



CITY OF RYE

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

2018 ANNUAL MESSAGE

Josh Cohn - Mayor, City of Rye

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Those that are in the room, I am honored by your presence. Those watching at home, given likely distractions, I am equally honored by your attention.

Some may have remarked on the title of my talk. This is my first annual message. I have reverted to a title used years ago. This title better suits my purpose. This is not a “state of” speech. It is simply my opportunity to tell you what I have observed, what I and at least some of my colleagues are thinking about and what we hope to do. And anything we hope to do can only get done with your help. We know that.

I and my newly-elected colleagues are with you tonight only because many of you, many especially for an “off-year” election, helped by taking the time and trouble to go vote. If you did only that, Democrats, Independents, Republicans, WEPers, WFPers, Conservatives and the mighty unaffiliated, you helped enormously – no matter who you voted for. We are here as a result of a good election, hard fought and a sturdy starting point for us. Thank you.

Please don't think, though, that having voted gets you off the hook. My early days as Mayor have already taught me how very important are the City's own boards, commissions and committees. Many of you have invested enormous time and effort in these. Not to mention the myriad other community, social, religious, charitable, you-name-it groups that weave all our efforts into the fabric that is our City. We need your continued participation in the work of the government and the work of the community. We on the Council also need your thoughts, your advice, and your continuing support.

I have been able to spend some time in City Hall in recent weeks. I already knew, but have learned better, how enormously talented and hard-working is our City staff. I thank them for their work and tutelage in these early days.

Now, to business....

I. Finances

A first and very deep concern is the effect of recent federal tax law changes on the City's financial position. Some have said that there will be a consequent fall-off in home sales, home values and in new construction, with knock-on deterioration of the City's fee income and tax base. Others believe that Rye's reputation as an excellent place to live will insulate it from or mitigate these consequences. One thing is certain, though. Local taxes have immediately become more unattractive than they already were.

I think the dominant view on your new City Council is that we must act with great financial caution. We have inherited a budget that leaves us little room. The prior Council was prepared to rest on optimistic assumptions, for example regarding increased building permit revenues and declining legal costs. Our available fund balance is only about \$400,000 above the amount that is our self-imposed bright-line to protect our triple-A rating.

We will watch our financial condition with care over the year. We may make changes in our budget, to the extent the law allows. We will need to think creatively and engage our community's great intellectual capital. One means of doing this, in process, is re-energizing our Finance Committee to help us navigate the new municipal financial environment.

As many know, an amount in excess of the total amount of the City's property tax revenues is absorbed by employee salaries and benefits, and retiree health care cost. Your new City Council inherits all four of our union contracts "open" – that is, to be negotiated. Our city workers contribute immeasurably to the quality of life in Rye. We honor and respect them. At the same time, we must work within the budget we have inherited and within the uncertain financial environment we face. We must and will be prudent on behalf of the City present and the City future.

Before we leave finance behind, it is worth noting that of your aggregate local tax spend, the City receives only about 15%. The lion's share goes to the school district and the County. And so our other sources of funds, be they additional revenue sources or grants and aid, are indeed important to us.

II. Fire Department

Rye has a combined volunteer and professional fire department. Continued effort is needed to make sure that this combination is successful and is rewarding to both volunteers and professionals. We will do our part to support this effort.

III. Infrastructure

We must deal with longstanding and, in some instances, neglected issues. Our roads overall need improvement. The effects of our recent weather have underscored this need – deeply – pothole deep.

Although we have had access to New York Rising flood grant money, for too long we have been slow to pursue deployment of those funds. Separately, our wastewater and storm water infrastructure needs are only now being surveyed. We can anticipate substantial wastewater and storm water infrastructure renewal and improvement costs, which we hope may be offset in some part by grants and aid.

Pedestrian safety and ease of travel should be improved by sidewalk construction or other means. Again, we hope grants and aid, and yes, neighborhood contributions, may in part fund this work.

The central business district parking issue remains after so very many years. We will again confront the issue, with fresh eyes and open minds.

I have just described several leading areas of potential capital investment. There are of course many others that are important and that can be found in our many-paged Capital Improvement Plan, from sports field improvements to replacing City Hall's dinosaurian HVAC system. (In reality, I understand our HVAC unit to be akin to the old cars plying the streets of Havana – miracles of mismatched parts and mechanical inspiration.) We will be reviewing and prioritizing capital projects with City staff, and with a sharp eye on the City's finances. Yes, bonding will be considered.

Disbrow Park improvements were a substantial subject of public discourse in 2017. We respect the Recreation Commission and will hear its selection of one of the consultant's plans, though we think the Commission has been inappropriately burdened in this instance. Our consideration will be framed by our regard for the City's financial situation and its many other needs, as well as by environmental concerns and the thoughts of park neighbors. Our hearing the Recreation Commission's thoughts will certainly enrich our outlook on what might be done at Disbrow, but it will not dictate any particular outcome.

The Thruway property, of course, comes to mind, as well. Steve Otis's bill was signed and we therefore have the welcome opportunity to negotiate a shared use agreement with Rye Country Day School. I am hopeful that we can achieve a satisfactory outcome for both our City and the school.

IV. Some Other Important Matters

There is an impressive quantity of matters, some involving neighboring jurisdictions that will require our proactive involvement. Here are highlights in no particular order:

-The Starwood-designed project on the United Hospital site is now for sale. This huge project remains a concern for Rye Park and for travel on the Post Road. Agreements were put in place by the prior Council that may provide some help. This Council, however, will be engaged.

-We have litigation pending with the County over its approval of the Playland - Standard amusements deal. We intend to renew dialog with the County, and with Standard, to the extent appropriate.

-Our City boat basin is an important community asset in enterprise fund form. It is struggling with the costly burden of dredging. We will stay involved in its progress.

-Crown Castle has indicated that it intends to appeal its loss in federal district court and that it may bring an additional state court action. We want carriers to provide good cell service to Rye. At the same time, we must continue to fight to use and protect our City's approval rights. It is striking that Verizon, Crown's sponsor, has failed to see an opportunity to do something customer-pleasing in Rye.

-The State's Last Mile project, a rebuilding of I-95, and certain overpasses and ramps, from Rye to Connecticut, will provide years of disruption. We will work with the State to ameliorate this disruption, to the extent possible.

-The Master Plan effort underway is important and will be continued, though we will review project scope and goals.

-Community concern over the nature of residential development remains high. Although potentially within the ambit of the Master Plan, we will consider how best to expedite a community conversation regarding this sensitive matter.

-The City and the School District can and should do great things together. We intend to reach out to the School District to see how we can work more closely together.

V. Council Communications, Transparency and Efficiency

We wish to have this City Council work better for you. I recently heard a resident say that the City had, in a given instance, not treated him well as a customer. But you/we are not just customers.

We are owners. And ownership, of course, brings its own bundle of rights and responsibilities. In this room and in all our dealings with you, the people of Rye, we will endeavor to treat you as owners.

And we hope that you will treat us as temporary caretakers (and co- owners), trying our best to work on our collective behalf. We will work at a collegiality and transparency that we hope will help both atmosphere and performance.

We are considering a variety of means, including some used in neighboring towns, to streamline our meetings, communicate with greater constancy and to be available to our constituents. More on this shortly.

I hope I have given you a sense of both how I see Rye and what the initial preoccupations of this Council may be. I say "may be" because your City is as subject to chance and circumstance as any enterprise, and your Council is constituted of seven individuals.

When considering our plans, I made a list of things I would like the City to do and another list of things coming to get us, whether we like it or not. And so we will work off both lists – and with your help—we'll get things done.

Thank you.