

City of Warwick - State of The City Address

Mayor Joseph J. Solomon gives his 1st State of the City Address.
2/27/2019 - 7:00PM @ Veterans Memorial J.H.S.

Honorable members of the City Council, School Committee, elected officials, department directors, citizens and guests, I'm pleased to welcome you all here for our first State of the City address in recent history.

I'd like to recognize the ongoing efforts of the City Council, who are working hard with my administration to address many of the issues we face. We've accomplished a great deal together.

I applaud the work and dedication of our School Committee and all our department directors for their commitment to our City.

Most importantly, I'd like to thank our residents and business community, who remain invested in ensuring that Warwick remains a terrific place to live and work.

I welcome this opportunity to update you on the state of the city — the good, the bad and all points in between. When I became Mayor, I promised our residents that transparency would be one of my priorities. With tonight's address, I continue to keep that vow.

By pulling the proverbial curtains back on City Hall's windows that people can see inside and be assured that we are, indeed, working diligently on their behalf.

We're fortunate to live in a City where residents and businesses are invested in its success, where people come together in times of crisis and celebration alike.

Our 39 miles of coastline, premiere open spaces and recreational resources are second to none. WalletHub, a Washington, DC-based organization, recently named Warwick as the fifth safest city in the nation.

SmartAsset.com earlier this month named Warwick as the most affordable community in Rhode Island in which to live, and we've been named one of the best places to live in the US on more than one occasion.

We're a place with a rich tapestry of community, a tightly woven fabric comprised of dedicated non-profits, businesses, civic groups and individuals who give their time and talent for the betterment of our City.

We have dedicated municipal employees who work hard every day to ensure that our citizens are getting the quality services and programs that they rightly deserve.

I've been blessed to call Warwick home for some 40 years. My wife Cindy and I raised our son Joseph here, and I could think of few better places in Rhode Island when I established my businesses. Ours is a unique City, with all the trappings of a large community, yet with a small-town feel created by people who care about one another and are invested in our collective success.

There truly is a lot to celebrate about Warwick.

Unfortunately, those of us inside City Hall know that the full state of our City had not been accurately presented to the public for many years.

Tonight, we'll take a look at some of our challenges. Our aging infrastructure crumbling. The so called "maintenance budget" the prior administration presented for this fiscal year contains a structural deficit of nearly \$7.4 million, setting the City up for a potential structural deficit of roughly \$12 million in fiscal year 2020.

Our surplus fund was also grossly overstated. Unauthorized contracts in two municipal departments have come to light. Our facilities have been neglected and school funding remains unresolved.

In short, in the many years leading up to my being sworn into office as Mayor, our community had been led to believe that we were sailing along on calm, tranquil waters.

Instead, the reality is that we have headed straight into a perfect storm, without proper warning, preparedness or safeguards. And since I took office, I'm finding that the issues that presented themselves within the first few weeks of my administration are only the beginning of the storm we must weather.

Nevertheless, my administration, along with the City Council, has taken on this challenge and with courage, grit and perseverance, this community will prevail.

We've been making great strides to steady the ship and chart a new course to safety by working tirelessly to address the many pressing and critical issues facing Warwick.

HISTORY

The challenges began immediately. Just three days after I took office and less than two weeks before the beginning of the annual budget hearings, the former finance director, who helped prepare the budget, abruptly retired.

His departure made it more difficult to get a clear grasp on the state of the City's finances prior to the City Council's adoption of the FY19 budget.

Compounding all of this was the fact that the finance and treasury departments have traditionally been staffed without a succession plan or cross training, resulting in our audits never being submitted by state-mandated deadlines.

This left the City Council and my administration with tenuous figures upon which to base important financial decisions impacting our taxpayers.

With all this in mind, one of my first acts was to engage the services of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council, an independent, nonprofit and nonpartisan public policy research and education organization.

RIPEC started right away to review the finance department, its people and processes to identify and correct weaknesses. They proposed a more efficient reorganization to build succession and efficiencies to assure smooth transitions between administrations and to assure our audits would be completed on time.

This safeguard will give us and future administrations accurate financial information as annual budgets are being prepared.

With their input, we have already restructured our finance and treasury departments.

RIPEC is now working with other City Departments. I am awaiting additional recommendations that will further our ability to right our financial ship and stay the course toward a brighter future.

With our new finance team in place, we have been assessing the state of the City's fiscal health line item by line item.

This begins with scrutinizing the state of the current budget. At this moment, the City is ailing, with a poor prognosis for the immediate future.

The so-called "maintenance budget" for FY19 that was presented by the prior administration had a number of significant gaps with a grossly overstated fund surplus. There were a number of factors that were overlooked or not addressed in this maintenance budget:

- It included the purchase of the City's street lights with no funds for the planned conversion to LED technology, or authorization to do so. The actual reduction in these costs within the FY2019 budget totals \$500,000, none of which has been realized.
- When the budget was prepared, a new collective bargaining agreement with the fire union had not been reached, and remains unsettled. The proposed budget did not contain any funding for the estimated \$950,000 associated with legal fees and a contract settlement.
- The use of fund balance. The "maintenance budget" had countless cost increases in it related to contractual obligations and fringe benefits. A tax increase should have been proposed to offset these increased expenses, in addition to a number of items, such as street lights and schools that were not properly funded. The solution instead was to take \$3.8 million from our reserves.

This meant the budget on paper proposed a zero percent tax increase that was not mathematically possible given the omissions in that budget. All of this has created a sizeable structural deficit for FY2020.

The real fact is that when I took office we had a total structural deficit for FY19 of nearly \$7.4 million.

By our estimation, the FY20 budget will have, at a minimum, a structural deficit of nearly \$12 million.

The structural deficit created by the prior administration is projected to increase debt service related to new debt issuances, school and city buildings, contractual obligations with our collective bargaining units, and projected increased operational costs.

Further, the City must address the carry forward of the School Department's estimated deficit of more than \$4.9 million, projected increases in school funding for FY20 and revenue from the LED technology that never materialized. If these matters are not resolved, the City faces a total potential structural deficit of \$18.6 million in FY20.

In addition, prior to my taking office, by July it had been publicly stated that the City's reserves were between \$22 and \$25 million, making everyone feel that we had an adequate cushion.

But the facts are that the FY18 budget included approximately \$4.2 million from our general fund to balance the budget. Coupled with the drawdown in the "maintenance budget", the City's so-called "rainy day" fund actually stands between \$13 and \$14 million.

The fact that the fund balance has been so rapidly depleted is of tremendous concern and demonstrates the built-in structural deficit that was created by the prior administration has compounded over the course of several years.

It also raises a red flag to the rating agencies because at the rate the funds are currently being used, the fund balance will be gone in a few years. Rating agencies will be watching closely to ensure that we reverse this trend.

This is important because taxpayer money is used to pay the city's loans. Increased liability means lower bond ratings and higher interest rates.

Increased interest rates will hamper our ability to borrow sufficient funds to address our crumbling infrastructure, roads and other capital improvements. Rate hikes will strap Warwick with hefty interest payments before we can begin to pay down the principal.

Then there's the matter of our responsibilities related to OPEB, or retiree benefits. Within our FY17 audited financial statements, our liability was at approximately \$141 million.

These calculations, however, were governed by a different set of guidelines.

Federal changes to these regulations mean we now need to show under current regulations our full financial obligations going forward. This means that we will show an obligation of roughly \$352 million on our balance sheet. This also affects what we should be paying on

an annual basis to cover both current and unfunded liability.

The City is currently only funding OPEB on a pay as you go basis and is not presently addressing the large unfunded OPEB liability of \$352 million that will now be present on the City's balance sheet. This, too, needs to be addressed if we are to assure the City's future fiscal health.

From the FY14 budget to the FY19 proposed maintenance budget, costs of personnel services on the City side of the budget increased by 87 percent. Though all of this may seem daunting, I assure you that my administration, with hard work and vigilance, will steer our financial ship away from these looming hazards. Warwick's future depends upon it.

My foremost goal is to give our City a solid financial foundation upon which to build in the years to come.

With the tools I possess from my accounting, legal and public service background and with the assistance of all of you, we can get the job done.

For example, my insistence on fiscal transparency and responsibility resulted in a competitive bid process that has saved more than \$20 million in health care costs alone.

As a Councilman, I insisted that a real estate appraisal be completed for the former Rhodes Elementary School. This led to the sale of the property for \$325,000 — full market value, and \$208,000 more than had originally been offered.

And as I've been carefully assessing the city's fiscal health, I've also realized cost savings by not filling a number of positions.

We'll be continuing our due diligence in this regard, carefully examining every proposed expenditure, as well as the potential restructuring of departments and personnel for cost savings. Further, up until now, budgets were created by simply reallocating what was spent in the prior year. Instead, I've already begun taking a very close look at all departmental functions and am digging into numbers, supporting the concepts of zero-based budgeting, where each line item starts at zero and any allocations associated with it must be vigorously defended.

And I can assure you that only real revenues, with quantifiable figures, will be included in my proposed budget — we will not operate by assigning imaginary revenues to any budgetary line item.

SCHOOLS

This brings us to another area of deep concern — both from a financial aspect as well as one that affects our whole community

As we know, school funding has been an issue for many years. Even with consolidations and staff reductions, it's an annual struggle to meet the School Department's budget requests.

And, just like many years before, our financial situation is compounded by school funding. The difference between the School Committee's request and the budget proposed for schools this current fiscal year was approximately \$8 million.

Even though the prior administration was aware of contract funding commitments and the impending reduction in state aid, they didn't propose an increase in funding for the School Department. This resulted in an overall reduction to the school budget, when compared to last year, since state aid for education was also reduced in FY2019.

The City Council ultimately allocated an additional \$1.5 million for schools this year. Following that, I proposed to give another \$1.75 million — which would have given them a \$3.25 million increase, or 40 percent of their original requested funding. This would have restored vital programs and services such as mentoring and janitorial staff positions.

Unfortunately, these issues remain unresolved and we now face a school budgetary shortfall in the range of \$4 to \$5 million. Most if not all of that was due to the lack of funding of the budget prepared by the prior administration and its hastily retired finance director.

It's essential to resolve this budgetary crisis in order to mitigate lasting effects on the upcoming and all future school budgets. Establishing a baseline through an audit is the first corrective step that has been taken to ensure sound fiscal responsibility for our taxpayers regarding this matter.

I realized that, in order to find a solution to these very critical issues, I needed to establish an open, productive line of communication with the School Department to repair a long-fractured relationship.

We began meeting with the School Committee and members of the administration in an effort to restore funding and reinstate important programs, such as mentoring.

Despite these discussions, in December the outgoing School Committee voted to take costly legal action against the City under the Carruolo act. Fortunately, the new School Committee has agreed to renew discussions and establish a working relationship.

They've suspended costly legal action in favor of mediation. I look forward to continuing discussions with all parties to resolve this impasse — our children deserve it, and the future of our school system depends upon it.

In the meantime, I've begun productive discussions with representatives our school PTOs and PTAs. They've already given me tremendous insight into the needs and concerns, not just of individual schools, but of the school system generally.

Tonight, I renew the promise I've made to the people of Warwick that my administration

will continue to work in good faith with the School Committee, the City Council, parents and our community in general to resolve these issues and pave the road to a productive path forward.

It is of the utmost importance that our schools be the best in Rhode Island and have the resources necessary to help our students succeed, balancing with these resources our full municipal budget and other needs throughout the City.

CONTRACTS

Then there is the matter of contracts that I have been contending with.

Improvements to the fire pension plan, which would have saved taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars, were left to languish. The union has filed a grievance regarding this because the approved collective bargaining agreement failed to include language to solidify this benefit reduction. If the grievance is legally upheld, it will cost taxpayers dearly. And shortly after I took office, two more issues related to fire collective bargaining agreements came to light.

The first "side agreement," regarding sick time payouts, entered into by the former union president and fire chief, took effect in 2013 without Council approval. A second issue was then brought to light regarding a discrepancy in how unused vacation time was calculated for payout. The calculation that the Fire Department has been using was more generous than what was ratified by the City Council.

Once these issues were brought to my attention, I immediately halted these practices.

As this process moves forward, we'll remain cooperative in working to determine just how much of a financial impact these two issues have had on our taxpayers in the years they were allowed to continue, unchecked.

If need be, I will support corrective measures that result in outcomes that are right and just for our taxpayers.

Some of these actions may have been attributed to incomplete or sloppy execution of contracts.

To correct this, I immediately implemented a new policy that will preserve the authenticity of the collective bargaining agreements as approved by the City Council and unions.

This will prevent the possibility of unauthorized altering of authenticated documents and assure that the final signed agreements have been prepared and amended as approved by the City Council and the collective bargaining units.

Although the City and the Union remain in arbitration over these matters, I want to make it clear that these disagreements — and disagreements with any of our unions — do not reflect on the fine work that the individual men and women of our City do for our residents

and businesses.

When there's a crisis at 3 a.m., its Warwick's police and fire you want at your door. When there's a snowstorm or other emergency, there are none better than our DPW crews to have on the road to assure our safety. And make no mistake. The dedication and commitment we see in these three departments are reflected in offices throughout our City.

While the media has widely reported on the fire contract issues, there are others that did not receive City Council approval. Nor was the Council aware of their existence.

Shortly after I appointed our new MIS director, he discovered 5 existing, unauthorized vendor contracts that began September 1, 2017 and spanned 15 months. All together, they represent roughly \$766,500.

Since uncovering this, the Finance Director and I have implemented a new process that requires documented bid draw down tracking. This will improve fiscal transparency and prevent unauthorized payments from going unnoticed.

Even as I continue to remedy these issues, I'm also making good on my promise to make Warwick a convenient place to do business by addressing issues that have been brought to my attention by developers and the business community the biggest concern I've heard since taking office regards how long it takes to have fire plan review. Delays of upwards of six months had been the standard for quite some time.

This is unacceptable. It's costly for developers and residents and it's bad for the economy and job growth.

To expedite the review process, we've issued guidance to builders and developers on how to obtain third party review of fire plans. Developers will have the option of paying for this review. These fees will be competitive with the fees currently being charged for larger projects.

Our overarching goal is to reduce the timeframe for approval to as little 10 days, rather than weeks or months.

In addition, the City is exploring options for reducing delays, increasing efficiency, and improving customer service in the long term. This may include additional staff, investments in technology, and modified plan review procedures. Additional policy changes will be developed and implemented as details are refined.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Despite this issue, on a positive note, developers and investors continue to choose Warwick.

From larger projects like we're seeing in City Centre, to smaller enterprises throughout the City, business is booming, and one of my top priorities is to keep that momentum going.

City Centre, our unique, transit-oriented development surrounding T.F. Green Airport, is really coming into its own, and we're seeing the fruits of the labor of many people as this area is transforming.

City Centre is spot on a story of our community's perseverance in the face of challenges. With our hard work and patience, we are creating a neighborhood that's becoming the premiere choice for companies to do business.

Developer and Warwick businessman Mike D'Ambra is one of those who, early on, saw the value in the City Centre concept, and a decade ago received City approvals that would bring his own vision for his property adjacent to the InterLink commuter station to reality.

Then, as we all know, the economy tanked. Hard.

But Mike persevered in the face of financial adversity, and, this summer, we celebrated with him, his family, and his investors as we cut the ribbon at the Hyatt Place Hotel. The 125-room hotel, which brought with it construction jobs and permanent, full-time positions, is Warwick's 17th.

It stands as a proud symbol of one man's belief that anything is possible, if you just work hard, have faith, and know that the sun will eventually shine after the stormy skies have passed.

I believe our vision and Mike's tenacity provided the foundation for the proposed Residence Inn at Marriott, which on Monday received City Council approval. The six-story hotel, to be constructed in the core of City Centre, will bring 40 new jobs to Warwick, in addition to part-time construction work. Its owners, Pinnacle Hotel Management, are making an investment of at least \$45 million for the hotel, renovations to the Radisson, and the future redevelopment of the former Laz parking lot. All told, this means the revitalization of 14.5 acres within City Centre.

Elsewhere in City Centre, we'll be welcoming Tavolo, an Italian eatery, in the former Legal Sea Foods and will soon see the results of renovations at The Iron Works Tavern.

Peak Performance has also invested a great deal of time into making its new home on Coronado Road more attractive.

We're also bringing new life and jobs to some of our historic properties.

In Pontiac Village, the first phase of redevelopment of Pontiac Mills has been completed. In just a few months, 60 percent of the apartments have already been rented, and riverfront units are coming online in the next week. Workers are busy rehabilitating the top 14 units for rental as well.

Developer Larry Silverstein's transformative work at the historic Mills has also lured

businesses from Newport and Garden City to this unique place along the Pawtuxet River. Union Mills, Studio B, One the Ropes Boxing and Fitness, and Apponaug Brewery now call Pontiac home.

In historic Apponaug Village, AAA has purchased the "sawtooth" building with plans to relocate its local headquarters there and preserve the 100-year old structure that stands as a symbol of our industrial heritage that helped to shape Warwick. This will provide an influx of AAA employees and members there, bringing new customers to local businesses in the heart of the village.

We're also becoming a destination for the medical industry. In the Crowne Plaza property, OrthoRI is constructing a 100,000 sf, three-story facility. The orthopedic specialists, who have locations throughout the state and offer more than 55 providers as well as more than three dozen trainers and therapists, are bringing with them 125 construction jobs and 275 permanent bio-medical jobs with a total annual payroll of \$30 million.

And it's not just new businesses that are thriving in Warwick. Greenwood Credit Union, a fixture in our community for 70 years, is constructing a new, 20,000 sf operations center across the street from its existing building.

I thank them for their continued belief that Warwick is truly the best place in which to do business. Stay tuned for expansions of Dave's Marketplace, Ocean State Job Lot and others.

We're also seeing our transitional planning efforts becoming a reality, with proposed mixed-use retail development at the Showcase Cinemas and a new restaurant at the site of a former gas station. These efforts are transforming our community along the East Greenwich line into a traditional village setting that complements our neighbor to the south.

Even as I'm committed to supporting large-scale projects that are great for Warwick, as a businessman myself, I know that small businesses are the lifeblood of a community. So, as promised in my inaugural remarks, I'm continuing to build on the momentum we've established through my weekly One-on-One business program. These firsthand glimpses into how our companies are operating will only serve to help us better understand their needs and help them to thrive.

I have been fortunate enough to walk through the doors of many unique and longstanding organizations, as well as many up-and-coming ones.

And I've found that, within our small business community, too, are signs of our City's perseverance, with companies that have weathered the challenges of starting up and those that have withstood the ups and downs of the economy over time and continue to succeed.

Whether it's newer businesses like "A Piece of Cake" — which has been in Warwick for only three years -- or a third generation one like "Warwick Ice Cream" our City does not lack the entrepreneurial vision it takes to develop a business and succeed in our community.

What's now known as Warwick Ice Cream had its modest beginnings as Warwick Milk, founded by dairy farmer Charlie Bucci in 1930. Charlie and his wife were blessed with five children — 4 sons, 3 of whom were deaf, and one daughter. In those days, educational and employment opportunities for those with handicaps were limited — but Charlie realized that his company provided a tremendous way for him to ensure that all of his children would succeed.

He built Warwick Milk from the ground up, and his sons were educated through working there. In 1932, they capitalized on the leftover cream they had at the end of each day and started serving ice cream from a brand new storefront.

By 1940, that modest storefront had grown to a full service ice cream parlor and restaurant. During the 1950s the business continued to succeed and by the early 60s grew to what we know today as Warwick Ice Cream, which is now poised to become a fourth-generation company.

Likewise, we've attracted new technology and retail companies that continue to grow. Places like "SquadLocker" and "InsureMyTrip" are prime examples of Warwick's ability to attract and retain an array of companies with cutting-edge business models. My goal is to continue to promote our central location between New York and Boston—with access by land and air—to entice companies to explore our business-friendly environment.

Then there are Scott and Lynn Pellett, business owners in our community for 20 years now. Scott was injured in his teens and had become an avid handycyclist. Combining their business experience and love of sport and fitness, the Pelletts began a niche internet-based handycycle sales business on a Gateway computer in a small closet. Today, Bike-On boasts 15 employees and an international customer base, all operated from their headquarters in Apponaug Village.

And we can support development in harmony with our environment, as we double down on our efforts to achieve a "sustainable Warwick" with three new solar parks. This initiative will support an array of residential and commercial renewable energy alternatives.

We'll move forward with policies designed to promote renewables in a manner that saves the City money while preserving our environment for our children and their children.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND CITY ASSETS

Now, let's talk about our infrastructure and City assets.

With nearly 400 miles of city roads constructed post World War II, keeping neighborhood streets in good condition has been a challenge. Despite the City Council's past efforts, the annual budget did not sufficiently address the significant needs throughout our community.

That's why the current budget contained an allocation of \$5 million, which has allowed us

to repair many streets that have been in dire need of attention. We'll be back in neighborhoods throughout the City when the construction season begins in the spring.

I can assure you that some funding will be included for road paving. This program, with the joint efforts of myself and our City Council, will continue.

We, as a community, need to begin discussing the need to pay for larger scale road improvements through other funding means, if we collectively desire an accelerated schedule for this initiative.

Better roads mean safer neighborhoods. It will also bolster our economic development efforts, because people want to invest in a community that is deeply invested in itself. We also have a half-dozen municipal buildings that have been left in disrepair. For instance, we're gathered here because a fire suppression main failed in the City Council chambers in October, and repairs are ongoing.

And we're all aware of the burst pipe in the Annex building last winter that damaged a significant portion of the building and continues to displace city employees in less-than-desirable quarters in the former Greene elementary school. Until this is resolved, we will be required to look at the use of all City assets to balance saving the taxpayers money while also supporting valuable community organizations.

Just after taking office, I learned that a structural report, which should have been conducted and sent to our insurer, had never been completed. I immediately commissioned the required structural analysis and have since pressed the Trust with potential legal action so that our City and taxpayers can see a full reimbursement.

These examples of poor facilities management highlight the need to make in-depth inspections of our assets and to develop a facilities management plan to determine what the long- and short-term needs are.

Once that's completed, we can then develop a short -, medium- and long-term operations and maintenance strategy to meet those requirements. This is the best and most effective way to protect our assets.

Without a facilities management plan, these buildings tend to languish, become deteriorated and are prone to vandalism, causing a blight in the community and negatively impacting area residents and Warwick as a whole.

While a more proactive approach should have been taken over the years to properly maintain, reuse, lease or sell these properties, I have been working aggressively on these issues.

For example, under my leadership, we have repaired the Buttonwoods community center. I am happy to report that the center will be reopened to house some municipal departments and for the community's use. We've accomplished that in six short months.

The Buttonwoods restoration preserves this public property while providing a more convenient location for the public and our employees. This will also provide us some time to reach out to the community and collectively discuss options, including what the community believes should be our commitment in reimagining a new permanent location for the city hall annex.

And on Monday, the City Council approved the sale of the former Christopher Rhodes School, which has been vacant for more than a decade and became a neighborhood eyesore. The property will be repurposed for a proposed residential development.

This will eliminate hazards and provide the City with 29 new families and residents, new members of our wonderful community. It'll also generate significant residential property tax revenue. The project stands to generate over \$7,000 in annual tax revenue per residence — over \$205,000 a year on a parcel that was tax exempt nearly 70 years. This project will provide our community with a development that is truly transformative.

In the coming months, we'll be working to establish appropriate reuses for our remaining vacant municipal facilities, so they do not fall farther into disrepair and continue to be an eyesore to the surrounding neighborhoods.

And, as our City ages, the state of the City's water and sewer infrastructure and several of our assets are also of significant concern.

With 87 percent of our water system constructed between the 1930s and 1970, and some 40 percent of our sewer system built prior to 1980, the need to take immediate action to address these issues in a comprehensive, effective way to prevent additional disruption to our whole community cannot be understated.

Never was this more evident than on the day before Thanksgiving. As people living in the Sandy Lane neighborhood were readying their homes for guests and preparing food for the holiday, a main sewer line collapsed.

This meant the backup of sewage into approximately a dozen homes, ruining Thanksgiving for those residents, and, more critically, leaving them to deal with cleanup when they should have been enjoying a long, restful weekend.

And we all experienced the traffic issues on Sandy Lane in the weeks following that, as crews repaired the line. Final work was only just completed last week.

Ongoing issues with our water infrastructure are also wreaking havoc that could have been avoided with a renewal and replacement plan. In the fall, we had a main water line collapse right near the highway, and almost weekly, water mains are breaking in areas throughout the City. These often result in emergency water shut offs with no advance notice to residents that they'll be without water — in some cases, for an extended period of time.

Our residents should not be inconvenienced and our businesses should not lose customers because our infrastructure is crumbling. That's not to mention the exorbitant costs associated with these emergency repairs — already at \$2.3 million and climbing since last summer. Funds that would be better spent invested into proactively protecting our assets.

These incidents speak to the very real need to proactively address these issues. We must develop a comprehensive 10-year strategy to address our City's infrastructure needs and to make adequate annual allocations for renewal and replacement budgets in both water and sewer.

We can no longer kick the proverbial can down the road and foist what is now our responsibility onto future generations.

Our City, public health and safety and the environment depend on proactive leadership in this regard going forward. I am up for the challenge.

RECREATION AND NEIGHBORHOODS

I'm also going to continue leading the charge to improve our recreational facilities and our neighborhoods.

The Mickey Stevens sports complex, which should be a jewel of our community, has been sorely neglected for far too long.

Voter-approved bond funds approved in 2006 have been continually frozen, delaying important and necessary improvements.

Thirteen years later, those problems have only gotten worse. Our residents, and particularly our youth, deserve better.

And think about this: Just one event — the 2020 Synchronized Ice Skating Championship - is projected to have a direct spending impact on Rhode Island of \$2 8 million, attracting 3,000 people to our state.

So it behooves us to have top-notch facilities to enhance recreational economic development opportunities to Warwick.

A combination of grant funding, municipal allocations and donated materials could assist us in making repairs and enhancements to Mickey Stevens. We will be vigorously exploring all options in the months to come.

As I've mentioned before, it's important that Warwick's children have safe places to play near home. Unfortunately, many of our "pocket parks" are in need of attention. The "adopt a playground" program we will implement will allow for new equipment and other improvements to neighborhood playgrounds and fields. This initiative will stand as a strong symbol of the spirit of collaboration that exists here in Warwick.

It's not just our smaller parks that will be improved. A generous RIDEM grant and support from the Friends of Salters Grove will fund a new playground, new landscaping, tables and other amenities for families to enjoy. At City Park, there will be new dugouts and picnic shelters, along with solar-powered restrooms.

As we anticipate the summer months, those who enjoy relaxing along our beautiful shoreline have a lot to look forward to.

Iconic Rocky Point has been beautifully restored, and people throughout Rhode Island will once again have the opportunity to enjoy a variety of family-friendly events in view of fantastic Narragansett Bay.

New picnic benches, shelters and improved handicapped access are only enhancing our efforts to ensure Rocky Point remains one of the premiere recreational facilities in the state.

As Council President, I worked closely with DEM to lead cooperative efforts to reconstruct the popular fishing pier at Rocky Point. When complete, the 111-foot deck will offer tremendous views of the Bay, with wide benches that will give folks a place to sit and relax near the water.

I'm pleased that, once again, residents of Warwick and the Ocean State will enjoy outstanding access to Narragansett Bay and all of its natural treasures on a pier that reminds us of the rich history of the park and our maritime heritage.

And, as beach season approaches, I look forward again to offering residents free access to our popular beaches, with a robust litter clean-up program that is endorsed by all who frequent our shoreline.

But it's not just our parks and playgrounds that will have our attention. We'll be doubling down on our efforts to strengthen minimum housing standards to better address issues of blight and public health concerns to make our neighborhoods safer and more attractive.

And we're already seeing business people who are invested in helping to make Warwick more attractive. Iron Works Tavern and Peak Performance have jointly "adopted" the Coronado Road corridor — no easy task, given the extensive landscaping that was installed as part of its improvement.

I thank them for approaching the City to volunteer their time and effort to keep this thoroughfare an attractive gateway into City Centre, and hope that more businesses will take part in this type of initiative.

Though the many issues that have combined to create this perfect storm for our City are daunting, I have full confidence that we will weather them successfully. Throughout my nearly two decades in public service and in the ten months I've been mayor, I've proven that I'm up for the task.

To be clear, there are challenges ahead of us, but they can be overcome. With a firm, steady hand on the tiller, I am committed to steering Warwick to brighter days and calmer seas.

These challenges may be difficult and require tough choices, but they are not insurmountable. And we, as a community, have proven time and again that we are resilient, and come together to support each other through turbulent times.

The Flood of 2010 is a good example of that. Here are two more.

In November, a fire helped define the true meaning of community. On Thanksgiving Eve Woodbury Union Presbyterian Church was consumed by flames. Devastating as it was, within days, Woodbury's congregation gathered for their Sunday services a few blocks away at Saint Benedict Catholic Church.

What could have been a time for despair was quickly turned into a time of hope. Without hesitating, Father Marciano extended a helping hand to the Woodbury congregation. Two days later, it would be the City's turn to offer helping hands—this time to Saint Kevin School. Extreme water damage caused by a burst pipe over the holiday weekend left students, faculty and staff with no place to resume classes.

I, along with my administration, the School Department and city and school employees, stepped in and worked with Fr. Marciano and the staff at St. Kevin School to find them a temporary home.

Working together, we were able to successfully move the entire student body into the vacant Randall Holden Elementary School.

Friends, I bring this up because that is what it takes to make a City, but, more importantly, demonstrates what community really is. The ability to collectively face challenges and adversity head-on and work collaboratively to find solutions.

Being good stewards and protecting the best interests of our City is why I'm here. It's why we're all here.

Both fire and water proved to be no match for the resiliency of our community. Just as aging infrastructure, finances and contracts won't define or defeat us.

In the months ahead we will use our collective knowledge to find resourceful and creative ways to better manage our City on an on-going basis.

Gone are the days of Band-Aids and quick fixes. We will invest in long-term, sustainable solutions that will benefit this generation and act as the foundation for all future generations.

In my opinion, Warwick is the jewel of Rhode Island. With a rich history that dates back to

the American Revolution, Warwick was founded on the backs of those who had big dreams and always looked to the brighter days ahead.

Similarly, I know that, together, we will meet these challenges head on. In the months to come, I will be soliciting input from our residents, our business community and the non-profits that call Warwick home on how best to use the resources and tools available to us to make our City even better.

I repeat what I've said in the past: I know that every person here tonight is invested in helping our community to succeed and transform. Because we live here. Because we work here. Because here, we have experienced great joy and even times of sorrow. Because it is the place we call home. Because I know each of you share my vision for a reinvigorated Warwick.

And, tonight, I add, with full confidence: it's also because, working together, I know that we can withstand any tempest that comes our way. Because ours is a community that perseveres and moves forward with hope and purpose, knowing our best days, and smoother sailing, are yet to come.