

2016 State of the Town Address
Jayme J. Stevenson, First Selectman
December 12, 2016

Good evening friends, colleagues, fellow Board members and folks watching from home. Shout out to our incomparable Channel 79 staff for keeping government accessible to everyone through technology. Seth, congratulations and best wishes to you as our new Moderator and thank you Sarah Seelye for the outstanding job you did for the RTM and the town.

I appreciate this annual opportunity to reflect on our notable accomplishments and vision for the coming year. This is my 6th State of the Town address and with each passing year, I gain valuable perspective. In my opinion, 2016 has been one of the more productive and forward-thinking years for Darien government and also the most challenging when considering the uncertainty of regional and state government policy.

Fundamental to the work we do each day is the principle that governments exist to provide a safe, healthy environment for us to live, work, raise our families and educate our children. As stewards of your tax dollars, we must set priorities, save for the unexpected challenge or opportunity and be transparent and accountable to you for each dollar we spend. The Board of Selectmen has recommended that all departments submit FY 2017/18 budget requests with a not-to-exceed 2% increase. Last year, this same methodology resulted in the one of the lowest Board of Selectmen's budgets in recent memory. Of course, each year is different, but we are committed to putting the taxpayers first in our budget planning.

An important theme over my 6 years as your First Selectman is the focus on providing government services in a more efficient, effective and customer-friendly way. In 2016, we updated the town's website, installed self-service computers in the building department, digitized land use documents, committed to implement OpenGov software that will aid our budget process and make our financials accessible to the public and....drum roll...we now can renew commuter parking permits and query the waitlist online!

We can and will do more. We need to better utilize technology in certain departments and should fully commit to LEAN Government management principles in our daily work. LEAN is a "continuous improvement" process and mindset, originally applied to Toyota's auto manufacturing process, that seeks to cut waste streamline systems and improve customer and employee engagement. I want to Thank Kate Buch and Jenn Charnesky for their leadership in looking at service delivery in new ways.

In 2016, we resolved several long-standing public safety, health and environmental concerns and have begun planning for some much needed and welcomed community amenities.

With the support of the RTM and the community, here are just a few of our accomplishments:

- Received our second 8-30g moratorium
- Hired full time, in-town paramedics and were able to utilize a town-owned building to save on operating costs
- Enacted a Peddler's Ordinance and socially-conscience Blight Ordinance

- Completed, with the generous support of the Friends of Gorham's Pond, the Upper Pond Dam and Habitat restoration project
- Abbey/Intervale drainage project is well underway
- Completed a community health needs assessment the results of which will be rolled out in early 2017 in a series of public forums
- Began a bacteria source testing program in the Goodwives River
- Set aside funding to plan for the dredging of two of our sedimentation basins
- Energy and Recycling Advisory Committee completed a public facilities energy audit
- Converting our streetlights to LED which will result in significant utility cost savings
- We received a grant to build a new Swap Shop
- Application has been made for lights at the Darien High School – Congratulations Blue Wave Football and Coach Trifone on your Class LL Championship...hopefully next season you will play at home under the lights!
- Planning is well underway for a much needed renovation of our multi-department town garage
- Funding has been approved for a 2017 Master Parks Plan that will, among other things, help us identify where we might locate a community swimming pool and possibly a temporary ice rink
- Received a grant and partnered with the Darien Land Trust to purchase 1.24 acres of land adjacent to Town Hall that preserves open space and creates the opportunity to build a pocket park
- Year-long negotiations will culminate in early 2017 when the RTM will deliberate on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to purchase the 16.3 acres of open space you see behind me from the Ox Ridge Hunt Club

2016 also saw a number of retirements within our Police Department resulting in a transformation of our command staff through promotions and the hiring of 6 new patrol officers. K9 Zulu retired paving the way for Grizzly and Argo to join the department. I want to thank Officers Aranzullo, Silva and Hinkley who volunteered to undertake the 24/7 care and training of our four-legged officers. You can follow K9 Grizzly's training on Instagram. Both Grizzly and Argo will be trained in narcotics detection in response to the significant increase in opioid and drug abuse. As the #1 public health crisis of our time, I will spend another few moments on this topic.

In response to the worsening opioid crisis and lack of in-patient treatment programs, Darien Police Department and the Town of Darien have partnered with *Saved from Addiction* to provide referrals to this new FDA approved life-saving treatment option. Opioid and drug abuse is taking the lives of 2 Connecticut residents every day. Overdose deaths have increased from 357 in 2012 to a projected 888 by year end. Sadly, Darien has not been spared. Through collaborations with the Darien Police, local and state health departments and community service providers, we are working hard to make positive change. Last Wednesday, and kudos to Senator Chris Murphy for his advocacy, the US Senate passed a comprehensive 21st Century Cures Bill dedicating \$1 billion dollars to increase opioid prevention, treatment and drug monitoring programs. I'm hopeful that with Senator Murphy's support, Connecticut will see some of this much-needed funding.

Darien police are among the most highly trained in the nation. However, incidents of police brutality and brutality against police across the nation have necessitated the need to implement the use of body cameras. Cameras alone are not the answer to resolving tensions between civilians and police but they can be an important tool in documenting civilian/officer interactions and collecting evidence.

Along with our new state-of-the-art police boat, we will be looking at other public safety tools in the coming year. CopSync, a real-time public safety alert service, is one such tool that we are currently researching.

Unknown to many is that the Darien Police Commission serves as our Local Traffic Authority, tasked with maintaining pedestrian and vehicular safety on our roads. You've heard a great deal tonight about redevelopment opportunities coming to Darien. Close collaboration is needed between our Local Traffic Authority, the Planning and Zoning Commission and Connecticut DOT to insure that the pedestrian experience is a priority as we improve our downtown and Noroton Heights commercial areas. A recent Road Safety Audit, organized by WestCOG, and the work of our Pedestrian Infrastructure Advisory Committee will provide meaningful input to our planning process for sidewalks, crosswalks and traffic signals. For our bicycle enthusiasts, a Darien/Norwalk Health Department initiative to develop bike routes connecting coastal communities in the southwest and to connect the Darien Train Station and Norwalk Community College is underway.

The Noroton Heights Access Study is soon to begin and we've just been awarded a Municipal Resilience Grant from the Connecticut Institute for Resilience and Climate Adaptation for the planning of a storm water management solution for the Heights Road area. Valuable action items will result from these studies and may require further town investment. I applaud the efforts of Public Works Director Ed Gentile in finding grant funding to limit taxpayer burden for these important infrastructure improvements.

Research has begun on the use of a new value-capture financing tool called Tax Increment Financing or TIF. TIF allows a portion of commercial taxes from a development project to be reinvested in needed infrastructure improvements spurred by the project. A timely example would be a new train station building in Noroton Heights and sidewalks, crosswalks and traffic signal upgrades around the Noroton Heights Development area. These could all be funded with TIF financing. I encourage the Board of Finance to look closely at implementing this tool.

We've learned a great deal from our research with developers about changes to how residents want to live. Real estate values support the notion that people prefer to live where they can walk to amenities like parks, shops, restaurants and transportation services. Our recently updated Town Plan of Conservation and Development recognizes this social shift and lays the policy ground work for the Darien of tomorrow while preserving our small town character. Bricks, mortar and tree-lined streets can enhance or detract from our small New England town "feel" but I would offer that it's our people and our focus on family and community that's most critical to this perception.

Commercial redevelopment, if thoughtfully planned and executed, can and will help grow our grand list to help offset financial pressures we face from further reductions in state aid, new mandates and our own desires to maintain and improve our public schools and facilities. I recommend that Darien joins our peer towns in formalizing an Economic Development Committee or Task Force that can provide proactive analysis for future development. I want to thank Susan Cameron for her leadership of the Planning and Zoning Commission and welcome John Sini into this role at a critical time in our town's development history.

By now, we are all familiar with the dismal State of the State. The non-partisan office of Fiscal Analysis projects the state will face \$4.3 billion in budget deficits over the next four years due to surging debt

costs and shrinking revenues. Appropriations Committee leadership imagines the need for a 20% reduction in municipal aid, school funding and support for social services.

What this will likely mean for Darien is a further reduction in ECS funding. This year we received \$775,000 of a promised \$1.3 million. The previous fiscal year, we received \$1.6 million. We should anticipate an elimination of School Construction Reimbursements, Municipal Revenue Sharing and STEAP Grant Funds. Cuts in state social service programs like Husky, Snap and energy assistance will have a direct impact on the need for more local funding to support families in need.

I've recommended to Chairman Zagrodzky that the Board of Finance should plan a path to fiscal self-sustainability which will mean the need to satisfy our spending plans entirely with local dollars. With the perfect storm brewing in Hartford, I'm exceedingly grateful for our conservative fiscal policies that have allowed Darien to outperform the state on all fiscal metrics. I would be remiss in not stating the obvious...elections matter.

Additional state mandates will likely add to our fiscal burden. There is a concerted effort underway to "integrate" local health departments. This is the mandated version of the 2007 voluntary effort to regionalize health districts. Early information indicates that towns would be required to pay 1.5% of operating budgets into the regional health district. For Darien, we currently spend \$296,000 to run our local department. Under the new mandate, we would be required to pay approximately \$2 million into the district. Funds would be redirected to cities whose property tax base is inadequate to cover their own health service costs.

Other regional initiatives will include a push for population proportional voting for COGs, heavily weighing votes for the urban centers' agenda. WestCOG has taken a defensive posture against this proposal acknowledging that this will undermine the fundamental COG structure by having small towns withdraw from the COGs. I have been pleased to serve as Vice Chair of WestCOG and Chairman of our Metropolitan Transportation Planning Organization since 2015 and have been recently named to the Board of the Connecticut Council of Municipalities (CCM) giving Darien a stronger voice in all regional matters.

WestCOG, CCM and COST (Council of Small Towns) will be coordinating our legislative agenda to insure a unified voice against costly mandates and any efforts to undermine local control. It's very important that you call and write to Senators Duff and Leone and Representatives Wood and Tong to insure they are looking out for the best interests of Darien this legislative session.

I'd like to end my remarks on a note of sincere gratitude.

Over the past several years, we've hired and promoted exceptional people on our town's management team. These folks, long with the rest of our outstanding staff are the reason we've accomplished so much in 2016. Please take a moment to thank them when you have the opportunity.

I'm very grateful for the wise counsel of Attorney Fox and his staff at Curtis, Brinkerhoff and Barrett; for the hundreds of volunteers who serve on town boards, commissions, the RTM and on special projects like the Fireworks and Memorial Day parade; to our volunteer fire fighters and Post 53 medical responders for the life-saving services they provide at limited taxpayer cost; to the Darien Athletic Foundation for their extraordinary generosity for the benefit of our kids; to our modest but mighty Senior Center staff for growing our Senior Program into what has become the best in the state and to

our local Human Service Department and non-profit network who provide invaluable safety net services to the most vulnerable in our community.

While it would be nearly impossible to name each person who has contributed to our collective success this year, there are a few people who deserve our recognition and thanks. Without the work and support of John Lundeen, Lucia Zachowski and the Friends of Gorham's Pond, the Upper Pond Project would not have been realized. Terry Gaffney and the Energy and Recycling Center Advisory Committee spent countless hours on the town building energy analysis. The McPherson Family's charitable gift of their storied family homestead will help preserve our town's history for generations to come. Deep gratitude to the Monuments and Ceremonies Commission for honoring our town patriots and Veterans. Join us this Saturday, December 17th at noon for the *Wreaths Across America* ceremony in Spring Grove Veterans' Cemetery. And finally and above all...to our dear friend Gene Coyle, whose memory, particularly in this place, reminds me every day how blessed we are to be Americans with the freedom to stand up, speak out and serve our community and country with respect, kindness and humility.

I wish you and yours a peaceful and joyous holiday season!

Respectfully presented,
Jayme Stevenson, First Selectman