

It has been "a year of accomplishment here in Summit."

The Honorable Nora G. Radest, Mayor of Summit, NJ

State of the City Address

January 3, 2019

Good evening my fellow residents, members of Common Council, and city staff. Welcome to all of our honored guests. Thank you for being here, and best wishes for a happy and healthy New Year. Tonight, it is my honor to stand before you as your Mayor and report that 2018 was a year of accomplishment here in Summit. Together, we made a strong city even stronger through the implementation of a number of thoughtful and fiscally-responsible civic improvements. And, in case nobody has noticed, the Morris Avenue Bridge is open!

Members of Common Council and I have worked diligently to move the city forward while keeping an ever-present eye on the city's bottom line. It continues to be my priority, and my pride, that council and I work closely together regardless of party affiliation. In Summit, truly, our residents come first.

A few changes in the make-up of council; Councilwoman Mary Ogden retired tonight, President Naidu has been re-elected and newly-elected member Greg Vartan has joined us on the dais. I am confident that in 2019, we will continue to enjoy our Summit tradition of civility, robust debate, and thoughtful outcomes.

I cannot mention council without a word about Richard Madden, who passed away on December 21, 2018. Rich served on council from 2010 to 2015, and as its president from 2012 to 2013. Rich was a brilliant man and a consummate gentleman who governed with respect. He made it a priority to share his wisdom with me when I was elected Mayor, and I was touched and grateful. Although he struggled with illness in these last few years, he was not a stranger to City Hall and was always available for guidance. We will miss you, Rich and remain extremely grateful for your dedicated service to our community and our country.

COMMUNICATION: It continues to be a major priority for me. I will continue my weekday and weeknight office hours, *Meet the Mayor* events on weekends and meetings by appointment. I have been able to speak with many residents and business owners over the past three years and appreciate you sharing your ideas and concerns. As a city, our strength lies in our ability to define our priorities and work together to make them a reality. To do that, we need to be informed citizens, and we need to be able to share our ideas, thoughts and skills. So please, if you have not already done so, go to the city website and click on the notifications tab. This will take you to a page where you can sign up to receive email or text notifications about city services, events and information on all sorts of municipal activities in town. You will see a list of categories and just choose what interests you. It really is the best way to keep abreast of what is going on. Traffic on our website continues to grow—we often exceed 30,000 visits a month. The City of Summit actively posts Facebook and Twitter with two to three posts each day. We have expanded our video capability and YouTube channel. Please like and follow the City of Summit on social media. And if you have another idea about how to reach you with information, we would like to hear it. Please email pressoffice@cityofsummit.org.

As I talk about our continuing dialogue as a community, it is impossible to ignore the ways in which we have been tested over the past six weeks. I know that we can depend upon our beloved Summit to reject the sad current national trend toward divisiveness and incivility. When bad things happen, Summit comes together. Our vigils and meetings are important responses to troubling times. I am proud of this tradition, and even prouder of the substantive actions we are taking and the programming that we are putting in place. We can and will ensure that hate speech has no place in our schools or in public places.

COMMUNITY CENTER: One wonderful example of our ability to come together to benefit residents across the demographics of age and income, is our Community Center. The new building is nearly finished and we anticipate a soft opening in the first quarter of 2019. As you may recall, when the \$6.5MM project was approved, council challenged the community to raise \$1.2MM in additional funds. I am very proud of the residents and corporate sponsors that stepped up to the challenge, raising nearly \$1.5MM.

I have toured the site and the new space is going to be terrific, especially the senior lounge and the full-sized gym. Programming that residents have desired for years will now be possible as a result of our larger and more flexible space. I would also like to highlight the way various community organizations came together during the renovations to help the Department of Community Programs continue its wonderful programming, including Pilgrim Baptist Church, St. John's Lutheran Church and the Junior Fortnightly Club. I also want to thank the neighbors of the Community Center; we all know construction is very invasive and I am grateful for your patience and understanding.

DOWNTOWN: Our downtown is flourishing. I am happy that there is ample good news to share on that front. Our retail vacancy rate is an outstanding 1.3% and some of the larger vacant spaces have signed tenants who are currently undertaking renovations. Several new businesses have opened, reflecting our modern economy with a mix of experiential and traditional retail. The space that used to house Rosalita Mexican Restaurant has been taken over by the owners of Summit House that was able to expand its liquor license into the new space and will create a new take on Tex-Mex. The space formally occupied by Bombay Bistro will be a noodle restaurant, Ani Ramen; the space vacated by the Summit Food Market will be divided between the Bull and Bear Microbrewery, and the Lash Lounge. The former newspaper store on the corner of Beechwood Road and Springfield Avenue will be occupied by The Shade Store. In addition, the ground floor of 47 Maple Street will house Special Properties, a subsidiary of Christies. We are pleased that loosening up some of our downtown ordinances will allow additional flexibility to best use our available space. While we still have a few vacant spaces, property owners and Nancy Adams, the executive director of Summit Downtown, are actively recruiting tenants. Downtown Summit is increasingly known as a place to shop, and share a meal. We appreciate the strength of the pedestrian traffic that has helped support this important community asset, particularly when some of our neighboring towns with similar demographics labored under a 15% vacancy rate as recently as one year ago.

PERMITTING: One priority in making our city as business-friendly as possible was improving our construction permitting process. The construction office continues to be one of the busiest offices in City Hall. In 2018, nearly 2300 construction permits were issued, representing 120 million dollars of value. The code office made over 9500 inspections in 2018. The online building and construction permit portal, entitled SDL, was launched on January 2 of last year and over 150 public users have utilized it. This innovation allows residents to track the progress of a

permit application, research property information and obtain Open Public Records Act data, resulting in fewer trips or calls to City Hall. This practical and cost-effective service is a direct response to those in the community who asked for a better way to do business with the city. This system is a first step and we are committed to increasing the number of users in 2019 and to making the permitting process nearly seamless going forward.

ROAD AND SEWER WORK: In a related area, one of the most important things the city does is to maintain and improve our infrastructure, crucial to resident safety and public health. While these projects are not generally very exciting, residents are always happy when their streets are repaved or otherwise improved. In 2018, we completed road improvements on nine roads, micro paved 51,000 square yards of roadways, improved the alleyway between Springfield and Deforest Avenues, and added a sidewalk on Maple Street by the K lot. The larger projects were done by outside contractors, but the Division of Public Works completed several other paving projects, saving our taxpayers over \$103,000. Additionally, we executed several drainage and sewer projects. Most of us only notice roadwork, but with miles of sanitary and storm sewers and thousands of sanitary and storm structures, a significant portion of city infrastructure is underground. Lastly, the Department of Community Services focused on several pedestrian safety projects, such as traffic calming, striping and bump-outs, including a flashing beacon at Morris Avenue and Aubrey Street, annual curb and ADA ramp improvements, and the intersection re-alignment at Plymouth Road and Silver Lake Drive. As I said, these projects are not exciting, but good stewardship of our physical surroundings is a hallmark of what makes Summit such a well-run and desirable place to live.

POLICE: Our stewardship of our roads and sewers is very important to our safety, and our safety mainstay here in Summit is our wonderful, responsive, police force. Our police are truly proactive and thoughtful about our well-being, and one example of that was the 2017 recommendation to re-establish a Traffic Unit. This unit has been operational for a year and a half. Priorities include educating citizens as to the rules of the road, analyzing traffic patterns, and conducting traffic studies. A main function is to enforce "moving" violations, when necessary. In 2018, over 1000 summonses were given to motorists for not following the rules of the road, and in particular for speeding and distracted driving. Unfortunately, many of those summonses have been issued to Summit residents. We must all be more careful, as well as be role models, as we navigate our Summit roadways.

One important priority is to improve conditions we know to be dangerous. This year we installed four-way stops at the intersections of Whittredge and Essex roads and Whittredge Road and Hobart Avenue, as well as at Oakland Place and Elm Street. While drivers needed some time to adjust to the new stop signs, I have heard many people praise them. In addition, the Public Safety Committee authorized the installation of speed humps at locations on Woodland Avenue and Ashland Road. Speeding on these roads has been a common occurrence and police department education and enforcement had not changed motorists' behavior. We are doing follow-up studies to determine the effectiveness of the humps, but preliminary data suggests speed humps are having a positive impact, and neighbors appreciate the traffic calming effect. Every member of council and I receive complaints about speeding in town, (some perceived and some a reality), and we are determined to take whatever steps necessary to address and decrease speeding issues that occur in our city. While the police and city's engineering department can educate, enforce, and redesign roadways and intersections for safer travel for pedestrians and motorists alike, it is incumbent upon each of us to travel with deliberation and focus, whether by car, on a bike or on foot.

Lastly, unfortunately we did have 15 car thefts in 2018. In all but one instance, cars were unlocked and the keys or fobs were left in the cars. In the case in which the fob was not in the car, the car was unlocked and the motor was running. Twelve of the vehicles have been recovered. This behavior is making neighborhoods less safe because the would-be thieves know they can sometimes access vehicles quite easily in our town. I implore every vehicle owner to lock your cars and keep the keys inside your homes.

TAXES: Taxes are never a popular topic, but nonetheless, crucial to our city's fiscal health and to our quality of life here in Summit. While it is important to maintain and improve city infrastructure, we are always mindful of the demands on our taxpayers. As you know, we had a 0% municipal tax increase in 2018 and I am committed to working with council and city staff to develop a stable budget this year. We face many pressures on our budget, not the least of which is increasing demands for capital projects. All of us want the city to be in the best possible repair, but prioritization and vision are essential. Council has been diligent in cutting costs where possible, such as the merged court system last year. It provides about \$100,000 annual savings and I am pleased to say that our residents do not feel significant inconvenience.

In order to make our tax dollars go as far as possible, I continue to stay in close contact with our Union County Freeholders to ensure that they understand our needs and provide all the assistance they can. Under the leadership of Chairman Sergio Granados, the freeholders delivered a budget that was under the 2% cap for the first time in several years. We received several grants from Union County for road improvements and for a bocce court for the seniors at the Community Center. We also received \$400,000 from the NJ Department of Transportation to implement pedestrian safety measures at the train station. Maintaining an informed dialogue with the freeholders is critical to our cooperative relationship. The freeholders held one of its October meetings here in Summit to make it easier for our residents to come to the meeting and speak out. I appreciate this acknowledgement that our concerns matter to our county officials.

We are very fortunate to live in a city that offers first-class services and amenities, which we both enjoy and have come to expect. Increasing our asset base is an important factor if we want to hold the line on taxes. Last year, I reported that we had negotiated a tax reduction with Celgene and that we needed to look at other ways to increase our tax base. We have a strong residential ratable base that has shown positive incremental growth in recent years; in 2018 we experienced an increase in construction value of \$22 million dollars or approximately 22%. Frankly, that is not enough to maintain level taxes and still deliver the services we all have come to expect from the city. Increased commercial ratables are a crucial component in a healthy city budget. Thus we are proceeding with thoughtful redevelopment in the Broad Street West corridor.

BROAD STREET WEST REDEVELOPMENT: One of the clearest mandates of the Master Plan Re-examination process in 2016 was a need for balanced redevelopment. The national housing market now places a premium on the ability to live within walking distance of a vibrant town center with proximity to shops, restaurants, places of work and mass transit. Summit is uniquely positioned to take advantage of this trend: we are a transit hub, 20 miles from New York City, with a thriving downtown and an excellent school system. The obvious opportunity for redevelopment is Broad Street West, an area of town that has been called out for thoughtful change for the past 20 or 30 years. This past year, the 10-acre area parcel between Broad Street, Morris Avenue and Maple Street was officially declared by council as an Area in Need of Redevelopment. This designation allows the city to offer tax incentives to redevelopers and it

also allows the city to maintain control over the type and quantity of the redevelopment. As I noted last year, this designation is one of non-condemnation, meaning that any of the private property owners in the Area in Need of Redevelopment can participate in the redevelopment or choose not to. The city does not have the desire or statutory authority to force any of these owners to participate.

Throughout 2018 we held several meetings for members of the public to elicit input regarding redevelopment. We also met with all of the private property owners and stakeholders in the area, including representatives of the library and the YMCA. Moving forward, there will be ongoing opportunities for residents to share ideas and concerns. To be sure, there will be some degree of disruption in town as we get into the actual construction phase of the project. To be good stewards for the future, we need to have the courage to make some hard decisions. I continue to think back on the vision of our city fathers who, in the midst of the Great Depression, committed precious city funds to the sinking of the railroad tracks downtown. Our city would never be the thriving community hub it is today if we had train tracks running through the center of Summit. This is our opportunity to do our part to provide value not just for our current residents, but for their children and grandchildren.

To begin the process, council hired a redevelopment attorney who along with our planning firm, Topology, prepared a "Request for Qualifications" for redevelopers. We received a remarkable 12 responses. We asked the developers to provide us with broad concept plans regarding what can be built on available parcels. Members of Common Council, city staff, our attorney, our planner and I met with the eight developers who submitted concepts with varying degrees of detail. This process has gone very well so far, and this is a testament to the efforts of city government to be available and accessible both to the community at-large and to the interested parties. This responsibly-proactive approach should ensure that our outcome is to the benefit of the entire community. The next step will occur in the first quarter of 2019, when the Planning Board and Common Council approve a specific Redevelopment Plan. After that, council must designate a conditional redeveloper or redevelopers with whom we will negotiate a Redevelopment Agreement, laying out in detail the redevelopment plans, costs, rights and obligations of the parties. This process is critical to the ultimate success of the project and should, we hope, be accomplished by the end of 2019.

FIREHOUSE: One important synergy of the Broad Street redevelopment project is that it will help us to address a significant need for a new city firehouse. One of the most important responsibilities, I feel as Mayor, is to keep our citizens safe, and the dangerous fast-moving fire that we experienced on New Year's Eve morning last year at 125 Summit Avenue was a serious reminder of the debt we owe to our brave firefighters. It is a testament to their planning and training, with a specific approach to potential fires at each apartment and commercial building in town, that nobody was hurt. Currently, we have a firehouse that is 100 years old. It was built for a generation of equipment that cannot meet today's needs. It is not even large enough to accommodate the size of modern fire engines. In addition, it is in serious need of upgrades and repairs. This is a responsibility we cannot shirk. Fortunately, the current building can be sold as part of the Broad Street redevelopment process, allowing additional flexibility in negotiations with developers, and significantly defray the necessary costs.

Thorough research has determined that the best location for a new firehouse is on a portion of the non-resident parking lot on Broad Street, next to the Salerno Duane office. The design phase will take much of 2019 and we hope to request bids at the end of 2019. This is indeed a very large capital project: the anticipated cost is approximately 11.5 million dollars. I realize that this is a significant decision and may seem like a substantial risk, but it was not made lightly. Unfortunately, a new building is an absolute necessity, and this is one of those tough decisions that council and I are elected to shepherd our community through. I am confident that we will find the most cost-effective way possible to make this investment in our public safety.

PARKING: Finally, the ever-popular topic of parking. Council and I, working with the Parking Services Agency, have continued to embrace innovation to address our downtown parking shortage and improve the parking experience for residents and visitors. In 2016, we pioneered the promotion of ridesharing as a way to ease parking congestion in the downtown. Last year, after surveying users, we expanded and enhanced the program; we changed vendors from Uber to Lyft in order to offer scheduled pickups, and created a pick-up location in front of the train station. This year we expanded the program to include up to 100 resident employees. We installed pay stations and removed parking meters in half of the downtown, mostly along Springfield Avenue. We also replaced the downtown parking meters with parking kiosks for on-street parking in the downtown area. The parking kiosks have greatly improved turnover in the premium parking spaces. The kiosks work especially well with the Park Mobile app that the city adopted a few years ago. If you have not tried the app yet, I highly encourage you to do so. We recognize that there was a bit of a rocky roll-out to our license-plate recognition program, but it has been very successful in preventing meter feeding and improving turnover at spots in the downtown, ensuring that the 90-minute spaces are available for the benefit of the shoppers and diners that they are meant for. This not only helps our merchants, it helps all of us find a space in town when we need one.

THANK YOU: Many of you have heard me say that Summit's best asset is its people, and that continues to be true. Tonight we recognized the many men and women who have volunteered on various boards and committees. They are all committed to making Summit the best that it can be and their hours of service are invaluable. We are committed to engaging even more citizen volunteers to help create a plan for the future of our city; we are fortunate to have community members who have tremendous talent and are willing to share their expertise. Having been your mayor for three years, I am here to tell you that in addition to the strength of our volunteers, our paid professionals - the men and women who work for the city - are top notch. They are focused on their jobs, want to do their jobs well, and care deeply when things go awry. Over and over again, when residents come to us with suggestions and complaints allowing us to see areas that can be improved, our staff responds. Much of the innovation I have discussed tonight is the result of the hard work and creativity of these individuals. And I want to thank all of them.

COUNCIL MEMBERS: I want to finish by extending my sincere thanks Mary Ogden who is stepping down after three years on Common Council. Mary has given countless hours to the city at council and committee meetings and in engaging residents all around town. Mary: You have made strong contributions to our city, fought for the needs of the less fortunate among us, and graciously supported our city staff. I am grateful for your hard work and dedication. I have enjoyed working with you, and I certainly will miss you. I want to welcome Greg Vartan, representing Ward 2. Greg: You worked hard in the recent election and I look forward to serving Summit with you.

And, of course, I am very happy to welcome David Naidu back to the dais and look forward to another year of his strong leadership of council.

I do not think anyone should underestimate the uniquely cooperative relationship council members and I have with one another and with city staff. I am proud that our goal is to work together leading Summit to become an even greater city than it already is.

Again, it has been a pleasure working with the 2018 council. It truly has been an honor and a privilege.

Thank you and Happy New Year.