

STATE of the TOWN

2021

Supervisor Richard L. Thurston

A presentation on the
accomplishments, goals, and future of the
great Town of Wappinger

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#WappingerStrong

STATE OF THE TOWN - 2021

Wappinger, Dutchess County, NY

February 18, 2021

by

SUPERVISOR RICHARD L. THURSTON

Dear Residents, with a very challenging 2020 behind us, I present to you my progress report on the State Of The Town of Wappinger, as well as my look forward. Despite the challenges caused by the COVID-19 Pandemic, thanks to strong, non-partisan support in 2020, we can point to many transformative and other accomplishments for and throughout our community. Among the most important has been establishing and expanding open, transparent participatory citizen engagement in Town affairs.

Proudly, I recognize the numerous accomplishments of *#Team Wappinger*: a team that includes our 53 full-time and 40 part-time “employees,” including: our elected officials ¹; our Deputy Supervisor, Kevin Hathorn ²; our staff; the members of our Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, and Board of Assessment Review. I also thank our volunteer community-focused committees and also our various advisers for their dedicated services. Without such unexcelled teamwork, we would not have experienced the many unparalleled accomplishments during 2020.

A special thanks to our first responders including: the Town’s three fire companies (Hughsonville, New Hackensack, Chelsea), the Dutchess County Sheriff’s Office, New York State Police, and EMStar– Town of Wappinger Ambulance; the Village of Wappingers Falls Police and Fire Companies, all dedicated to serving and protecting our Town residents 24/7.



I present my 2020 State of the Town Report in the following pages.

1. TOW Elected Officials are: Richard L. Thurston, Town Supervisor; William H. Beale, 1st Ward Councilman; Angela Bettina, 2nd Ward Councilwoman; Chris Phillips, 3rd Ward Councilman; Al Casella, 4th Ward Councilman; Mike Sheehan, Highway Superintendent; Joseph P. Paoloni, Town Clerk; Carl Wolfson, Town Justice; Heather Kitchen, Town Justice; Legislators Donna Bolner (District 13), Lisa Paoloni (District 14), and Joseph D. Cavaccini (District 15).

2. Appointed by Supervisor Thurston and approved by the Town Board

Our 2020 accomplishments came notwithstanding the assault of the COVID-19 virus on our community throughout the year. We were repeatedly saddened throughout by the passing of residents, relatives and friends, and many others who had succumbed to the virus, including my cousin Paul Thurston: to their families and friends, we continue to offer our deepest sympathies.



Fortunately, our Town services remained virtually uninterrupted during 2020³. Throughout the year, we prioritized services for Town-wide health, safety, and communications, while constantly adapting operations to ensure the safety and welfare of employees, residents, and businesses. We were able to provide our services because:

We not only completed the enhancement of our technology platform and capabilities, including cell phone distribution, to enable working remotely before COVID-19 struck⁴; but

We also implemented one of the most comprehensive pandemic response plans and protocols in Dutchess County and were one of the few town halls in the county open to the public during the pandemic.

We focused intensively on: business continuity; disaster recovery; shared services; virtual engagement; increased attention to security, including security platform and secured tools, etc. In all of these and other elements, we broke down the internal silos so that our Team worked together to carry out operations. We obtained high reviews from the State audit on these and other items in 2020.

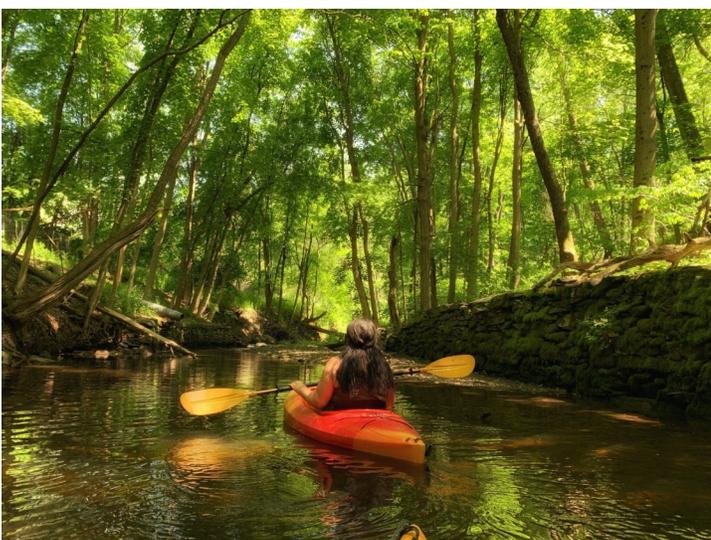


3. The only operation that we shut down, and only for 2-1/2 months in the Spring was the Recycle Yard, dry trash area. We kept the wet garbage open throughout the pandemic. Most significantly, we learned that “Remote is Possible” and made changes very quickly to enable a virtual presence.

4. Our government is data rich but was technology backward. Upon assuming office, I knew that we needed to create systems, buy new software, and create new processes that would enable us to use data efficiently. I realized from my business experiences that data is the basis for decision-making. Greater efficiencies depend on data to enable one to make informed decisions and taking advantage of data storage on the Cloud. Finally, enhanced technology and data efficiencies create new levels of transparency and accountability. We are one of the few municipalities in Dutchess County that employs an IT specialist in Tom Bahr, along with Craig Roberts, our IT consultant, and Joey Cavaccini who is responsible for disseminating the various news and information to the public, along with Mike Miner, our Town Videographer. The Board and I also established a Social Media policy and hired an HR Director to assist with privacy protections.

An unforeseen benefit of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 was the upsurge in new homeowners moving into our Town. As more New York City residents acquired properties outside of NYC, our Town benefited significantly from the new influx of neighbors. Wappinger has been a top target for families moving out of New York City; the Town's residential home vacancy rate is well-below similar area towns; its residential home prices are slightly lower than Fishkill and East Fishkill. In fact, our new homeowners have created an unexpected growth in our mortgage tax revenues to a 2020 year-ending \$456,000 over budget. This growth helped to offset some of our funding setbacks, including the decline in sales tax revenues. There is no guarantee that a similar occurrence will exist in 2021.

During my Second *Inauguration Address* to the Town in January 2020, I established a number of non-partisan priorities for #Team Wappinger, each designed to benefit the entire Town. Out of those basic principles, we have focused on:



Promoting the ongoing safety, health, and welfare of our residents, including: advocating for residents at various levels of government; keeping our taxes and property assessments low; adjusting and re-examining Town-charged fees and costs, including escrow fees; encouraging small business preservation, development and growth; promoting protections for the Wappinger Creek Watershed involving especially the protection of our water sources; and providing for more job growth through expansion of our businesses, etc.

Creating Sustainable Highway infrastructure improvements, including: Myers Corners Road reconstruction; commencement of Old Hopewell Road Reconstruction; planning for the construction of a roundabout at New Hackensack and All Angels Hill Roads; planning for a new roundabout at Chelsea Road and Route 9D; improvements along Route 9, etc.



Long-term Planning and implementation of non-highway infrastructure improvements, including: sewer and water repair, maintenance and expansion including I&I mitigation; expanded water supply with new well fields and other arrangements; playgrounds, parks, and park facilities; preservation of Carnwath Farms; etc.



Building Leadership capabilities, including capturing institutional knowledge and enabling training to enable our leadership to make meaningful and lasting change. Technology and data involves providing enough information to allow us to move forward. It has not been just about governance, but securing resources through more capable leadership.

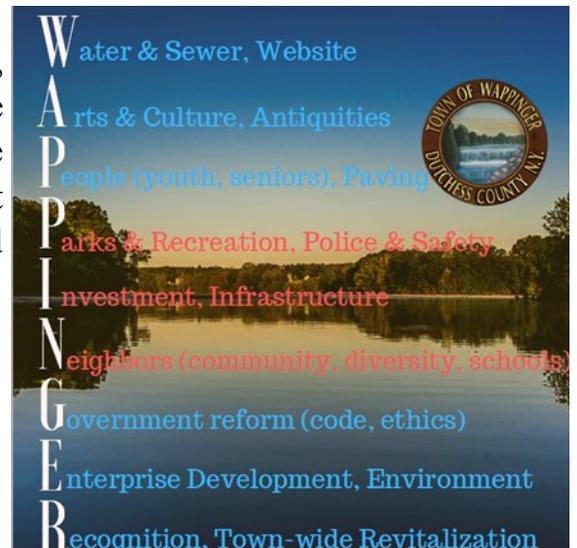
Advocating for our residents and engaging citizens, including: working aggressively to attract more affordable housing (housing has been and remains a top priority); promoting the location of county services within the Town; *participatory citizen engagement* through our meetings, on-site visits, revised Town Website and various social media channels and participatory workshops; establishing and promoting diverse activities for our Veterans, etc.



Each of these priorities fell within our “W-A-P-P-I-N-G-E-R” initiative that I established in 2018-19, as shown in the attached graphic.

Not everything came out perfectly: we made some missteps, but through trial and error, we have been able to adjust and make mid-stream changes where appropriate.

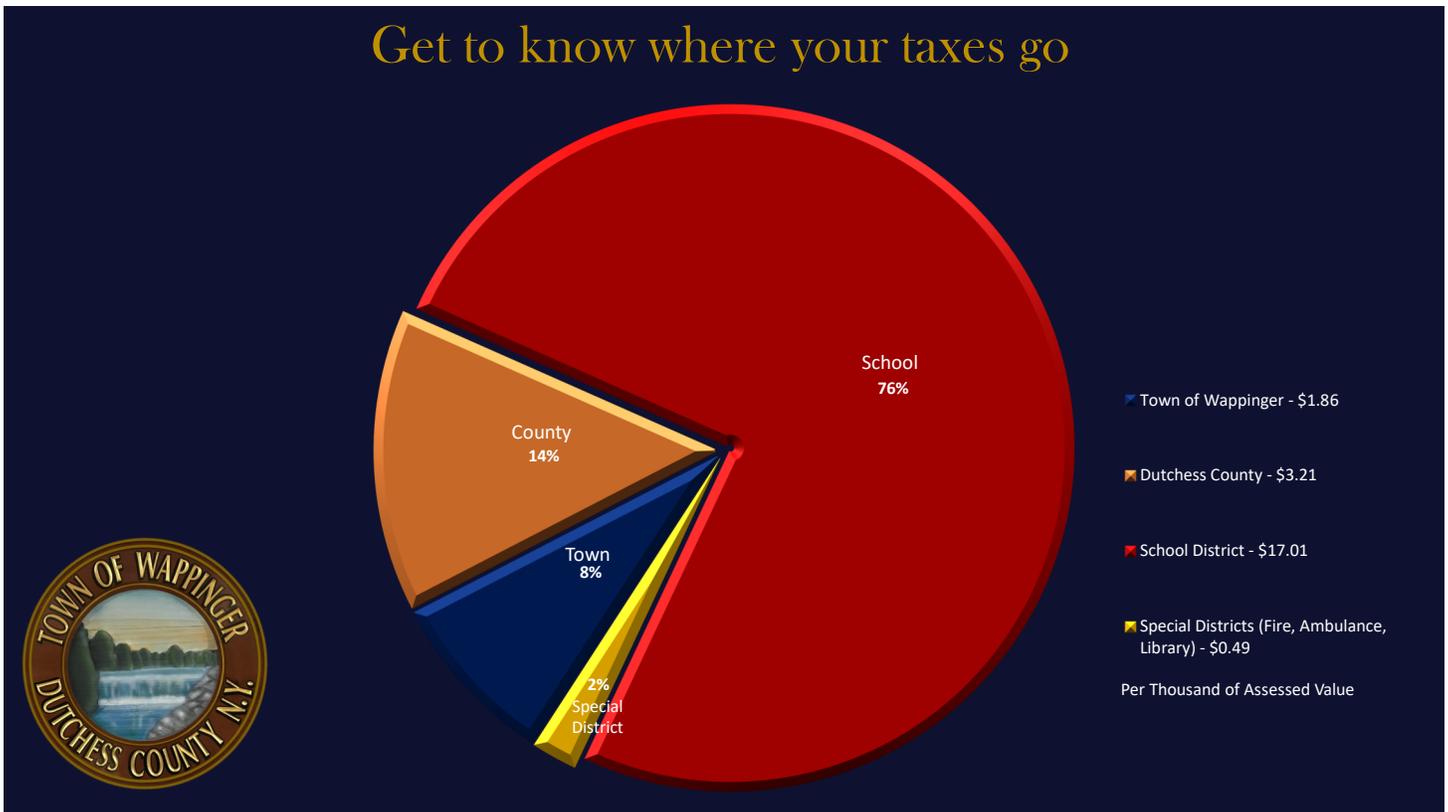
Through our pro-active approach to innovation, pushing the envelope, and encouraging constructive feedback, we have built a new platform for constructive citizen engagement. Can more be done? Of course it can, and will be focused on during the months and years ahead.



In the following pages, I report on some of the specific accomplishments of myself, our elected and appointed officials and most especially, our Town Staff.

Later on in this report, I will also comment on the activities of our County Legislators Bolner, Cavaccini, and Paoloni.

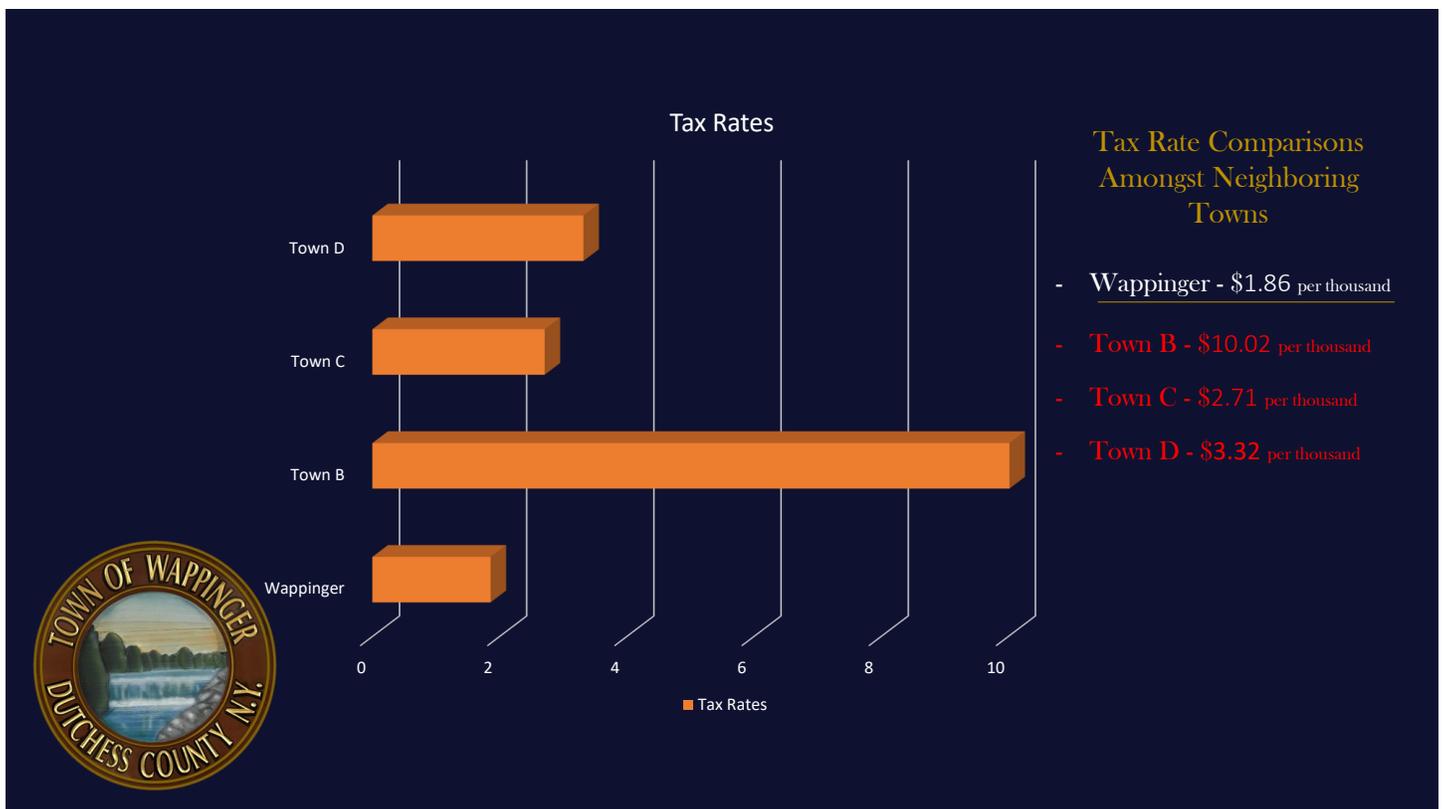
Fiscal Responsibility and Taxes. Notwithstanding COVID-19, we ended the 2020 fiscal year in a much stronger financial condition than we had anticipated would be the case at the end of March 2020. This result is attributable, in part, to our conservative budget that we established during our 2019 budget planning. Also, we initiated a number of new fiscal policies and procedures that strengthened our management of the budget, resulting in reduction of costs and expenses. In fact, we brought a new level of professional, experienced fiscal management to Wappinger Town Hall.



The unexpected surplus helped us to reduce the impact of our 2020 drawdown on the “A” fund balance, which fund is responsible for most of the non-highway costs that the Town incurs annually.

The taxes for the Wappingers Central School District is not the responsibility of the government of the Town of Wappinger. The Town government is not involved in the budget planning of the WCSD budget and we have absolutely no say or influence over the WCSD budget.

Our 2020 budget held down Town taxes much lower than those of other municipalities. Similarly, real property assessments were not increased across the Town. Our 2021 Budget resulted in **NO TOWN OR VILLAGE IN-TOWN TAX INCREASES**. Furthermore, the Town's total outstanding declined from \$23,455,000, as of 12/31/17 (the day before I first took office), to \$22,350,000, as of 12/31/20. This resulted in a reduction of **\$1.1 million or approximately 5%**. That reduction occurred despite our borrowing for the following projects: \$2.1 million in road improvements; \$1.3 million in HVAC improvements at Town Hall; \$1.8 million for the EMS Building improvements; \$300,000 for Tall Trees water supply; and \$625,000 for the purchase of Highway Equipment. All of this and more, enabled us to continue to maintain our AA+ rating, while being praised for: *“Wappinger's strong management team maintains a number of good and robust financial policies and practices...new policies on a wide array of topics ranging from ethics to social media and internet usage;”* and



“We highlight that revenue and expenditure assumptions are very conservative and reflect, at least, five years of trend data and external considerations. We believe these conservative budgeting practices and management's anticipation of an impending economic slowdown for 2020, even before COVID-19 hit, allow the town to manage through this challenging economic period.”



Major Infrastructure Improvements. We continued to keep Wappinger’s infrastructure safe and updated. Unfortunately, our aging infrastructure has required us to focus increasingly on repair and maintenance. Thus, we have made the improvement of our water, sewer, and highway infrastructure a top priority. We are also working on other initiatives related to beautification of Route 9, expansion of increased sidewalk and walking trails.

We funded these initiatives through a combination of: Dutchess County assistance; grant funding; bond funding; and reinvestment from our separate UWWD and UWSD fund balances. We continued to improve our infrastructure, including: installation of two new water wellfields to ensure a continued, high-quality, long-term water supply; connected water to Chelsea residents; major highway improvements (@ Myers Corners, Old Hopewell, and a new roundabout @ New Hackensack/All Angels Hills); and planning for the decommission of our aged pocket sewer plants, such as the ones at Wildwood and Royal Ridge; and working on water and sewer challenges for residents at Woodhill Green, The Pavilion, and the mobile home park on Cooper Road.

Town Parks and Facilities. During 2020 throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we kept open each of our 13 Town Parks, our boat ramp and docks at Chelsea, and Carnwath Farms. In addition, we made substantial improvements to park grounds and facilities, including: new playground equipment at Quiet Acres Park and Rockingham Park replacing decades old equipment;



Councilmembers William H. Beale, Angela Bettina, Christopher Phillips, and Al Casella



repurposing and reconstruction of an ADA restroom facility, parking area and preparation for construction of an universal use playground at Spook Hill Park; field renovation and construction of new restroom facilities at Inspiration Field at Robinson Lane Baseball Complex; approved funding for the rehabilitation of the Major Daniel Martz Vietnam War Memorial at Martz Field Recreation Facility; Eagle Scout projects at Carnwath Farms, Spook Hill Park, Middlebush Cemetery, and others; and ongoing construction and restoration at Brexel-Schlathaus Park.



Building and Code Enforcement Department. In 2020, our Department saw an increase in total building permits issued, which confirms that Wappinger continues to be an amazing place for building and controlled development. The Department processed a record-high number of inquiries and permits for swimming pools, house additions, and alterations. Since families are home more, they are investing in their most important asset, their houses, which is great to see. The building department issued 1223 permits during 2020 of which 24 permits were for new homes, with 7 already having CO's issued and new families occupying them. We increased training for our staff to improve customer service and enhance efficiencies. We addressed ongoing concerns of our residents on Fowlerhouse Road as Tractor Supply built its new store.



The Town Board's enactment of major Town code reform resulted in greater accountability, transparency and fairness, while promoting the rule of law and reduced regulation at the local level. Also, the Town Board, upon my request, reacted quickly to the COVID pandemic, relative to allowing outdoor dining and other commercial outdoor activity. Having business owners go through the review process during a pandemic was not an option. We had to cut through the Red Tape, so, we authorized Department staff, led by Barbara

Roberti, in conjunction with the Building Inspectors and Fire Inspector, to issue temporary approvals. This has allowed the restaurants to have outdoor dining. These temporary approvals have been extended under my Board's authority in an effort to provide continued relief to these businesses and keep them open.

Wappinger's history, traditions, and culture.

Strong unparalleled emphasis on Wappinger history, tradition, and culture, including, but not limited to: creation of our first-ever Arts, Culture, History Committee (we began the preparation of a plan to use our cultural and historical assets more effectively); recognition and promotion of our Hamlets (our Hamlets have been the life blood of our community and accordingly we have initiated a series of initiatives to bring greater attention to them such as new town signs demarcating their boundaries); creation of a comprehensive, 96 page annual Town Guide; small business of the Month awards, etc.;



Highway/Public Safety and Storm Relief. Strong focus on public safety continued throughout 2020, including, but not limited to: maintaining the lowest cost structure



with highest safety performance (police and Town-dedicated ambulance); maintaining strong support for our Dutchess County Sheriff's Office and New York State Police; increasing town patrols in Town of Wappinger vehicles with increased traffic enforcement throughout the Town; executing prompt, effective, and coordinated responses to damage caused by natural storms, including close coordination with Central Hudson, Dutchess County Officials, Inter-municipal cooperation, etc. Our Wappinger Town Highway Department under Superintendent of Highways Michael J. Sheehan paved 7 miles of roads in 2020.

Veterans Affairs. We created a Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee under the leadership of Deputy Supervisor Hathorn to pursue many significant initiatives to support our veterans. These initiatives are focused on recognizing their sacrifices and patriotism, while coming to their aid and assistance. Among the key activities are Hometown Heroes banners, which are flying from utility poles in East Fishkill and Poughkeepsie, soon to come to Wappinger. Also memorializing veterans are Memorial Bricks, such as the ones at Castle Point and Brexel-Schlathaus Park. The next phase is planned for the west side of the memorial statue, where ordered bricks may be installed for everyone to see. Wappinger Veterans Memorial Highway signs will also be unveiled in April, at the northern and southern borders of our town, on Route 9.

Many Veterans Graves have been researched, and those names will be announced at a future Memorial Day Ceremony, recognized as vital contributors to our freedom. An American Flag Retirement receptacle has been built and installed at Town Hall, so that residents can deposit their un-serviceable (worn, frayed, faded and torn) American Flags, to be ceremonially retired from use. Veterans Monument care, beginning with Major Daniel Martz Vietnam War Memorial at Martz Field on Pye Lane. It had fallen into disrepair, so a plan was made to redesign and relocate the memorial eastward, to the entrance to the park, rotated 45 degrees to face both the walkway and Pye Lane. The 5K Walk/Run is planned for April 17th at the Lake Walton Road entrance to the Dutchess Rail Trail, welcoming all residents to participate for a small fee.



Town of Wappinger/Dutchess County Legislators' Partnership. After the Fall 2019

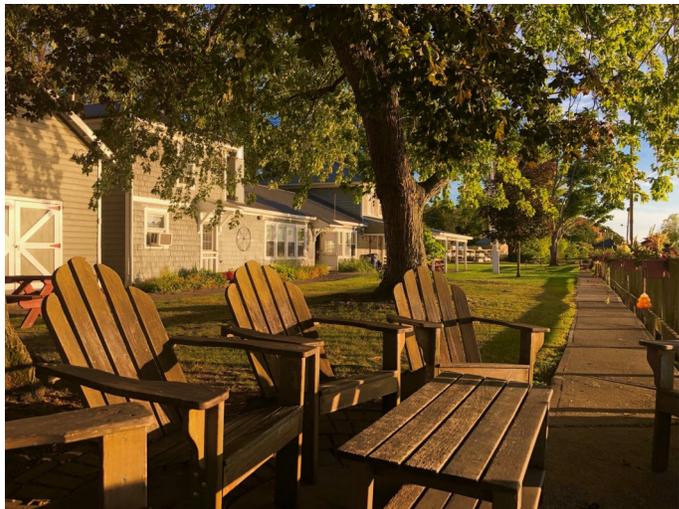
election results soundly re-elected me as your Town Supervisor, I met immediately with our three elected County Legislators (2 were newly elected) to discuss my plans and Town needs during 2020-21. The results of many of the following priorities are reflected above.



The non-partisan priorities that I set for the benefit of the entire Town, and on which I obtained the assistance of our legislators and members of all parties, included:

Promoting the ongoing safety, health, and welfare of our residents; (which has become all-the-more important throughout the ongoing COVID pandemic), including advocating for residents at various levels of government; keeping our taxes at 0% increase; reducing/waiving fees; encouraging small business preservation, development and growth; protections for the Wappinger Creek watershed involving the protect of our water sources; and providing for more job growth through expansion of several major businesses such as Hudson Valley Lighting, to name a few.

Highway infrastructure improvements including Myers Corners; Old Hopewell; construction of a roundabout at Route 376, New Hackensack, and All Angels Hill Roads; planning for a new roundabout at Chelsea Road and Route 9D; Improvements along Route 9, to name a few. We have established and maintained a very strong partnership with the County DPW concerning all County Roads running through the Town of Wappinger.



Non-highway infrastructure improvements including sewer and water repair, maintenance and expansion; expanded water supply with new well fields and other arrangements; playgrounds, parks, and park facilities; preservation of Carnwath Farms; to name a few.

Advocating for our residents and working to attract more affordable housing; location of county services within the Town; expanded activities for our Veterans, to name a few,

Our County Legislators Donna Bolner (District 13), Lisa Paoloni (District 14), and Joseph D. Cavaccini (District 15) reviewed the challenges and opportunities for the Town and, since then, have been making much progress in assisting our Town at the County level, even in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic. Several highlights of our County-Town Partnership include:

In January 2020, following Supervisor Thurston's lead in working with Dutchess County Officials, Legislator Cavaccini advocated on the floor of the Legislature to step in and provide crucial water and sewer maintenance operations to the mobile home park on Cooper Road, which allowed for 50 individuals to remain in their homes after the property owner walked away. Since then, we allowed our Town Engineers to assist the County with evaluations and proposals. Other related matters are now being worked on.

In February, Legislators Paoloni and Cavaccini joined with Supervisor Thurston in working with the displaced residents of the fire that ravaged 10 Market Street in the Village of Wappingers Falls. Through these humanitarian efforts, and the support of our great community, we were able to raise over \$25,000 and find new homes for these individuals.



As we entered March, our community became affected by the crippling COVID-19 pandemic. Legislators Bolner, Paoloni, and Cavaccini have advocated for hundreds of thousands of dollars in grant funding for parks and programming in our community from the County level, funds in which the Town of Wappinger and the Grinnell Public Library District benefitted by receiving. Legislators Paoloni and Cavaccini are continuing to advocate for funding to develop a Community Center at Carnwath Farms Historic Site & Park. Our legislators have continued to ensure that the Town of Wappinger is kept informed on the progress of the County's rehabilitation project of Old Hopewell Road.

In July, Legislator Cavaccini and Supervisor Thurston partnered with Fareground to bring a Little Free Food Pantry to Town Hall, where our seniors and residents in need can access healthy and nonperishable food. Legislator Cavaccini continues to work with Supervisor Thurston and the Town Board to enhance the quality of life in our town such as rehabilitating Carnwath Farms Historic Site & Park and enhancing our hamlet centers like at New Hackensack and Hughsonville.

In addition to this, our legislators followed the Town in adopting a County budget with a zero tax increase. In spite of COVID-19's impact on Dutchess County, this strong County budget for 2021, continues to offer services with new initiatives such as addressing homelessness and housing, youth services, as well as continued funding for senior services, mental health, infrastructure improvements, County parks and other critical services, and no layoffs. Our Legislators also rallied behind the much-needed capital improvement projects at Dutchess Stadium to ensure that the New York Yankees partnership with the Hudson Valley Renegades moves forward. The economic impact of bringing the Yankees' minor league team to the stadium will have great benefits for the Town of Wappinger. The Town is also working with the County and State to improve traffic flows on Route 9D in Chelsea.



Legislator Bolner who serves as the Chairwoman of the Tick Task Force, together with the Department of Behavioral and Community Health, announced a “Be Tick Free!” Media Contest that will be open to middle and high school students from now through May 10, 2021. The goal of the contest is for students to learn how to prevent Lyme and other tick-borne diseases, and then use their digital media skills to teach others what they have learned. Students are asked to create a 30- to 60-second live action or computer animated public service announcement on how to prevent tick-borne disease.

Legislator Bolner serves as the Majority Leader of the Legislature. Ex-Officio on all Legislative Committees as well as Airport Advisory Committee - Ex-Officio, Architect/Engineer/Construction Management Selection Committee, Citizens Advisory Committee on Domestic Violence – Liaison, Tick Task Force – Chair.

Legislator Paoloni serves as a member of the Family and Human Services Committee, Public Works and Capital Projects Committee, Public Works and Capital Projects Sub-Committee to Interview Candidates for Appointments, Airport Advisory Committee - Ex-Officio, Merit Award Board.

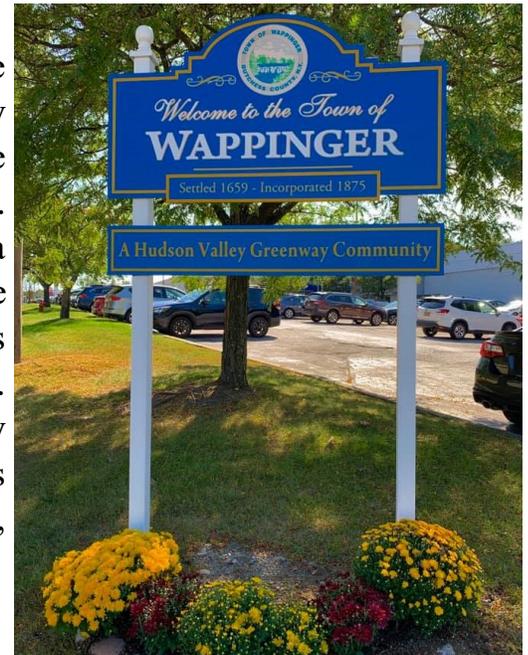
Legislator Cavaccini serves as a member of the Environment Committee, Public Works and Capital Projects Committee, Benefit Assessment Review Board and the Veterans Affairs Committee.

THE LOOK FORWARD.

Despite its health setback, the COVID pandemic accelerated innovation in a number of areas. Sophisticated technologies, remote working; database advancements; instantaneous communications and information hubs; social media information channels; 3D manufacturing enablers of small businesses; etc. have been commonplace.



We now have the opportunity to harness this collective innovative spirit throughout our Town to continuously enhance the quality of life of our residents. This will take participatory citizen engagements to a new level. Together, we can and must work towards reimagining a new future for our Town, our Hamlets and Village -- one that reflects the lifestyle and business landscape changes brought on by COVID in our Wappinger Community. With this goal in mind, the following are my key objectives. These objectives, in addition to those elements already in place, will build on the solid foundation, planning and execution established during the past 3:



- Finalize our long-range capital planning initiative to increase investment in infrastructure and accelerate improvement in sewers, roads, and drainage - prioritizing sustainability and making green choices wherever possible.
- Expand and diversify our tax base in order to provide the new amenities and services we deserve, upgrade our aging infrastructure over time, and reduce our over-reliance on residential property taxes. And, minimizing property assessments.
- Create opportunities to increase safe, daily and evening foot traffic in our Hamlets and along the Route 9 corridor by expanding residential both living in those areas and new commercial office space (we do not want more storage facilities and car dealerships).
- Create and implement a streetscape improvement plan that includes sidewalks, lighting, signage, and landscaping in certain priority areas such as the Route 9 corridor.
- Build on our successes in existing parks by creating new, additional open spaces and public gathering spots.
- Diversify our housing inventory by providing opportunities for affordable housing, expanded apartment inventory, etc..
- Continue to integrate arts, culture, and history into our Town's fabric through our existing committee.
- Ensure the integration of the Alpine Commons/BJ's site and the Plant Depot site on Route 9 site as critical to our overall Town plan.

- Working with the EPA in 2021 to address the Federally-designated toxic waste site located in the lower Wappinger Creek in order to allow the development along the Wappinger side of the Creek of our waterfront revitalization plan (WIP). Included is continuing to work with County, State and Federal officials to ensure our water supplies remain clean and secure, including the several toxic waste sites within our Town and Village that remain under ongoing observation and remediation.
- Similarly, working with the Village of Wappingers Falls and the various communities along the 46-mile Wappinger Creek to improve and enhance the environmental quality along this natural ecosystem;
- Ensure that the Chelsea/Chelsea Ridge area obtains comprehensive Town Water and Sewer infrastructure during the next 3-5 years.
- Execute the Wappinger Creek Watershed Development Plan for the environmentally sensitive Wappinger Creek residential, recreational and commercial areas. We will begin a similar initiative for the Sprout Creek in 2021.
- Continue to fight for better commuter facilities and parking/traffic interconnection at the New Hamburg MNR station.
- Continue to work with Dutchess County and NY State DOT on circulation and traffic management opportunities. And,

Taking public-private partnership to the next level

The potentially transformational opportunities can best be summarized as focusing on the following items:

1. Implementing short-term, post-pandemic economic growth, working together with neighboring communities and Dutchess County Government.
2. Continuing to prioritize resident safety and security.
3. Further promoting Town history and culture of innovation and service.
4. Expanding parks and recreation opportunities, specially focusing on our seniors.
5. Enhancing citizen participatory engagement. And, through each and every of the initiatives,
6. Prioritizing quality of life issues.



Conclusion.

In closing, as challenging as 2020 was for all of us, I hope we carry the positive lessons of the pandemic with us once that normalcy returns, which include prioritizing family, community, service, and health.

I, and our elected officials (working as a Team without political agenda or preference) will continue to ask that you commit yourself to remaining engaged and informed, and proactively to stay on top of the information we share through our website and various social media channels. Your input will be critical as we work together towards continuing to reimagine the future of Wappinger. This will be the foundation for participatory citizen engagement.

I also ask that you continue holding us accountable for delivering on our commitments, and once again approach this year with an open mind and a heart full of gratitude for being fortunate enough to live in this great community. This great Town of Wappinger has been in existence long before any of us, and it will be here long after we're gone. My task has been and will continue to remain focused simply on leaving it better than how we found it.

It remains a privilege to be your Supervisor. God bless our great community and country. Until soon, please stay safe and remain well!

Proudly and respectfully submitted,



Dr. Richard L. Thurston, Esq.

Supervisor

Town of Wappinger, NY

