



FOOTBRIDGE PARK
BLAIRSTOWN, NJ

TOWNSHIP OF BLAIRSTOWN
Incorporated 1845

106 Route 94, Blairstown, New Jersey 07825
www.blairstowntownship.org

MAYOR'S MESSAGE: 2020 TOWNSHIP REORGANIZATION MEETING

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Fellow Township Committee Members, Elected Officials,
And especially my wife Karen and children, Emma, Anita, and Joshua

I would first like to thank Reverend David Harvey of the First Presbyterian Church of Blairstown for giving the invocation this evening. This has been the fifteenth year in which Pastor Dave has invoked the direction and blessing of God on our town at this meeting.

I appreciate that Senator Steve Oroho took time out of his busy schedule to administer our oaths of office. Steve is always just a phone call away, along with Assemblymen Space and Wirths, to help our community. We are fortunate to have such committed legislators.

I congratulate JoAnne Van Valkenburg in being re-elected to the Township Committee and serving as Deputy Mayor. There is no bigger booster of Blairstown than JoAnne. She is deeply concerned about the well-being of our town. She and I might have different methods, but making Blairstown a better place is always the ultimate goal.

When I first sat here at the 2006 reorganization meeting, I mentioned that I would work for a "return to normalcy". This elicited chuckles from a couple of Blair Academy students in attendance who remembered that this was the motto of Warren G Harding, the winning Presidential candidate in 1920. But it fit the times.

Those of you active in our community back then will well remember the knockdown, drag out controversies that raged on for several years. Among them:

- A township committeeman removed from office for improprieties.
- The police department referendum.
- The old municipal building burned to the ground and the contractor who was constructing this building stopped work and filed for bankruptcy.
- A water department that was pumping out undrinkable water to our village residents.
- The lack of public disclosure in the decision making process, which was showcased by a township committeeman who's name plate on the podium read "Boss Hogg".

Happily, those issues are long behind us.... All except one.

The final piece of the puzzle to provide the best quality drinking water to our residents – connecting a new water well into the system, is still to be completed. We drilled a new well over two years ago which is awaiting NJDEP approval in order to be utilized. When this well becomes the primary source of water for the system, quality will markedly and permanently improve.

But not all controversies are in the past. Last year, the Committee levied a municipal tax for the first time in fifty-five years. We had intensive, sometimes heated discussions about the tax proposal. But the difference from the pre-2006 years was that this debate occurred at public meetings. The public was aware of all our positions and arguments. The community witnessed the transparency.

We are a committee of five. Individually, we have little authority independent of each other, we must all work together. Compromise is part of our job to reach that common goal of improving our residents' quality of life.

Many times in the past when fielding road complaints from our residents I mentioned to them that, “you get what you pay for”. I wasn't being flippant, it really was the truth. We didn't have a large municipal source of funds to fix all of the roads to a better standard because of the lack of a municipal tax.

I was in the minority on levying a municipal tax, but must say again that “you get what you pay for” and there has been a huge increase in township funded road construction activity as a result of the tax. Our residents are most appreciative when they can visibly see where their hard earned money is being spent. The road improvements made just last year are noticeable and substantial and are only the beginning.

During 2019, through the assistance of our state legislators and Governor, the NJDOT also funded a big share of local road construction work. The work on Belcher Road and both sections of Mohican Road came primarily from transportation trust fund grants. Our grant application for work on section one of Heller Hill Road has already been approved for this year.

But, your township government is more than just roads. Our dedicated and professional staff in the front office and in the field keep Blairstown running in good times or during emergencies.

Our Police, Fire Department, Ambulance Corps, Community Emergency Response Team, and Office of Emergency Management are always there when you most need them. Or do we remember the Road Department that is plowing snow while we are sleeping in our warm beds?

Over my term on the Township Committee, I have witnessed many times how dedicated these organizations are in serving our town. I wish that all of our residents could see first-hand how passionate our first responders and DPW are in helping our residents during power outages, hurricanes, blizzards, and floods.

We welcomed during 2019 a new municipal clerk, Everett Falt. Everett is instituting changes to bring new efficiencies to the office which are so appreciated. He is the one person in Blairstown government that the public has the most contact.

We also appreciate the dedication of so many citizens that volunteer to serve on the Land Use Board, Historic Preservation Committee, and Open Space Committee. These are the real people that maintain our quality of life. Without prudent land zoning, remembering our past, and keeping our rural character, Blairstown would be like so many other overdeveloped New Jersey towns. I invite you all to get involved in these three groups.

In addition to the water well project and continuing road improvements, we will be focused on several projects this year.

After much input from residents and business owners, changes to parking, traffic flow and speed will take place in the village area. Main Street must become more business friendly while respecting those living in that area.

The Walnut Valley Firehouse pollution remediation project will begin this year. At least 2,700 tons of contaminated soil must be removed which resulted from two leaking underground storage tanks that have been unused for many years.

The opioid and substance abuse problems are the saddest and most difficult challenge that we face. There are no easy solutions. We can't just buy our way out of this scourge. The victims have to want to help themselves. Through education, rehabilitation, and law enforcement we can best assist their recovery.

Consolidation and shared services are the buzzwords of the 2020's.

Over the next several months, we will be having discussions with area municipalities on the best solution to consolidate our municipal courts over a greater number of municipalities to gain bigger financial efficiencies.

A solution must be found to permit a feasibility study to be conducted that would examine the expansion our present 7th to 12th grade regional school district in to a Kindergarten to 12th grade district. If we don't try to solve our own problems; Trenton will, and probably not to our liking.

Blairstown has been in the forefront over the years in sharing the expertise of our assets.

Our Chief Financial Officer and Tax Collector work for several municipalities. We have participated in a regional municipal court for many years. Our Fire Department and Ambulance Corps are the primary first responders for multiple towns. The state took over the functions of our local building construction department. The Planning Board and Zoning Board of Adjustment were combined into a Land Use Board. Our Office of Emergency Management has led the area's preparation and response to disasters.

These efficiencies contributed to the fact that our 2019 municipal budget was \$602,000 less than it was 14 years ago during 2005.

Our own Senator Oroho is an author and sponsor of the “Path to Progress” initiative. These are proposed bipartisan policy reforms designing to stop the downward spiral of New Jersey. We look forward to working with the Senator to accomplish the program goals.

I would also like to ask my family’s forgiveness from being away from home so often for another year. Only the spouse of someone sitting here really knows the challenges and aggravation that a township committee member faces daily. Thank you Karen for putting up with me.

When I first began sitting here in 2006, my oldest daughter, Emma was in 2nd grade. She now is a senior in college and is a student teacher for 2nd graders. My twins, Anita and Joshua who are now college freshmen, were still in nursery school. All three progressed through the Blirstown Elementary School, and then North Warren Regional High School as did I.

I would also like to recognize in attendance this evening some people who have been real help to me and are a sounding board during my time in public service: former President of the North Warren Regional Board of Education, former Blirstown Mayor, and former Warren County Sheriff Sal Simonetti. Former Blirstown Mayor, former Warren County Republican Committee Chairman, and current Commissioner of the NJ Motor Vehicle Commission Walter Orcutt. Former Blirstown Deputy Mayor and my running mate for many years Sal Lascari.

Thank you to the Township Committee for placing your trust in me by naming me Mayor for 2020. You can be assured that I will continue to work for Blirstown as I have for the past 14 years.

And a big thank you to all for coming out this evening.

Steve Lance
Blirstown Mayor