



## Mayor Brindle's Opening Remarks February 23, 2021

Good evening, everyone, and thanks for joining us virtually tonight. 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.

### **COVID-19 UPDATES**

I want to start by recognizing that yesterday, this country surpassed 500,000 deaths from COVID-19 -- a truly unimaginable number. In under a year, we lost about the same number of Americans to this virus as to those killed in WWII, Korea, and Vietnam combined. I hope we all can honor the memories of those who died by continuing to do what is necessary to drive these numbers down even further as we await additional vaccines.

The seven-day average for confirmed COVID-19 cases in New Jersey is down 6% from a week ago and 40% from a month ago, and the rate of transmission is .86. As always, more detailed information about statewide numbers is available on the NJ COVID-19 Dashboard.

Due to the ongoing favorable trends, Governor Murphy announced some additional easing of restrictions this week that include increased capacity for sports and entertainment venues, increased spectator numbers for collegiate sports, and increased capacity for religious services. Full details can be found [here](#).

On the vaccination front, New Jersey has administered 1,713,580 doses to date. I continue to receive questions from frustrated residents -- rightfully so -- about the vaccination rate in Union County. I share the view that the County should be doing better, but the reality is that the surrounding counties have larger and more vaccination sites. For example, Morris and Middlesex have the mega sites and Essex has four county-sponsored sites. The State did not approve a mega site in Union County. And while Summit Medical Group was vaccinating many Union County residents, their allocation has been decreased so they are now doing fewer.

Our local health department has let the County know that we are willing and eager to do whatever we can to partner with them to get shots into arms. As I've mentioned previously, we have applied to be a local vaccine provider but the application is still on hold pending an increase in supply. We are, however, moving forward with logistical planning for a site in Westfield so we can start vaccinating as soon as there is supply available to us.

In addition, I am thrilled to see the resourcefulness and community-oriented mindset of some resident volunteers come together in an effort to coordinate a plan to assist Westfield's most vulnerable residents in obtaining vaccination appointments and securing transportation. Representatives from Lifelong Westfield, the MLK Jr. Association of Westfield, the Westfield Community Center, the Westfield

Neighborhood Council, and Police Chief Battiloro met today with our Health Department's Vulnerable Populations Coordinator to see how we can collectively best assist those in need. I will report more as additional details become available, and we may be asking for additional community volunteers for assistance in securing vaccination appointments.

#### **LOCAL UPDATES**

- Please join the Mental Health Council on March 10 at 7:00PM for a webinar on resilience called "Protecting Our Happy," a free one hour program to support mental wellbeing during these challenging times. Additional information and registration is available [here](#).
- The College Men's Club of Westfield will be accepting applications from Westfield seniors for 2021 college scholarships, as well as from juniors and sophomores for 2021 SAT/ACT scholarships. This local, non-profit volunteer organization provides merit-based and need-based scholarship grants for young men in our community to help pay for college, and has granted more than \$1 million in funds since its founding in 1922. For more information on available scholarships, or to donate, please visit their website.
- A big thank you to Lifelong Westfield and Fire Chief Tony Tiller for hosting a fire safety seminar for our seniors earlier today. It will be available to view on TV36 for those who missed it.
- Please consider offering your comments as part of our Police Department's accreditation process. For those that aren't familiar with it, this is a very big deal and has never happened in the history of our department. If attained, accreditation means that our department has met the highest standards of review from independent assessors representing the NJ State Association of Police Chiefs. Chief Battiloro has been working on this since he was sworn in, reviewing and updating every Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to ensure we are fully compliant and meeting, and in some cases exceeding, best practices. Public input is invited as part of this final assessment, and anyone wishing to comment may call 908-543-4063 on Monday, March 1, between the hours of 10:00 A.M. and 11:00 A.M. Comments will also be accepted by e-mail at [accreditation@wpdnj.org](mailto:accreditation@wpdnj.org). Full details are available on our website. Thank you in advance for your participation, and big kudos to the Police Department for undertaking this process.
- We have a busy agenda tonight covering a variety of issues. I'm thrilled that we'll hear an ordinance on second reading to historically designate 417 Prospect Street, at the request of its owner, Joyce Goldstein. Joyce has lived in the home, which was built in 1865, since 1980, and I want to thank her once again for her support of historic preservation. The addition of this property brings the total number of designations to five in the past two years, representing the most in recent Town history.
- I am also grateful to the HPC for their ongoing dedication to prioritizing voluntary designation and collaboration with property owners to save these pieces of Westfield's history. The HPC recently revised and expanded their Design Guidelines for Historic Sites and Districts to simplify the approval process for proposed work on designated properties, and to guide property owners

in planning and designing their construction projects. These guidelines can be found on our website.

- In addition, tonight Town Planner Don Sammet will be reporting on progress the Town is making to fulfill our Affordable Housing obligations per our April 2017 Court approved settlement with Fair Share Housing Center. While I recognize the affordable housing obligations that a municipality must address can cause consternation among some residents, I think it's important to recognize their purpose in addressing the affordable housing crisis that exists in NJ, and the collective responsibility municipalities have to be part of the solution. It's not only the right thing to do, but it's also constitutionally required since the New Jersey Supreme Court's first Mt. Laurel decision 46 years ago.

In our own community, much of our entry-level affordable housing stock has been replaced with larger expensive new homes, pricing many first time home buyers and retirees out of the market. The majority of our teachers and first responders can no longer afford to live in the community they serve. Since the rent charged for affordable housing units is based on an income formula tied to the market rate, "affordable" in Westfield applies to those making \$50-80K per year. This is what many consider "workforce housing," and something that our community should embrace as a means to maintain the economic diversity and inclusive character of our community, which has historically been a hallmark of Westfield.

In order to meet our court-ordered obligations, we must allow for residential units to be built in agreed upon locations with either a 15% or 20% set-aside for affordable units. Thanks to the efforts of Don Sammet, and former Mayor Andy Skibitsky and the previous Council, they arrived at a well-planned settlement that would enable residential projects to be built in strategic locations (generally along our rail corridor) that would improve blighted areas and benefit the immediate vicinity.

Tonight, we are voting on a redevelopment plan for a project that does just that. In February of 2020, this Council unanimously voted to declare the Sevell's property site on South Avenue an area in need of redevelopment, the first time a Westfield governing body has chosen to use this designation as a means to improve the aesthetics and public benefits of a project. Our redevelopment planning consultant Topology will be presenting an overview of the project a bit later, and I think you will conclude that the proposed development will be a significant aesthetic improvement over the vacant industrial site that exists there today, while also delivering a significant increase in tax revenue.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the concerns of residents who cite school overcrowding and congestion as reasons for opposing new residential development. Based upon experience in other communities, new one and two bedroom apartments don't typically bring many school age children, as evidenced by our own school district, who confirmed that there are only five school-age children residing in the 120 new units that have recently been built in Westfield. The fact that overall school enrollment has been declining, even prior to the pandemic, should also alleviate potential for overcrowding.

Regarding the potential for increases in traffic and congestion, this Council shares those concerns which is why we are currently updating the circulation element of the Master Plan to guide us in future planning. This work, which should be complete in the coming months, will identify circulation and traffic areas of concern, recommend mitigation strategies, and ensure any future growth will not impede our ability to get around safely and efficiently, whether by foot, bicycle, mass transit, or automobile.

With that, we'll get to work. I want to remind everyone that I will once again be enforcing Robert's Rules this evening to ensure we stay on topic and the meeting runs efficiently.

Thank you.