

STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS 2005

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We are on the cusp of remarkable changes in the Town of Orangetown. Many of the projects that have been planned and worked on for many years are about to come to fruition and bring with them substantial tax rateables and uses that will benefit all town residents. I will speak more about our major project – the development of the RPC site – at the end of my remarks.

Taxation and Budgeting

Our first obligation is to ensure that Orangetown remains an affordable place to live and raise our families. It is a goal that does not change regardless of the projects on our plate.

That charge has been severely challenged in recent years, largely by factors out of our control. Orangetown, and towns of similar size across New York State, have been hit hard by dramatic increases in health insurance costs and substantial increases in payments to the state's pension system – about \$2 million in the last area alone. But residents have said to us in many ways – including the defeat of our recreational bond in the fall – that the causes of our cost increases are not as important as the solutions and our willingness to address them. They care about the bottom line.

Last year, the Town Board passed a budget that reflected a tax increase of 5.5% - nothing to boast about, yet, as a means of comparison, the lowest percentage increase of any of the five towns in Rockland. In part, this was achieved because we employed conservative budgeting practices a year before. Unlike other municipalities, we are not issuing bonds to cover the increased pension costs. Although this required the bitter pill of a double-digit tax increase for the 2004 budget year, it followed the strong recommendation of the New York State Comptroller and allowed our bond ratings to remain strong at AA3. The increase in 2005, therefore, was more modest.

Working Smarter

The total number of town employees has been stationary for a number of years, in part because the Town has used technology to work smarter and because we have asked our department heads to do more with less, even as our population has increased.

For the Police Department in 2005, this will mean radio upgrades and the upgrade of mobile data terminals. It is also likely to include new scheduling software. For the Building Department, this means new permit software, grant-funded computers and the continuing development of the on-line permit information system, the first in the nation. The Finance Office will implement new software for accounts receivable and purchase orders which will allow departments to submit purchase orders electronically and dramatically reduce paperwork.

We have already implemented electronic banking for all of the Town's bank accounts and the Finance Office is investigating credit card payment for other Town services.

New Website

The introduction of a new website for Orangetown.com will replace the Town's four linked but separate websites and may include on-line registration for parks and our golf courses. Forms will be easily downloaded, and up-to-date information on current Town issues will be available.

Revitalization of Hamlet Centers

We have made good progress in the revitalization of our hamlet centers. New sidewalks were installed in Sparkill. In Tappan, working with the County, all overhead wires and poles will be removed and brick pavers will be installed. This area - one of our two historic districts - will then have an appearance more in keeping with its historic heritage. Through the foresight of the Tappan Volunteer Fire Department, additional municipal parking will be made available in the near future.

In Pearl River, streetscape improvements have also been completed, including pavers, and street lighting through the efforts of our Town Highway and Sewer Departments in collaboration with the Pearl River Chamber of Commerce. We will strive to work more closely with the Chamber to address the mix of businesses to insure Pearl River's revitalization and address outstanding parking issues.

Senior Housing Development

Our senior housing projects are in different stages of fits and starts, but all of the projects that have been presented are better than first proposed because the Town Board had the foresight to pass the Planned Adult Community (PAC) zone. This insures that the highest quality housing will be available to Orangetown residents and we hope to have those projects approved as quickly and responsibly as possible.

Drainage Issues

The Town Board will discuss the creation of a drainage district to address our most serious flooding problems early in the new year. Work is proceeding on perhaps the most challenging problem area - the Cherry Brook drainage system - and other areas will be addressed as well.

Sewer System Accounting and Overhaul

The Town's new five-year capital improvement plan will be presented later this winter. It will include the upgrading of our sewer system infrastructure. The plan will allow us to properly schedule the financing of these improvements over time so we can make use of various funding mechanisms, including the State's revolving loan fund.

It is anticipated that before the end of the winter we will announce a major overhaul of our sewer system accounting. This will allow for a more equitable distribution of sewer charges based on usage. In some cases, it is projected to actually reduce residents' sewer taxes, even after major improvements are included. Finally, we are hopeful that we will soon reach an agreement with our four River Villages and Upper Nyack on a long-standing sewer dispute.

Regional Issues

It was announced recently that the New York State Department of Transportation has taken the lead in the Tappan Zee Bridge/ I-287 Corridor project. This is potentially good news since DOT has spoken favorably about a rail link across the Hudson. Many of us are concerned, however, about funding. Our fear is that if the mass transit component is promoted without first securing federal funding, we may simply end up with additional vehicular travel lanes and more sprawl. We will continue to advocate for mass transit as a major ingredient of the overall solution for the region.

The final status of the Millennium Pipeline has yet to be determined and we will monitor those developments.

And on Indian Point: although some of the most pressing safety and security needs at the plant have recently been addressed by Entergy, the evacuation plan is still unacceptable and unworkable; the fact that a nuclear plant is within 25 miles of the largest metropolitan area can not change. The only solution is for the plant to close or convert to other means of delivering energy.

Another issue that appears to have no municipal boundaries is hate crimes which have appeared in Orangetown and in other areas of Rockland County and the region. We have and we must speak with one voice in condemning these acts for what they are: crimes of hate and cowardice that will not be tolerated in our community.

RPC Development

Our greatest challenge remains the development of surplus land at Rockland Psychiatric Center. We have already accomplished a lot: we purchased the property from the state so we could determine our own destiny; we wrote a master plan that protects the most environmentally sensitive land, especially around the Lake; we developed a recreational plan; and we signed an historic agreement with our volunteer

fire and emergency service representatives to provide for urgently needed affordable housing. Nine developers have been short-listed to five and, in about two weeks we hope to approve the final request for proposals for those five developers to tackle. We expect, ultimately, that senior housing will be augmented and commercial development will occur at this critically important site. This will bring substantial tax rateables to the Town and continue to help us stabilize taxes. At the same time, we understand the importance of working with developers to craft proposals that are consistent with the suburban nature of the Town of Orangetown.

It is crucial that we critically review and evaluate every element of the proposals that we receive and that we negotiate in the best interests of the Town. You have our commitment that we will make this our top priority and will produce the best proposal for the Town.

RPC Recreation

Recreation has been the subject of much discussion in an environment of hope and controversy. We are moving forward on readying land at two locations at RPC, so that our burgeoning sports leagues can accommodate all who want to play.

We should not lose sight of the goal: to provide the maximum opportunity for our youth and those who are young at heart to fully participate in recreation at the most economical cost. It is not really important to the kid on the soccer field, or the little league field or the basketball what the name of their league is; what's important to them, and what must be the only criterion for us, is to keep the fundamental goals in mind.

In addition, we will work with the community to see if there is any economically acceptable way to provide the amenities that were the subject of a bond vote this past fall. The defeat of the recreational referendum was discouraging for thousands of Orangetown residents, and we will try to reach a consensus, through a dialogue and consensus building process with the community as to how we should proceed.

Governmental Integrity

Overlaying all of these issues – particularly relevant when selecting appointees to our land use boards – is to ensure that the integrity of the governmental and appointment process be maintained at all times. There are several appointments coming up on our land use boards. It is critically important that we appoint individuals who are committed to ensuring a level playing field for all those who come before them. I am happy to say that our first round of interviews have identified excellent candidates for the Boards. Appointments are expected to be announced at next Monday's meeting.

Thank you and best wishes for a great 2005.