

First Selectman's 2017 State of the Town Remarks

Jayne J. Stevenson

12/11/17

Good evening Mr. Moderator, members of the RTM and fellow colleagues and volunteers. A special welcome to newly-elected RTM, Board and Commission members including the Board of Selectmen's newest member, Pam Sparkman. I congratulate Pam on her successful election as well as my fellow board members, Susan Marks, Kip Koons and Marc Thorne, on their re-elections. We thank Rob Richards for his time on our board and we mourn the loss of our friend and colleague Kip Hall. The Board of Selectmen is looking forward to working with all our town colleagues in 2018 on policies, projects and a budget that will ensure Darien remains one of the best communities in Connecticut to live in, raise a family, educate your children, and run a business.

Thankfully, Darien's local election wasn't diminished by the negative political influences that continue to plague our country. Community engagement on local, state and national issues is, in my opinion, at an all-time high. This is a very good thing and foundational to a successful democracy. But essential in our engagements is respect, an open mind, compassion, empathy and the ability to take personal responsibility for our words and actions. As parents and educators we work hard to instill these building blocks of strong character in our children and we should strive to role-model these qualities in all of our interactions.

Tonight is my 7th State of the Town address as your First Selectman and I'm grateful for the strong community support this past November. I always enjoy this annual opportunity to reflect on our notable accomplishments. It's exciting to hear from Chairmen Sini and Ochman about the many positive developments moving through our land use boards and happening in our schools. Chairman Zagrodzky articulated well the fiscal challenges ahead and how we can work together to sustain the elements that define us as a premier community. Setting aside the State of the State for a moment, I want to share what our town boards, community partners and exceptional staff have accomplished but first and foremost, congratulations to our Blue Wave Football team on winning, in a nail biter, the Class LL State Championship against the Greenwich Cardinals. Hard fought and well deserved. Congratulations to all!

Darien continues to benefit greatly from important public/private partnerships. We are deeply grateful for The Depot and The Community Fund's work supporting positive youth development, the Darien Land Trust's land investment partnership, the Darien Athletic Foundation's investments in our athletics facilities, the Darien Foundation's investments in our emergency response equipment and our schools, the Tree Conservancy's town-wide tree planting program, At Home in Darien's Senior advocacy work and Person-to-Person's support of our most vulnerable residents. A newly constituted Monuments and Ceremonies Cemetery Committee has taken on stewardship of our historic cemeteries. On behalf of our town fathers and mothers, I want to express my gratitude for the yeoman's work by Sharon Kells and her committee. The Darien Public Library is a critical partner in hosting our community on a wide variety of important topics like the January 2017 "Health Needs Assessment" series, Emergency Preparedness Forum and, of course, as the inaugural-year home of the Fitch Academy. We are so fortunate to have a resource the caliber of the Darien Public Library, made possible with a substantive taxpayer grant and very generous contributions from the Library Friends. Our work with the Friends of Gorham's Pond continues on the permitting to dredge our two sedimentation basins. On a holiday note, the Friends of Gorham's Pond invites our community to come together for the first annual Christmas Carol sing on Ring's End Bridge on Sunday, December 17th at 5:00pm.

Public health and safety are the primary functions of government. This has been a rebuilding year for the Darien Police Department administration and staff. Chief Ray Osborne was promoted by the Police Commission after Chief Duane Lovello's retirement and along with Captains Anderson and Lawlor, they bring extraordinary professional experience to their leadership roles. A host of other promotions sets the stage for many years of exceptional policing. As they say in sports...we have a deep bench - which will serve our town very well. Darien Police continue to strengthen their relationships with the youth in our community. This year, DPD instituted a Juvenile Review Board to help some of our kids avoid the judicial system.

We're blessed to have 3 well-staffed volunteer fire departments who continue to be integral members of our emergency response team. We greatly appreciate their willingness to work with our finance department this year on a new bill-paying system.

Our in-town Stamford EMS Paramedics are serving the town and Post 53 very well. With legislative support, paramedics can play an important role in delivering medical services traditionally reserved for doctors and nurses which could help offset the high cost of healthcare. At my request, Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) has added this initiative to their 2018 legislative agenda.

The opioid crisis demands sustained action by healthcare providers and government at all levels. With over 1000 deaths per year in Connecticut and 65,000 nationwide - nearly double the deaths from car accidents and more than were lost in the Vietnam War - the opioid crisis is the #1 public health emergency of our time. No town or city has been spared from the impacts of this crisis and we must dedicate whatever resources are necessary to save lives.

In the second half of 2017, we implemented the OpenGov cloud-based performance management and transparency software tool. Staff is being trained and we expect to utilize some of its capabilities during the coming budget cycle. Our goal is to have full implementation by the 2019-20 budget cycle. Finance Director Jenn Charnesky and Town Administrator Kate Buch deserve tremendous credit for championing OpenGov for Darien. It's noteworthy that Darien is a statewide leader in this initiative. Our great hope is that the Board of Education will see the value in this tool and jump on board in 2018. OpenGov implementation is the beginning of a more comprehensive technology plan for our town to drive efficiencies and enhanced customer service. Online permitting, a renovated website, use of social media and an expansion of our QSend software platform across departments are just the beginning. You can now follow TownofDarienCT on Twitter and Facebook!

2017 was also the year for planning and infrastructure projects. The Public Works Garage renovation is moving forward on time and on budget. This project is setting a new standard of accountability for town capital building projects. A new Parks Master Plan is almost complete and our community will soon be able to more fully enjoy our newly acquired land at Ox Ridge. The very complex Abbey/Intervale drainage project was completed; Aquarion replaced 5400 feet of water main; the state-managed Noroton Heights Platform replacement project is moving along (albeit slowly); Route 1 was repaved and new fog lines were installed creating a "road diet" of sorts along the corridor. To help improve pedestrian safety, the Local Traffic Authority and State of CT approved new dynamic speed signs, crosswalks and 'slow school' markings at Hindley School, new pedestrian signaling has been approved for the Hecker/Post and Noroton Ave/Post intersections and a recommendation for a new traffic signal at Thorndal/Post has been submitted to CTDOT for review.

In spring 2018, a new sidewalk will be installed from Old Kings Highway South under the I-95 overpass on Tokeneke Road. The Board of Selectmen understands that pedestrian safety is a top priority for our residents and we remain committed to this effort and

ask that our colleagues on the Planning and Zoning Commission and Board of Finance also commit to this priority. As we begin our commercial development renaissance, let's lean forward to create the pedestrian-friendly town we all desire.

An overheight warning system is in construction at the intersections of the Post Road, West Ave and Tokeneke Road. In partnership with WestCOG and the State of CT, design for an improved Norton & West Ave. intersection is underway and the Noroton Heights Access Study is nearing completion. Repairs are in progress on the Old Kings Highway North Bridge and the Norton River Bridge on Route 1 will be fully reconstructed beginning in 2018. The long-anticipated gas expansion project should begin in 2018 as the commercial developments you heard about from Chairman Sini move forward.

Though not traditionally considered "municipal infrastructure", I'd like to acknowledge our exceptional staff. We continually ask these incredible people to do more with less, address dynamic regulatory and fiscal situations and to provide excellent "customer service". I'm extremely proud of our staff and all they accomplish on our behalf. Please take a moment to thank them when you have the chance.

My tenure as your First Selectman has given me the opportunity to represent our town beyond our borders. I've had the privilege of serving as Chairman of both Western Connecticut Council of Governments and our federally mandated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) that manages federal transportation funding in our region. Since its inception in 2015, WestCOG has provided tremendous assistance to our town on transportation-related issues, GIS data aggregation and legislative advocacy. There's no doubt that the Office of Policy and Management (OPM) and majority leaders want to use COGs for regional service delivery. This would allow the state to move certain expenditures, like social and health services, off the state's balance sheet. Fortunately, the consolidation of local health districts didn't move forward and an analysis of regional tax assessors showed zero potential savings. I'm a strong voice against mandated service sharing but believe cities and towns should be encouraged to voluntarily partner if they can pass on meaningful savings to taxpayers.

I'm also honored to continue to serve on the board of the state's largest municipal advocacy group, Connecticut Conference of Municipalities (CCM) and their insurance arm, Connecticut Interlocal Risk Management Agency (CIRMA). Having a leadership role in these regional and statewide organizations allows me to represent Darien well beyond our borders on a wide variety of critical issues.

2018 will undoubtedly pose new opportunities and challenges for us. I'm proud of the conservative assumptions we made regarding Education Cost Sharing (ECS) revenue in the 2017-18 budget. This proved to be a very wise decision. After 10 months of state budget chaos, legislators finally passed a budget on Halloween (some irony there) that was immediately out of balance and guaranteed over \$3.5 billion dollars of out-year deficits.

As I noted last year...our best defense is a good offense...continuing on our path to fiscal self-sustainability is the best protection against wild swings in state policy and changes in the federal tax code - specifically the possibility of sharing in the cost of teachers' pensions and the potential loss of state and local tax deductions. 2018 is also a revaluation year for Darien. Market conditions will produce new values that may be favorable for some and burdensome for others. We must be mindful of the compounding effect local, state and federal tax changes will have on Darien taxpayers. To that end, Kale Buch, with the support of the Board of Selectmen, has directed town department heads to budget for no increases in their 2018-19 requested budgets. This may be difficult to achieve but it's the right place to start.

I want to thank the RTM for your support of our Blight Ordinance and Veteran's Tax Relief. The Blight Ordinance is working exactly as you intended and is showing very positive results. Supporting modest tax relief for our Veterans is a wonderful, inexpensive way to express our gratitude for their service to our country.

Building on the great work of the Energy and Recycling Advisory Committee, we must continue to support 'sustainability' initiatives that reduce energy use and waste disposal costs. By using fuel cell, solar, geothermal and natural gas technologies, I challenge us to work towards net zero energy consumption for at least one of our town buildings. Water conservation through mandatory 2-days-per-week irrigation is our new normal. Aquarion's data trends show that we are nearing the 1960's drought levels. Lawn irrigation is the single largest draw on our public drinking water supply. I would like to dialogue with the Planning & Zoning Commission to see if there's an opportunity for land use regulations that provide incentives to businesses and homeowners for low impact development. Water conservation is an integral part of the new State Water Plan.

Two final requests tonight...we are looking for enthusiastic volunteers who will help us continue our Memorial Day Parade and Town Fireworks events and we will soon be forming a Bicentennial Committee to plan our celebration honoring the Town's 200 year birthday in 2020! Please email me or call my office to volunteer.

The November 2018 election for new state leadership is critical for Connecticut's and Darien's successful future. Please take the time to learn about the candidates and what they stand for – the status quo or taking those difficult but necessary steps to right the ship.

I wish everyone here and watching from home a joyous holiday season and very happy, healthy 2018!

Thank you.