



State of the Township Address

Mayor Matthew Moench

January 5th, 2023

Prepared remarks

Good evening, Council President Kirsh, members of the Council, family, friends, appointees, and members of our community. It is amazing to me to think that the last time I stood before you in person at a Bridgewater reorganization was the day Michael, Tim and I were sworn-in: January 1, 2020. We collectively stood here, along with our council colleagues, with energy, ideas, and goals we promised to deliver for the residents of Bridgewater.

While we certainly could not have predicted the COVID pandemic which would forever change our very culture, we knew there would be challenges. We knew there would be obstacles to overcome for our residents. Nevertheless, our Bridgewater community rose to meet those challenges, and we delivered on the things we promised on January 1st, 2020: Maintaining low taxes, improving our roads and infrastructure, fighting overdevelopment, enhancing safety, and constituent services.

Most importantly we promised to preserve our quality of life and to strengthen the ties that bind us as a community. Whether those bonds are the roads that literally connect our community, coming together for our first annual Menorah lighting, or gathering for last year's 129th reading of the Declaration of Independence at the Middlebrook encampment, building those shared values, experiences and vision for the future is critical to the quality of life we enjoy and the future of the township.

Over the past year, and the two that preceded it, we have worked hard to deliver on the promises we made the last time we stood before you. I'm proud of the work we did 2022 and the work we are going to do in 2023.

One of the many issues which unites and binds us is our appreciation for the quality of life here in Bridgewater and our collective desire to protect that which we love. In January 2020, our community was facing an overdevelopment crisis; one that threatened to change the quality of our life for the future. The Center of Excellence loomed large over the future prosperity of Bridgewater. In fact, it would have been the largest redevelopment in Bridgewater since the Bridgewater Commons Mall. We were looking at 400 apartments, a mega-supermarket, hotels, strip malls, and all the traffic that comes

with it. When coupled with several other approved and proposed projects, Bridgewater faced the potential for more than 1200 additional housing units, and a drastic change in the character of our suburban community.

46,000 people call Bridgewater home, and whether you're from Bradley Gardens, Martinsville or Finderne, there is a character to our community which binds us together, and which we must not surrender it to anyone. Allow me to make a crucial distinction: *Development* is an economic reality, and the mark of a vibrant community. *Overdevelopment* is a scourge on suburban and rural communities everywhere. **And let me be perfectly, unmistakably clear: any administration which fails to protect the people of Bridgewater from overdevelopment is bankrupt of leadership, devoid of credibility, and completely mistaken in its vision for our community.**

That is why we refused to back down in the fight against the Center of Excellence, **and we won.**

For two years we fought to address this problem: we did so in the courtroom and across the negotiating table. In June of last year, the Council and I stood before you and announced that we had reached a resolution to stop Center of Excellence mixed used development and revert the project back to what it was and should be - primarily a research and development facility for our bio-tech and life sciences industry. This project will support our tax base, provide high-paying jobs, eliminate impacts on our schools, and reduce traffic from the previously approved project.

However, we cannot simply look to the past, but must address the future threats to our community. That is why this past year the Council passed an ordinance which eliminated warehousing as a primary use for commercial properties in Bridgewater. This critical change means that companies cannot come into Bridgewater promising to bring in viable, community-friendly development, and then turn around and instead build a gigantic Amazon warehouse without the explicit approval of our land use boards.

And let me be frank: the land use boards have been vigorous and their opposition to ill-conceived projects which would harm the character of our community. I would like to specifically thank the Board Chairs, Jeff Foose, the Chairman of our Zoning Board, and Maricio Vecsio, the Chairman of our Planning Board. I appreciate and acknowledge their leadership, and they can count on the unwavering support of this Administration in their efforts. Bridgewater residents and Bridgewater residents alone must decide what development fits in with our community—and there are no exceptions.

Please don't get me wrong: we are proud to host a thriving local economy which is the envy of many towns our size in New Jersey. We are happy that many cutting-edge biopharmaceutical and technology companies call Bridgewater home. But there are limits, and as long as I sit in this office, we will *not* sacrifice the character of this community for *any* development project.

This year we will also continue to work towards a comprehensive Master Plan update to make sure that our vision for the future growth and development of Bridgewater matches our vision for our community, and to ensure that we protect the quality of life for our residents with appropriate planning and development.

We will also complete a recreation and open space master plan in 2023, which will provide for the future protection, acquisition, and use for our open space and recreation properties, including the opening of Camp Cromwell and the future uses of that property.

However, we won't wait to make improvements while the long-term plans are finalized. Instead, we will continue to look for opportunities to improve our parks. For instance, in the near future new playground equipment is coming to both Alfred Brown park & Harry Ally park.

One of the impacts of overdevelopment is the wear and tear it takes on our roads and infrastructure. In January 2020, one of the things I think nearly every resident would agree on was that our infrastructure was in disrepair and in desperate need of true investment and planning. We promised to address the issue and have done so.

Together with the Council, we embarked on a five year plan to completely reinvigorate Bridgewater's 630 different township roads, constituting 250 miles of roadway. We utilized proper planning, based on objective criteria and engineering analysis to identify priority roads and develop a sound plan. We utilized more efficient engineering plans and aggressive bidding to obtain favorable pricing and more efficient services to stretch each taxpayer dollar further. Overall, the council and administration committed to a 5-year investment into our roads and the results are already felt by our community.

And this whole process has been entirely transparent for our residents—we have an entire website dedicated to tracking the progress of these road repair projects, so that residents know exactly what we've accomplished and what work remains to be done.

In the four years before I took office, the Township averaged making repairs to just over 21 roads annually. In the three years since, we have repaired or restored 146 roads, or just over 49 roads annually. By the end of this year, which will be year three of the five year plan, we will have made improvements to **nearly 200** of our township roads. .

When it comes to infrastructure, we cannot neglect drainage and the impact it has on our community. If you look at a topographical map, you will see immediately that as much as we rely on our roadways to connect us, Bridgewater is also very much connected by water. The drainage system in this Township flows from the highest parts of Washington Valley Road straight down to Finderne Avenue—and *all of it* is interconnected and interdependent. Hurricane Ida demonstrated that for us, at costs of tragic proportions.

This interconnected drainage system had also long been neglected, and is in dire need of assessment and modification. This past year, we partnered with the Natural

Resource Conservation Service of the federal government to address several critical drainage projects within the Township affordably and efficiently. The project on Blossom Drive off of Washington Valley Road is of particular importance; storm erosion has turned what used to be a babbling brook into a 25 foot-deep gorge which is still growing wider and deeper by the day. At very long last, that project will begin construction very soon— with 75% of the cost borne by the federal government.

We continue to work toward a Universal Drainage Assessment for a comprehensive approach to drainage in our community and are working with other state and federal agencies to arrive at a cost-sharing agreement for a universal drainage survey of the Township, so we can make an empirical assessment about our drainage system and prioritize effectively.

Finally, while we can all be thankful for improved roads, less development, and improvements to parks, if we are not safe in our community nothing else matters. One thing which connects absolutely every resident of Bridgewater from our youngest to our oldest is that we are all, every single one of us, served and protected by the men and women of the Bridgewater Police Department, and our many wonderful volunteer fire departments and rescue squads. We are incredibly fortunate to have some many dedicated individuals who give up their time, safety, and comfort for us.

I would like to take a second to once again welcome Chief Mitzak into his new role. John has served the citizens of Bridgewater with unbroken fidelity for 25 years, and we are all tremendously proud and pleased to be able to call him Chief. I know he has a vision for the future of this department, and I have all the confidence in the world that he and Captains Tenent and Savare will implement it effectively.

And let us never fail to recognize or acknowledge exactly how fortunate we are. The Bridgewater Police Department is a world-class law enforcement organization. Chief Mitzak, his command team, and all the officers who serve under them are a credit to Bridgewater and to their profession. They enjoy the unanimous support, trust and confidence of this Administration, our Township Council and our residents.

As much as we strive to maintain the character of Bridgewater, the world around us is changing, and it is no surprise that our public safety practices must evolve with it. While I was a Councilman, I advocated to create a program modeled off one in Stafford Township down in Ocean County, which partnered a social worker with the police force to help address mental health in the community.

In 2021, we were able to get this program off the ground with the help of Somerset County, and last year we were proud to have the first county pilot program based out of Bridgewater led by Bridgewater's own Dameon Stackhouse. Dameon and the Community Police Alliance have already done great work for our community and we look forward to the great work they will do in the year to come. Dameon and Officer Barnett will be collaborating to launch a new program targeting disaffected and isolated youth in Bridgewater, which will be funded by a grant pursued by the Office of Constituent Relations.

Providing for the safety of our community is my number one priority. Today, our police and our community face many more challenges than they ever have before. That is why, in partnership with the BPD, my Administration will be launching the BridgewaterSHIELD initiative.

What does a responsible law enforcement agency owe to the residents it serves? BridgewaterSHIELD is the answer to that question.

Security. Honesty. Integrity. Expertise. Loyalty. Discipline.

BridgewaterSHIELD will be an initiative running across the full spectrum of police-resident relations. It will be a platform through which the police department and the Township government collaborate to deliver those values to our residents. It will involve vastly expanded Community Policing initiatives, greater outreach into the community, more neighborhood patrols, and more proactive policing. We will also continue to aggressively address the rash of car burglaries which disrupts our community and many other communities in New Jersey. We already obtained license plate reader surveillance cameras to help identify stolen cars coming into our community, and are looking at amending local ordinances to provide additional police powers to address car thefts before they happen. We are investigating tools for combating the thefts of catalytic converters, and will make sure our residents' processing of personal firearm permits are as expeditious as is within our control.

All of this and more will fall under the BridgewaterSHIELD initiative, and I am looking forward to pursuing its implementation later this year.

It is our job to fight for our community and to deliver on the promises we made. I am proud of our accomplishments in 2022, and look forward to more achievements in the year ahead. We have invested in our community and the things that bind us together. Our roads. Our environment. The character of our community. Our law enforcement. Our different cultures, religions and traditions. Our recreation. These are the things which make us who we are, which connect us together, and in which we are proud to have invested so heavily since I have been Mayor. Those investments will continue—and expand—this coming year.

Before I conclude, I would be remiss if I did not recognize all the people who have been instrumental in making those investments, and who will remain so as we renew our efforts this year. Administrator Mike Pappas, Deputy Administrator Wells Winegar, Township Clerk Linda Doyle, Director of Municipal Services Tom Genova, Director of Health and Human Services Christine Madrid, DPW Superintendent Dicky Shimp, Township Engineer Bill Burr, Recreation Superintendent Rachel Barrett—there are so many more, and I would be up here all day if I mentioned by name everyone who deserves to be. Let it be known that I thank them all on behalf of our residents, and appreciate deeply all the efforts and energy they pour into the betterment of Bridgewater.

I also want to thank the Council. Allen, Howard, Michael, Tim and Filipe have been instrumental in their partnership, and inspirational in their vision for Bridgewater.

Most importantly, I want to thank my wife Stephanie, and my three children. Without them, I would not be here—and, speaking only for myself, there wouldn't be any reason for me to be.

Finally, I want to thank all of the residents of Bridgewater for entrusting me with the leadership of our beloved town. It is a privilege I have never taken and will never take lightly, and I am humbled to stand up here and address you once again as the Mayor of this wonderful Township. May God bless all of you, may He bless Bridgewater Township, and may he forever shed His grace on the United States of America. Thank you.