

Mayors 2015 End of Year Message

Overall, 2015 was a good year for Washington Borough. 2015 was not without its controversies or things that didn't go planned, but we worked through them all. There will always be new challenges to be faced and we will face them head on.

Since the State of New Jersey has not been able to reach any kind of solution on affordable housing, the courts are now attempting to find the solutions. This is going to cost every municipality in New Jersey a significant amount of money. In an effort to preserve our rights, we have filed a declaratory judgment with the appropriate court. At the moment, nobody knows how this will play out and it may be many years before it gets resolved. Please be assured that Washington Borough has done and will continue to do everything necessary to meet or exceed our COAH requirements.

The sewer issues on South Prospect Street have not been resolved as of yet. There is a contract for the work that we expect to be signed by all parties in the next few weeks. Once that contract is signed, work will begin and should be completed in a few weeks, weather permitting. It will be very satisfying to finally put this issue to rest!

The paving project on North Lincoln Avenue did not go as planned. We had to meet some new Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and the first contractor hired did not do the job properly. This delayed the project as we had to hire another contractor to fix what the first contractor fouled up. In the end, it was fixed and the road was paved.

North Lincoln Avenue was not the only the only road paved. We also paved all or parts of, Presidential Drive, West Warren Street, East Warren Street, Stewart Street and Park Avenue. Part of Park Avenue was paved for us by the Unites States Environmental Protection Agency after they finished their testing and we paved the rest.

Our finances are in great shape! We didn't need a tax increase for 2015 and we were able to lower our sewer fees. Our audit for the year 2014 showed no recommendations or issues that needed to be corrected. This is the first time we have ever seen an audit report like this!

Our farmers market was returned this year as a Farmers Festival. This would not have happened without the efforts of Councilperson Josephine Noone, our Green Team and The Washington Borough Business Improvement District. We look forward to future Farmers Festivals as they grow and improve.

We welcomed a new Library Director this year, Usha Thampi-Lukose. In hiring Ms. Thampi-Lukose, we ended a shared service agreement with The Washington Borough Board of Education and Gail Scovill. This shared service agreement helped us through a very difficult financial crises, I want to thank our Board of Education and Ms. Scovill for their efforts and for being such great team players! I have every confidence that Ms. Thampi-Lukose and staff will provide excellent library services for our community.

Like many communities, we have a significant amount of properties in foreclosure. This puts a tremendous strain on our resources as we ultimately end up as the property caretakers. We can and do put liens on these properties, but if the owners can't be found, we can't collect anything. To combat this, we have begun foreclosure proceedings on some of these properties. To date, we have foreclosed on 6 non-performing properties. As we take possession of these properties, we will put them up for

sale periodically. Once sold, they will be paying taxes again and ease the burden on those of us who do pay our taxes.

Going forward

Our Fire Department informed us that they anticipate replacement of one of their fire trucks in 3-5 years, at a cost of approximately \$350,000 to \$450,000. We need to start planning for this now. The more we can put away for this truck now, the less money we have to raise or borrow later.

One of our larger employers, BASF has informed us that they will be ceasing operations in Washington Borough this year. BASF has been an outstanding friend and partner to our community and will be missed. We wish them good luck for the future and we would be happy to welcome them back should they desire to come back.

We are beginning to improve our technological infrastructure this year. We will be replacing an antiquated computer server with a state of the art device this month. We will be looking at a software package that will allow us to better communicate the citizens and track information on properties more efficiently.

In conjunction with our schools, we are expecting to have solar panels installed on most of our buildings. This will be done through a bidding process where companies will bid to own and install the solar panels on our roofs and sell us the power they generate at a cost below what our current electric provider charges. This should reduce our utility costs significantly.

Deputy Mayor Heinrich and I have been investigating the latest in lighting technology also. Our goal is to see if we can improve the lighting while lowering our utility costs even further. There are a number of options for this and cost estimates will be looked at soon.

In conclusion

I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to my fellow elected officials, all of our staff, our contracted professionals, and our volunteers for their efforts to make our town the wonderful community that it is. With all of your continued support and efforts, we will progress to making Washington Borough the showcase of Warren County.