

# State of Town 2016

## Andy Stewart, Supervisor

### Annual Town Reorganization Meeting, 1/5/16

#### **Welcome and Acknowledgements**

Good evening, welcome to Orangetown Town Hall, and Happy New Year! Thank you all for joining us tonight. It is my pleasure to speak to you and deliver the State of the Town address.

Before going any further, I want to recognize a few important people here tonight. First, and most importantly, my wife Rachel. Thank you also to Monsignor Nevin and Rabbi Pernick for offering your spiritual blessings. Thanks to Dru Pluhowski and the students of the Nyack High School Advanced Chorus for your beautiful music--and thanks to Joe D'Urso for your many gifts of music to the town! Thanks to our Town Clerk Charlie Madigan and my secretary Kim Allen for helping to coordinate this event, and our dedicated IT staff and video volunteers for making this meeting accessible via TV and YouTube. Thank you to my colleagues on the Town Board and my assistant Elijah Reichlin-Melnick, my Finance Director Jeff Bencik, and my Deputy Supervisor Allan Ryff. I note also that I am reappointing Jeff, Allan and Elijah to their respective positions for my current term. And finally, thanks to all of our Department Heads. All of us in Orangetown are very lucky to have such outstanding people working for the Town. Thank you to the people of Orangetown for trusting me with your votes and re-electing me to a new term as Town Supervisor. Finally, I want to express my gratitude, and I am sure the whole town council feels the same way, to all our town workers and to the volunteers serving on numerous town committees. Through our combined efforts we have saved millions of dollars and changed town government in ways both big and small. Tonight we re-dedicate ourselves to our mission of public service and it is truly an honor to serve with you!

At this time I would like to recognize and welcome those who are here representing other elected officials—representatives of Assemblywoman Jaffee, State Senator Carlucci, and Congresswoman Lowey.

I also welcome Jerry Bottari as our newest Town Councilman. After serving Orangetown for many years as a police officer, I know he will bring valuable experience and a true love for our community to the Town Board. Thank you Jerry for making the difficult choice to run for office! Congratulations also to those who have been re-elected: Councilman Paul Valentine, Superintendent of Highways Jim Dean, Town Clerk Charlotte Madigan, and Town Justice Pat Loftus. Finally, I want to thank Tom Morr for his eight years of service on the Town Council--we all wish him well.

#### **Introduction**

It's my job to tell you a bit about the town's accomplishments in 2015 and goals for 2016. As I prepare to boast a little about the "Orangetown Team" I am both humbled and inspired by what I am seeing other local teams do. To pick a few, the Pearl River High School Boys Soccer team who made it all the way to the final game of the New York State Class A State Championship, the Nyack community groups who built a cool new skateboarding park, and the Lagana family,

owners of US Informations Systems, who have opened a training facility in Pearl River for the next generation of information technology tradespeople.

These few examples show that Orangetown is a community not only rich in history, as our motto says, but rich in talent and teamwork as well, and this is true outside town hall, as well as within. I believe Town government succeeds when it provides an ideal platform for all members of our community to pursue their dreams -- a platform of essentials like roads, public safety, parks and services, managed according to the principles of quality, fairness and economy.

All of us here on the town board and in our town departments are passionate advocates for Orangetown! My particular interest tonight is to talk about public works, and public money, and provide a bit of detail about two projects I think are particularly important. I apologize for the many, many things I have to leave unsaid, for lack of time.

## **Public Works**

In 2015 there were many notable public works successes in Orangetown.

Our Highway Department finished the replacement of the century old Oak Tree Road Bridge in the center of Tappan. The new structure is safer for drivers and pedestrians, and also decreases flooding on the Sparkill Creek. Thank you to Ellen Jaffee for helping get funding for this project.

Four other important projects completed in 2015 were the County's new bridge on Oak Tree Rd, the re-design of Route 303 in Blauvelt by the NYS Department of Transportation, the re-surfacing of 65 streets by our highway department, and the relining of aging and leaking sewers in Nyack by the sewer department. Each is a story in itself.

## Works in Progress:

My New Year's resolution is to ride my bike to work as much as possible. Luckily, Orangetown is a great place for bike riding, and will be even better in the year ahead, as the State completes the extension of the J.B. Clarke Rail Trail from Orangeburg to Blauvelt. We also got a \$100,000 grant from Senator Carlucci for a "bike bypass" trail around a very dangerous bit of Rte 303 in Blauvelt, a great idea conceived by Councilman Valentine.

In addition, the town is building a commuter parking lot on Route 340 in Sparkill across the street from the American Legion post, next to the little league field. This will help free up parking spaces in downtown Sparkill and create the chance to improve Depot Park. In 2016, the Highway Department plans to resurface 79 streets, and is working on three major sidewalk projects: one on Route 340 by STAC, and two in Pearl River, one on Central Avenue and the other on Middletown Road by Shoprite.

On the east side of town, Tallman Pool will once again open to the public in May, the result of a partnership between the Palisades Interstate Park Commission and a local business, with support from the town and from Assemblywoman Ellen Jaffee. I am happy to report that Orangetown

residents, employees and emergency responders are entitled to a 20% discount off membership fees. It is great to see Orangetown businesses and leaders filling the gap left by the State's abandonment of so much valuable park property.

### **Homes for Heroes Drainage Project**

The public works project I am most excited for in 2016 is planned for 6 acres of abandoned federal land adjacent to the Homes for Heroes veterans housing project off Western Highway in Tappan. Once part of Camp Shanks, this site is being redeveloped for veterans housing, stormwater management, and a new home for the Hi Tor Animal Shelter. Just recently, after mountains of paperwork, we received two big pieces of news: the federal government approved our request for ownership, and the State awarded \$895,000 in funding. Our plan is to rip up over 20,000 square feet of pavement and build stormwater facilities that will reduce flooding, improve water quality, beautify this derelict site, and create a walking path for use by neighbors. This project is "epic" as I think the youth of today would say, treating stormwater runoff from about 50 acres of developed land in Tappan.

I want to thank, and congratulate, Jim Dean and Joe Moran, and their staff, plus the town attorneys and our grant writer Sylvia Welch, for helping make this happen. I also want to publicly thank the Honorable John Murphy, once again, for his leadership and cooperation, as head of the Homes for Heroes veterans housing project. He realized the veterans could not use the 6 acres along the CSX rail line for housing, and he saw the benefits to his project in having the town as a neighbor on the site. John recently retired from the County Legislature after a distinguished tenure of over 40 years, but he will stay involved with this project.

The re-location of the Animal Shelter and the completion of veterans housing make this a win-win-win scenario we can all be very proud of.

### **A Word or Two About the Town Budget.**

By now, we all understand that every year we face the dilemma of finding savings and new revenues in order to avoid raising property taxes that are already among the highest in the nation. The town requires a certain number of skilled employees, equipped with the right vehicles and supplies, to protect public safety, sanitation and quality of life - to create that "platform of essentials" I mentioned earlier. But personnel related costs (salaries and benefits) now absorb over 70% of our budget, and most of the remaining 30% of the budget is for essential supplies and equipment so our employees can do the jobs we hire them for. This is our budget dilemma and there are no easy answers.

In 2015 we did see some key savings. Our finance department has saved us hundreds of thousands of dollars by getting great interest rates when we bond for major capital equipment, and when we refinance our bonds. A new load-shedding agreement pays the town \$100,000 a year just for turning on our backup generators when the electrical grid needs a little extra help. And we hired a specialized auditor to review our cable company franchise payments and they documented that Cablevision owes the town about \$150,000.

But the major fiscal story of the past year was the much-debated golf deal, which I'd now like to discuss.

### Golf in Orangetown

It took several years of debate and a great deal of work by town staff to institute new, private contracts for the operation of the two town golf courses. Now that the contracts have been signed, let's take a minute to remind ourselves again of why these decisions made sense.

Here are the key facts: both Broadacres and Blue Hill have operated at deficits for years, running up a collective debt of \$3.5M to the general fund despite the best efforts of town staff and the Golf Committee. After a thorough and competitive proposal process, in 2014 the Town chose a private company, Applied Golf, to run Broadacres. This change cut personnel costs, boosted revenues, and brought some nice updates to the clubhouse and golf course. Feedback from golfers was all positive, and the town is on track for significant savings over the next three years.

On to Blue Hill.

In 2015, based on the success at Broadacres and our residents' demand to meet the tax cap, we requested bids to manage not only the pro shop and restaurant at Blue Hill, which had long been run by private businesses, but the course maintenance as well, traditionally a town function. After months of reviewing proposals, and many, many discussions, the Town Board selected Applied Golf's proposal to operate the course and run the pro shop, and we signed a contract in December. As for the restaurant, the Town Board is actively negotiating with possible new operators to get the restaurant up and running soon.

Applied Golf has hired some of the current pro shop employees, and one town employee continues to oversee the golf course. All other town employees have either retired or moved to open positions elsewhere in town government where their talents are needed. There were no layoffs of town employees, but we did reduce the overall number of town employees, saving money. In both golf contracts the town pays Applied Golf a fee to run the course and the town continues to collect all revenues. As an added incentive, the contracts set revenue targets for Applied Golf. If Applied brings in more business and exceeds the target, they get to keep 50% of the extra money. If Applied falls short of their target, we split the shortfall 50/50 - both parties share in the rewards and the risks. All current equipment and facilities, as well as the land, of course, still belong to the town.

This golf deal will save the Town about \$2 million over three years, money desperately needed for other services. This was not an easy project. Thanks are due to our personnel department, town attorneys, finance, and the CSEA, as well as the town council and the golf committee. I also need to give a special thank you to Aric Gorton, the Superintendent of our Parks & Recreation department. He has done an outstanding job through a very stressful process of change, and is the consummate professional. Aric, you and your staff do a great job caring for our wonderful park system and the many, many kids and adults who enjoy your fun programs - thank you!

## Conclusion

In my view, these golf deals were “low hanging fruit” budget projects -- we lowered costs while enhancing services for the public. In one way or another, we need to do this over and over again in large and small ways, if we are to continue to provide such outstanding quality of life in Orangetown without exacerbating the already overburdened taxpayer.

If you will bear with my fruit metaphor, we need to not only pick low hanging fruit -- which we have seen is not as easy as it may appear! - but we need to plant fruit trees, or create projects that bring in revenues. Here are a few areas of opportunity that I see:

- Redevelop the town’s land at Rockland Psychiatric Center, with an eye not only on environmental and tax impacts, but on possible new revenue streams. We may also want to explore the possibility of building a new town hall that would consolidate town government in one place, thereby increasing productivity and efficiency in staffing, utilities and maintenance.
- Promote clean, non-polluting business development at the Pfizer site - we are meeting with IRG later this week to learn more about their ideas.
- Use labor saving technologies and outside contracts wherever appropriate to avoid having to replace retiring employees.
- Explore how to Reduce the impact of escalating utility rates in two ways:
  - Obtain ownership of all our street lights to take advantage of lower electricity delivery rates, and then convert the lights to LED bulbs to boost efficiency and lighting quality.
  - Find locations for solar energy arrays in Orangetown and make this cheap and sustainable energy available to the public so folks can go solar without messing with their own roofs.

I want to close by reminding us all that local government is a partnership with the community, and works best when the community is actively involved with the process. So thank you to everyone who is here tonight, or watching on TV. I hope you will stay involved, and come to other board meetings throughout the year. As 2016 gets under way, I look forward to continuing to work with all of you, and with my colleagues in town government to keep Orangetown a great place to live, work, and play.

Now it’s time for me to turn the microphone over to my colleagues in town government to make their own comments about the state of our town.

I wish you all a happy and healthy year!