

The State of the Town

February 9, 2021

What we accomplished during a very challenging 2020

2020 was a challenging year for the Town of Greenwich. Our long serving administrator and Budget Officer and our Town Judge both retired. Two huge positions to fill. Fortunately, we were able to find two great candidates to fill those positions.

Our next hurdle: create a budget for 2021 with falling revenues in 2020 and in 2021. We had to put the Town on a business-like footing. To accomplish this, we were forced to ask a number of questions that had gone unanswered in the past ... not to micromanage the organization but to find a solution to this difficult and unprecedented problem. We can report mission accomplished: we have an acceptable budget given the trying circumstances.

We also took a strong stand against the defacing of political signs and the painting of racist comments on a local residence. There is no place in Greenwich for such criminal behavior.

Then COVID-19 hit. We were one of the first Towns to declare a State of Emergency and to implement the administrative changes required to deal with the pandemic we never closed the Town's office. The Highway Department continued to provide services to our citizens. We handed out over 3000 masks. Worked with community groups to assist senior citizens. Mailed facemasks and information sheets with emergency contact information. Offered safety checks.

In spite of the pandemic, we safely conducted the only summer youth program in the area. 56 children participated in this program and got to swim and play outdoors!

We improved the Battenkill Park, built a new playground for our kids. Started planning the renovation of the building at Hudson Riverside Park to convert it into a community center, and continued planning for other park improvements, such as a pavilion, a parking area, a dog park, and other amenities.

Our Review of the Town's Comprehensive Plan.

We reviewed the 2004 Comprehensive Plan, our most recent plan. It identified what Greenwich lacked and what it needed in the future. Simply, it pointed out a direction, for the Town's future. Here is what the plan said about the future of our town:

“The number one challenge for the Town of Greenwich is to maintain the rural character while coping with growth....where to allow it and what kind of development should be allowed and/or encouraged while maintaining the Town’s character.”

“Another challenge is to provide for affordable housing while not disturbing the rural landscape and associated qualities that make Greenwich special. A component of affordable housing is smaller lots, which are more densely situated and have community sewer and water services.”

“Finally, taxes are perceived as a problem.... Adding to the taxpayer’s irritation is the fact that the tax base is generated mostly through residential property taxes.... industrial businesses can provide a healthy contribution to a Town’s tax budget...., the presence of successful industries can provide opportunities for employment to local residents.”

[The entire 2004 Comprehensive Plan is available on the Town’s website.]

Sixteen years later the challenges remain precisely the same.

The community remains in favor of maintaining Greenwich’s rural character. However, the property tax burden continues to fall overwhelmingly on residential property owners. At the same time there continues to be a need for housing, not only for seniors but also for graduates and workers who want to continue living here. Addressing these challenges is long overdue. We must begin the planning and groundwork now.

We must put town management on a business-like footing and address the residential tax burden.

To accomplish both of the above goals, we must end the practice of annually increasing the budget up to and occasionally exceeding the tax cap. We must live within our means. To do this we created a budget that prioritized expenditures as “must have” or “like to have” in order to make the choices necessary to avoid budget increases. By prioritizing “like to have” spending [referred to as “discretionary funding”], we were able to maintain the most desirable “like to have” programs and stay within the budget.

For example, we found funds to continue the summer swim program which was on the verge of being abandoned. We also found money to clean up the Battenkill Park and install brand new playground equipment. Prioritizing does not always mean eliminating programs but instead getting the most bang for our tax dollars. The net result was no increase in the budget.

To put the Town’s management on a business-like footing and provide true transparency, we provide a report of the Town’s finances and future revenue projections on the Town’s website each month. In these times of economic turmoil, much of it caused by the pandemic, the public must know where and on what their tax dollars are spent and the potential impact of those expenditures

on future budgets.

To improve the management of the Town's business, we instituted several policies designed to evaluate proposed expenditures before they are made.

Our Grant-Review Committee is now charged with reviewing proposed grants for both short- and long-term cost-benefit to the Town. Because of one such grant review analysis, the Town council rejected a grant for a study that would ultimately have led to a potential commitment for several hundred thousand dollars that the Town was not ready to undertake. In another case, such analysis led to the Council to approve a water line study.

To ensure that discretionary funds are spent as proposed by organizations seeking Town funding, we instituted a new Discretionary Fund Policy. This new policy requires organizations seeking financial support from the Town submit financial data supporting their request and if granted to enter into a contract that ensures the funds are spent as proposed. This policy conforms to State Comptroller requirements and should have been implemented years ago.

As part of placing the Town's government on a more business-like footing and better coordinate the maintenance of our roads, public buildings, and parks with all the other services provided by the Town, we are proposing that the Highway Superintendent for the Town of Greenwich be appointed rather than elected. Today in New York State, all counties, cities, and villages appoint their Highway Superintendents. If you live on a State road, a County road, or a Village road, you already have an appointed Highway Superintendent. In New York State only Towns have elected Highway Superintendents. We have published the factors you should consider when determining whether or not you would like your Highway Superintendent appointed or elected.

Our critical needs must be addressed.

The simple fact is that without any increase in commercial and industrial development the residential homeowner is destined to bear the lion's share of the Town's real property taxes, which are now about 70% of the Town's revenue. As the Town's budget grows so will the homeowner's property taxes. The answer, as the 2004 Comprehensive Plan unconditionally stated, is to add commercial and industrial businesses to the tax base.

Rental Housing continues to be severely lacking for young couples, graduates, people who wish to live and work in Greenwich and seniors wanting to downsize and move to apartments. Again, this was pointed out in the 2004 Comprehensive Plan. We must find ways to develop rental housing as soon as possible and since rental housing requires infrastructure and services, that developed must be close to the commercial zone and Village.

Two Immediate steps: Review water needs and the Comprehensive Plan.

Both business interests and planners agree that municipal water is a key element in attracting both businesses and building apartment housing. For Greenwich that means bringing municipal water out to the Route 29 & 40 circle and north on Route 40 to the end of the Commercial Zone. As a first step we engaged a firm to conduct a water line study and potential funding options, as part of our long-term plan.

Although we believe that the challenges facing Greenwich in 2004 are much the same today, an update to the Plan is definitely in order. Planners advocate updating Comprehensive Plans at least every 10 years while every 5 to 7 years is better. We have already arranged for a grant request to fund an update to our current plan and as soon as approved we will appoint a Comprehensive Plan Committee to get it rolling.

Our Focus on a new Comprehensive Plan.

We will ask the Comprehensive Plan Committee to focus on the impact of land use and land regulations on business and housing development. In particular, we will ask the Committee to review our laws and regulations for those requirements that make opening new businesses in the Town difficult or even impossible. For example, today we have a parking requirement that led to a new business to open in Easton instead of Greenwich and cost our Town over \$800,000 in taxable assessment.

For housing, we will ask the Committee to review the current rules and recommend changes to expand the area for multi-family dwellings outside the Village but still close to essential services such as, shopping while, most importantly, not causing a disproportionate intrusion on the Agricultural Zone.

Our Quality of Life.

While we do spend a lot of time addressing the Town's economy and taxes, we do not intend to ignore its quality of life, for quality of life is very important to both our present and future residents and is a vital aspect of the Town's attractiveness. As mentioned, we made a number of improvements to the Battenkill Park, including a new playground which families are finding attractive. Our next target is the Hudson Riverside Park on County 113. Presently it is, well simply a mess, with several dilapidated buildings and grounds that need cleanup and rebuilding. Frankly, the remaining grant funding will not cover all the necessary improvements and the Town cannot sell the parcel because of conditions in the purchase agreement.

Instead, we plan to use the remaining funds in the grant to refurbish one building and make *it* into a community center. In the future, we would like to add more facilities for public use such as a pavilion for picnics and gatherings, a dog-park and playground equipment. But that's in the future. Some of improvements can be done within the next year.

What are our choices today?

Greenwich has a reputation for its quality of life. To many that means an agricultural landscape, open spaces, parks, and access to essential services. However, maintaining the town costs money and the costs for essential services such as highway maintenance, park maintenance, employee salaries and benefits and fire protection keep going up. Added to those costs are the "like to have" costs such as the library, youth and senior programs, cemetery fund and the like. We have two choices: continue as we have in the past which will lead to increased residential property taxes and eventual reduced services, or through improved management, careful budgeting, and enhanced revenue as we have outlined above maintain the present and build for the future.

Our goal will always be to retain Greenwich's character and enhance its future while finding ways to give homeowner a tax break through good management and responsible budgeting.

Epilogue for 2020.

Last year was a year for the ages... a year that will never be forgotten, especially by those, who endured lifestyle changes to a degree never imagined. It was a year from the Twilight Zone ... with debilitating illness, difficult grocery shopping, family separations, school disruptions, cancelled sporting events, curtailed youth activities and business owners facing unimaginable obstacles! And sadly, some of us mourn the passing of loved ones ... the victims of this terrible pandemic and quarantines we all have had to endure.

But there is hope! The American Spirit endures and has not wavered. We are tenaciously fighting back and defeating this terrible pandemic. We've developed tests, better treatments, and vaccines ... all in record time. We are standing at the precipice of defeating this plague. We are a tough and resilient people. We never accept defeat and through strength of character, we will return to a time when we can hug, watch our kids go to school and out to play with their friends ... a time when we can enjoy the simple things of life bequeathed to us by our Forefathers: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. Through God's providence, in 2021 we will return to "The Good Old Days."

May God Bless our citizens and Our Great Town of Greenwich.

Don Ward, Greenwich Town Supervisor