

First Selectman's 2018 State of the Town Remarks

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Good evening Mr. Moderator, members of the RTM and my fellow elected and appointed colleagues. Would the new RTM members please stand so we can welcome you appropriately! The Board of Selectmen is looking forward to continuing our work together to ensure Darien remains the special place it is to raise a family and operate a business. Although he couldn't be with us tonight, I want to thank Interim Superintendent, Dr. Elliot Landon, for his guidance and leadership while we search for a new Superintendent.

Chairman Sini acknowledged his "retirement" from the Planning & Zoning Commission at the end of his term this November. I want to express to John our deep gratitude for his 5 years of excellent leadership and thoughtful guidance as we continue through this exciting time of historic redevelopment. You should be very proud of what you and your commission have accomplished.

Congratulations to Representative Terrie Wood and State Senator's Bob Duff and Carlo Leone on their re-elections and a warm welcome to our new representative to Darien and Stamford, Matt Blumenthal. My door is always open to collaborate on legislative matters that impact our town.

Last week, I had the honor of meeting with Governor-elect Lamont. I left the meeting feeling hopeful and optimistic about Connecticut's future. Governor Lamont promised to "do no harm" to cities and towns, address long term pension and healthcare liabilities and he will seek operational savings by breaking down silos and barriers to coordinated and more efficient government service delivery. In his interview with the Darien Times, he pledged to hold the line on taxes including reducing business taxes and regulations to help make Connecticut more competitive and to invest in education, infrastructure and workforce development. These are policies I think we all can get behind!

As we know, the devil's in the legislative details so we must stay fully engaged on issues that would impose new unfunded mandates or shift financial burdens from state government onto our local property tax base like pension-sharing and statewide car and/or property mill rates. Bottom line...I remain hopeful that Governor Lamont's business background and understanding of the challenges and opportunities here in Southwestern Connecticut will be a benefit to us in the long run. I recommend reading the study completed in 2018 by the Commission on Fiscal Stability and Economic Growth. The legislature will likely take up many of the revenue-neutral tax rebalancing suggestions in this report during the coming session.

Tonight is my 8th State of the Town address as your First Selectman. What an honor it is to lead our town alongside Chairmen Zagrodzky, Ochman, Sini, my board and all the volunteers who generously give their time and talents to support our town. As we just heard from my colleagues, our schools are among the best in the state, we are in the midst of significant commercial development revitalization and our fiscal house is in order. Our town administrative staff, police, our 3 all-volunteer fire departments, Post 53, Darien-based paramedics, public works personnel and our teachers deserves our debt of gratitude for their dedication to our community. Town Administrator Kate Buch, Finance Director Jennifer Charneski, Human Resource Director Laurie Dunn and our assistants Linda O'Leary and Karen Dunn deserve special thanks for their administrative leadership and support of our staff throughout the year. We are very fortunate indeed.

I want to thank my fellow Selectmen Susan Marks, Pam Sparkman, Kip Koons and Marc Thorne for their bi-partisan collaboration and contributions to our board's work. That's what makes local government service so rewarding – the ability to put aside political ideology to support the town that we love so much. This year's statewide election brought out the best and worst of political discourse and I don't imagine that will change much as we move through the municipal cycle and onto the 2020 Presidential election. I'm grateful that here in Darien, we govern with open minds and in doing so, not only do we accomplish our goals but we serve as positive role models for our children as they make their way in a tumultuous world and become our next generation of community leaders.

It's my pleasure to share with you a sampling of our 2018 accomplishments and give you a preview of more good things to come in 2019.

It's been a very busy year for our Parks and Recreation Commission and Department. The Parks Master Plan is complete and a building committee has been formed to undertake renovations to Pear Tree Beach. Parks staff cleared the Short Lane property...what a wonderful addition of precious waterfront property to Weed Beach. Park staff also cleared and laid a wood chip path through Hecker Woods connecting Hecker Avenue and Town Hall property. This beautiful passive pocket park was made possible by a generous contribution from the Darien Land Trust and a grant from the State of Connecticut.

Highland Farm is now available for the whole community to enjoy. Installation of the required permanent fence and the temporary parking area begins this week. Funding for permanent parking areas will be included in the Board of Selectmen's budget request. The holiday season is a great time to go and enjoy the site but please remember...dogs must be on leash and flying objects, including drones and model airplanes are not permitted. We are grateful for our Parks Department stepping up to help organize the Town Fireworks, year 2 of the Weed Beach Fest and Tree Lighting at the Darien Sport Shop. I hear time and time again that along with our great schools, easy commute, great shops and restaurants and relatively low taxes, it's our parks, beaches and access to the Long Island Sound that draw families to our town.

Mark your family calendars for our first annual "Old Fashioned Holiday" at Tilley Pond Park on Saturday, December 15th from 4-6pm. This new event is sure to become a Darien holiday tradition just like the Caroling Sing Along hosted by the Friends of Gorham's Pond. This year's caroling event will be held at Pear Tree Beach this Sunday, the 16th at 5:00pm. The Darien Tutor Singers will be on hand to help keep us in tune! These wonderful community traditions help Darien keep that small New England town spirit alive.

In addition to critical roadway, sidewalk, solid waste, sewer, storm and recycling center management and a host of state government mandated reporting requirements, 2018 was a year of infrastructure planning and construction activity for our Public Works Department. Notably, the Town Garage Renovation Project was completed in June, ahead of schedule and \$500,000 under budget. I want to thank our dedicated staff and members of the building committee who oversaw this complicated project. It's not easy to rebuild a building that houses maintenance crews and equipment for 3 town departments with uninterrupted daily activity! The Town Garage project set the new standard by which we will manage all capital building projects going forward, including the renovations of Pear Tree Beach and the redevelopment of Ox Ridge Elementary School.

I also want to thank Board of Education member Jill McCammon for her great work chairing the Darien High School Cafeteria project. I'm sure Jill will think of 2018 as the year of the 'duct bank'. The Board of Selectmen is grateful for her diligence and professionalism throughout this challenging project. The result is very well done and hopefully being enjoyed by our students and staff.

DPW is coordinating with Eversource on the installation of 21,000 feet of natural gas main. That project will be complete in 2019. The Town Garage, Middlesex Middle School and the Darien High School will all be running on natural gas for this heating season and gas main will be in place for future connection to Royle School and the Noroton Heights Fire Department.

Planning work continues for the intersection and signal improvements at Noroton Avenue/West Avenue and Noroton Avenue/ Ledge Road. These projects will be funded over the next several years by a combination of state funding and small local contribution. These improvements enhance road performance in connection redevelopment activities in Noroton Heights.

The Old Kings Highway North Bridge over I-95 was completed and work begins soon to replace the Noroton River Bridge. As I reflect on the significant amount of state infrastructure investment here in Darien between bridge, roadway and Noroton Heights Train Station Platform improvements, I believe our collaborative working relationship with the State of Connecticut is serving us very well.

The Noroton Heights Station Area Study was completed in October. Key recommendations were provided for both on and off-site areas and the Noroton Heights Station itself. Consultant proposals have been received for the design of a new station building, expanded platform canopies and new pedestrian bridge. We will work closely with CTDOT and Metro North to help ensure that these needed improvements move forward. All of these recommended improvements coordinate well with proposed commercial redevelopment in the area.

New sidewalk installations were completed on Tokeneke Road and Ledge Road by Post 53 with more new sidewalks planned for Locust Hill and Edgerton in 2019. In response to ongoing resident and business requests, I will be requesting budget dollars for a Master Sidewalk Plan that will include safe walking routes to all of our schools. I look forward to coordinating this master plan with the Board of Education and school administration.

Pedestrian safety improvements are a high priority for our residents. Coordination between our Local Traffic Authority, DPW and the State of Connecticut has resulted in the installation of permanent dynamic speed signs along the Post Road and the installation of an over-height warning system at the railroad overpass. Three independent studies support enhanced pedestrian safety measures along the Route 1 corridor but getting CTDOT support for Post Road crosswalks is elusive. I'm confident that the Baywater redevelopment project will facilitate these much needed safety improvements.

Darien experienced significant flooding rain events in April, June and September. In response, we are working with one homeowner who is seeking FEMA grant funding to raise their home and are undertaking a campaign to educate homeowners on best-practice watercourse management. Please be mindful that grass clippings, leaves and tree limbs in your pond or stream negatively impact your neighbors both up and down stream. In addition, the town will be dredging the sedimentation basin in front of Town Hall and assisting the Friends of Gorham's Pond with the dredging of the sedimentation basin in the Upper Pond. Gorham's Pond is a town treasure...a plan to begin dredging the pond proper is very much needed.

You heard from Chairman Sini that significant storm water systems will be required as part of the redevelopment of the Noroton Heights commercial area. In addition, in 2019, the town will install a new drainage system in the commuter parking area near The Depot. The combined projects by Federal Realty, the Palmer Family and the Town of Darien are anticipated to significantly improve flooding conditions along Heights Road. DPW will also be undertaking a resiliency project to locate and remedy ground water infiltration and illicit connections to our sanitary sewer system.

Darien is leading the way on sustainability initiatives. Thanks, in large part, to the work of our newly renamed Advisory Committee on Sustainability, with Craig Flaherty at the helm, our recycling center is the envy of SWCT. Our new food scrap composting and robust recycling program is saving taxpayers' money through cost avoidance. Thanks to Carolyn Bayne, Pam Sparkman and fellow volunteers who are working hard to make the food scrap composting program a success! The Board of Selectmen recently approved Darien's participation in the SustainableCT program...a voluntary program to enhance municipal sustainability across all areas of government responsibility.

We have already accomplished many things for which we will receive program credit. By spring of 2019, solar installations at the Darien Police Department, Town Hall and Town Garage will be operational with anticipated savings of nearly \$500,000 over 20 years. We've also added a sustainability goal to future capital building projects. As part of our town efforts, I would like to work on developing incentives to further encourage low impact residential and commercial development. Achieving recognition as a "Sustainable Connecticut Town" will be another positive attribute for folks when they are deciding where to buy a home or start a business.

Our police officers both human and K9, 3 all-volunteer fire departments, Post 53 volunteers and Darien Paramedics continue to provide outstanding public protection services to our town. We are fortunate to have Chief Osborne and Captains Anderson and Lawlor leading an exceptional team of skilled law enforcement professionals. Congratulations to Lieutenant Shredders for graduating from the FBI National Academy and to Officer Amanda Hinkley and K9 'Argo' for successfully completing their Patrol Certification. Did you know that you can follow K9s Argo and Kenny on Instagram? The Department received State of Connecticut Tier II Reaccreditation in May and received a Gold Award for achievement in traffic safety this year. Two new officers joined our patrol ranks and are currently completing their field training. Check out the new crime mapping tool our DPD has added to their website. My public service announcement the evening on behalf of our hard-working police department is: Please lock your cars!

The Juvenile Review Board, now in its second year of operation, is proving to be a very successful solution to helping keep kids who get arrested for minor offenses out of the court system. To date, the JRB has adjudicated 18 cases with no repeat offenders. A very positive outcome so far. Thank you to the officers and civilians who volunteer their time to serve on the JRB.

Many parents have contacted me over the past year to talk about school security. Important collaboration is required between Darien Police, First Selectman, District administration and Board of Education on all school safety issues. The current DHS Student Resource Officer program has proven to be a great benefit to our high school environment. Having a specially trained SRO in the high school each day gives students, staff and parents added comfort. We are dedicated to supporting the placement of an SRO at Middlesex Middle School and I am currently working with the Darien Police Department and the school administration to bring this to fruition in the summer of 2019. I welcome the opportunity to engage our parents and Board of Ed in a conversation about school security at our elementary schools. Each city and town has different policy standards for school security. I've suggested that the Council of Small Towns (COST) add to their legislative agenda this year the creation of a statewide school security best-practice template.

Town government works best when in partnership with non-profit organizations. The Darien Library and our places of worship are critical partners in serving the educational and spiritual needs of our community. Thank you to the Darien Athletic Foundation and DAF Media for supporting our student athletes and to The Depot and The Community Fund for their continued commitment to positive youth development; to the Darien Foundation for their grant to improve TV79's operations; to At Home In Darien for their support for our seniors and to the member organizations of the Human Service Planning Council who collaborate to address critical

needs as they arise. The Cemetery Committee continues their hard work cleaning up our historic cemeteries and just in time for our Bicentennial Celebration in the year 2020. Post 53 will turn 50 in 2020 so we will have much to celebrate.

In 2018, I continued my role as Chairman of Western Connecticut Council of Governments (WestCOG) and the Southwest Metropolitan Planning Organization (SWRMPO), Vice-Chairman of Connecticut Interlocal Risk Management Agency (CIRMA) and Board Member of the Connecticut Council of Municipalities (CCM). I'm currently Chairing a CCM task force convened to offer input on addressing the state's pension issues. Having a leadership seat at the regional and state table gives Darien a voice in policy-making. I'm honored to serve you in these capacities beyond my role as your First Selectman.

WestCOG is doing valuable work. We are finding common ground among our 18-town membership on shared service projects like snow plow route optimization, tree canopy analysis, regional GIS, municipal healthcare cost containment and online service delivery. With a stronger majority in Hartford, we may see a renewed push for proportional voting in our COGs. Our small COG towns stand in strong opposition to this effort.

Chairman Zagrodzky's deep dive into our town finances was excellent. There is much to glean from his analysis. Just a few comments from me on the topic.

As the state economy continues to erode and household incomes are negatively affected by federal tax changes and other job market factors, we have seen some weakness in our local and regional real estate market. In Darien, we have 20% more inventory this year over last and sale prices are down by an average of 20%. On a positive note, the October revaluation shows grand list stability and evidences strength in the entry level sector of our market. Darien continues to be the town of choice here in SWCT. Great schools, easy commute, low mill rate and a commitment to thoughtful redevelopment are working in our favor...even the New York Times had great things to say about Darien in yesterday's paper! Darien has always 'sold' itself without much effort but a challenging economy has encouraged a new collaboration between the First Selectman, local developers, the Board of Realtors and the Chamber of Commerce to create a Darien PR campaign. I have a short video to share with you at the conclusion of my remarks.

Our taxpayers generally support our annual town budgets because they know their tax dollars are well-managed and they can see a positive return on their investment. However, we must be mindful that year over year tax increases are unsustainable. I will continue to challenge us to do better.

Darien, we are holding our own. Our own fiscal stability and economic growth has helped us manage significant reductions in state aid while providing the services our residents demand. If we stay the course with discipline and conservative long-range planning, we will not only survive the state's fiscal crisis...we will thrive and continue to be one of the very best towns in which to raise a family and own a business!

Thank you and Merry Christmas!