

State of the Town Address 2013
Jayme Stevenson
First Selectman

Good evening everyone. Madam Moderator, thank you for the opportunity to join the RTM this evening to share our comments on the state of our wonderful town. Thank you to members of the public who are here tonight and to Channel 79 for keeping us connected to folks watching from home. I'm very encouraged by the interest our residents have in the workings and decisions of our local government.

I'd like to take a brief moment to say a warm welcome to my board and in particular, our newly elected members – Susan Marks, Reilly Tierney and Kip Hall. Jerry and I are looking forward to 2 very productive years guided by a spirit of collaboration and non-partisanship. We thank our "retiring" members Dave Campbell, John Lundeen and David Bayne for their years of service to the Board of Selectmen. Projects like the Affordable Housing Plan, the proposed Gorham's Pond project and the soon-to-open Mather Community Center all carry the vision and dedication of these outstanding volunteers.

And we couldn't do all that we do without the dedication and support of our outstanding staff, police department, our 3 volunteer fire departments, Post 53, the Darien Library and the host of other non-profit organizations who work together to provide services and amenities that enhance all our lives.

Madam Moderator, I'm very pleased that you've asked us for a forward look this year because last year at this time we were reeling from the aftermath of Super Storm Sandy and the horrific tragedy in Newtown. Many of us are still dealing in one way or another with both of these events and events in our own personal lives but I believe there's always a silver lining. We've come together as a community, as we always do, to rebuild our homes, improve our school and public facility security, enhance our emergency preparedness systems and refocus on the important little things that make us strong and resilient.

I believe there's a silver lining even in the challenges we currently face in our Special Education program. I'm confident that our board and staff will be relentless in their pursuit of excellence in serving all our students and make whatever changes are necessary to guarantee this for generations to come.

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Looking forward, we will continue to partner with the Board of Education to find long-term solutions to burgeoning enrollment. It's important to remember that our property values are directly related, in large part, to the quality of our school system – this is a good problem we face. However, the solutions need to be flexible, cost-effective and consider an education delivery system that will change over time given advances in technology and curriculum

delivery. I applaud the Board of Education for acknowledging that we need to step back from the proposed plans for Tokeneke and Royle Schools and rethink how we can achieve our facility expansion needs without overburdening our taxpayers.

We tend to look at certain metrics when comparing Darien to other towns state and nationwide. We have conservative and sound fiscal policies and a strong tax base that continues to earn us a AAA bond rating in spite of a weak state economy, we have the 5th lowest equalized mill rate in Connecticut, we enjoy high property values with the average home sales price in 2013 of \$1.6 million and our high school is ranked #1 in the state.

Our recent October 1, 2013 revaluation shows property values declining between 3 and 8%, yet we continue to be a highly desirable, vibrant and family-friendly community. An important note here is that many other communities that have undertaken revaluations in the past 3 years have seen double-digit reductions in value. There's no question that the economic downturn since 2008 has tested our community, but we've weathered the proverbial storm well – a credit to sound financial practices and a strong residential and commercial tax base.

As we consider future projects, I ask that we be cautious in our spending decisions but continue to invest in our infrastructure and projects that improve and enhance our natural resources and town assets.

My highest priorities for the coming year are to see the successful opening of the Mather Community Center, projected to open in February 2014, where our seniors and the entire community can come together.

I'm eager to implement improved parking management systems and to work closely with the Planning and Zoning Commission to plan for expanded parking for commuters, downtown customers and employees. It's time we begin to consider structured parking and how it can work successfully in our small town. We must provide for improved parking to support our downtown if we want the kind of positive growth we've seen over the past 10 years to continue.

I plan to come before the Planning and Zoning Commission in January to ask them to identify Incentive Housing Zones so we can be proactive in our approach to developing more affordable housing. Incentive Housing Zones along with our new Affordable Housing Trust Fund and an updated Affordable Housing Plan are the necessary tools for us to keep control over our housing development decisions and will show our commitment to affordable housing as we continue to fight for legislative changes to the affordable housing appeals process known as CT Statute 8-30g.

While we work with our legislators to modify 8-30g, we continue to work towards our 2nd moratorium. Darien was granted a moratorium from 8-30g, in October of 2010 and due to persistent legal challenge, our moratorium was upheld in court 3 times. Darien is only 1 of 3 towns to have ever qualified for a moratorium and as of today, remains the only town with a

moratorium still in effect. We should be proud of our efforts to support the development of affordable housing. Our current moratorium expires in October of 2014.

The redevelopment of the Allen O'Neill neighborhood, now called The Heights, and Garden Homes on the Boston Post Road will provide a substantial number of points towards our 2nd moratorium. The Darien Housing Authority is currently considering a redevelopment of Old Town Hall Homes, their senior housing community on the Post Road, that could also be a positive factor in obtaining our 2nd moratorium.

I'd also like to see the Planning and Zoning Commission work with the Board of Education to continue discussions regarding permanent lights at the Darien High School. Personally, I believe, if managed properly, this could be a wonderful community amenity but it must be a community discussion with due consideration and respect given to all stakeholders.

We remain committed to flood mitigation projects like the Intervale/Abbey Road drainage project. I'm very hopeful this project will become a reality this year. Board of Selectmen capital spending priorities will determine if the West Avenue drainage project will move forward this coming fiscal year or need to wait.

We will continue to support our residents that are still rebuilding after Super Storm Sandy and look forward to Darien Junior Sailing constructing a new facility at Weed Beach to replace their building destroyed in the storm.

Other important priorities include strategic land acquisitions that are important to the town to preserve precious open-space or to allow for future development, continuing discussions with the Department of Transportation and Metro North on a renovation of the Noroton Heights Train Station, working with Yankee Gas to expand natural gas availability to more homes and businesses, continued collaboration with CL&P to protect our electric utility system, enhancing our emergency preparedness systems, evaluating a possible move of the Probate Court to 35 Leroy, prioritizing new sidewalk installations and continuing collaborations with my fellow municipal leaders on matters of mutual interest and concern within our region.

And speaking of our region, it's going to get bigger! Public Act 13-247, passed in the 2013 Legislative session, mandated regional consolidations and for all regional planning groups to become Councils of Governments. Currently, Darien is a member of the Southwestern Regional Planning Agency – an 8 town region comprised of Darien, New Canaan, Greenwich, Stamford, Norwalk, Westport, Wilton and Weston.

The state has mandated that we "voluntarily" consolidate with another region if we wish to continue to have a voice in matters of regional interest and to receive funding for transportation and other regional planning projects. The members of SWRPA and the Housatonic Valley Council of Elected Officials have submitted a joint letter of intent to merge to the state's Office of Policy and Management. The Housatonic Valley includes 10 towns from Ridgefield to New Milford, many of whom share our small town issues and concerns.

The Office of Policy and Management has not been able to articulate an appropriate rationale or benefit of this consolidation effort leaving us to question if the intent is to form a governance structure similar to county government. As a member of the “consolidation” committee for SWRPA, I’m keeping the interests of Darien and the other small towns in our region as a priority and will report to you on our merger progress. The mandated change to a Council of Governments will require your legislative attention.

The silver lining in this consolidation is that we will, as we in SWRPA do now, consult, collaborate with and draw on the strengths of our expanded membership to support each community within our region. Further, we’ll be able to retain our regional planning volunteers and each town within the COG will now have equal voting power. With strength in numbers, we will fight any effort by the state to shift tax burdens from the state to our new region.

People often ask me what the big issues are in Darien. While we do have our share of challenges to address and wishes to fulfill, my answer is always the same...we are blessed to live in a community with caring and generous people who make Darien a wonderful place to live, raise a family, go to school, start a business and work and play.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my thoughts and for the privilege of serving as your First Selectman. My door is always open and I welcome your thoughts and ideas. I love to hear from kids too – as elected officials we’re laying the groundwork for their future and they have important things to say.

I wish you and your families a restful and joy-filled holiday and wish our Blue Wave Football team good luck in next Saturday’s State Championship game against New Canaan.

Go Blue Wave!

