

Delivered – State of the Town Address
First Selectwoman Jennifer Tooker
February 6, 2022

To the Rotary Clubs, thank you to both for hosting the annual State of Town Address. As a Sunrise Rotarian, who doesn't make many meetings lately, I so appreciate all that you do for the community. Thank you to the Library for allowing us to use your space and technology to reach as many Westporters as possible. It is an honor and a pleasure to be here with you to share the progress Westport has made over the past year, and to update you on some of the exciting opportunities that we are now pursuing.

I've officially celebrated 8 weeks in office. And it has been quite a ride. But first, let's talk about the past year.

Haiku from Poet Laureate, Diane Lowman
The state of the town
Resilient optimistic
We are Westport strong

There is little doubt that the past year has been one of challenges and uncertainty. However, I can proudly say that our Town employees, our elected and appointed members of Westport's Board and Commissions, our businesses, and our amazing residents have faced these difficult times with professionalism, perseverance, and resiliency. The State of our Town is indeed very strong.

Surges and drops in Covid-19 cases during the past 12 months have required all of us to be flexible and vigilant in our efforts to protect against the virus while reclaiming a new normal in our work, schools, and daily lives where possible. I wish to extend my heartfelt and deepest appreciation for my predecessor, First Selectman Jim Marpe, for his tremendous leadership during this time.

Our administration has and will continue to follow the data and the science and the recommendations from State and local health experts to enact policies that mitigate risk while also – and this is critically important – allowing us all to return to the activities and way of living we expect and deserve. While the way we live,

work, and play will continue to evolve, we must and will move forward together. Our Town will support our residents' post-pandemic lifestyle choices as we continue to deliver the highest quality services, facilities, and amenities for our entire community.

I would like to take a few minutes to provide you with an accounting of our Town's undertakings and accomplishments over the past year. I would also like to recognize at this point the talented, dedicated Town employees who have been on the front lines serving our residents throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, and have done so with professionalism and compassion that makes me very proud to lead this amazing workforce. Our Town employees are the very definition of essential workers and each and every one of them has contributed to our Town's success.

In Town Hall, our Human Resources Department had a busy year recruiting candidates to fill 29 important open positions in a very difficult job market for employers. As you know, we are competing with other towns and businesses who are experiencing worker shortages. It is a testament to our reputation as a top-notch employer that we can attract these impressive hires which are a diverse and accomplished group. We welcome them to our community and to our Town Hall family.

Several of these terrific new hires have joined us in the Tax Collectors office, following the retirement of some long-time employees, and the department is now under the direction of our new Tax Collector, Christine Allison. This year, the department saw a marked increase in online tax payments compared to the year before and we will encourage that trend to continue. And we look forward to some good news about the grand list from our Tax Assessor's office this week.

We hired a new Town Clerk this past year, Jeff Dunkerton, whose office for the first time offered online Dog Licenses for residents. This new program was a group effort between our IT Department, our Operations Director and our Town Clerk's Office, and is just one of many examples of how we can better deliver services for Westporters through cooperation, collaboration and technology. In addition to our new Town Clerk, we also have 2 new Registrars of Voters and 2 new Deputies and together this brand-new team managed a successful municipal election along with registering 100s of new residents to vote.

Speaking of new residents, we all know Westport's real estate market was impacted significantly. With 100s of new residents and of course current residents wanting to improve their homes, our land use departments were incredibly busy – seeing a surge in permits. The same was seen on the commercial side with dozens of new businesses opening in Westport. Our Building Department implemented new software to allow permits and inspections to be viewed on line. Other land use departments ... P&Z, Conservation, Health and Engineering along with our IT Department continue pursue a comprehensive, on-line permitting system. They are dangerously close. We are always looking for ways to innovate and serve our residents and businesses more efficiently and effectively.

So, what has attracted all these new residents? There are many answers to that question. But in addition to our excellent schools, our parks and beaches continue to be a primary reason why people move to Westport. Our Parks and Recreation Department has been at the forefront of delivering opportunities, first-class amenities, and recreational activities for all Westporters. Recently, we hired a new Parks Superintendent – this critical role will oversee Westport's more than 25 parks and beaches, I bet you all didn't know we had that many, with a focus on user accessibility and of course enjoyment. Please visit Riverside Park if you haven't already – it's received a beautiful upgrade – and we are hoping the public will make use of it.

Our Parks and Recreation Department also adopted a Financial Sustainability Policy, which will ensure effective use of taxpayer resources, and the ability to maintain and upgrade our amenities and facilities for the future. We witnessed record usage of our golf course, our tennis and paddle facilities, Cockenoe Island and even clamming permits we up significantly. It is clear that our residents are embracing the outdoor lifestyle and seeking relaxation and enjoyment in our parks and beaches more than ever before.

But during this very challenging year, not only have our residents flocked to our outdoor spaces for refuge, but we have also seen that they have needed support in other ways. Our amazing Department of Human Services stepped up to meet the needs of residents with compassion and dedication. They continued their emergency management response to support Westporters adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, including outreach and support to address residents'

long-term and immediate basic needs with mass drive-thru and home delivery food and meal distribution programs for food-insecure seniors and other residents. DHS staff members also provided community outreach and support for seniors, youth, and other vulnerable populations via home visits, phone, social media, and weekly email updates; all while addressing the ongoing social and emotional well-being needs of all residents and managing a specific \$700,000 Dept of Housing Cares Act Grant on behalf of Homes with Hope to make COVID-related improvements to the Gillespie Shelter facilities.

Through the Westport Center for Senior Activities, our seniors were kept engaged and connected to their peers and instructors via virtual programming which helped so many cope with the isolation of the ongoing pandemic. The Senior Center was successfully reopened in July for in-house programming in a safe manner. Staff also Assisted seniors with obtaining vaccination booster shots and in obtaining test kits as the Omicron variant spread.

As mentioned before, we've had a surge of new businesses opening – many being restaurants. Along with the Chamber of Commerce and the Westport Downtown Association, the Planning and Zoning Department has worked tirelessly with business owners during a very challenging year. They facilitated existing restaurants to stay open and new restaurants to be established contributing to a Restaurant Renaissance in Westport.

The P&Z Department also took important measures to diversify housing in Westport and keep in compliance with legal requirements established by the State of CT, and raising the total number of affordable units to 400. And they also adopted a text amendment to prohibit retail recreational cannabis establishments in Westport.

I mentioned before that our town employees are truly essential – without them, Westport simply doesn't work. Our Department of Public Works is in many ways the backbone of our town. They are out there every day strategically planning for our future, fixing roads, plowing snow, upgrading our infrastructure, repairing sidewalks – you name it, they do it. This past year, for the first time, the Town's Department of Public Works took over responsibility for paving our school parking lots. So, in addition to paving 6 Town parking lots, they paved 4 school lots as well.

And about 10 miles of roads. Additionally, they have undertaken dozens of infrastructure projects all around town including almost 1.5 miles of sidewalks, numerous complicated bridge projects and sewer upgrades. It is critical that we continue to invest in our infrastructure for the safety of our residents and the future of our Town.

While upgrading our infrastructure and planning for the future, we consistently look for opportunities to be a more sustainable community. We received quite an honor this year as we were awarded Silver Certification from Sustainable CT – one of very few municipalities and this is the highest honor. Thank you to the efforts of former Operations Director Sara Harris, virtually every single Town department head, numerous local non-profits, former First Selectman Jim Marpe and especially the leadership of Sustainable Westport. Everything from converting our street lights to LED to increasing the number of electric vehicles in our Town fleet – and specifically including our police vehicles – has enabled us to achieve this status. We will continue to work towards a sustainable future together.

Speaking of the future, in coordination with the Town of Fairfield's IT, Police, and Fire Departments, we upgraded our police and fire department network to communicate with the newly created, state of the art joint dispatch center that will open for business soon. This new venture will allow us to continue to deliver effective emergency services while providing long-term cost savings. Identifying opportunities for coordination with surrounding towns on projects like this will continue be a priority going forward.

In addition to all the other first responder activities our firefighters do, they received COVID-19 vaccination training in early 2021, which enabled them to provide vaccinations at clinics for Westport Public Schools and the Aspetuck Health District. Firefighters administered over 5,000 vaccinations at these clinics. We are incredibly proud of their lifesaving work.

More of Westport's finest, our police department continued to protect and serve our community with integrity, kindness and effectiveness in the midst of this global pandemic. Strict proactive protective measures allowed the Westport PD to maintain high levels of service despite COVID-19 infections raging.

Importantly, our Police Department continues to meet and exceed the requirements set forth by Connecticut's Police Accountability Bill. We are extremely proud of our department's record of conduct and their ongoing commitment to transparency, including the installation of a Civilian Review Panel and the approval of an upgraded body and dash camera project.

The effects of the pandemic have been keenly felt by our EMS staff. They continue to walk into medical emergencies with courage and purpose, never knowing what they will face. I witnessed their unbelievable professionalism first hand when I called 911 three weeks ago, yesterday. My Dad was suffering what we thought was a mini-stroke, but ended up being life-ending heart attack. The entire team, EMS, PD and Fire, were kind, considerate, swift and decisive. I couldn't be more impressed and grateful.

As you can see, our Town has a long list of impressive accomplishments and goals reached during the past year. A year filled with daily uncertainty, the Town staff exhibited true resilience and continued to deliver the high standards of service the community demands and deserves while taking on initiatives that are critical to the future of the Town – all while managing a global pandemic. Speaking of the future, let's talk about those priorities. I'd like to take this opportunity now to thank newly-elected Selectwomen Andrea Moore and Candice Savin for their leadership as we move forward. The opportunities before us are very exciting.

Downtown - We are ready to engage in upgrading our Downtown. This will be a multi-year, staged effort starting with changes to the Parker Harding lot along the river and then moving to Jesup Green and the Taylor Lot and Taylor Place section and lastly to the Imperial Lot behind the Library. Additionally, the Baldwin Lot, which sees a tremendous amount of use for downtown shoppers, will undergo a much-needed repaving in the near future. Our goal is to create better connection and access to Downtown for shopping, dining, and enjoying our arts and cultural institutions. It will also allow us to activate our beautiful riverfront for the use of residents and visitors alike.

The Longshore Capital Improvement Plan will kick off at the February meeting of the newly constituted Parks and Recreation Commission. With our new partners at the Inn at Longshore, the time is right to move forward with a comprehensive long-term plan for this treasured Westport facility. We are excited for this

process to commence and to seek the input of all stakeholders because we know that these changes will benefit our community for decades to come and help keep Westport one of the most attractive towns to live and visit in the region.

Traffic and Pedestrian Safety is a key priority for residents and of course for this administration. We will approach these challenges in a holistic way by first looking at issues in our neighborhoods. Prior to creating a new Traffic Advisory and Neighborhood Safety Commission, we will be hosting public meetings for each of the Town's nine districts. These public meetings will enable us to receive real-time information about challenges and opportunities in each town neighborhood and will ensure that the concerns of all residents are heard as our Town experts from Police, Fire, Public Works and P&Z will be in attendance. These meetings will be held through the Spring and early Summer. Please look for details. Running concurrently, we have prioritized a number of sidewalk projects in the first 2 years completing some connectivity around our schools and Downtown as we know walking has become important to our residents through the pandemic and beyond. Pedestrian Safety leads me to another issue, specifically the Cross Hwy corridor from Bayberry to North Avenue. This heavily trafficked area, which provides access to a number of our public schools, is a top priority. We want to do everything possible to ensure the safety of our commuters and our students.

Flood Mitigation and Resilience is another area that continues to need our attention. Increasing frequency and severity of storms is a painful reminder. The leadership of the Flood and Erosion Control Board and our Engineering Department have proposed that this board take on an expanded role with respect to reviewing and prioritizing stream improvement projects and general strategy regarding flood prevention. I think this is an excellent idea and more details will follow regarding operationalizing this role. Again, running concurrently, we will continue to prioritize certain bridge and culvert repairs. However, I want to thank our Flood and Erosion Control Board and Engineering Department for their thoughtful and smart operational proposition.

Lastly, I would like to take a moment to discuss another key initiative of our administration that has been critical to our Covid-19 pandemic response, and will continue to support our residents in the near and long-term. That is the Westport Together Alliance, which focuses on the social and emotional health and well-

being of our entire community. It is a partnership between the Town, our schools, the PTAs, and our non-profit organizations, and has delivered essential programs and resources over the past two years. We know that the mental health and wellness struggles among residents continue – and in many ways the pandemic has shown a bright light on this issue. We are committed to bolstering the Westport Together Alliance to ensure every Westporter knows they have access to the support and resources they need.

Haiku from Poet Laureate Diane Lowman

Facing challenges

Seizing opportunities

Supporting our Town

Thank you again to the Rotaries for hosting this event, to the Library for the beautiful venue and technology, and to all of you for attending and giving me the opportunity to discuss the progress and promise of this Town we all love. We will continue to wake up every day and work hard to ensure Westport remains the best place to live, work and play in the region and you know this is where you belong.