

State of the Town
First Selectwoman Jennifer Tooker
February 5, 2023

As prepared for delivery

Welcome everyone! I'm excited to be here with you all today. It's an honor to share the stage with BOE Chair Lee Goldstein. Thank you to the Rotary Clubs for hosting us for the annual State of Town address. As a Sunrise Rotarian I know firsthand everything you do for our community and think I can speak for everyone when I say that we are truly grateful for all of you.

And of course, thank you to The Library, for hosting us in this beautiful space. The award-winning, 5-star, only 5-star library in the State of CT which hosts not only events like this and other more traditional library-type events, it is also the home to Verso Fest – an annual music and media conference – and it is the first known library to ever record, produce and release a vinyl album. We are so lucky to have this unbelievable asset in our community.

Our beautiful community – Westport. There's just so much to talk about. I've officially celebrated my first year in office and I realize the honeymoon period is long over. There is so much going on and I'm pleased to be here today to tell you about the progress we're making on our top five priorities, as well as some exciting new initiatives.

At the heart of it all, the guiding principle of my administration is to ensure that Westport continues to be the best place to live, work and play in the region – a place where everyone is welcome and feels like they belong. This is our North Star and the driving force behind everything we do. I think this is incredibly important to communicate over and over again, as we continue to see new residents and new businesses want to be in Westport. We are a very desirable community. Why?

I can't say enough about the talent and dedication of our town employees, the members of Westport's Boards, Commissions and Committees, our business owners and nonprofit leaders, and of course our amazing residents. It is the collaboration, the dedication and the energy of all of these groups working together that make Westport so special and allow me to state with confidence that the State of our Town is just fabulous.

I could stand here for hours recounting all the things that we have accomplished this past year. For instance, our Police Department and our Police Chief was featured as a Champion for Change on CNN for their community policing strategies and techniques which are setting the standard across CT and well beyond.

Or how about the work of our Parks and Recreation Department on the beautiful, upgraded Riverside Park which now has accessible walking paths and sweeping views of the Saugatuck River.

And our Public Works Department managed the rehabilitation project of the jetty at Burying Hill Beach which will protect that hidden gem for years and years to come.

But that's not why you are here today. I don't think you want me to catalogue all the achievements of the past year, but you want to know what we are working on for the future. So, I'll begin with an update on the top 5 priorities Andrea and I identified when we came into office.

Traffic and pedestrian safety – We just released a report and set up a page on the Town website with details of the concerns you shared with us over a series of public meetings last spring. In the report, we note which concerns we can tackle and which ones we just cannot. We have definitely made progress – all of which is detailed in that report – but I'll highlight just two examples. Most notably we were awarded \$450,000 through the Federal Safe Streets and Roads for All Action Plan Grant. This will help us continue to be strategic in making improvements to our traffic issues. A shout out to Fire DC Nick Marsan who led the effort to obtain this grant.

Another highlight is the establishment of the Police Department's Traffic Safety Unit. We now have 2 officers dedicated solely to traffic enforcement and calming. This is in direct response to the extensive feedback we received from residents on enforcement, speeding and general traffic concerns.

So, next steps? The report will be a living document. The Task Force will hold 2 public meetings per year to continue to hear residents' concerns, update the report and hold ourselves accountable to making progress. I want to say thank you to our Police, Fire, Public Works and P&Z departments. This was a huge undertaking, and the work has really just begun.

The Longshore Capital Improvement Plan – After engaging the public and receiving feedback from residents during months of public meetings and information sessions and numerous on-line surveys, the Parks and Recreation Commission is currently looking at a 10- year plan to upgrade Longshore Park. It includes pickleball courts, paddle courts, better vehicular and pedestrian circulation, pool renovation and a clubhouse for the golfers among other improvements. The Commission will be discussing and deliberating on the plan over the next month or so at their public meetings. I want to say thank you to our Parks and Recreation Department and Commission, including Chair Dave Floyd, for their tireless work on one of Westport's most important assets.

Revitalizing Downtown – The goal is to ensure Downtown is a destination for families, shoppers, diners – for visitors and residents. After engaging the public and receiving feedback from residents during months of public meetings and information sessions and numerous on-line surveys, the Downtown Plan Implementation Committee (otherwise known as DPIC) has approved a conceptual schematic for significant upgrades to Parker Harding Plaza.

This includes reconnecting to the riverfront, increased green space, flood mitigation, better vehicular and pedestrian circulation, among other improvements. Once further details are received and reviewed by DPIC, we will start to move this through the approval process, presenting to the various boards and commissions over the coming months. This project, along

with the upgrade of the Baldwin Lot earlier this year, will complete the upgrades to this side of the Post Road. Imperial Lot and Jesup Green/Taylor Lot will be the next projects to tackle. I want to thank DPIC under the leadership of Chair Randy Herbertson, Parks and Rec, P&Z, DPW, Police, Fire, and Conservation departments for their collaborative efforts on this important infrastructure improvement.

Flood Mitigation and Stream Management is a high priority given we are a coastal community with the beautiful Saugatuck River running through us - along with 7 streams. Earlier in the year I announced the increased leadership and strategy role the Flood and Erosion Control Board on this important initiative. Subsequently, over the past few months we have hosted multiple public meetings to discuss flooding issues along each of these 7 streams with the corresponding neighbors. These discussions will inform the prioritization exercise the Board will undertake and action steps they will propose. As you can imagine, this work is complicated and long-term in nature. I want to thank DPW, Conservation and P&Z departments for their leadership.

I am firmly committed to ensuring that the Westport Together Alliance, a partnership between the Town, our schools, the PTAs, and our non-profit organizations, has the resources it needs to continue supporting the emotional health and well-being of our entire community, now and in the future. I have stated many times that many of us are more fragile now than we were pre-pandemic. Under the leadership of Kevin Godburn and the Director of Human Services Elaine Daignault the programming and services we offer have never been better and never been in higher demand. From hosting informative speakers, to QPR training, to increased counseling and everything in between. We want to be known as the community that puts our arms around each other and supports each other, where people feel safe and heard. I want to thank Human Services and our many partners, including the Westport Prevention Coalition for your life-changing work.

So that concludes my update on our 5 stated priorities. I will continue to drive action and results and I will continue to update the community on all 5 of these. But, as we all know, in this job priorities shift. And that's not bad, it is just a reality. As new ideas, new issues, new concerns arise, the priority list grows. And here are a few others.

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Long Lots Elementary School – As spelled out in our Town Charter, when we undertake a large building project it is the responsibility of the First Selectwoman to appoint a Building Committee to oversee and execute the project. I appointed the LLSBC in September, a group of talented professionals who understand the component pieces of getting a building built, chaired by Jay Keenan. The committee is virtually the same group of volunteers who delivered the successfully rehabbed CMS. They are hard at work determining the options for Long Lots. I want to thank the LLSBC and DPW, for taking on this multi-year project with the BOE and the school administration.

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This is Suzy's House - We live in a community that understands the importance of diverse housing. We continue to look for opportunities to grow our affordable housing. A good example of accomplishing that goal is what we did with Suzy's House. It is a Town-owned

building that is leased and operated by Homes with Hope. Plans are underway to renovate it into a fully integrated Congregate Housing Program. The program will prioritize young women aged 18 to 24 years and will include six en-suite bedrooms with a communal kitchen and living space. In addition to these renovations, the Town deed-restricted it for 40 years so it could be officially counted as affordable housing. This was a win-win-win. Homes with Hope is able to fulfill their mission. The Town is able to increase their affordable housing. And young women will have a safe and nurturing place to live. We will continue to look for opportunities like this as the conversation around affordable housing continues.

So, one of the things that I've learned in this role as your First Selectwoman, which I knew coming in but I see even more vividly now, is that some of the best ideas come from conversations with our residents and business owners. I have what I call an open-door policy – if you have an idea or thoughts on how we can do things better, how we can better serve all of our constituents and make our town a better place for everyone – I want to talk to you.

Or if you just want to come visit! I welcome people to my office all day long, adults and kids. Interacting with, learning from, listening to and working with people is my favorite part of the job. Let me give you a few examples of ideas that have come from you.

In my role as Second Selectwoman, I met with various teams of residential brokers around town. I'm back out doing that again now. I firmly believe they're our boots on the ground – they know more about why people are moving to our community, what they love about it, and how we can better promote it than anyone. They helped me to see that we needed a strong digital footprint to showcase the best of Westport for new residents and potential new residents.

It was a great idea and a few months ago we launched discoverwestportct.com. It really speaks for itself. It's an excellent site, so if you haven't seen it yet, please check it out.

As many of you know, there's a collaborative effort underway to support our sister city of Lyman in Ukraine. This was driven by two men who grew up in Westport, Brian and Marshall Mayer who have founded the non-profit Ukraine Aid International. They reached out to me to see if we could help. Dan Woog and a group of concerned and active residents were also on that initial call. Not only did they immediately get on board to help, Dan became the master communicator and fundraiser behind the effort. He's been amazing. We've raised over \$250,000 of private money from you – our incredibly generous community. Our police chief and fire chief are providing supplies that are obsolete to us, but vital to them. We're in regular communication with the Mayor and Police Chief in Lyman. Through Ukraine Aid International and Alex21 – another non-profit we are working with - they tell us exactly what they need - and we get it to them - which is tricky and often extremely difficult due to conditions on the ground there. We get regular videos and photos from Lyman and we share that news with you all so you can see the impact we are having as a sister city. We look forward to bringing in the schools and connecting the kids once we get past the initial stage of helping with immediate needs on infrastructure and first responder equipment.

I have one more example of a resident-driven idea. Cliff Sirlin and Stefano Pacifico both reached out to me - separately – they didn't even know each other - with the goal of making

Westport the tech startup hub of Connecticut. Westport is the home to many technology businesses, leaders, entrepreneurs and investors. Startup Westport (which is what we are calling this initiative) will build on our reputation and network to grow the local ecosystem of entrepreneurship and innovation in information technology and related fields. This is being driven by a group of talented residents, involved in the industry, and in partnership with the Town. The kickoff event is on March 16 right here at The Library. Why do I show this picture? We think the time is now with more people working locally and not commuting as frequently.

These are just a few examples of what makes Westport so great – and keeps me truly excited to come to work every day. People ask me what I think makes Westport so different and I always tell them it's the energy and the people. The energy that comes from all you wonderful people.

Thank you to Selectwomen Andrea Moore and Candice Savin and to my talented team – the Town employees - to the tireless volunteers on our boards, committees and commissions – to our supportive, smart local business owners – to our engaged non-profit leaders and to our amazing residents. Bringing all of you together on projects and initiatives that are important to the future of Westport and knowing how to advance them is the winning combination. That happens because I lead by listening and I love to get stuff done. I'm lucky to be surrounded by people who feel and do the same.

It takes all of us working together to ensure that Westport continues to be the best place to live, work and play in the region – a place where everyone is welcome and feels like they belong. And really, that's what it's all about.

Thank you for your time today. I'm looking forward to answering your questions.