

In particular, we ought to continue the direction of our recent discussion over the location of our public access cable TV studio. There are distinct synergies that exist in our respective efforts to inspire young minds, as they pursue careers and other adventures. Let's work together on a joint venture for the benefit of our shared love – our children.

And all of these initiatives, of course, must be considered in the context of providing the high level of services which the residents of Rye have come to desire and expect, while also keeping taxes as manageable as possible.

This is not an exhaustive list; there are many more existing issues which require our attention, with many more sprouting up every day. We certainly have enough on our plate. The truth is that we relish these challenges. But we cannot take them on without your help, for which we humbly ask.

A couple years ago, I clipped an article from The Wall Street Journal which reported on the Berkshire Hathaway annual shareholders' meeting. This article struck a chord with me, and has remained on a corner of my desk. It indicated that Berkshire's legendary chairman Warren Buffet had invited a prominent short-seller – that is, someone who had placed a bet against Berkshire stock – to participate in a panel posing questions to him.

The Journal concluded that: “Perhaps the most important thing you can do when everything seems to be going right in your portfolio is to listen to somebody who insists you are wrong.”

So we need and want your support. But we also accept and learn from and are shaped by your criticism. We seek out public engagement no matter its source or motives as an essential part of the good government to which we all, I believe, aspire.

More recently, a couple weeks ago, another article in the Journal caught my eye. This one asked successful people about the best and worst investments they ever made. Former Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker put it succinctly: “The worst financial investment I ever made was spending so much time in government. The most satisfying personal investment I ever made was spending so much time in government, frustrating as it could be.”

Another year older, and another year wiser, I think I know what he means. But I don’t think that I would have it any other way.

We ended 2014 on a high note with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the dedication of City Hall. And as we start the next half-century in this building, we can have optimism that our best days are still ahead of us.

Thank you, God Bless you and God Bless the City of Rye.