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Town of Riverhead 2021 State of the Town Address

February 8, 2021

Good Morning. Thank you all for attending today, and thank you to those who are watching virtually.

Today, I will provide you with the State of our Town, and highlight where we were, and where we are going, united as a Town. I will also highlight some of the accomplishments we have achieved.

I want to thank the Town Board, Councilman Hubbard, Councilman Beyrodt, Councilwomen Kent, Councilman Rothwell, and former Councilwoman Jodi Giglio, now our new Assemblywoman, all of our Town Officials, our Police Department, our Department Heads and our dedicated staff, who have all provided the critical services our community deserves under the current COVID-19 State of Emergency.

Just over nine weeks after I took office, we as a Town, began to experience the global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, as it progressed towards the East End. Five months later, we endured a massive tropical storm, among other events, all of which created financial hardships and raised concerns for the safety and health of our residents.

During the first year of my administration, we endured many serious and complicated challenges. At a time when our residents were scared and confused, and with limited movement and resources, the Town Board made significant progress and achieved many accomplishments together as a unified team, while protecting our community.

While, we now have some understanding of the economic impacts resulting from the pandemic, it will likely require a year to ascertain the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As emergency managers, we have, and we will continue to prepare for setbacks. Many protocols have been set in place to effectively communicate and keep our community safe and operational as we head towards recovery. I am optimistic our new normal will commence this summer, and I am confident we will tackle any future obstacles

presented, and we will rise above this pandemic. We will recover and emerge as a stronger more unified community.

On the COVID-19 Pandemic Response:

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, education and safety protocols were immediately established and will continue until the Governor's State of Emergency is lifted. Two extensive public outreach efforts were conducted, with the goal of educating our residents on how to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Executive Orders, interim reports, including updated state, county and town information, along with CDC recommendations and safety protocols were made available on a daily basis to the Town Board, our residents, and local businesses to keep them informed.

Employees at all Town buildings and facilities were provided with detailed instructions on COVID-19 protocols and testing information, along with personal protective equipment. Safety shields were constructed and installed to safeguard both the public and Town personnel from the risk of the COVID-19 virus.

Our local restaurants were severely impacted when state mandates required them to close. The Town of Riverhead led the charge in Suffolk County to enable restaurant owners to create temporary outdoor dining and open at 50% capacity, prior to the Governor's re-opening plan. In further support of our restaurants, we waived all permit application fees, and we recently extended the expiration date.

Once our churches closed their doors in compliance with state mandates, the homeless, some of whom had medical conditions, were left without shelter. Preparations were in place to house the homeless in tents at Indian Island Park. Instead, over the course of 3 days, we worked with Suffolk County and we succeeded in placing all 33 individuals in shelters, where they continue to be provided with food, healthcare, and a safe haven.

The Town continues to partner with Suffolk County to deliver emergency food to homebound families in need of assistance.

In April, the town received a generous donation of \$10,000 dollars from the Zucker Family Foundation. Food was purchased in bulk and distributed to our food pantries and our soup kitchens. Additionally, two Island Harvest Food drives were organized to provide food for local families in need.

My office assisted National Grid in organizing two events for residents in our community. A Thanksgiving food drive was held at St. John's Church, and Christmas holiday gift bags were provided to our Veteran's at the Acadia Nursing home and the United Veteran's Beacon House.

These efforts greatly assisted those in need, and our sincere appreciation goes out to the Zucker Family Foundation, Island Harvest and National Grid for their dedication to our community.

Over the next year, we will continue to combat the COVID-19 virus and work with State and County officials to ensure Riverhead is provided with our share of vaccines.

On Finance:

As a Town, we were faced with a sizeable budgetary shortfall. The impacts of the pandemic led to a projected \$1.8 million dollar decrease in building application fees, State and County aid, and Justice Court revenues in the General Fund. We mitigated these losses by cutting all non-essential spending, placing promotions on hold and limiting new hires, while maintaining the services our taxpayers expect and deserve.

We renegotiated both the Superior Officer's and the PBA's 2018 contracts at a savings of \$645,000 dollars, and reduced all Town insurance policy premiums by \$30,326 dollars. These efforts enabled us to reduce the 2021 operating budget across the Town's three major funds by 1.14% and we remained within the New York State tax cap.

I am pleased to add, we lowered the Town's outstanding debt by \$9,680,000 dollars. This will reduce our interest costs and put the Town in a stronger financial footing.

On Information Technology Infrastructure:

Last February, the Town hired a qualified IT Administrator. We installed much needed internet upgrades, including advanced email threat protection. Our essential Town data is now secured and backed up to the Cloud, to an off-site location, and a location out of state.

This effort proved significant when it became necessary to limit employee exposure at Town Hall. The upgrades allowed our staff to efficiently work remotely from home. In doing so, Town Hall was able to weather the effects of the pandemic and remain operational, without losing communication.

The Town's website was enhanced, and Google translate is now available in various languages to provide access to all residents. A COVID-19 information page was added and updated frequently.

Videoconferencing capabilities were installed in the Town Hall Boardroom to enable the use of hybrid and virtual meetings using channel 22 and Zoom. The Town's telephone system was upgraded to Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP).

On our Seniors:

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our seniors have been harsh. Our senior population has endured many challenges, more than the general population, due to health and isolation concerns. While our Senior Center was forced to close and many programs were cancelled, we focused on providing food and essential services to our most vulnerable residents.

We established the Riverhead Senior Assistance for Essentials program (also known as Riverhead SAFE), enabling our seniors to order groceries, food from local restaurants, medication, and other essential items. These items are delivered directly to their doors, eliminating the need for our seniors to leave the safety of their homes. This program will continue until the Governor's Executive order is lifted.

The COVID-19 vaccine availability has been sporadic, and the process has been very stressful on our seniors, especially online registration. Next week our office will launch an outreach program to assist seniors with transportation to and from Riverhead vaccination sites. The Senior Hotline coordinator and our Senior Center will join forces to ensure our seniors receive vaccines, once they become available.

Our Senior Emergency Hotline was created to offer the most up-to-date COVID-19 information, as well as to provide referrals for residents experiencing hardship. Plans to expand our Senior Home Improvement program are ongoing and will be implemented in the near future.

We expanded our Meals on Wheels program, thanks to funding from the Federal Cares Act, and have added two new buses to support our increasing Senior Transportation Service program, funded by a NYS DOT grant obtained by the CDA.

We urged the Governor to waive the annual reapplication process for low income seniors and the disabled, who apply for property tax exemptions. In December, the Governor signed an Executive order granting municipalities the ability to waive the reapplication requirement through 2021.

On Our Schools:

The COVID-19 pandemic forced our schools to close overnight, and our children were forced to learn virtually. This impacted our children, along with their parents, family members and especially our teachers, who were left scrambling to revise and create online lesson plans to instruct from their homes.

We initiated open lines of communication with the School District, and we remain committed to working together for the benefit of our children.

The Safe Routes to School project, designed to create a safe pathway for our children to walk to school, is fully underway and we are now working on the construction phase. The project will be completed through a Town partnership with the School District, and will connect Harrison Avenue to Pulaski Street. Sidewalks along Cranberry Street will also be constructed. We hope to start construction this summer.

We partnered with the County to install stop arm cameras on school buses, to identify drivers who illegally pass stopped school buses. Violators will be identified, and summonses will be electronically generated.

We anticipate the approval of a Community Benefit Agreement of \$150,000 dollars, created to support the School District and the Riverhead Library in providing designated study locations for students who do not have access to Wi-Fi at home for virtual learning.

We urged the County and the Governor to re-instate contact sports for our students, affording our children the physical and sociological benefits of team sports once again. The request was granted and High School contact sports resumed on February 1st.

On Law Enforcement:

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising unemployment rates and uncertainty led to a rise in suicides, drug overdoses, domestic incidents, and thefts in many Suffolk County Towns. I am pleased to report, the crime rate in Riverhead has remained relatively steady, and, in some instances has decreased.

Ten new Police Officers have been hired to replace retiring officers. Five will start immediately, the other 5 are awaiting Police Academy training. We are also upgrading our police communication system to digital radio and a new fingerprint scanner will be installed, using funds obtained from a grant.

We transferred the Fire Marshal's staff from the Planning Department to the Riverhead Police Department and have implemented a schedule to complete fire inspections on a yearly basis.

On the Governor's Unfunded Police Reform Mandate:

The Riverhead Law Enforcement Advisory Panel (LEAP) was created in response to the Governor's Police Reform Act. A group of 15 core members and 10 advisors representing every segment of our community, were selected to participate in this initiative. A survey was created in both English and Spanish and distributed. Data from over 1,200 responses is being analyzed, and we anticipate completion of the report by the middle of March.

On Code Enforcement:

Our ability to effectively address overcrowded housing in Riverhead was severely hindered by the pandemic. Evictions and tenant removal are not permitted under the New York State Safe Cares Act. These mandates, directed by the Governor and the New York State Chief Justice, are set to expire on May 31, 2021. Once these restrictions are lifted, the courts will commence issuing eviction orders. Further, we currently have five Supreme Court actions pending.

We will continue to investigate all Code Enforcement complaints. All violators will be issued summonses, our only recourse at the present time.

We adjusted the hours of our Code Enforcement officers to adequately address complaints, and we are in the process of adding an additional vehicle computer to enhance efficiency.

On Ambulance and Fire:

We have funded the ambulance sub-station in Jamesport to address the increase of calls for assistance during the summer and fall seasons.

The Riverhead Volunteer Ambulance Corp. has been equipped with new Motorola radios, enhancing communication between first responders. In addition, we have identified funding to purchase an All-Terrain Vehicle.

We await completion of a Community Benefit Agreement, which will provide funds for additional training to all four Riverhead Fire districts, as well as, the Flanders Fire District and our Ambulance Corp.

On Building & Planning:

Earlier in my administration, I met with the CDA, the Planning Department, and the Town's consultants regarding the Pattern Book. Recommendations were made to include zoning within the Downtown area. The Pattern Book has been completed and adopted. The study will be used as a tool to modify zoning, and further enhance revitalizing our Main Street.

The update to our Comprehensive Master Plan has commenced. This plan will serve as a road map to our future, and community involvement is critical.

We are also in the process of streamlining the building application process and in the future, all applications will be available online.

The long-awaited opening of Island Water Park, is scheduled for this summer. Riverhead will now have a new destination park, consisting of interactive family-friendly entertainment at all skill levels. This unique recreation park will feature an indoor surf pool, a restaurant, a café, and family entertainment. This venture will create over 550 employment opportunities and will provide a symbiotic relationship with our businesses, our hotels, our restaurants, and our student interns. All Riverhead residents will receive discounted activity fees.

On Our Community Development Agency (CDA):

The CDA continues with their innovative approach to acquire funding for various projects in Riverhead. We have obtained three grants from the State and the County, totaling \$1.8 million dollars to create a new Town Square.

I am pleased to announce, we are in contract for three properties located on Main Street. Two parcels will be demolished, opening Main Street to green and open space leading to our beautiful riverwalk. Our new Town Square will become a public gathering space, with pedestrian connectivity and open vistas to the Peconic River.

The Long Island Science Museum has purchased the Old Sweezy building and will continue to work with the CDA and our Planning Department to develop the site, complementing the new Town Square.

With another grant, the Town has developed a Transit Oriented Development Strategy plan for the area near the train station.

I am pleased to announce the Town has already received interest from a developer to renovate one of the sites within the new overlay zone.

Wayfinding signs are being installed on Main Street and along our riverfront, funded by grants and donations. In addition, funds have been identified to repair and paint the cupola in Jamesport.

Finally, after years of flooding, we are comprehensively addressing the ongoing concern of flooding at our riverfront. The United States Army Corps of Engineers have begun creating a Flood Management Plan to address flooding. The CDA has secured funding in the amount of \$151,000 dollars for this critical project.

On Water:

We have taken measures to protect our water supply and water infrastructure with the adoption of water restrictions, and adopted a new Town Code for water conservation in landscaping.

Our Water Superintendent also tackled adjusting our water rate schedule to assess and charge heavy users.

We as a Town, have committed and invested funds to protect our residents in Manorville and east of EPCAL, some of whom are threatened with contaminated water containing high levels of PFOS and PFOA. These residents deserve clean and safe water. We will continue to champion for this effort with County, State and Federal officials to supply clean and safe water, as soon as possible.

On Highway:

Our Highway Superintendent and his team have continued to work through the pandemic to ensure our highway infrastructure is maintained and kept in safe condition. The team weathered a massive tropical storm in August, and kept our roads clear during three major snowstorms within the last two months.

On Engineering:

Our Engineering and Street Lighting Departments have completed the LED lighting conversion of all Town streets lights, as well as, all lighting fixtures in Town facilities, while benefitting from PSE&G rebates. This effort will result in substantial cost savings on the Town's electric bill.

On Recreation:

Our Recreation Department, the first in Suffolk County, created virtual events designed for our residents, in every age group. Despite the obstacles presented, our dedicated staff reinvented family-friendly holiday events, while complying with social distancing protocols. A virtual, interactive brochure was created and includes exciting workshops for our youth, with a wide variety of classes for adults.

Enhancements were made to the Veteran's Memorial Trail at EPCAL, and playgrounds at the George Young Community Center and Bayberry Park were renovated with the assistance of our Buildings and Grounds Department.

A pending Community Benefit Agreement will provide \$350,000 dollars for parks and an additional \$250,000 dollars will be dedicated for open space.

In Closing:

This State of the Town highlighted some of the many accomplishments we have achieved this past year. Our future looks bright and we will continue to build on our achievements.

I am confident we will overcome any crisis we may face. As a Town, we will continue to be innovative, proactive and explore all avenues to move our great Town forward with pride and resilience.

I am dedicated to our Town. I will always be mindful of the burden the COVID-19 pandemic has on each and every resident and the taxpayers of our Town.

Again, I want to personally thank our Town Board, our Town officials, our Police Department, our Department Heads, and all our dedicated staff, along with our committee members and volunteers. Without you, none of these accomplishments would have been possible.

Thank you and God Bless!