

Mayoral Address – January 7th, 2017

Good morning. Welcome to the 88th reorganization of our town Council and a Happy New Year to all. I would like to recap the year that just passed highlighting some of our major accomplishments and give a brief overview of where we are headed in 2017 with setting goals and objectives to help move Manville forward.

2016 was a transformative year for me personally and for our Borough. First, I decided to retire back in February after a 33 year career in information technology and corporate finance. This allowed me to be able to devote more time to helping Manville. It was a difficult decision because I really loved my job and the company's mission but it was the best decision given the situation having our Borough Administrator leave us due to his retirement. And as we are all another year older, as a hidden benefit of my old age, I signed up for membership in the Manville Seniors organization and look forward to their calendar of events this year. It's really not so bad getting another year older being a senior citizen.

To be honest 2016 didn't begin so well. I walked into an empty mayor's office without much of a transition. We encountered a major snow storm in January and a massive fire that burned for days in February at the government depot on our border with Hillsborough. Our fire and EMS first responders gave mutual aid to our neighbor in need under frigid conditions. There is no doubt Manville first responders, including our police force, are among the very best and bravest.

During the summer Hurricane Matthew caught everyone's attention. The storm at one point was projected to come up the east coast and there was talk of another "Floyd like" event for NJ. I grew up on North Second Avenue, which is one of our hardest hit flood zones, not too far from Borough Hall. Watching my childhood home be knocked down in March, I'm keenly aware of the adverse effects of flooding our town has encountered and may endure again with each approaching hurricane season. Climate change seems to have made severe rain events much more frequent and the threat of flooding now ever present. We need to manage our Borough's finances going forward with that threat in mind.

As your Mayor, I take public safety very seriously and started work immediately to acquire our own portable generator for our emergency shelter. I know we lost power in the past at our shelter and I did not want our town to be in that position ever again. Working with our state OEM and various FEMA contacts we received a \$75,000 grant to help offset 80% of the cost of purchasing the generator.

I would like to give a big "thank you" to our Lt. Governor Kim Guadagno. I met her at an event and she told me if I ever needed anything I could call her cell phone. So I wrote down the number for future reference. As weeks past, I felt we needed help to expedite this purchase moving the grant through FEMA. I called the Lt. Governor and she picked up and got me in touch with a representative from our Home Land security department.

Within a week or two, we were given the green light to make the purchase after months of waiting. The trailer based generator is housed at our OEM building.

We also entered into a new 3-year sheltering agreement with the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2290. This ensures our veterans' the peace of mind that they will never encounter any financial burdens while operating as our emergency shelter. Our veterans are a big part of our community and they deserve our full support.

In Manville, 2016 will most likely be remembered for a property tax crisis highlighted by the outcome of a town wide, county mandated re-assessment and a school funding formula out of touch with current day realities. The current school funding formula sadly makes Manville's school district one of the most underfunded in the state. In addition, the on-going Blue Acre buyout program with 108 homes being taken off our tax rolls compounded the uncertainty. The overall value of our town fell 20% from the height of the real estate market back in 2008. The re-assessment was necessary to put an end to a run of costly property tax appeals we encountered every year since 2012. Based upon the number of tax appeals filed, it is clear our residents want lower property taxes.

Keeping Manville affordable will be the top priority of this governing body during 2017 and in the years ahead. The one major accomplishment I'm most proud of is acquiring over \$500,000 dollars of aid and grants to help stabilize our municipal property tax rate during 2016. That amount of money equates to over a \$100 dollars savings on an average assessed home in town. This was a team effort of the council and across all our departments. I thank all our Borough employees for their dedication to our town during some tough fiscal times. Acquiring the much-needed state and federal aid for Manville will remain a priority.

We worked hard to balance the municipal budgets the past two years with increases of \$24 in 2015 and \$8 dollars in 2016 on an average assessed home. Governor Christie's 2% property tax cap has helped confront the property tax crisis we face living here in NJ. This law helps curtail any excessive spending to rein in the growth rate of property taxes.

So the transformation of Manville has begun and it will continue; focused on lowering the operating costs of the services we provide. Our municipal court was outsourced to Hillsborough beginning in 2016 and we did not replace 3 full-time employees who either retired or resigned saving significant budget dollars heading into our 2017 budget cycle. Our projected budget surplus will also help offset any significant municipal tax increase this year.

Last July, we hired our new Borough Administrator, Andrea Bierwirth, after a long search for the best-qualified candidate for the job. Andrea's municipal and financial experience has been a big help in getting our financial house in order. We began work on a 3-5 year capital program and analyzed our long term debt payments from prior bond issuances. In 2018, a major bond repayment will be completed which may allow for a capital improvement plan to be executed at that time.

2017 should be a good year for our Borough after a resurgence of our community spirit in 2016. The Manville High School football, wrestling and cross country teams had successful winning seasons. Our rec program offerings throughout the year, especially our Community Day event and recent tree lighting on our Main Street were well received. Our library is thriving with its many program offerings and increased circulations. There's no doubt we live in a nice community with great potential.

With a new President taking office later this month, there is a sense of renewed optimism about the future of our country. This recent holiday season saw record spending. Consumer confidence seems to be back. This all paints a favorable picture for redevelopment to finally begin for the Rustic Mall property.

I am hopeful we will see a shovel in the ground this year with a project that may consist of luxury apartments, limited commercial space and some low- income senior housing. The time is now to put the past behind us and move the project forward for the good of our town center to help rejuvenate our Main Street business district and increase our tax rateables.

Three other important work efforts are on our radar in 2017. One is to codify our Borough ordinances and develop an on-line, searchable catalog of the laws that govern our Borough. Another is to have our tax maps updated. They need to be converted to an electronic format to accurately reflect our tax rateables. And third, our on-going participation and achievements in the Community Rating System will allow for further reductions in flood insurance premiums that many homeowners pay.

Residents currently paying flood insurance receive a 15% discount. We would like to achieve a 25% discount level this year as flood insurance rates continue to escalate. These deliverables are long overdue and come with some additional budget costs that are unavoidable. But the benefit to our residents is well worth the expense. I think we all can agree there is plenty of work to be done in the months ahead.

Recently I received a post-campaign email message from President-elect Donald Trump that I would like to share an excerpt from that pertains to addressing the many problems that confront us as Americans...

And I quote our President-elect... "I REFUSE to accept that it can't be done. This is the country that declared its independence, won two world wars and landed a man on the moon. This is America. We can and we WILL get it done."

That message resonates with me concerning the future of Manville and getting help with flood mitigation work to actually lower flood water levels here. I refuse to accept it can't be done!

Of the 21 towns in Somerset County, Manville is by far the most impacted. It has become a regional issue also. Our multi-town Raritan and Millstone flood commission is doing a great job keeping the spot light on the problem.

I am hopeful with new Presidential leadership in Washington DC, that cost-effective plans for helping Manville will become a reality. By taking action to help lower flood water levels during times of flooding, it will help save homes and neighborhoods which will give our residents a sense of renewed hope.

In closing, I have a picture hanging in the Mayor's office from the 1980 USA Olympic hockey team's win over the Soviet Union. It's inscribed "Do you believe in miracles?" Well, I believe in miracles. I believe in hard work and with perseverance, our efforts will eventually pay off and progress will be made. Let's keep the faith!

To read about our progress this year, please sign up for the "Community News", a free monthly newspaper mailed to homes that will keep everyone informed of our progress throughout the year. I am looking forward to a productive 2017.

God bless our Borough by keeping us safe from future flooding and may God continue to bless the country we all love, the United States of America.

Thank you,

Mayor Richard M. Onderko