



WEST WINDSOR TOWNSHIP

HEMANT MARATHE, Ph.D.
MAYOR

State of Township Address 2024

13 May, 2024

Thank you, Council President Geever and Council Members, for your kind invitation to give my state of the Township address.

Every year I wonder what am I going to say in this address that people don't know already. We are fortunate to live in a great community and our Township is in great shape. Like my family, many of you chose to move here. Like me you don't regret your decision. Thankfully many families choose to stay in West Windsor long after their kids graduate from college. I know friends who have paid taxes long after their kids have left, maybe grudgingly, but they love all West Windsor has to offer and appreciate what this community has given their family. I want to thank every resident for making West Windsor a great community.

While talking to people throughout the year I realize that sometimes people don't appreciate the complexity and limitations of the Mayor and Township government. I will answer some of the common questions I have received over the years.

Let me start with the budget - Our Chief Financial Officer John Mauder will make a budget presentation during the meeting tonight. I am sorry to steal some of his thunder.

Tonight, the Council will vote on the 2024 Township budget. I am proud of the transparent and open process the Mayor and Council uses to review the budget, which is how we strive to do everything every day. The Council held open budget hearings for over 9 hours over three days to go over the budget before it was even introduced. Every citizen had an opportunity to comment and give suggestions. Both Mayor and Council heard the public's desire for more lighting and pedestrian safety. As a result, the Council increased the budget in those areas even above and beyond the increases proposed by the Administration.

The Township has two caps on the budget. Most people are aware of the 2% cap on tax increases which means that the total taxes raised by the Township can't increase more than 2% compared to last year. This year our tax levy is increasing by 1.44% well under the cap. The less understood cap is the cap on total operational expenditures which is a total of 3.5% which includes an additional 1% that the Council will vote on tonight. That means the Township can't spend more than 3.5% than what we spent last year. We are

making full use of this 3.5% cap. This increase has to take care of the high inflationary price increases we have seen across the board as well as new state mandates and maintenance of infrastructure. A number of people say that they are willing to pay higher taxes for a particular service. Some examples are increased maintenance and amenities for roads and public spaces as well as brand new items such as additional street lights or flashing beacons at pedestrian crossings. Since we have maxed out the expenditure cap any increase in one area has to match dollar for dollar a decrease in another area.

I often hear about high taxes paid by the residents and the implication being we should be able to provide more services. I want to point out that although municipal government does collect your property taxes about 85% are passed through to the County and School District. An average household in West Windsor pays only \$2,246 in annual municipal taxes or about \$187 per month. That is all the Township gets to keep. In return you get all services provided by the municipal government – Police, fire, garbage and recycle pickup, snow removal, brush & leaf pickup, Health Department and Senior Center services, roads, street lights, sidewalks, street trees and parks. I am sure I missed a few things in the list. Just to reiterate all that for \$187/month. By every measure the taxpayers are getting full bang for their tax dollars from the municipal government.

John will cover the budget in detail in his presentation. I would like to highlight some of the increases in the budget based on community requests.

We are hiring two new Police officers this year. Residents repeatedly point out issues such as cars not stopping at cross walks, blowing past stopped school buses or in general speeding. Our Police do daily enforcement and write their share of tickets. Hiring of two new officers will help us increase enforcement. However, Police can't be there at all places all the time.

At my request, for one week, the Police kept track of sources of tickets written. On internal roads, between 60-70% tickets were issued to West Windsor residents. It's our friends, neighbors and in some case ourselves who are responsible for traffic issues. The Police will continue to do their job. A permanent and long-term solution is for each of us to be cognizant of our driving.

In light of the traffic accident last year on Rabbit Hill Road residents have asked for more street lighting, cross walks with flashing beacons and new sidewalks at various locations.

As I have pointed out in the past street lighting is an expensive item. Last year the Township paid about \$415,000 to JCP&L and PSE&G for street lighting. This is an annual expense out of operating budget. This year after Council requested an increase above what the administration had already proposed we have budgeted \$450,000. We have not finalized all locations but can confirm the following

- Rabbit Hill Road, including intersections with Cranbury Road, Route 571 and all side streets; replace 6 existing light fixtures and install 8 new lights;
- Bennington Drive; upgrade 4 existing street lights;
- Cranbury Road in the area of the new sidewalk and crosswalks; 5 new street lights and 1 street light upgrade
- North Post Road existing curve; 2 new street lights
- Conover Road existing s-curve; 4 new street lights.

In addition, we are in discussions with PSE&G for

- Installing 10 new lights on Bear Brook Road from Windsor Haven to Meadow Road, at intersections and the curve in the road.

We continue to evaluate locations in town where upgrading or installing new street lights is appropriate.

Please be mindful it takes PSE&G approximately 4 to 6 months to install or upgrade lights after we give approval. So, it may be early fall before these projects are completed.

Regarding flashing beacons at crosswalks – these are far more expensive to install than street lights and the cost varies depending on the location and available infrastructure. Every time a road is redone, we look for opportunities to make it more pedestrian and bicycle friendly including whether a flashing beacon will be appropriate.

This year we are evaluating crossing beacons at a number of locations:

- We have already installed two on Bear Brook Road and one on Rabbit Hill Road.
- One is designed for Alexander Road at crosswalk to Nash Park and will be out to bid this summer.
- One on Penn Lyle Road at the Trolley Line crossing we are working with the contractor on pricing.
- We are actively looking at three school crosswalks on New Village Road at Village School and Grover Middle school. Also, at Penn Lyle and Canoe Brook near High School South.

The location of these improvements is based on input from the Police and engineering. Thank you to the Bicycle & Pedestrian Alliance, the Rabbit Hill residents and other residents who have given input on crossing areas around town.

Lastly there is always requests for sidewalks. It's a complicated issue because sometimes the residents who are responsible for maintaining the sidewalk after it's constructed are not enthusiastic about the project. As evidenced by the two phases of

Cranbury Road sidewalks these projects take a long time. We are committed to extending the Cranbury Road sidewalk to connect it to the Trolley line Trail near Rabbit Hill Road. The budget allocates \$50,000 to design the extension. We hope to fund the construction cost of over \$400,000 over the next two budgets.

There is no argument that traffic has increased in town over the past 30 years since my family moved here. Residential developments both in West Windsor and surrounding towns contributed to this increase. The state requires us to build new housing under the affordable housing legislation. As Mayor I am committed to doing whatever I can on both fronts to reduce development resulting in increased traffic and find solutions to the existing traffic problems. The fact is the traffic in West Windsor will continue to increase due to developments approved by us and neighboring towns.

In order to reduce the burden, I am committed to reviving two bypasses projects that have only been talked about for a number of years – the Vaughn Drive Bypass and Penns Neck Bypass through SRI property.

I am happy to report that first part of the Vaughn Drive Bypass, connecting the new road “A” from Avalon development to the New Jersey Transit Train Station is planned to be completed before this Fall. It will provide an alternate path to residents of Avalon Development to get to Route 1 via Alexander Road. We are in active discussions with the County to complete the remaining portion of the bypass to provide a proper connection to Alexander Road. I can’t commit to a timeframe, but it has been my priority every year since I got elected Mayor.

Any development application for SRI property will require construction of the Penns Neck Bypass connecting Washington Road through SRI property to Route 1 near Harrison Street. Since the road will be entirely through West Windsor we will not have to worry about objection from other Townships.

The good news is that once again there is no tax increase in this budget - the municipal taxes are flat at 0.428 cents. Since I became Mayor in 2017 January the total tax rate has increased from 0.418 in 2018 to 0.428 in 2024 for an increase of 2.4% over a period of 7 years or approximately 1/3rd percent (0.34%) annual increase in taxes. This while increasing our surplus from \$1.5 million dollars when I got elected Mayor to \$7.8 million dollars in the proposed budget an increase of over 420%.

No wonder we continue to maintain our AAA rating making it less expensive to borrow for capital projects.

The Township's excellent financial performance is a direct result of welcoming businesses to Town. When I became Mayor, I started TRC (Technical Review committee) to review applications before they came to the Planning Board. We have attracted more businesses to Town. As a result, our total assessments increased by over \$225 million over 7 years in spite of a temporary drop during Covid.

From naysayers you constantly hear about warehouses, but the fact is although all our neighboring towns have built many warehouses, we don't have a single one in town. Instead, we have attracted many small businesses, just to name a few as examples:

- Kid Strong in Southfield Commons Shopping Center
- Tous Les Jours, Mango Mango in Windsor Plaza
- Liberty Martial Art, Hutchinson Homes in Ellsworth Plaza
- Jersey Mike's Sub, Smile Flossophy, along 571
- Rumble Boxing in Windsor Green
- More Than Q, The Container Store, Starbucks in the Square at West Windsor.
- Oceans Job Lot, Floor & decor, Bluestone Lane Cafe, just salad, Goldfish Swim School, Burn Boot Camp, Planet Fitness, Pasar Malam, Playa bowls, in Nassau Park Pavilion

Many new small businesses will be part of what will be the bustling, walkable downtown area on Princeton Hightstown Road that many have asked for over the years. We have been working closely with Mercer County on redoing that section of Route 571 to improve bicycle, pedestrian and road safety with sidewalks and safer crossings. I am optimistic that with the new county executive the project will move quicker.

I am happy to report that the retail environment in West Windsor is healthy. I encourage all residents to support these great businesses and all others in town.

This brings me to unfortunate wasteful spending that we must include in the budget. Last year we spent \$125,000 out of budgeted \$275,000 defending a baseless lawsuit against approval of the Bridgepoint 8 warehouse complex on Quakerbridge Road at the edge of town. The courts ruled in our favor on every count of the lawsuit in an unambiguous fashion. Sadly, the plaintiffs who are West Windsor residents and taxpayers chose to appeal which has forced us to budget another \$254,000 this year to defend the lawsuit.

With the approval of new affordable housing legislation and potential of the site to house over 3000 apartments I had hoped the plaintiffs would see the light but sadly we are forced to spend taxpayers' money in an unproductive fashion.

This brings me to the topic of affordable housing, a state mandate I have spent considerable time making sure does not adversely affect West Windsor. The legislature came up with a new law and process for each Township to fulfill their affordable housing obligation. The new process has never been used so it's anyone's guess how well it will work. However, West Windsor always has the bull's eye on our back because every builder wants to build in town. I want to make sure we do everything possible to prepare ourselves for the next round.

The Township is required to file various reports with the Department of Community Affairs between June and September. By October 20th of this year the Department of Community Affairs will publish their non-binding obligation of each town. By January 31st of next year West Windsor Council is either required to adopt a binding resolution either accepting the number assigned by the Department of Community Affairs or a number based on its own determination of our fourth-round obligation. A lengthy process will follow that resolution and the potential of landing in court is significant. During the last round West Windsor spent about \$500,000 coming up with a settlement with Fair Share Housing center. I hope given how proactive West Windsor is, we will not have to spend unproductive money on lawsuits to come up with our fourth-round obligation.

I want to assure residents that we have already started work to protect our interests. When Department of Community Affairs determines our obligation by October 20th, 2024 we will be prepared with the homework. I will keep residents updated as the process moves along.

Since I was elected Mayor, every year a group of volunteers have hosted the Mayor's Ball. It's not an official Township function but run by a group of volunteers. They raise funds for a non-profit organization and so far, have raised funds for both Volunteer Fire Departments, Police Department, the Historical Society and the Arts Council. This year's recipient is Attitude in Reverse "AIR". AIR is a great organization that does work in breaking down stigma associated with mental illness. The founders Trish and Kurt Baker, local residents channeled their personal pain into helping others. The Mayor's ball committee will hold various events around town throughout the year. The first event of the year is Dive into Summer at West Windsor Waterworks, on June 21st. Please support this worthy cause in whatever form you can.

As the Mayor I may be the face of the Township, but the Town is run by various Township boards and committees appointed by the Mayor and Township Council. Many volunteers continue to serve for a number of years on our Agricultural Advisory & Affordable Housing Committee, Human Relations Council, Environmental Commission, Board of Recreation and Shade Tree Commission, Planning and Zoning Boards.

We are also blessed with other volunteer organizations not related to Township government such as two Volunteer Fire Departments, FOWWOS, WWBPA, Farmers' Market and the Parking Authority. They all make West Windsor a great place to live.

Please thank these volunteers for their selfless service to the Township.

Before I close, I would like to acknowledge one special individual for whom this is her last State of the Township Address as an employee. Gay Huber our Township Clerk is going to retire in a few months after over 35 years of service to the Township in various capacities. She is a lifelong West Windsor resident having been born and brought up in West Windsor. If any of you want to complain about all the taxes you have paid over the years, she has you beat by a mile so don't complain. Apart from being a Township employee, she and her family volunteer for the Fire Department and Historical Society among other volunteer activities. Although technically the Township Clerk works for the Township Council and thus the opposition, I am thankful for the support she has given me since I got elected Mayor.

Gay thanks to you and your family for your service to West Windsor in every capacity. You will be missed.

As I meet many people around town, I am honored and humbled by your kind words and support. Thanks for the opportunity you have given me since 2001 to serve in various capacities as School Board Member, President, Council Member and as your Mayor.

Given the craziness going on in partisan politics today, I am glad West Windsor has a non-partisan form of government. It's a privilege being the Mayor of one of the best towns in the country. God bless West Windsor; God bless the State of New Jersey and God bless America.

Hemant Marathe, Mayor