

State of the Town  
December 10, 2012  
Jayme Stevenson – First Selectman

Good evening friends – Madam Moderator. Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you this evening and share the many accomplishments of my board and staff in 2012.

Truth be told, with the culmination of a more-than-spirited election cycle, Hurricane Sandy and the follow up snow storm, I was very tempted to stand here tonight and just sing you a Christmas Carol. Don't worry, I'll save that for another time.

First, I'd like to thank Liz, Betsy, Fred, Sarah and Karen Armour for your leadership and to your boards and RTM members for your thoughtful work on behalf of our nearly 20,000 residents. Much of what you hear from me tonight wouldn't have been possible without your collective support and that of our very talented and hard-working town staff. I'd like to also offer special thanks to Town Administrator Karl Kilduff and attorney Wayne Fox and his staff. Their knowledge and guidance are critical to all of our municipal operations and invaluable to me personally.

This year, to set the stage to respond to new challenges that affect our quality of life, encourage more efficient delivery of town services and to create a platform for improved accountability, the Board of Selectmen instituted a new goal setting protocol. Our goals will now be incorporated into department performance measures and budget requests and will allow us to better evaluate ideas and proposals for their consistency with our mission. Our new mission statement, goals and objectives are on the town web site for your reading pleasure.

Since January 2012, the Board of Selectmen has appointed or re-appointed 4 advisory committees and 28 individuals to boards and commissions. Volunteers are the life blood of our town government so I've made it an important part of our process to interview each and every volunteer and to thank them for their service.

We successfully negotiated new agreements with the Police, Public Works and Town Hall unions. Each of the contracts included cost saving provisions for healthcare and workers compensation. We considered and approved a number of tax appeal settlements resulting from the 2008 revaluation. 4 of the appeals were from the 3 country clubs and the hunt club. Negotiations with the clubs resulted in the town receiving deed restrictions and rights of first refusal on club property - a significant and valuable tool for the town to help preserve open space should the opportunity arise in the future. The Tax Assessor's office is organized and ready to begin the work on the mandated 2013 revaluation.

Capital projects, transfer station operations, drainage, parking and pedestrian safety and, of course, Hurricane Sandy have been the focus topics for my board.

The Darien Police Department building and Weed Beach renovation projects were completed this year on time and under budget. Decisions by prior administrations to hold on these projects ultimately provided a tremendous opportunity to realize significant cost savings for construction and project financing. We continue to enjoy favorable pricing for the Board of Education Office/Mather Community Center project. The timing of these projects couldn't have been better for our taxpayers. I also want to thank the Board of Finance and Finance Department for seizing the opportunity to take advantage of historic low rates to refinance our eligible outstanding debt and for supporting the installation of natural

gas to town hall, the police department and 35 Leroy which will allow us to reap cost savings for years to come. The Public Works department and I have initiated dialogue with Yankee Gas to encourage expanded gas infrastructure town wide allowing more homes to reap similar cost savings. Their current business model doesn't support or incent timely or cost efficient expansion but we will continue to advocate for this important service in the coming year.

The lengthy and passionate debate regarding an ordinance to ban single use plastic checkout bags had the very positive outcome of raising awareness about recycling. This year, we put into practice Single Stream Recycling and convened the Transfer Station Advisory Committee to develop educational awareness about single streaming and to make other operational efficiency suggestions regarding the transfer station. This committee is energized and hard at work. And, yes, you can single stream recycle plastic bags.

The ongoing discussion about new sidewalks required the development of a new sidewalk installation policy to help guide future funding decisions. Several outstanding new sidewalk requests, including the proposed sidewalk on Route 106 will be evaluated against our new policy criteria during the upcoming budget cycle.

Flooding and drainage continue to be a focus and concern for the Board of Selectmen and the Department of Public Works. Please indulge me in a bit of history. The unprecedented storms of 2007 set in motion a series of actions and reactions to not only respond to public concern but to better understand what can and cannot be done to mitigate future flooding in Darien. In May of 2010, the Flood Mitigation Strategy Committee made formal recommendations to the Board of Selectmen based on their review of studies prepared by hydraulic engineers for the Stony Brook, Noroton River and Goodwives River watersheds. The engineers were tasked with evaluating existing conditions, modeling different flood levels and making recommendations for mitigation projects and protocols. Many of the 12 recommendations by the FMSC have been implemented or are in process and 2 large drainage improvement projects - one on Intervale Road and one on Kelsey Street - are currently being engineered and will be presented for consideration in the upcoming budget cycle.

I have met on several occasions this year with members of the EPC, FMSC and town attorneys to continue the dialogue regarding the creation of a separate FECB. Although EPC favors this separation of duties, the concept was rejected by the RTM and given back to the Board of Selectmen for further discussion. Until any formal decisions are agreed upon, the Public Works department continues to be well suited to respond to the recommendations set forth in the FMSC report and to research and implement new drainage projects as they arise. Director of Public Works, Bob Steeger, can attest that I am focused on the issue.

Hurricane Sandy, thankfully, did not bring the flooding as initially forecast. However, this enormous Category 1 Hurricane/Noreaster combination storm will go on record as the most costly storm for the Town of Darien in our reported history. We're still gathering figures but information to date suggests it will cost the Town nearly \$1 million dollars before insurance and any FEMA reimbursements - 4 times that of any storm on record. While we did have ample notice and time to prepare, the storm and its aftermath necessitated our Emergency Operations Center to be open for 9 days. 90% of our town was without power by the time the storm ended. We opened an emergency shelter for 4 nights sheltering 75 residents and 9 pets. 19 dedicated volunteers and Post 53 and school personnel staffed the shelter 24/7.

Damage to the town was significant. We had 146 downed trees, 71 downed trees with utility wires in them, 72 blocked roads with 12 of those inaccessible to emergency vehicles. Clearing these inaccessible areas and removing the trees with wires is the most critical “make safe” phase of storm recovery and was our primary focus as soon as the winds stopped.

17 homes have been rendered uninhabitable, 21 additional homes, 2 commercial buildings and 3 town facilities suffered varying degrees of damage by coastal flood waters or by fallen trees. An oil spill in the Jr. Sailing area of Weed Beach will require extensive and costly remediation. The town is working closely with residents in Noroton Bay to facilitate the process for home repairs and rebuilding. A reminder to those needing FEMA assistance or low-interest SBA loans - all applications must be submitted by the end of this month.

Activating the EOC in the new police building was critical to our storm response and I commend the dedication of our town employees who worked tirelessly to support our response and recovery efforts. This unprecedented storm required the focused and prolonged attention from not only Public Works and the Police, but also our Fire Marshall, Health, Social Services, Parks and Recreation and Buildings Departments, school administration and staff, Post 53 and our 3 volunteer fire departments. The Darien Public Library and The YMCA were also critical partners in providing much needed community support and we’re very grateful for their efforts. Marc McEwan deserves special mention for helping me quarterback our response. The CodeRed reverse 911 system continues to be an invaluable communication tool. Please register your home and cell phones if you haven’t already. I promise I won’t CodeRed my Christmas Carol!

We always learn a great deal from each emergency event and have already met and detailed our after action recommendations, some of which will need funding in the upcoming budget. A few of the most notable recommendations are for improved generator capacity in our critical town buildings, satellite communication capabilities for the EOC, better information from private associations and the creation of an Emergency Shelter Task Force.

Downed utility wires and loss of power is not just inconvenient, it can be life threatening and therefore feedback to the utilities regarding their storm response is critical. My fellow chief elected officials from the 8 SWRPA member towns have aggregated and presented our utility response critique to both CL&P and their regulatory agency, PURA. It’s imperative that the utilities significantly improve their response – 4 storms in 5 years *should* have provided enough experience to make meaningful improvements. My colleagues and I will do all we can to demand improved service for our towns. Additionally, I’ve recommended to our public works director that we consider adding a tree trimming protocol to our annual road repaving program so we can be more proactive rather than reactive regarding vegetation management.

I want to especially thank everyone who reached out to your friends and neighbors in need and also to the groups who gave support to other communities whose recovery needs are far greater than ours.

In spite of rather anemic and uncertain economic environments at the state and federal levels, Darien is healthy. You’ve already heard from Fred about new development, Liz on the state of our finances and Betsy regarding the success and desirability of our schools. I attribute our town’s sustained health to sound and conservative policies that balance service expectations with taxpayer burdens. As we move into a new budget cycle in the coming weeks, I pledge that my board will remain mindful of continuing

economic uncertainty, potential changes in state and federal tax policies and rising local unemployment rates.

As we begin our look at the new budget, it's important to know that we don't start at zero. If each town department held their funding requests to the same level as last year, we will need a budget increase of 2.9% based solely on contractual obligations and debt service payments for contracts and projects approved by all the town boards including this body.

I've recently met with members of the Board of Finance to discuss changes to the way the budget information is organized and to the process itself that we believe will make the process more efficient and transparent. We've also met with the chiefs of the 3 volunteer fire departments who've agreed to our request to hire a consultant to help in budget planning for the large capital investments in equipment planned for the next 10 years. I want to thank the departments for their cooperation. And I remain hopeful that the Board of Education and the town can find meaningful ways to share services and save costs. I'll be presenting suggestions as part of our budget request.

I'd like to briefly touch on several other great projects that my board has in progress that will continue through 2013:

We've approved new parking technology for commuter parking lots allowing for better permit management and enforcement and a more efficient daily parking process.

SWRPA's Route 1 Corridor Study has been completed and presented and there will be several traffic and pedestrian safety initiatives that may come forward in the budget.

The town is partnering with the Friends of Gorham's Pond and the State of Connecticut to bring a dam repair and dredging project in Upper Gorham's Pond to fruition. Private contributions and grant funding secured by the town will enable this long awaited and very worthwhile watershed improvement project to become a reality.

The new Board of Ed office and the Mather Community Center will open in 2013 finally giving our seniors the kind of facility they deserve. What to do with the Edgerton property remains in question as the Board of Ed evaluates their facility needs in response to increasing enrollment. Dr. Falcone and I have spoken and he understands that my job as First Selectman is to be mindful of the needs of ALL our residents and to honor the goals of our town plan of conservation and development. I appreciate his willingness to think creatively to find a solution that will satisfy the educational needs of our students but also provide flexibility as enrollments will surely change over time. I've often thought how interesting it might be to consider the benefits of a Charter School model for our highly successful ELP program.

Some of you may be anxious to hear about the status of affordable housing in Darien. Our efforts on this front continue. As you've heard, the redevelopment of Allen O'Neill, now known as The Heights is well underway and the first 10 buildings will be complete within 6 months. I have had numerous informal discussions on our next steps for additional affordable housing. The limited four-year moratorium granted to Darien in October of 2010, under CT statute 8-30g, is not nearly enough time to acquire, fund, develop and occupy the large amounts of housing needed for a second moratorium. However, we will continue to pursue a variety of affordable housing options in the coming year.

One of SWRPA's legislative initiatives for the next session is modification to 8-30g. My fellow CEO's have agreed that while we all desire to encourage the development of more affordable housing in our respective towns, we further agree that 8-30g is a one-size-fits-all mandate and does not appropriately incent development nor does it protect towns from costly litigation. I'm very pleased to be presenting our bi-partisan supported modifications tomorrow morning at the SWRPA Legislative Breakfast and want to thank Planning and Zoning Director Jeremy Ginsberg for his work on this. I've shared the proposal with our local legislators and have asked for their support.

There's no better representation of dedication and hard work than by Charlie Savarine as our building inspector and Chief Building Official for the past 30 years. Charlie retired in November and we wish him well in his retirement. We welcome Peter Solheim as our new acting building official. Pete has worked for the town for 20 years and provides a seamless transition for this very busy department. We also wish the best to our outgoing voter registrars Tom Dunn and Don Smith. Their terms end in early January at which time we welcome Kathy Hammell and John Visi. Tom and Don have done a great job for many years particularly this past year with redistricting and a presidential election cycle complicated by a hurricane. On behalf of the town, I thank you all for your service and wish you a happy and relaxing retirement.

Finally, I want to thank my board for their support and for working with me to foster an environment of transparency, inclusiveness and collaboration. Our government system is complex and at times inefficient but it's one in which the will of the taxpayers is carried out - not the desires of a few individuals or elected officials. The Boards of Selectmen, Education and Finance all play important and distinct roles in this unique process but you, the RTM, has the most important role of keeping us all accountable and balanced in our requests. Thank you for all you do.

I wish you *peace* this holiday season and *hope* for the coming year - don't forget to put that generator and land-line telephone on your holiday wish list!