

State of the Town of North Hempstead

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A little over a year ago we elected a new President. At the time that he took office, the nation was yearning for leadership, bold decisions, change. The country had lost its way with the greatest financial collapse since the Great Depression; a loss of standing and stature throughout the world; and the continuation of unsolvable problems involving health care; the environment; and education.

The American people turned to Barack Obama filled with hope and great expectations. President Obama took office approximately one year ago and immediately embarked on an effort to meet the challenges of the times providing bold and decisive change.

The result? The economy appears to be coming back, America is better respected throughout the world, and there are seeds of resolution to enormous problems such as health care. And, with all that, the mood of the country is one mired in anger, stress, and anxiety while hope falls prey to fear.

We are not a patient people.

Upon taking office, President Obama said that the challenges we face “will not be met easily or in a short span of time.” We the people agreed because we understood how daunting the task before the new President was at that time. And yet, within one year , the new era is on the horizon even as our confidence wanes. Some eve declare that we are not up to the task and demand our retreat.

The President has done what we have asked him to do, and now we find ourselves in that precarious moment between investment and return , feeling uneasy as we wait. At times such as these, some are quick to turn inward and avoid the confrontation of the times. Others are more outspoken and confrontational.

President Obama: move us, lead us, challenge yourself, challenge us. Do not give up simply because we have contradicted ourselves through our demands. We expect you to make sense of it all and to make it work.

We expect our President to take the heat and the criticism, all the while wanting him to continue to lead, because deep down inside many of us still believe. The loud and angry voices notwithstanding, our system is strong, our President a voice of reason. Our nation is feeling its way through precarious times, but will emerge stronger than ever before .

No, this is not an introduction to tonight's State of the Union address, President Obama's first as President. This is a speech about North Hempstead . So what does all that I've just said have to do with us? It has everything to do with us.

The Town of North Hempstead is an American town with people from diverse backgrounds, varied degrees of wealth, different work experiences, old and young, a highly educated and well informed population.

It is many communities in one: a waterfront community; a region of wealth and prestige; a cosmopolitan neighbor of New York City; a melting pot of vibrant cultures; a haven for the middle class; a wonderful place for seniors to live or retire; a Long Island suburban Town filled with people of faith, people with needs, people with hope for the future.

We also have communities within our Town challenged by one form of neglect or another; pockets of poverty with needs difficult for either the private or public sector to meet.

Yet still, we have an appreciation for culture; a passion for the environment; a spirited commitment to our neighborhoods; and a penchant for activism.

The Town of North Hempstead , almost a quarter of a million people strong is an economic and intellectual force as so many other communities are within the State of New York . We work hard and we play hard and we too are at a crossroads wondering what the future holds for us.

Republican or Democrat or Independent, residents here, like Americans everywhere, are challenging our leaders to inspire confidence. Residents wear their frustration on their sleeve and express it at the ballot box. Sometimes by voting, sometimes by staying home.

Those of us who serve in government must listen to those voices; those that yell, those that reason, and those that stand mute. It is a challenging time to serve as a leader in government.

Geographically, the Town of North Hempstead is located just east of the New York City border and west of the Town of Oyster Bay. To the north lies about 30 miles of waterfront along Little Neck and Manhasset Bays as well as parts of Hempstead Harbor. To the south lies the Town of Hempstead, the largest town in America.

In fact, the Town of North Hempstead was once part of the Town of Hempstead up until the American Revolutionary War. In 1775, when the rebels in the State of New York established the Provincial Congress to replace the Assembly, northern Hempstead residents wanted the town to participate, but the Hempstead town leaders refused, their loyalties being to the Crown.

On September 23, 1775, community leaders up in these parts declared their independence from the Town of Hempstead, and in so doing, the British Crown. They had wanted to send delegates to the Provincial Congress that had been set up by rebels to replace the New York Assembly, but the Hempstead town leaders refused, supporting the Tory cause.

We declared our independence on September 23, 1775, having sent delegates to the convention anyway. The British fleet, however, happened to be parked down the south shore in those southern Hempstead waters and the folks up north were soon arrested for challenging the British Crown, not to mention the leaders in the Town of Hempstead.

Winning the war helped things work themselves out, however and soon after that, in 1783, the State of New York recognized the new Town of North Hempstead.

Early in my administration, we established North Hempstead Day where we read our declaration of independence in our public square, otherwise known as Mary Jane Davies Park, on September 23 of each year to the joy and amusement of children from local schools.

But this is not what I wanted to talk to you about today. I wanted to speak about 311, TownStat, Project Independence, the Office of Inter-municipal Coordination and my School Recycling Partnership.

Of course, I've been talking about these things every year, but they continue to evolve and they are important features of our town government and, I believe, of what local government should be in America today.

You see, we still have to confront the cynicism of the American voter, the local resident, the folks like you and me who believe in the American dream, remain cautiously optimistic, and yet still wonder if government is working.

I'm often struck by the intensity of some constituents who contact the Town with an issue or concern. This intensity is sometimes expressed as outright anger at the perception that no one is addressing their problem, or even listening to their concern.

When confidence fails, all looks bleak. When frustrated, we paint with broad strokes. When we lose confidence in our government havoc breaks loose.

Nationally and locally, government must keep up with people's expectations. I have come to see how people generally want the same result as one another, we generally support the same goals. It is the means to getting there that creates friction, frustration and discontent.

We want our voices to be heard, we want investment in our community to be protected, we want our loved ones to be safe and cared for when care is needed, we want to have confidence in those who lead us, we want hope to be the beginning of better things.

And so, today I stand before you recognizing that there are issues of national concern that give perspective to our local existence. The question, then, is what have we been doing to meet our responsibilities. What are we doing locally to meet the challenges of the day?

In the Town of North Hempstead our finances are solid, even during the hardest of times. We have maintained our current credit rating, the highest in town history and we have avoided layoffs while reducing our work force through attrition. We will rebuild and bring back the numbers needed to perform at the highest of levels, but we will do so in a responsible and timely manner.

Our parks are more beautiful than ever and our roads continue to get the attention that they must. We've expanded our services through grants and sheer will power with creative ideas and extraordinary town personnel who really do care and show it by making people's lives better in small and not so small ways.

We launched new programs last year like our pharmaceutical return program where in two days we collected over nine hundred pounds of unwanted pharmaceuticals that may otherwise have been disposed of improperly or used inappropriately.

We've expanded Project Independence which I will speak about in a moment, but we have now added medical and grocery tax rides, portal to portal for little or no cost.

We are working with the arts community to foster economic development while respecting the power of the arts in helping us on a personal and community level. Exciting things lay ahead including a films festival, art contests, and community art for all to see and appreciate.

Our New Cassel revitalization continues to move to conclusion with Prospect Avenue reconstruction beginning as we speak and our Platinum LEED Certified Community Center on the verge of going out to bid.

Plandome Road in Manhasset will soon see half of a million dollars in Safe Route's to School monies making the road safer, and better and prettier.

Mill Pond, Roslyn Pond, Hempstead Harbor, Manhasset Bay , and Manhasset Valley Park will all see improvements in the coming months as so many other ponds and parks have seen in the last few years.

Our Housing Authority is making great strides in redeveloping its properties on behalf of its residents and our Business and Tourism Development Corporation will be reborn as a vehicle to provide resources to not-for-profits looking to invest and grow in our community.

Town Hall has been restored, Tully Pool is being rebuilt, Manorhaven Pool is next in line. Playgrounds and ball fields are better equipped than ever before and North Hempstead Beach Park is coming along as a great venue for all to spend quality time on the north shore of Long Island .

Harbor Links Golf Course and Clubhouse continue to thrive with more events than ever before, and North Hempstead TV is really becoming a resource for local television about local people and local government.

And, while not the sexiest of subjects, flow control is here and garbage costs are going down.

In fact, I've been so focused on making government work better and on the challenges that we face in local government, that the Newsday editorial board, from time to time calls me smart, creative and innovative as a leader. On the other hand, they say that I can be disengaged while I focus on the technical or boring stuff that I always seem to be talking about. They say that I have no passion, not enough heart, and am too focused on the technological. They even called me a **technocrat**.

And so, I believe that this is as good a time as any to explain to you why the statistical data analysis maintained through computerized call center systems is critical to maintaining our fiscal platform and managerial vertical allowing the Town to document input and manage output through both qualitative and quantitative analytical methodologies.

Seriously, however, I would like to spend a few moments on our signature programs here in the Town of North Hempstead.

311 & TownStat

Accessibility to government has topped the list of priorities since I took office. Our 311 Call Center is one of the initiatives I'm most proud of.

I announced my intention to bring 311 and Town Stat to the Town of North Hempstead in my first State of the Town in 2004. We started slowly, but with a \$500,000 federal grant through the offices of Senator Chuck Schumer and support from then Senator Hillary Clinton and Congress members Gary Ackerman and Carolyn McCarthy we made it happen.

The 311 Call Center delivers on two fronts: helping employees to better manage their workloads while improving responsiveness to constituents' inquiries and concerns.

Last year, 311 logged a total of 117,406 requests for service, an increase of more than 3,000 calls from 2008.

These calls run the gamut, from general information about scheduled events in the parks, to the status of buildings department applications, to calls from constituents thanking a Town employee or department for a job well done.

One important benefit of the 311 Call Center is its function as a first point of contact where constituents' questions can be answered immediately, thereby reducing the call volume reaching departments town-wide.

Because each call is logged, tracked to resolution and documented, I can tell you the great story of Joanne Lagomarsine. Joanne has been a resident of Mineola for 40 years. She placed a call into 311 on January 9 at 4:57 PM to report the sad news that her nine year old dog, Sam, a Husky-mix, was missing.

After 311 logged her call, the Service Request was sent to the Town's Animal Shelter. Two days later, on January 11 at 9:07 AM, Joanne received a phone call from our Animal Shelter letting her know that Sam was found and brought to the Animal Shelter and would soon be returned to her.

Joanne and Sam were going to try to be here today, but unfortunately they couldn't make it. Thank you Joanne for sharing your story with us.

In the area of Environmental Stewardship, I would like to talk to you about our School Recycling Partnership Program.

During my first years as Town Supervisor, I would receive calls from time to time from local students, teachers, administrators and even parents about recycling or the lack thereof in the schools. They would ask for guidance or assistance, but the Town has always been separate from the schools and there wasn't any mechanism for us to work together.

At one point, I received a request from some folks in Port Washington about buying recycling bins for the Port Washington School District. Eureka . Why stop there, I thought, lets purchase bins for every classroom, in every building, in every school district in the town.

Supplying 47 buildings in eleven school districts was a tall order in and of itself, but without a plan to pick up the recyclables and deliver them to the appropriate places, the plan had no teeth. So we put out a bid and awarded a contract and now the Town picks up the recycling for nine of its 11 schools districts, with over 30,000 students participating in the North Hempstead School Recycling Program. Since the inception of the program, our students recycled some 456 tons of paper, which saved more than 7,752 trees, a small forest.

I would like to thank the school superintendents and administrations of all participating school districts, and specifically two superintendents that are here today, Dr. Geoff Gordon and Dr. Charles Cardillo.

But we didn't stop there. Recently we added industrial scales to weigh the garbage, initiated a video contest and a recycled materials arts contest. We added e-waste collection, which generated almost 100 tons of unwanted electronics last year and we are off and running with one of the nation's leading recycling programs. We recently received the New York State Environmental Excellence Award for this program and received an A+ by the Citizens Campaign for the Environment for our recycling efforts.

Other environmental initiatives, by the way, include Operation Clean Sweep, the Green Team, the construction of a LEED certified Community Center in New Cassel, the reseeded of Hempstead Harbor with shellfish, the pharmaceutical drop-off program, Mill Pond restoration and the removal of hundreds of tons of debris from Sheets Creek in Port Washington .

Office of Intermunicipal Coordination

In the area of Best Practices, our Office of Inter-municipal Coordination stands as a model of governmental partnerships.

Years ago, the issue of layer upon layer of government was brought to my attention. I decided to establish the Office of Inter-municipal Coordination to provide a central hub to help coordinate the Town's interaction with the myriad of local governing bodies. The Town of North Hempstead has within its borders 31 villages, 11 school districts, over 50 special districts and a number of authorities and associations.

We needed a mechanism to provide support for shared services and inter-municipal dialogue. We needed to be able to provide greater oversight and more accountability. The town has fulfilled its mission, working with districts and villages in ways that make sense to all involved.

To date, we have over 50 inter-municipal agreements where we provide road resurfacing, signs, salt, emergency services, and other such items to other governments or agencies within the town. I believe we saved millions of taxpayer dollars over the years while providing a central hub where governing bodies can come together to work together on behalf of our residents.

Project Independence

Over the past two years, the quality of life in North Hempstead has been well documented. Money Magazine ranked the Town one of the top 100 best places to live in America and then again ranked us as the second best place for a healthy retirement. One of our projects featured in these designations is Project Independence.

Former Commissioner Madge Kaplan once suggested to me that we should do an urban NORC, Naturally Occurring Retirement Community, but we should do it here, in the suburbs. I said fine, but I'm not calling it a NORC because I didn't like the sound of it and besides, we are not going to present ourselves as a retirement community. I decided to call it Project Independence.

We designated two census tracts in New Hyde Park where 40% of the community was 60 years old or older and we created a pilot program where seniors in these two census tracts received all sorts of services including visiting nurses and social workers along with medical transportation and access to friends, neighbors and organizations that were there to support seniors when they needed help.

A pilot is meant to lay the foundation for serving an even larger community and so we, in North Hempstead took Project Independence from Pilot to Program. From two census tracts in New Hyde Park we took this idea and made it a town wide program. The question presented was how do we maintain that individual connection to the people? How do we give people the confidence that when they call us we will get back to them, know their name and solve their problem?

The answer was to marry Project Independence to our 311 system. We have now established eight geographic areas throughout the town covering all residents and have taken Project Independence Town wide.

According to our 311/TownStat data base, Project Independence last year received 1550 311 service requests; performed 1970 units of social work services; made 670 home visits from our visiting nurses; performed 430 blood pressure screenings and included over 2000 seniors at our education programs that addressed issues such as bereavement, fall prevention, and medication management.

Joining us today on behalf of Project Independence members throughout the Town is Henny Fradkin who has been a resident of Port Washington for more than 50 years. She became a Project Independence member last month along with her husband, Sid .

Henny is now Sid's primary caregiver, and the support Project Independence has provided, including access to supportive staff, has helped ease the daily burdens she faces , and helped her to live in the community she has called home for so long . Henny is here with us today – let us give a great round of applause for Henny.

Partnerships

One theme weaved through each of the examples I've covered today is that successful local government is all about partnerships. In North Hempstead that has meant partnerships with our schools, partnerships with our villages, and partnerships with our special districts.

And it has meant partnerships with elected officials at all levels.

Our Nassau County Legislators Judi Bosworth, Wayne Wink, Richard Nicolletto and Robert Troiano are invaluable partners , working with us on projects from parks to policing.

Assemblymembers Michelle Schimel, Chuck Lavine and Tom McKeivitt are working hard for us in Albany , during some of the most difficult economic times in modern memory.

North Hempstead is fortunate to have not one, but two residents serving in Congress - Congressmembers Gary Ackerman and Carolyn McCarthy have delivered not only essential resources for programs like Project Independence and the improvements to our waterfront, but are national and even international leaders on a wide range of issues.

Senator Chuck Schumer has been there for North Hempstead every time we've asked, securing the funds which turned the North Hempstead 311 system from a dream into reality, and providing support for many other projects and programs.

His leadership on so many issues makes us proud to have him representing us in the US Senate.

We look forward to working with our newest US Senator Kirsten Gilebrand who has recently expressed interest in working with us here in the Town of North Hempstead .

State Senator Craig Johnson, however, deserves special mention for his tireless efforts on behalf of North Hempstead. In 2009 he has secured millions of dollars for our town which helps our residents in so many ways. From money for parks improvements to support for our community centers the NYS dollars will make a difference here in North Hempstead Town. One particular grant is worthy of special mention.

For fifty years flooding has plagued certain areas of Mineola and Carle Place. The damage to people's homes and public property has been enormous.

Many years ago, Senator Johnson brought the county, the town and the village together with representatives from his office to take this flooding issue head on. We made some progress, but the real solution to the problem required millions of dollars and inter-municipal cooperation that is rarely seen.

After exhausting every resource to find money to fix this problem, it was Senator Johnson who came through this year with the 2+ million dollars needed to remediate this issue once and for all.

Michele Cerro has been a resident of Mineola for 19 years. She has experienced the issues with flooding from the first day she has moved into her house in 1991. Michelle says that, "Fixing this flooding issue will change the quality of life for all residents in Carle Place and Mineola" I would like to thank Michelle for keeping our focus on this important issue even when the odds of resolution seems improbable if not impossible.

Working together across governmental and political lines is what successful government is all about. And as I have highlighted for you here today, it 's one of the reasons why residents of North Hempstead can be proud of those that serve them at all levels of government.

This brings me back to where I started. Tonight President Obama will address the nation. With all the frustration, anxiety and fear that exists in towns and cities throughout America, I believe that hope is not an empty promise, but a feeling that beginnings lead to better things to come. I believe that we have illustrated that here in North Hempstead. As difficult as these times are, we are moving forward, making a difference, and meeting the challenges.

In the metaphor of lightness and dark, it is the moment before the dawn, and we must ask ourselves whether we can hold out in the dark for just a little while longer.

President Obama, I ask you today to stand your ground, wiser today than yesterday, having already laid the foundation for future success.

Learn from all that has been done, but do not fail to move us, to lead us, to challenge us. Failure is not an option .

I stand at the helm of an American Town . I hear the recriminations and worn out dogmas of which you once spoke and I see those that stand on the sidelines full of doubt.

I tell you that this is the moment that we must stand firm and believe that with the morning sun comes a better day. I stand with you Mr. President. In towns, cities, and villages across America you will find that America 's promise is still strong and it is still real. Even in those voices of frustration and anxiety lie hope and great expectations. We will succeed, there are better days ahead. God bless the President, God bless the town of North Hempstead, and God bless America