



## Mayor Brindle's Opening Remarks April 28, 2020

Good evening, everyone, and thanks for joining us virtually tonight. 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. 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 113,856 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey, with another 718 still under investigation. Currently, the County reports 12,188 cases, with Westfield reporting two more -- bringing our case total to 216 to date. For context, the last time we held a Town Council meeting, two weeks ago, there were 68,824 cases of COVID-19 in New Jersey, with 146 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

- Today, Governor Murphy introduced the members of his Restart and Recovery Commission, who will advise on issues of public health, workforce development, and transportation; seek ways to maximize federal support; review potential long-term investments; and ensure that restart and recovery works for every family.
- The Governor is also signing an Executive Order permitting municipal governments to extend the grace period for property tax payments due until June 1. Under existing law, municipalities are only allowed to allow grace periods of up to ten days. This information just became available today, and as a result we will be adding a resolution to tonight's agenda extending the 2Q tax payment grace period to June 1.

### LOCAL UPDATES

- On the local front, today I signed a proclamation to honor the dedication of our grocery store employees in Town as unsung essential workers during this crisis. These employees have been presented with unprecedented challenges -- from tremendous increases in demand to social distancing operating modifications -- and have continued to work diligently to enable all of us in the community to secure our basic necessities amidst this pandemic. We will post the

proclamations for both Trader Joe's and Stop & Shop on our website as a sign of our ongoing gratitude for their continued commitment.

- I receive a lot of questions regarding our reopening plans, the timing of which will primarily be driven by the state. The Governor unveiled a plan yesterday which provided the metrics that will determine when things can reopen, but the timing of which remains uncertain -- which I know is frustrating for everyone.
- I also receive many questions about the reopening of our parks. Some residents want it to happen now, while many residents are strongly in favor of waiting longer.
- I remain concerned that Westfield continues to experience a consistent amount of new cases, with only a small percentage coming from long term care facilities, indicating that community spread is still happening. We are also concerned that if we reopen our parks in advance of the County parks, it will push crowds to ours, particularly as the weather improves. Even now, we are seeing people violating the park closures, and the Police Department has begun to utilize drones with a recorded siren and message for additional enforcement. Once the parks are opened, our police need to be confident that they will have the capacity to manage crowds and ensure social distancing.

That being said, we are discussing a reopening plan for the parks which will most likely be done in an incremental fashion similar to how they closed, which was done in coordination with the Board of Education and in consideration of County closures and other municipalities' practices.

To manage expectations, we are not there yet, but the parks reopening is something I evaluate and plan for on an ongoing basis with input from Administrator Jim Gildea, Police Chief Chris Battiloro, Regional Health Officer Megan Avallone, and members of the Town Council. One of the key indicators we will continue to watch is the prevalence of community spread.

I say this as your Mayor who has been very upfront with the community from day one of this crisis. When you are asked to make sacrifices, you expect nothing but the truth in return, and that is, and has always been, my commitment to you. I will continue to focus on facts, guided by values and principles, not politics or popularity. I'm looking forward to when we can pivot from saving people to serving people, which is just on the horizon if we can hang in there for just a bit longer.

- And that leads me to the introduction of our 2020 budget, the primary purpose of tonight's meeting. You will see that it reflects a lot of revenue uncertainty stemming from unknown tax collection rates and lost revenue from sources like parking, courts, construction, investments, and the pool.

We have cut our expenses significantly, and have a list of additional expenses that we are prepared to cut if receipts come in lower than anticipated.

Since elected, my administration has strived to find the right balance between keeping an appropriate level of surplus for unexpected events and putting our taxpayer dollars to work for you. We've done that through expansive road paving, investment in equipment and automation, and using surplus to lower the municipal tax rate to zero last year to mitigate uncertainty over the revaluation. This has all been accomplished while maintaining a 15-20% surplus level which is important to maintain our AAA bond rating.

We are very fortunate that we are in a strong financial position to weather this crisis in 2020, but the longer term view remains less certain, just as it does financially for many individuals and businesses given the current economic environment. Municipalities have not been promised any financial assistance to offset pandemic-driven revenue declines, so we must be discerning, flexible, and methodical to determine the best path forward to deliver uninterrupted services to our residents.

This unprecedented health crisis has further illuminated the challenges that I addressed at our March 10 Council meeting, particularly regarding our over reliance on revenue from discretionary sources. Every crisis also brings opportunity, and I look forward to working with the community to reimagine the possibilities for our recovery, and am confident that we will emerge stronger together with a bright future ahead.

In closing, I have two additional acknowledgements to make. The first is to extend birthday wishes to Councilman Dardia. The second is to acknowledge a special coincidence that was brought to my attention earlier today: Today is not only National Workers' Memorial Day to honor those killed, disabled, injured, or made unwell by their work, but it is also National Superheroes Day. I know the community joins me in thanking all of our superheroes who are getting us through the pandemic -- from the grocery store employees I mentioned earlier, to postal carriers, first responders, medical professionals, and all other essential employees who continue to rise to the occasion for the benefit of us all. Thank you.