

State of the Town Address
Jayne Stevenson, First Selectman
December 8, 2014

Good Evening Madam Moderator, RTM members, fellow elected and appointed officials and our residents watching from home. I wish a special welcome to the new members of the RTM this evening – thank you for volunteering your time to our wonderful town.

I enjoy this evening and the opportunity to have a conversation with you about some of our notable accomplishments over the past year and offer you a preview of important issues and projects we'll be working on together in 2015.

Our 2014 accomplishments are significant. The beautiful new Mather Center opened its doors in July and, in the 5 months since opening; membership has increased by 220 to 1,100 seniors. Director Beth Paris and her small but mighty staff have added 13 new classes and programs, serve an average of 45 meals a day - 75 for special events - and have managed over 140 seniors a day in programs. It's clear to see that the vision for the Mather Center has come to life and our seniors are very much enjoying their new home. Punch list challenges at the Board of Education's new space at 35 Leroy are nearly complete. I want to thank the school administration for their patience and support through their transition. We're committed to giving you the functionality you required in your new space. Board of Ed facilities maintenance services have been integrated at the town garage and the Edgerton property is ready to for demolition. When we take the 30,000 foot view of the Shuffle project, we should all be very proud of what we've accomplished for the long-term benefit of our town.

With your support, we've made strategic property investments in 4 Short Lane and 32 Hoyt Street. Community discussions will happen over the coming year to determine how the Short Lane parcel can enhance the Weed Beach facility and, as Chairman Liz Mao mentioned, the facilities study undertaken by the Board of Ed may give us direction on the use of 32 Hoyt Street. Investing in these properties has given the town options we didn't have before. Again, I want to thank the RTM for their long-term vision in supporting these acquisitions. I may be bringing other strategic land acquisition opportunities to you in the coming year.

The Board of Selectmen and town staff have managed key leadership transitions in both the Parks and Recreation and Public Works Departments. We welcomed Mr. Ed Gentile as our new Superintendent of Public Works and supported the advancement of Mr. Jim Coghlan to Interim Director of Parks and Recreation. Both gentlemen are a tremendous asset to our town organization.

2014 also presented us with some serious challenges. Families along the coast struggled to get back into their homes after Super Storm Sandy did significant damage to their properties. Some projects are still not complete and some residents are still displaced. The FEMA process left much to be desired for many of the affected homeowners. I hold myself accountable to finding better ways to help our residents when, not if, disaster strikes again.

Quoting from the title of Oprah Winfrey's new book, which I highly recommend, "What I Know for Sure" is that serious challenges will continue to surface unexpectedly. The town's response to the potential threat of Ebola required swift and detailed response protocols to be adopted. Our Director of Health and emergency preparedness personnel should be commended for their work. Planning exercises and drills pale in comparison to action plans developed in response to an actual emergency. Our emergency action plans will be updated to include all that we've learned.

We are cautiously optimistic that local economy will continue to strengthen. The state mandated 5-year property revaluation is behind us, zoning and building permit activity is returning to pre-downturn levels, tax collections are strong and property values are trending up resulting in projected grand list growth. However, a surprisingly high Darien unemployment rate of 5%, state budget pressures, unfunded state mandates like the proposed new storm water management regulations and the realities of the Affordable Healthcare Act must be considered when the Board of Selectmen and the Board of Education begin to draft our 2015-2016 budgets. The community "conversation" at the RTM budget meeting last May made it very clear that taxpayers will not support another year of 5% growth in spending. I heard you. My board heard you. My staff heard you.

In Town Hall, we've been working diligently since then to find savings and set the stage for a conservative budget process. In response to legislation passed in October 2013, I've convened the Consolidated Services Working Group consisting of members of the Boards of Selectmen, Education and Finance to find ways we can collaborate, find efficiencies and save taxpayer dollars. I want to publicly thank Mr. Frank Huck for his leadership of our working group. We're hopeful that there may be real opportunities for cooperation in the areas of insurance, healthcare, finance and facilities maintenance and management. I remain hopeful that this exercise will be more than just an exercise and that we can begin to implement some of our ideas in the coming budget cycle.

I'm eager for the opportunities and challenges that 2015 will bring. All three collective bargaining agreement negotiations have begun and the town is poised to propose some important cost-saving provisions.

We continue to attempt to procure the necessary easements to move the Intervale and Abbey Road Drainage Improvement Project forward. This process hasn't been easy or fruitful to date. I hope the folks, from whom we need easements, can put themselves in the shoes of the neighbors who flood and partner with the town to help remedy the problem.

In 2014, the Board of Selectman as the Parking Authority implemented new technology for daily parking. There's heavy utilization of the new system and very few problems. In the coming weeks and months, more improvements will be made. We will begin a comprehensive parking study, introducing a more automated enforcement system and implement an online parking permit waitlist. We are also poised to make some needed changes to our parking regulations. The proposed changes, if approved by the Parking Authority, will support our downtown businesses, allow for greater utilization of permit parking spaces and provide a system that will insure a "clean" wait list.

Several tragic events have occurred over the past 2 years that have underscored the need for improved safety at our train stations. Security cameras are being installed shortly as a pilot program at Noroton Heights allowing public safety personnel to observe our parking lots, platforms and stations.

As Chairman Susan Cameron reported, the commercial district in Noroton Heights will see a substantive redevelopment effort begin over the next two years. Any redevelopment effort must be carefully coordinated and give consideration to the impacts to surrounding neighborhoods, traffic and pedestrian access and safety. I'm actively engaged in discussions with the Department of Transportation to support a train station redevelopment that will better serve commuters and enhance these future commercial developments.

In one of the first public acts of the newly merged SWRPA and HVCEO Council of Governments (formally named the Western Connecticut COG), a grant application for planning dollars for a potential Noroton Heights Train Station redevelopment and pedestrian improvements project was approved and forwarded to the DOT for consideration. I'm honored and pleased to tell you that I've been named as Vice Chair of the Western Connecticut COG. My position on the Executive Board and the relationships I'm building will allow me to keep the needs of Darien in the forefront of regional discussions.

The Board of Selectmen will continue to dialogue with the Board of Education on future school facility needs. The fate of the Edgerton property where the former Hollow Tree Elementary School stands waiting for demolition can only be considered once the school district solidifies its facilities plan.

I've asked for a meeting with the school administration and Board of Ed to discuss Walking Student Safety. New sidewalks around some of our schools should be considered. In the meantime, I'm working with the Local Traffic Authority and our Public Works Department to add signs, crosswalks and other safety measures to help insure the safety of our students. I'm looking forward to this discussion and am prepared to support long term capital planning for new sidewalks near schools and other public places.

I want to thank my fellow Board of Selectmen members, Karl Kilduff and the rest of my hard-working staff, the Board of Finance, Planning and Zoning Commission, Board of Education, Dr. Pierson and the school administration, members of the RTM and the countless volunteers who support our wonderful town. I'm grateful for the contributions of all the non-profit organizations who help do the work that government can't. And I want to offer a special word of thanks to the Thriving Youth Task Force and to the Darien Athletic Foundation for their generosity and support of our children.

I wish you and your families a healthy and joyous holiday season.

Go Blue Wave Football!