

State of the Township Address

January 4, 2021

Good Evening.

Thank you for joining us for this year's reorganization meeting. Even though we have been having our Council meetings virtually since March, it is still very strange to not be standing in front of a chamber full of friends, family, colleagues and residents as we start a new year in Bridgewater.

I stood in front of that chamber on January 1st of last year and sometimes it feels like that was a 100 years ago. So much has changed and will continue to change over this new year but I still have hope. Hope that Bridgewater will remain the same place I love and cherish and hope that we, together, can make it even better than it was before the pandemic changed our way of life.

I would like to start by acknowledging the residents Bridgewater for the strength and perseverance that this community has displayed over the course one of the most difficult and trying years any of us could have imagined.

Every resident has been impacted by this pandemic in significant ways, but none more so than the family and friends of the 84 residents we lost this year – mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, brothers, and sisters. Our community will forever grieve this tragic loss of life, and I know that words cannot make up for the loss of a loved one, but I would now ask that everyone lower their head in a moment of silence to remember those that have passed and pray for the enduring strength of our community.

Thank you.

Loss of a loved one is not the only impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly 1,400 residents have contracted COVID-19. Many of our residents in long term care facilities have been unable to see family for months. Residents have lost their jobs or seen the businesses they spent their lifetime building struggling or fail. Our children are not attending full time in-person instruction, and no matter how hard our dedicated and passionate teachers work, remote learning can never replace the in-person educational experience.

However, in the midst of all of this hardship, we have seen dozens of examples of the best of our community. Individuals and groups who have demonstrated the resiliency of the human spirit and the dedication to others that inspires us all.

I would like to start by recognizing all of our front-line first responders and healthcare workers who, while we were able to stay safe in our homes, put their health on the line everyday to help our community. Whether in a hospital, doctor's office, long-term care facility, or COVID testing site, our front-line workers never failed us.

This goes especially to our volunteer Fire and Rescue squads, who, out of the kindness of their hearts and unyielding commitment to our community, put their health at risk on a daily basis. It will take a lot more than this disease to take the spirit and dedication to service from these volunteers. I, on behalf of the Council and all Bridgewater residents, salute and thank you.

And we should not forget those essential workers, like grocery store employees who continued to show up at work to make sure that we continued to have food and essential items at the height of the panic and uncertainty. Nor should we forget our teachers who are trying their best, while managing their own personal struggles, to provide for an environment for our children to learn and grow.

Last, I want to thank our team here in Bridgewater, especially Director of Human Services Christine Madrid and OEM Coordinator, Sgt. Jamie Edwards, Under Christine's management of our health professionals, we've provided statistics and safety information through our Health Educator, implemented a robust contact tracing program with our Communicable Disease Investigator, recommended and implemented internal and external policies to help keep our staff and the public safe when accessing municipal services, and addressed specific COVID-19 related issues as they have arisen. Additionally, our Office of Emergency Management Coordinator, Sgt. Jamie Edwards has ensured that Bridgewater's most vulnerable are being monitored diligently through the Register Ready program. Sgt. Edwards also helped make sure that PPE were available and distributed to Bridgewater first responders, staff, and assisted-living facilities and help direct other needed resources.

A sincere thank you to all our public health officials for all you have done for our community this year.

Lastly, but certainly not least, I need to thank all of you. The residents that make Bridgewater one of the best places to live in America. I have seen some amazing things happen over this past year.

I saw Jennifer Loughran lead the now infamous Mask Squad, who have distributed countless face coverings to members of the community. More than the masks, they helped provide a sense of control, purpose, and hope at our community's darkest hour.

I saw a high school student spearhead blood drives and antibody testing which he led right to fruition.

I saw our Chinese American community pool resources and donate PPE to our Township and first responders.

These are just a few of the countless tales of the everyday heroism that is taking place in Bridgewater.

Thank you to all of our residents who have provided condolences and comfort to those grieving and for inspiring hope to our community.

Municipal governments were no exception to the financial toll of the COVID-19 pandemic. It quickly became clear that the consequences to our Municipal budget were significant.

Bridgewater found itself with an over \$2 million deficit directly related to loss of revenue due to COVID-19, items such as hotel occupancy taxes and profit sharing with the Bridgewater Commons mall. The only thing that was clear about that budget was that we knew that we could not make up our lost revenue solely on the backs of our residents and taxpayers, so many of which were already struggling. We needed to make deep, significant cuts in order to spread the pain in a reasonable and responsible way.

I believe that we achieved a budget that minimized the impact on our residents, in part by reducing spending by \$1.6 million dollars below last year's spending levels. We made tough decisions to ensure that our public would not bear the financial burdens from our lost revenue and we were successful at doing so. I would like to thank the Council, especially the Council Finance Committee, consisting of Howard Norgalis and Filipe Pedroso, for being a dedicated partners throughout the process, and I look forward to continuing our collaboration as we enter a new budget year.

Despite these challenges, we achieved or set in motion several of the initiatives that brought me to this office.

One of these keystone initiatives was the Universal Road Assessment. With the results of this assessment now in hand, we outlined a plan to take a different, decisive approach to tackling the challenge of addressing Bridgewater's infrastructure and the Administration now has a clear path forward. We have created a comprehensive strategy for future Township roadway improvement projects that emphasizes efficiency, economy and transparency for residents. This new approach includes:

- The division of the Township into six unique Road Improvement Regions with the goal of allocating roadwork each year to each area of the Township.
- The design of six road improvement packages, using quantitative data obtained through the Universal Road Assessment, for both engineering and construction which correspond to the six Road Improvement Regions.
- Additional focus on road preservation measures to extend the useful life of all Township roadways
- The building and maintenance of a standalone and publicly available website which is OurBWRoads.com that is now one-stop comprehensive resource for all Township information regarding current and future roadway improvement projects

With the strategy now set, the Bridgewater Township "Road Lottery," which has been coined by many residents, is now over. We have the data and the tools to make meaningful changes to our Township roadways. However, Just like many of the roads in Bridgewater did not crumble over night, the problem will not be fixed over night but the residents of this community deserve a thorough and transparent plan that sets realistic yet aggressive goals. I believe that this will accomplish just that over the course of the next several

years. Thank you to our council for authorizing the funding to conduct the assessment and for their commitment to this strategy moving forward.

Thank you to Director of Municipal Services Tom Genova and Township Engineer Bill Burr for all of their work to make this a reality.

Along with a fundamental change in the way we approach road projects, I believed that the Township needed a fundamental shift in the way that we communicate with our residents. This is why, on day one of this Administration, we reallocated Township resources to create an Office of Constituent Relations. Since January 1st of this year this office has been charged to create a hub for resident complaints, questions and concerns. Too many times over my years on the Township Council did I hear from residents who told me that they had not heard back for the Township on their issues. This was unacceptable to me. Every taxpayer in Bridgewater deserves a response.

That is not to say that we can always provide a response that will make the resident happy or fully resolve their issue. But anyone who takes the time to reach out to the Township deserves a response. The Office of Constituent Relations has also helped us improve and increase our communication through our newly created newsletter, increased content on our website and Facebook pages, and assisted in making meetings virtual.

I plan to continue to build this department in the future to continue to expand the ability to communicate with our residents and to address the issues and questions on the minds of our taxpayers. I want to especially thank Deputy Township Administrator Wells Winegar for spearheading OCR and helping bring this vision to reality.

In addition to being responsive to residents, this Administration and Council have also been dedicated to protecting our quality of life and our safety.

In terms of our resident quality of life, our focus has been our fight against overdevelopment in Bridgewater and nothing exemplifies that mission more than the ongoing legal battle with Advance Realty and their plans for the Center for Excellence site.

This year, we refused to back down to Advance Realty's attempts to void some of the limited protections imposed by the prior Planning Board. We fought Advance Realty in court, and after a trial the Superior Court upheld the Township's position, and required Advance Realty to come back before the newly constituted Planning Board. That board was expanded last year to provide for additional resident participation and more voices to be heard. Rather than face the Planning Board for final approvals of the Supermarket and hotel, Advance Realty has appealed the decision.

While I support appropriate development of the COE site, I will not support the current proposal and will use every tool at my disposal to fight this application in every forum where there is an opportunity to do so. We will continue to fight this appeal, and I am confident we will win.

Hand in hand with quality of life concerns, like overdevelopment, is public safety. Without the safety and security provided by our police department, roads, parks, recreation – it doesn't matter. Nothing is more important than the safety of our community, and I will never backdown from supporting the men and women of the Bridgewater Police Department who provided that safety to all of us.

I firmly believe that we have one of the best law enforcement agencies in the country. And it's not just me... I cannot tell you the pride that I have driving around Bridgewater and seeing the results of the organic, resident driven campaign to put out "I support Bridgewater PD" lawn signs all over town. Thank you to all of our residents who support our men and women in blue.

The key to a great police department is efficient and effective leadership and we have that in spades with our new Police Chief Paul Payne and his command staff.

Chief Payne has brought a fresh vision to the agency and has accomplish much in his first year as Chief.

Within weeks when I took office last year, Chief Payne implemented key scheduling changes I had advocated for as a councilman.

This allowed us to put significantly more officers on the road. With what is referred to as the Pitman schedule, depending on what time of day you are talking about, it increases our police coverage anywhere from 25% to 63%. It is a significant increase in public safety for our residents. And in light of scheduling challenges from COVID, this was a true game changer to ensure we had the manpower necessary.

We have also dedicated additional efforts to processing our residents' firearm applications. In a timely manner. This year we saw applications for firearms, up from 2019. The Second Amendment is as important as any of our other rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights, and we will continue to strive to make sure that we reduced any barriers at the municipal level to our residents accessing those rights.

As we have all seen, 2020 has been a difficult year to be in law enforcement. Actions taken by individual police officers have tarnished the profession for the good, caring officers who are just trying to do their best to serve the community.

I have confidence in every man and woman in our Police Department but that does not mean that we have to be complacent. We can always be better and together with Chief Payne's and senior officer leadership, and the leadership of the PBA, we have taken proactive steps to move our department stronger and our community safer.

The PBA led an effort to increase their use of force training and conducted specialized training with Igor Gracie from the legendary Renzo Gracie Academy in New York to learn the basic fundamentals of Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and grappling. This will help our officers deal more safely with non-compliant suspects.

Additionally, the Police Department also purchased state-of-the-art training tool called the Street Smart VR (Virtual Reality) System.

The system provides hundreds of training scenarios, acquired through body-worn camera footage, to put officers through real life situations. The equipment is portable and can be set up almost anywhere. The training session is recorded which allows for a playback critique session with the officers from multiple angles and in-depth reference points.

Although "shoot, don't shoot" scenarios are part of VR training, various other training situations such as mental health dilemmas, active protest situations, and non-compliant suspects are encompassed in the training. It is difficult for instruction led classroom environments to provide this new level of training. VR

training allows for customized real-world training that can match real-life situations but are in an arena that allows the officer to correct his or her mistakes and reinforce proper displays of force.

A bonus to acquiring the Street Smarts VR system is allowing the community a glimpse into the world of law enforcement. By allowing members of the community to take part in the VR training, when the pandemic allows, we can potentially widen the dialogue between the community and the police when it comes to the proper application of use of force in tense situations.

So while an emphasis on new and enhanced training techniques is critical, we also have to understand that a police officer cannot be trained for every situation. Sometimes, either suspects or victims require additional emotional and mental support that goes beyond the capabilities of an officer.

That is why the chief spearheaded a initiative called the Police Chaplaincy Program which was passed into ordinance late this year with the support of our council

This allows our Department to recruit members of our religious institutions that, beyond being available for special events, can help people in crisis, in real time. We have also established regular meetings with leaders from the religious communities in our Township to talk about issues in our community and to engage in a dialogue with the administration, police department, and community leaders. I applaud the Chief and his command staff for working so diligently with our houses of worship and getting this done for our community.

Last, but certainly not least, we have partnered with Somerset County to establish a pilot program to partner with social workers to provide help to residents in need of additional care, such as substance abuse, domestic

violence, or mental health concerns. As a councilman, I first learned about a similar program called On P.O.I.N.T.” (Proactive Outreach in Needs and Treatment) program, first implemented in Stafford Township..I have fought for this program for two years, and I am encouraged that the County seems ready to be a partner in this initiative.

I will continue fighting for this and any other tool that I believe our brave police officers need to do their job for the residents of Bridgewater.

Thank you to Chief Payne and all of our officers for all that you have accomplished this year.

The sense of community is one of the things that I believe separates Bridgewater from other towns and community events are the best way to build that camaraderie.

When I came into office, one of my goals was to re-imagine old traditions and create new ones for all Bridgewater residents.

As we all know, the pandemic has made that goal a difficult one to achieve fully. We were, however, able to set the stage for a couple of these events by starting, mostly virtually, a Christmas Tree lighting and a Menorah lighting at the Municipal Complex for the holiday season. These events will now be pillars of the season in Bridgewater and I look forward to having the entire community participate in 2021.

We have also gotten creative with our newly formed Bridgewater Veterans Advisory Committee, or BVAC, who helped us conduct small ceremonies for both Memorial Day and Veterans Day which we filmed, edited and released to our community. I look forward to BVAC continuing to innovate the way in which we honor, celebrate and serve those who have served us so bravely.

I look forward to the Township hosting more events that will celebrate the history and diversity of our great community in 2021, including possibly a Bridgewater Founder's Day, and a Bridgewater Day of Service.

There is a lot to look forward to in 2021 but the challenges that the Township faces do not end with the turning of the calendar year.

The COVID-19 pandemic will continue to reap havoc on sources of Township revenue and will, again, face a difficult budget landscape in 2021.

We have attempted to get ahead of these financial realities by using any and all tools at the Township's disposal including:

- The sale of the Redwood Inn property for residential development
- The sale of a package liquor license
- Diligent and thoughtful application for Federal, State and County aid

I also advocated hard for the State to pass legislation for municipalities to apply to Coronavirus Relief Bonds to help make up for lost revenue over 5 years.

I, along with the Council, pursued these so that we do not have to pass a large tax increase on to you. We will do everything in our power and ability to prevent our financial burden to be passed to our residents.

Conversely, outside of the scope of the pandemic, we are quickly approaching a crisis in the Township's Sewer Utility. Over the past decade, the Township has not raised the flat rate at which we charge our residents while absorbing fee increases from our regional sewerage commission.

Changes are needed...and not small ones. This is not the politically expedient thing for me to say but I strongly believe that I was elected to solve tough problems and make difficult decisions.

Sewers are not an exciting" thing to talk about and they are often ignored until catastrophe strikes. I will not allow us to make that mistake.

In the coming months, we will engage in public forums to discuss how to best address the dire infrastructure and revenue needs that the system will need to remain effective and solvent. We will look at every solution, including the possibility of selling our system or changing the way in which we calculate sewer rates, to make sure that our sewer infrastructure is properly maintained and operational for our residents.

While we continue to grapple with these challenges, we also need to continue to improve as a government.

We need to take a deep look into reviewing and updating the Township Master Plan. This is critical for us as we need to look holistically about the future of Bridgewater and what we want our community to look like for years to come.

We will begin the process of an update to our open space and recreation master plan to address all of our open space needs, including, finally, moving forward with a long-term vision and plan for Camp Cromwell.

We also enhance our ability to serve the public.

Upgrading our website is near the top of that list. It is difficult for us to be transparent to our residents when we have a website that is so unorganized and difficult to navigate.

More and more as time goes on, residents rely on our website for important information and the current interface leaves people frustrated and uninformed.

I hope to change this in 2021 and use additional technologies to streamline any and all processes for our residents.

Another important area to me is an increased focus on substance abuse awareness and bringing forth Township resources to help individuals and families that are going through crisis while helping to prevent addiction before it starts.

Across the country, overdose deaths are going through the roof as this pandemic and the correlating shutdowns have exacerbated mental health and addiction issues.

I will bring a new focus to our Municipal Alliance and if the lack of State funding continues, I will consider investing in programs at the Township level.

We also need to find ways to help stimulate our small business community. This sector of the economy has been decimated by this pandemic and the massive shutdowns that have ensued. I, along with several other Mayors, established Mayors for Main Street in May and have been advocating our State officials for relief to these businesses.

There are things that we can do in Bridgewater too.

We have started the process of re-invigorating our Shop Bridgewater program which drives business to our local small businesses while giving discount and property tax relief to our residents.

We are planning on engaging our restaurant to start an inaugural "Bridgewater Restaurant Week" to drive business to these struggling establishments and we will continue to think about new an innovative way to help buoy these businesses that are the life blood of our community and economy.

These, along with many others, will be what I want our Administration and council to focus on in 2021.

Like I said earlier, Bridgewater faces many challenges, like all towns in this day in age, but I still have hope. I encourage everyone listening to have hope because only through a positive outlook, can we see now unrealized opportunities and possibilities for our entire community.

I would once again thank out Township Council because none of this progress could have been accomplished without your diligence and vision.

Thank you all for coming today, albeit virtually and for allowing me the honor of being your Mayor.

God Bless you, your families, Bridgewater Township and the United States of America.

Thank you.

