



Mayor Brindle's Opening Remarks April 14, 2020

Good evening, everyone, and thanks for joining us virtually tonight for our first Town Council meeting via Zoom. I am joined by the entire Town Council here on video, as well as Town Administrator Jim Gildea, Town Clerk Tara Rowley, Chief Battiloro, Town Planner Don Sammet, Town Attorney Tom Jardim, and Town Engineer Kris McAloon, with our remaining department heads listening in with all of you. Please remember that public comment will only be accepted via Zoom, although we are live streaming for viewing only on Facebook Live and YouTube Live as well. The replay will also be available afterwards on Facebook, YouTube, and TV 36. For those of you who receive my regular COVID-19 emails, tonight's comments here will also serve as today's update.

CONFIRMED CASES

- As of today, there are 68,824 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey, with another 1,702 still under investigation. Currently, the County reports 7,265 cases, with Westfield reporting 14 more -- bringing our case total to 146 to date. For context, the last time we held a Town Council meeting, three weeks ago, there were 3,675 cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey, with 16 in Westfield.
- As always, a more detailed breakdown of statewide numbers is available online at the NJ Department of Health COVID-19 Dashboard.

STATE UPDATES

- The New Jersey Department of Health has issued a waiver allowing for certain individuals with EMT or paramedic experience, but whose certifications have expired within the last five years, to return to the job in response to this current health crisis.
- Governor Murphy plans to sign a bill that will allow employees forced to care for family members because of COVID-19 up to 12 weeks of family leave in a 24-month period without losing their jobs.
- The Governor will also sign the bill extending the tax filing deadline for income and corporate taxes, and for estimated payments, from April 15 to July 15. This bill also extends Fiscal Year 2020 to September 30.

LOCAL UPDATES

- On the local front, today I signed a proclamation to honor the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, which will take place on April 22. I want to thank the Green Team for its energy, enthusiasm and action it brings to this mission all year, and particularly during Earth Month. Despite not being able to continue with the robust line up for which they had originally planned, they have shifted

to a Virtual Earth Month celebration that includes the launch of a video series and the do-it-at-home Climate Ribbon project. I also took this opportunity to sign on to Climate Mayors, a bipartisan network of US Mayors working together to demonstrate leadership on climate change through meaningful action in their communities: <http://climatemayors.org>.

- As we approach Mental Health Awareness Month in May, I want to take this opportunity to thank the Mental Health Council for the work they have done since their inception last year to normalize discussions about mental health, make Westfield a stigma-free community, and ensure that our residents have easy access to mental health resources. Surely the onset of this pandemic has mental health implications for many, and the Mental Health Council has been extremely helpful in providing informative links and information now included in our Coronavirus Information Center.
- Thank you so much to everyone who has donated to the We Love Local Fund to benefit our local business community. To date, the fund has received \$202,000 from more than 700 donors, and has distributed \$183,000 to 135 Westfield businesses. In addition to the many individual donors, I also want to acknowledge the related fundraising efforts for this worthy cause. Thank you to J. McLaughlin for their retail fundraiser that yielded over \$600 in donations. Also, thanks to Westfield resident Joe Mindak, whose painted pallets have raised \$3,500 for We Love Local. And now, we have Westfield High School students bringing their generation into the fold with the upcoming Westfield Fortnite Tournament being held this Friday and Saturday to benefit We Love Local (more details on their Instagram page: @westfieldfortnitefundraiser).
- Although we do not yet know when we can resume large-scale events, we do know enough at this point to postpone the Memorial Day parade -- given the logistics that would need to be secured and finalized within the next month. We expect to host the parade in either July or September at a time when we can gather and properly honor those who have made the ultimate sacrifice. We will communicate a new date at the appropriate time.
- Shifting to finances, we continue to receive questions about the May 1 property tax deadline that is quickly approaching. There is currently a ten-day grace period in place for that payment. Unfortunately, we do not have the authority to extend that grace period, as such an extension must come from the State. The State Assembly passed a bill for an extension, but the Senate declined it after intense lobbying by counties and schools. Keep in mind that, as the municipality, we are the tax collector and are mandated to first pay the county and school obligations in full. So in the event that our tax collections decline, which I anticipate, the municipality is the one left scrambling to plug budget holes. I share in your collective frustration and have been talking to other mayors about our options. We expect some recommendations from the NJ League of Municipalities tomorrow, and I will of course be sure to communicate any updates we receive on this important issue that impacts so many of us.
- In anticipation of declining revenues, it should come as no surprise to anyone that, like most municipalities, we are in the process of revisiting our budget as the entire economy continues to process the impact of this pandemic. 45% of our budget is generated by non property tax

revenues -- such as parking, construction, and courts -- all of which were lower than anticipated prior to the pandemic, are now at a virtual stand still, and the timing and certainty of their restoration is unknown. It also remains unclear what the impact of COVID will be on property tax collections due to high levels of unemployment. As a result, we will be proposing significant and potentially drastic budget cuts based upon reduction in revenue projections. We will be prepared to share these details with the public when the budget is introduced at our next meeting on April 28.

- The impact of this pandemic on our current financial situation only reaffirms what I shared at our March 10 Council meeting regarding the necessity and urgency of expanding and diversifying our tax base. To that end, I'm pleased to report that the Planning Board endorsed the Town Council's redevelopment resolution, and has directed our redevelopment planner to do a study to determine if our eight municipal parking lots, the Lord & Taylor properties, and the Rialto property qualify as non-condemnation areas in need of redevelopment.
- Tonight we're taking the next step by voting on a resolution to ask the Planning Board to seek a study to determine if our entire downtown within the Special Improvement District qualifies as an area in need of rehabilitation. As a reminder, this designation allows for agreements with property owners that is meant to encourage them to improve their properties through five-year tax abatements on the value of their improvements. The property owners were very enthusiastic about this designation when we asked for their input last month. This designation seems more necessary now than ever as a means to ensure our downtown not only survives but eventually thrives after we emerge from the other side of this pandemic.

In closing, let me again offer my thanks to all of you for your patience, resilience, and sense of community during this time of incredible uncertainty. Information about COVID-19 has moved rapidly, with ongoing new updates about confirmed cases and fatalities, social distancing requirements, testing availability, best practices, and calls to assist those in need. It's a lot to take in, day after day.

It has been just over a month since my initial COVID-19 message to the community, and the world already looks very different in that time span. Things we took for granted as part of everyday life are now temporarily suspended. None of us envisioned April being a time for distance learning, waiting in lines to enter grocery stores, and wearing face coverings in public.

As I've said before, none of this is easy for anyone. But the stay at home order means just that: Stay at home, except for essential travel, which should be limited as much as possible. We can do this. Please know that every decision I make in these unprecedented times is with the best interest of this community in mind, and I know this is our shared goal.

So, keep the suggestions coming. Keep the good news about community-led initiatives coming. I read every message sent to me, and it's so heartening to see Westfield come together when everyone needs it most.