



Mayor's Message – February 26, 2025

It's been a while since I have given a mayoral overview. Why? Because I gave one in early 2020 and the program I offered was entirely upended. COVID hit and the world stopped. George Floyd was murdered and demonstrations and a state-mandated police review followed even here in Rye..And along came Ida in 2021. These read now as discrete and contained events, but they were a continuum of disruption, some of which is still being felt.

As I have revealed my intention not to run again, this could be a moment for a look back. I will save that for later. I came into office with a group of council members determined to make municipal government move, and to a great extent we did. I will hold to that goal in my remaining time in office and so will be looking to the future in this talk – with a smidge of history for context. Having learned a lesson though, please understand that I offer thoughts, not certainties.

Flooding – {NOT READ, ceded to Brian's report – mentioned only need to stay close to our federal and state electeds/funding sources, attention to Beaver Swamp Brook and coastal resiliency] Our efforts to move on flooding began in 2018 and 2019 with rescue of our NY Rising projects and outreach to renew Army Corps and NY DEC interest in Blind Brook. Ida taught us we needed to accelerate. **We have acquired the fresh studies needed to win funding and have a list of projects that we must find ways to fund and move forward.** We have learned that our Blind Brook flood risk is profound and will take many projects to diminish. We continue to work towards upstream relief but have come to understand that our existing undersized bridges and culverts and narrow channel also require attention. We have replacement of the Locust Avenue Bridge half-funded and are in talks with the library, the Y and Assemblyman Otis about potentially expanding that project to encompass a more substantial channel and wall overhaul. We are in early days of inquiry as to improvements needed all the way down through the Nature Center to the too-small Boston Post Road bridge. Besides overwhelming Blind Brook, Ida

also taught us our stormwater system is inadequate. Despite the million-plus dollars invested in stormwater improvements since Ida, we know we are working against a massive issue of undersized pipes in the ground. And we can't forget our residents on Beaver Swamp Brook who also suffer with that brook's flooding. We must keep working intently with our state and federal elected officials and the County to help secure the funding and upstream cooperation needed to move this battle of flood level inches forward. And we must add to our focus coastal resiliency as our weather and sea level change.

Infrastructure – Capital Program -When first coming into office, my Council colleagues and I found the staff's massive list of capital improvements, graded according to urgency of need. The list had seen almost no movement in years. We selected a group of the most urgent projects, largely renovation or replacement of utilitarian City facilities, to pursue and fund as priorities. After years of planning and a 2022 bond issuance dedicated substantially to this, we have seen a consistent rollback of anticipated commencement and completion dates and great increases in cost. For example, in a 2022 update we learned that the needed City Hall HVAC and LED lighting project was expected to be completed in spring 2023. It has not begun. The new DPW garage originally estimated at approximately \$5 million was anticipated to cost in 2021 a then alarming \$6.3 million. By the time of the belated 2024 bid that we just rejected, the cost with some additions to plan exceeded \$10 million. **We are way behind on some of these needed projects and, as we have observed previously, project costs constantly rise over time. We need to review overall funding and timing. We must not waste the great planning investment already made. Certainly COVID, the great amount of sewer work required by the Save the Sound settlement (a huge environmental achievement – not necessarily in terms of all we had to do and cost – but a huge environmental victory), responding to Ida and renewing Nursery Field has slowed us, but we need to move these projects faster now. This is a matter of both staffing and funding.**

We executed a successful emergency renovation at Rye Rec to provide rainy day space for our summer camp, when school space became unavailable. During COVID, which otherwise would have delayed this project, we learned that our skilled DPW staff could do many of the basics that then unavailable contractors might have done. We have continued to use staff similarly in other projects, like the underpinnings for the salt shed. **We must ask, however, whether there is a time/money trade-off involved in this and whether contractor use might diminish the project delays that now have become so costly.**

Smaller – in progress projects: The boat basin partial dredge was advanced by a combination of forward-looking Boat Basin Commission leaders and City staff. It also was stimulated by the disappointing departure of the Coast Guard buoy team – which we want to have return to buttress our federal channel status. That will require more dredging. The Forest Avenue sidewalk project, which is the result of a renewed grant effort early in my administration, is moving slowly through New York State Department of Transportation planning. The repeatedly flood damaged Theodore Fremd-Blind Brook wall, much delayed, should soon be a-building. **Each of these projects needs staff energy and continuing Council interest to get over the finish line.**

We waited years and wait still for the estimates for Whitby Castle repair and the substantial Rye Golf Club swimming pool renewal. Both costs will fall on the Club membership, as the Club, like the Boat Basin is an enterprise fund. It seems likely that the Club will need City temporary assistance, possibly through a bond. **Again – staff and Council attention required.**

-Nursery Field – The 2023 Council decided to advance the prospects for receipt of this anticipated \$3 million gift of an artificial turf field to the bid stage. This was a good decision well-made on a record compiled in 2019 and 2020 and renewed and elaborated over six months of 2023. The 2024 Council spent four months on a redo that seemed intended to torpedo the project. No

new points were raised. Fortunately, recognition of Rye residents' best interest prevailed. Although there was a staged show of unanimity, the project survived only narrowly. **We expect the field to open in the spring – yes, our City can bring major projects to completion!**

Road Maintenance -In 2018, we learned that the City's road renewal process was not adequately funded. A consultant now guides us on the annual funding needed to outpace deterioration and on how to assign the funding without politics to where it is most needed. Our well-funded roads, barring the depredations of Con Ed and sewer repairs, now are better than most towns. **I ask this Council and those in the future to keep this going.**

City Finances/Sustainable Funding – We appear to be in good fiscal shape. We have had to go to the bond market to support our necessary projects, but our rate timing was good. Our outgoing City Manager is a career municipal finance guy and that shows to our benefit. In 2018 we asked staff to set aside prior Councils' fear of grant "strings" and look judiciously for grant opportunities. We have done well in obtaining grants and governmental aid *but know that the future may be leaner.* **Let's review our current financial position against current costs of all we must do (not just infrastructure). If we are at risk of falling short, let's figure that out early and figure out how to get what we need.** I, like most of us on the Council, am loath to tax. Even though the City receives the smallest share of our property taxes, I hate to increase the burden. On the other hand, we estimate that Rye taxes less than peer towns. **Question: Do we want quality services and a city with the resources to assure their delivery? If the answer is yes, let's figure out very realistically what stable funding resources we need and what stable funding sources we have, including taxes, to avoid slipping into fund-starved municipal inertia.**

City Manager Search – This search will be an important piece of City business, but one that we should not rush. We have previously pledged to look with care at both external and internal candidates. We will fulfill that

pledge. **We are aware of the strength and long experience of our senior staff and their ability to keep the wheels turning well, especially in the company of a capable interim manager.** We should be confident in this resource and be patient and deliberate in this process.

Staffing – For an ambitious Council, City Hall has been a bottleneck. The same few people (primarily the City Planner and City Engineer) are responsible for dealing with new projects, responding to emergencies within their purview and handling routine business. This is a difficult personal challenge for these very strong employees and a challenge for the City. Frankly, when resident concern over 95-97 Oakland Beach hit in 2021, I was amazed that residents did not understand just how busy City Hall had been with COVID, police review and Ida, and what effect that had had on our ability to do other things. [Read email] **IF, and I underscore the “if,” this is a Council , like those in recent years, that wants Rye to be a municipality that meets residents’ needs and wants, then we must work with the City Manager to obtain the capacity, either in-house or through consultants, to get things done. We must also continue prior Council requests for succession planning, so that each department can credibly survive employee transitions. Finally, this Council must learn to use subcommittees of its members, operating in sub-quorum numbers in accordance with the Open Meetings Law, to advance projects and inquiries on its own or with staff.** Some on this Council refused to do so in the past. That seemed to have been in part politics and in part a view that the Council is a board that sits on high, dropping asks on the burdened manager. That practice is a recipe for low productivity. Last year I took a stab at organizing s subcommittee, with the City Planner as our guide, to formulate a start on a comprehensive plan. Our proposal was rejected by the majority, in favor of throwing the matter on the City Manager’s to-do list, his very long to-do list. Six months later, at the last Council meeting, absence of progress was noted and the matter was tossed back to our busy City Planner. Deer population control, an example of an easy matter to research, similarly was tossed to the City Manager’s large to-do list. Prior Councils in my tenure

produced flag lot and steep slope restrictions, rock chipping and blasting limits, a new leaf blower law and a revised tree law with Council sub-committee shaping and moving those efforts with City staff. Come on colleagues, roll up sleeves, pitch in, let's get things done.

Zoning and Land Use – I came into office eager to take on the issues of Rye's evolving character, housing needs, commercial needs, parking, tree preservation and a new master plan. Master plans now are called "comprehensive," plans, so let's use that. In 2018, we delayed a restart of the comprehensive planning process initiated by the prior administration so that we could learn from the inside. My 2020 annual message announcement of a comprehensive plan start was derailed by COVID and everything that followed. Several important, site-specific land use decision makings have been met with objections that these decisions can't be made without a new comprehensive plan. Underlying these objections is the unwarranted belief that the new comprehensive plan would achieve one particular result or another. It is important to make clear as we now take the process forward that comprehensive plans are broad and for the most part general and aspirational. Not every thought in a comprehensive plan will be implemented, as reference to our most recent plan (1985's) will reveal. Implementation will come (or not) in the form of later, discrete decisions by a variety of City bodies – a prominent example being zoning changes subject to the City Council. **Yes, we should take this plan forward with due speed and we must make sure that every willing voice in our population is heard in the process. But no, we cannot freeze development activity in Rye during this lengthy project.**

Housing – Along with all of Westchester, we are under pressure to increase housing, especially transit-oriented and affordable housing. Rye more particularly needs housing appropriate for down-sizers who wish to stay in town and for young people. Governor Hochul was defeated in her first effort to impose transit-oriented development despite municipal zoning (that was her proposal), but she has returned to the issue with incentives, carrots rather than a stick. The MTA is interested in working with municipalities to achieve

such development. I am sure Rye doesn't want Harrison's Avalon, but can we find a path to what works for us? I am not influenced by any anonymous, self-credentialed planners, but I was affected by needing to scramble to get our housing information pretty damn quick to our Albany delegation as they fought Hochul's first try. **Let's focus before something happens to us that we don't like.** Let's think of public/private partnerships and even partnering with MTA in a Rye-friendly manner. Let's consider our parking lots, our police department/courthouse and wherever else. Here's a whadda-ya-think: figure out how best to use the land occupied by the little parking lot below CVS and that occupied by the police station/courthouse and the adjacent police parking lot and build a new PD courthouse and just a bit of transit-oriented housing – and goodness knows, let's find a way to wedge in some parking.

Central Business District Study/Parking Study – I am for convening a task group (and it is on our agenda) to propose protective measures for the central business district in advance of comprehensive plan treatment. Rye is blessed with a small commercial center with a uniquely attractive charm. It is important that we try to understand that charm and what it will take to make sure it survives the change that will and should come. An important linked topic is the perennial parking issue that now threatens to drive new CBD buildings higher to accommodate ground floor parking. **We had started on a parking study pre-COVID. It needs to be revived, perhaps including consideration of a parking deck over the City's Highland lot.** That deck could be used to absorb some of the merchant employee parking occupying many spaces in our existing lots.

Cell Antennas – In 2016 and 2017, many residents and I pushed back against the risk that Verizon, through a builder called Crown Castle, would install mini-cell towers on residents' lawns throughout the City. That pushback and City action resulted in Crown Castle's withdrawal of its application. Underlying circumstances have changed remarkably since 2017. **The Public Service Commission approved the withdrawal of the copper wire landline**

phone service that was able to work through power outages. Our replacement voice-over-internet phone service and the mini cell towers cannot do that. Rye Town Park, with City cooperation, has installed generator-supported transmitters in its tower building. In a recent settlement with Verizon, we agreed to installation of a generator-supported monopole at the railroad station. **Having cell service in power outages is an important safety issue. We have and should continue to reach out to providers to see if we can obtain infrastructure to promote better cell service where we desire it in a manner acceptable to residents.**

Garbage Trucks – Early in my first term, we appropriated funds for our current, gorgeous, yellow fleet, but not without a spirited discussion of our garbage collection and what this vital city environmental service should include -- and what kind of trucks were appropriate. We resolved to take up the question of services in advance of the next fleet purchase, to allow ourselves time to experiment if need be with different truck types and figure out potentially different staffing needs. Right now, our DPW offers two garbage pickups a week and an array of recycling and special pickups. We added two food scrap drop-off locations in recent years. We experimented over a couple of years with curbside pickup of food scraps for a relatively small group of residents. We discontinued the effort for several reasons, including erratic “customer” use and transportation aspects that challenged the desired environmental benefit. Although I believe nearly half the Westchester municipalities have food scrap drop-off programs, only one, Scarsdale, after many years now, has a municipality-wide pick-up program. This is not to say that we should not reconsider a pick-up program. But the County has told me that there is no prospect of doing what successful, large-scale western US municipal operations do -- they efficiently combine food scrap and yard waste into a single, mixed pickup transported to a single processor. I digress. **Instituting any service for all or pruning any of the current services is the kind of issue that requires City deliberation with broad public participation. Then, as our present fleet of trucks ages, staff can establish well in advance personnel requirements and the kind of trucks we should**

order next; be they the traditional trucks like those we now use, split-packers, one-armed bandits or whatever.

-Playland Taxes – Years ago, our City Manager and City attorney proposed that the independent City Assessor consider imposing property taxation on Playland, given that the County had awarded a so-called management agreement to a for-profit entity (and for-profit entities typically pay for their services through taxes). That for -profit entity was Standard Amusements. The contract gave Standard substantial discretion over Playland’s operation. It provided no compensation to the City for the emergency services we provide to Playland.

The City Manager and attorney stated that the Assessor would be correct on the tax law if the Assessor decided to tax Playland. I and others on Council agreed that taxation seemed fair, but having seen the City lose in prior litigation against the County, we sought further assurance from our attorney. We repeatedly received the view that our tax position was very strong. Why do I tell you this? Rye residents should understand that their mayor and council do not want to see the City go litigation punting (and I have heard otherwise), especially against the County, but that we do want the City to protect its justified interests.

Unfortunately, the City was challenged and so far the court has rejected the City’s view. We have entered into a partial settlement that allows our appeal to continue without additional adverse knock-on effects

Now though, Standard and the County are tearing up the deal between them. The County had promised us \$250,000 in compensation for one year’s services, but that check has not arrived. And there is a substantial obligation floating around between the Rye City Schools and the City, as a result of a tax shortfall in the first year of the effort. Yes, fairness seemed with us, and still does, but so far this looks like it may have been a wrong turn for the City,

Given time and cost, I am for playing this hand through our pending appeal.

United Hospital Site – Port Chester Form-Based Zoning - We are in litigation with Port Chester on these topics – primarily the traffic aspects. The hospital site now is undergoing brownfield cleanup, and we have engaged an expert to look at that as well. **The Council will need to be alert to progress on the ground and in court, and will need to make sure that it deals protectively on behalf of our involved neighborhoods.** This may mean the City acting proactively, on its own, to institute traffic control measures within our own borders.

Solar Energy - As we consider renewal of the MTA lot lease and use of our other parking lots, maybe we can consider installing solar panel canopies. We may be able to save the City some energy costs and do the planet a solid.

Hybrid Meetings – Our City Hall is equipped with new technology for hybrid meetings in which participants far from City Hall can participate virtually. The NYS Committee on Open Government has submitted a favorable report on hybrid meetings and the state legislature has extended permission for such meetings. **Let’s put in place the necessary local law to make this a reality and give all Rye residents, even Councilmembers who travel for work, a fair shot at participating in the Council.** This even if from time to time they need to be on the road, as Councilwoman Souza is tonight. And let’s think of Councilmembers with parenting responsibilities and all of us who from time to time fall ill, but don’t want to miss a meeting.

This Council – Last year, 2024 was my first year without majority backing. I have many differences with how the new majority behaved last year. I am hopeful that we can be more productive this year. For the moment, just two short messages for my majority colleagues: First: We need to drive progress. There is always too much to do and time is short. Second: Mayor and Council

lead. City Manager and the City's attorneys are our respected reports. If progress were to falter or things were not well between manager and staff, we need to be on it. Similarly, we must view the work of our lawyers critically and obtain the best sources of advice we can. To do otherwise is to abdicate and fail the residents we serve.

I hope we can collectively do better this year.

Priorities and Pivots – Priority lists seem tidy and comforting. To some extent they are inevitable. But the City's to-do list (and I have only touched on a small piece of it) may be a yard long and what should be done first versus what can be done first may be vexingly contradictory. Throw on top of that the unforeseen or once-seen as low priority item that bursts into public consciousness as an instant need – to which a Council must respond...as some of us did in years past with respect to flag lots and rock chipping. I had the bewildering experience last year of finding that the City of Rye froze at the mere possibility that a neighboring municipality might propose (I emphasize might – there never was a proposal) a new joint flood project. Our priorities can't be wooden. **Some pivots will be necessary to provide responsive municipal activity, even if they frustrate Council progress on prior priorities.**

This has been enough of an adventure in underscoring items for residents, Council and staff to consider as we go forward merrily, I hope, in 2025. There is so much more that could be covered, from working on Con Ed rates with Shelley Mayer to seeking further First Amendment guidance on displays on City property. But let's save that for next time and go to work.

Thanks for your attention and patience.

Cohn, Josh

To: Usry, Greg G

Tuesday, February 16, 2021 5:50 PM

When we went over your to-do list, we ended hurriedly and didn't get to a few items of mine. They are:

-limited zoning changes - I established a Council working group in September, but you asked that we not pull Christian in until after budget season. We need to get some of his time now.

-tree law - again, there is a working group, need to get some of Christian's time.

-leaf blowers - we were going to look into ways to attack the problem -- including bans on gasoline powered blowers and landscaper permit issuance. I see this as something I should take up with Kristen, though we might need some of Ryan's input.

-blasting/rock chipping - eager to learn what we find out about the Oakland Beach blasting situation. I witnessed a .5 blast, but was told our rules permit up to 1.5. That seems unimaginable, but maybe there are prescribed standards and mitigants that make it rational. I would ask to start here with a briefing of me and may be one or two other Council members by Christian.

-snow ordinance - are we asking too much of our residents?

I also need some of Christian's time on master plan information.

Thanks,

Josh