

State of the Town Address
Jayme Stevenson – First Selectman
12/12/11

Good Evening Madame Moderator, Fellow Elected Officials, RTM Members and everyone watching from home on Channel 79.

Congratulations to all newly elected officials, RTM members and board and commission volunteers – you're the back bone of our representative government and we're truly grateful for your service to our town.

It's my honor and privilege to be here this evening speaking to you as Darien's 43rd First Selectman. Today we debate \$100 million dollar budgets, infrastructure improvements, transportation woes and quality of life issues – imagine John Bell's challenge in 1820 of managing Darien's newly granted independence from Stamford!

Thank you for granting me the opportunity to lead our town through an uncertain time. Perhaps it's the magic of the season, but I do have great hope that our country, our state and our community will begin to feel the signs of renewed optimism in our economy if we reduce wasteful spending and continue to support prudent investments in education and town services.

Government has expanded to respond to a wide diversity of concerns but our fundamental goals are to **protect our citizens and educate our children**. Our community demands high levels of service for our tax dollars and as a result, our children and our property values benefit from an outstanding public school system, first rate protective service from our police, 3 volunteer fire departments and Post 53 emergency medical service.

Our public works and parks and recreation departments do an outstanding job of keeping our roads, sidewalks, train platforms, beaches and parks safe and clean even through the challenges of more than our fair share of unprecedented storms.

The Board of Selectmen operate under 2 overriding principals – **support policies that limit tax burdens to only what is necessary to deliver the level of municipal service our tax payers desire** and, as Fred mentioned, **protect our property values**.

Highlights of our year have included keeping the Board of Selectmen's budget nearly flat from 2010, significant progress on the Weed Beach and Darien Police Department building projects, the return of community fireworks, natural gas lines installed to Town Hall, outstanding emergency service and public works response to historic storm events, town support of the redevelopment of Allen O'Neill, the addition of \$600,000 in savings to our reserves and moving the Mather Community and Senior Center plan **successfully** through all town boards.

The slide you see behind me is a visual representation of how your tax dollars are spent. Liz and Betsy have done a great job of detailing our financial and educational landscapes. I would like to make special note, however, how pleased we are that our Moody's Aaa rating was reaffirmed this week. A true testament to years of conservative budgeting, prudent cash management and sound investing on the part of our Board of Finance, Finance Department and town Treasurer.

We're on the eve of a new budget cycle so I thought it would be interesting for you to see all the services that are supported by the Selectmen's budget. For fiscal year 2011, the Board of Selectmen's operating budget is \$27.2 million or 24% of the overall \$115 million town budget. While the Selectmen's budget carries all town debt service, only \$176,000 of the \$10 million annual debt service is attributed to Selectmen capital projects. The balance is for school capital projects and sewer system improvements.

Less than one quarter of the town budget funds road and sidewalk maintenance, library services, fire and protective services, social service programs, snow removal, the town dump, recreation and youth services, public health initiatives, elections, record keeping, building and land use permits and inspections, disaster preparedness, town beautification, tax assessment and collection, information and personnel management and communication systems, to name just a few.

The Selectmen's budget supports the **non-educational needs of our 20,000 residents**. We maintain 81 miles of town roads, 27 miles of sidewalks, 2 public beaches, 12 public parks, 84 miles of sanitary sewers and 15 sewer pump stations. Some believe that our beaches are our Darien's greatest asset – my money is on a well maintained sewer system!

The wide variety of services you see here are provided to you by 71 town hall employees, 58 police personnel and library staff along with hundreds of volunteers on the RTM, boards, commissions, in our fire departments and at Post 53.

I thought I would share some high lights of town services tonight.

(Finance Department)

Our finance department and town treasurer continue to manage and invest our tax dollars to standards that have, for 20 years, enabled us to earn the Government Financial Officers Association Comprehensive Annual Financial Report Award of excellence as well as maintain the highest rating possible on our creditworthiness.

(Tax Assessor)

Darien maintains a Grand List valued in excess of \$8.8 billion dollars. Included on our grand list are 6,400 residential properties, 300 commercial properties and approximately 240 vacant land parcels. Our last 5-year grand list update was completed in 2008. The next revaluation is scheduled for October 1, 2013. Our tax assessor updates values of over 400 properties each year that have undergone permitted renovation. There are over 1,100 businesses that file with our assessor each year. Interesting to know, and somewhat gratifying after all the storms, is that CL&P is our largest personal property tax payer. The assessor's department has instituted a quality assurance program to improve customer service and quality of data.

Worthy of note are the 160 citizens who receive tax relief or qualify for tax deferral as a senior or disabled citizen. I would like to strongly encourage anyone over the age of 65 who is suffering financial hardship and who are income eligible, to contact the tax assessor's office to apply for state and local tax relief programs. Information on these programs can also be found on the **town web site**.

(Parks and Recreation)

Our Parks and Recreation Department continues to provide a very high level of service to our community. Along with their work on the Weed Beach building project, they issued 7000 beach permits, supported the significant growth of our Senior Program, maintained our 209 acres of parks, beaches and playing fields and continued to respond to increasing demand for recreational services and amenities.

(Health)

Our health department continues their diligence with food establishment inspections. Inspection ratings are now available to the public online. With the support of the Darien Police department and the DEA, the health department sponsored 2 very successful prescription drug collections. Several flu clinics were offered both at Town Hall and the Senior Center and a mobile cancer screening is planned for March. We've maintained our designation as a Heart Safe community. Water quality monitoring at our beaches is an ongoing effort of the department and this year we enjoyed consistently good water quality.

(Public Works)

Our department of public works did an outstanding job of clearing roads of storm debris after the big storms. They provided support to the State's now-complete Noroton Heights rail station improvements and completed repairs to the Darien Station floor and restrooms. 2 drainage improvement projects recommended by the Noroton River Watershed Study are currently in design and an engineering survey of Rt. 106 from Leeds Lane to Barringer Road, that will be used to inform future discussions about a new sidewalk in that area, has been completed. 2.8 miles of roadways have been resurfaced and new sidewalks have been

installed on Noroton Avenue, Leroy Avenue, Christie Hill Road and the Post Road. Work has been completed on the Goodwives River Road Sewer Project. The Swap Shop continues to be a mecca for reusable items saving the town nearly \$20,000 in refuse removal. Leaves have been picked up and preparations for the winter season are underway.

(Social Services)

The Department of Social Services continues their important mission of providing information and services to meet the needs of all Darien residents. This year, 62 Darien children received backpacks, school supplies and sneakers to help them start the school year in the best possible way. Last year our social services department partnered with The Community Fund, the youth commission, The Depot, The Darien High School, the Darien Dog Group and many others to provide holiday meals and gifts to nearly 100 needy families. It's anticipated that the number of holiday meals provided this year will double.

120 households applied for energy assistance last year. The need for assistance increased this year yet federal funding has been cut in half. Increased requests for food assistance prompted our social services department to open the Household Goods Closet to provide expensive household necessities like laundry soap and personal care products so that our residents can have more of their income available to buy food. I want to thank the Depot's Cops and Kids program for filling the closet through their recent home goods drive.

As you leave tonight's gathering, please consider taking a Gingerbread Man from the Social Services "Giving Tree" in the Town Hall lobby. Your gifts of socks, gloves, hats, toys, gift cards, books and money can make a meaningful difference in the lives of many of our neighbors this holiday season. There is only one week of "giving" left before the holiday – we need your help.

As we look to the new year, I'll be asking town employees and the Board of Selectmen to identify efficiencies of service delivery, opportunities to improve infrastructure and support ideas that may result in long term cost savings. We will continue to offer our support for downtown business development and efforts to boost our commercial tax base.

Our 4-year moratorium from CT Statute 8-30g affords us the opportunity to develop a prudent plan to build affordable housing that suits the needs of our residents while preserving the small, New England-style character of our town. I pledge to continue Dave Campbell's efforts in Hartford to modify 8-30g so that it becomes a more useful housing development tool for communities like ours.

The outcome of tomorrow's referendum vote on the proposed Mather Community and Senior Center will determine the need for further capital investment in the current Senior Center and the use of the vacant building at 35 Leroy Ave. I'm hopeful that 12 years of study have finally resulted in a plan that supports our Seniors, creates efficiencies, engages the Community and preserves valuable town assets.

I want to thank everyone who has contributed time and energy to this project and who has participated in the public debate. No matter what the outcome, we can all feel confident that the project has been fully vetted and the community's voice will be heard.

I wish you all a peaceful holiday season and a happy, healthy New Year. My door is always open and I hope you'll share your ideas and concerns with me. Together, we can make Darien the best it can be.

Thank you.

First Selectman

Jayme Stevenson, First Selectman

Town Operations and Services

