

## **Mayor's Address 2022**

**Welcome to the 93<sup>rd</sup> annual reorganization meeting of the Mayor and Council. Thursday, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022.**

First, I would like to wish everyone a Happy and Healthy New Year as we begin another year governing the Borough. I look forward to working with everyone on council and welcome Councilwoman Madak and Councilman Agans to the team.

Looking back for a moment, 2021 is certainly a year that presented us with significant challenges dealing with the lingering pandemic and a major flood disaster from remnants of hurricane Ida. One thing about our community was very evident days following the flood, our fellow residents care deeply about one another. The outpouring of support for relief supplies from neighbors, our school district, surrounding towns, and local companies was truly heartwarming. This is what the American Spirit is all about, helping others in times of need. There is no doubt the American Spirit is alive and well in Manville.

Our Police Department, Office of Emergency Management, Fire and Rescue volunteers should be commended for their emergency response efforts. We are extremely thankful there was no loss of life in our Borough and that is a testament to the dedication and bravery of all those who responded to evacuate our residents.

Hurricane Ida deposited 11 inches of rain in a very short period of time causing flash flooding in our Borough that no one expected, nor was it ever encountered before. This storm, the worst in our Borough's history, caused the lower floor of our Borough Hall to flood significantly. That certainly didn't help with providing necessary services days after the flood. Restoration of our Borough Hall and council chamber should begin later this month.

It was a very stressful time for everyone, but the employees of Borough Hall and our Department of Public works put in long hours to meet the needs of our residents looking to rebuild their homes. I would like to say thank you once again to everyone involved in our flood recovery efforts. A big thank you to our Somerset County Commissioners who helped provide debris removal contractors and to PSE&G for their help in our recovery efforts. And a special thank you to VFW Post 2290 and its leadership team and volunteers for always being there as our Red Cross shelter in times of emergency.

History was made days after the storm when President Biden, Governor Murphy, and other federal, state, and county officials visited Manville. It was the first time a sitting President of the United States visited our town. I was honored to shake the President's hand and ask for his help. I am hopeful federal disaster aid will be allocated to New Jersey soon and that we receive our fair share this time.

2022 begins like most years, all eyes on the municipal budget. Governor Murphy may have said "if the property tax rate is your #1 issue, we are not your state". I would like to say, "if the property tax rate is your #1 issue, Manville is your town". For the past 6 years, we have not exceeded the 2% hard cap on the municipal tax levy and have looked for ways to save tax dollars thru various shared service agreements.

Our existing budget reserves will cover most of the unexpected flood expenses we have to deal with. However, I will be making the strong case for additional municipal aid for our Borough. The state aid we received has not increased 1 dollar in the last 4 years. That is no longer acceptable.

I am not in favor of simply raising property taxes further to deal with flood expenses and to cover the loss of property tax revenues due to Blue Acre buyouts. Governor Murphy and our state representatives in

Trenton already received that message from me, we need more financial aid. And we certainly deserve it given the severe flooding we must deal with.

The storm delayed road resurfacing projects that were planned. This spring, roads will be repaved that were trenched last year for water company infrastructure work. Other resurfacing projects for Brooks Boulevard and Knopf Street will be completed also. By early summer I am hopeful that our Main Street's, pedestrian safety focused "road diet", will finally begin construction. This is a 6-year-old, federally funded, 7-million-dollar project to provide safety improvements along the roadway.

Our Main Street and business district will be in focus by adopting a plan to designate areas in need of rehabilitation. This will open the door for financial aid from the Economic Development Authority in Trenton to help business and property owners recover from the economic impacts of the pandemic.

Late last year, we adopted a new study determining the old Rustic Mall superfund site as an area in need of redevelopment bringing the old 2005 study up to statutory 2021 standards, and this time, we have included the condemnation option. I wish the current property owner would either develop the site or sell the property to a developer willing to. We could surely use the additional tax revenues it would generate, and it would help revitalize our town center. We could sure use the progress and provide additional housing for those affected by the flood.

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet to solving the flooding issues that confront Manville. Climate change may be real, however over development of upstream communities is real too. The amount of impervious surface in our water shed is past the tipping point. I am

hopeful we can address flood mitigation efforts on a smaller scale starting with the Royce Brook.

We will continue to work to make Manville more storm resilient. I will also try to improve communication with all residents via our monthly newsletter, social media and putting news alerts on our website.

In closing, the 2020 Census shows that Manville's population has increased to just short of 11,000 residents. Manville is clearly a desirable place to live, a tight-knit walkable community. This past Christmas our town's spirit was on display thanks to the Manville Arts Council's Bright Lights map and luminary giveaway. And the veteran history in Manville is something to cherish. The freedoms we all enjoy today were protected and passed on to us by all our Hometown Heroes who came before us. They will never be forgotten.

Yes, we are small town America! One of the most patriotic towns in Somerset County. I, along with my fellow council members, look forward to tackling the challenges ahead. Proud to be "Manville Strong" in 2022!

God bless all the residents of Manville. And God bless the United States of America!

Mayor Richard M. Onderko