

West Windsor State of the Township Address (as delivered), May 13, 2024

Following is the State of the Township Address as actually delivered by West Windsor, NJ Mayor Hemant Marathe on May 13, 2024 at the Council Meeting at the Municipal Center.

The text below is taken from the Township-published YouTube [video](#) of the meeting, from 4:50 to 29:28 in the video.

The text is presented as it differs from the Township-published 7-page draft at: <https://westwindsornj.org/images/notices/2024/State-of-the-Township-Address-051324.pdf> and is annotated with deletions in ~~red strike-through~~ and with additions in **in green boldface**.

State of Township Address 2024
Given at W. Windsor Municipal Center
Council Meeting of May 13, 2024

Hemant Marathe, Mayor

MAYOR MARATHE:

He meant, "Mayor is here, because he's always late. He runs on India time." So ...

Thank you, Council President Geevers and Council Members, for your kind invitation to give my state of the Township address.

Every year I wonder what am I going to say in this address that people don't know already. We are fortunate to live in a great community and our Township is in great shape. Like my family, many of you chose to move here. Like me you don't regret your decision. Thankfully many families choose to stay in West Windsor long after their kids graduate from college. I know friends who have paid taxes long after their kids have left, maybe grudgingly, but they love all West Windsor has to offer and appreciate ~~what~~ **that** this community has given their family. I want to thank every resident for making West Windsor a great community.

While talking to people throughout the year I realize that sometimes people don't appreciate the complexity and limitations of the Mayor and Township government. **I always say, jokingly, "I wish I was a king."** I will answer some of the common questions I have received over the years.

Let me start with the budget - Our ~~Chief Financial Officer~~ **CFO** John ~~Mauder~~ **who** will make a budget presentation during the meeting tonight. I am sorry to steal some of his thunder.

Tonight, the Council will vote on the 2024 Township budget. I am proud of the transparent and open process the Mayor and Council uses to review the budget, which is how we strive to do everything every day. The Council held open budget hearings for over 9 hours over three days to go over the budget before it was even introduced. Every citizen had an opportunity to comment and give suggestions. Both Mayor and Council heard the public's desire for more

lighting and pedestrian safety. As a result, the Council increased the budget in those areas even above and beyond the increases proposed by the Administration.

The Township has two caps on the budget. Most people are aware of the 2% cap on tax increases which means that the total taxes raised by the Township ~~can't~~ **cannot** increase more than 2% compared to last year. **Doesn't mean your taxes necessarily will increase more than 2%, but the total taxes that we collect.** This year tax our levy is increasing by 1.44% well under the cap. The less understood cap is the cap on total operational expenditures which **in this year** is ~~a~~ total of 3.5% which includes an additional 1% that the Council will vote on tonight. That means the Township can't spend more than 3.5% than what we spent last year. We are making full use of ~~this~~ **that** 3.5% cap. This increase has to take care of the high inflationary price increases we have seen across the board as well as **the** new state mandates and maintenance of infrastructure. A number of people ~~say~~ **have privately told me** that they are willing to pay higher taxes for a particular service. Some examples are increased maintenance ~~and~~ amenities for roads and public spaces as well as **some** brand new items ~~such as~~ **like** additional street lights ~~or~~ **and** flashing beacons at pedestrian crossings. Since we have maxed out the expenditure cap any increase in one area has to match dollar for dollar a decrease in ~~another~~ **some other** area.

I often hear about high taxes paid by ~~the~~ residents and the implication being we should be able to provide ~~more services~~ **any service that the person desires**. I want to point out that although municipal government does collect your property taxes about 85% are passed through to the County and **the** School District. An average household in West Windsor pays only \$2,246 in annual municipal taxes or about \$187 per month. That is all the Township gets to keep. In return you get all services provided by the municipal government -- Police, fire, garbage and recycle pickup, snow removal, brush & leaf pickup, Health Department and Senior Center services, roads, street lights, sidewalks, street trees and parks. I am ~~sure~~ **certain** I missed a few things ~~in~~ **on** the list. Just to reiterate all ~~that~~ **those services** for **just** \$187/month. **Compare that to your phone bill, or your cable bill, or your homeowners association dues, and you will realize how good a deal it is.** By every measure the taxpayers are getting full bang for their tax dollars from the municipal government.

John will cover the budget in detail in his presentation. I would like to highlight some of the increases in the budget based on community ~~requests~~ **input**.

We are hiring two new Police officers this year. *(Gesturing to audience ...)* **He will still say, "It's not enough," ... see, he's nodding his head.** Residents repeatedly point out issues such as cars not stopping at cross walks, blowing past stopped school buses or in general speeding. Our Police do **a** daily enforcement and write their **own** share of tickets. Hiring ~~of~~ two new officers will help us increase enforcement. However, Police can't be there at ~~all places~~ **every location** ~~all the~~ **at every** time.

At my request, for one week, the **West Windsor** Police kept track of sources of tickets ~~written~~ they wrote during that week. On internal roads **not counting Route One**, between 60-70% tickets **on every road** were issued to West Windsor residents. ~~It's~~ **That's** our friends, neighbors and in some case ourselves who are responsible for traffic issues. The Police will continue to do

their job. **But** A permanent and **a** long-term solution is for each of us to be cognizant of our **own** driving **habits**.

In light of the ~~traffie~~ **unfortunate** accident last year on Rabbit Hill Road residents have asked for more street lighting, cross walks with flashing beacons and new sidewalks at various locations. **Let me address all three requests.**

As I have pointed out in the past street lighting is an expensive **annual** item. Last year the Township paid ~~about~~ \$415,000 to JCP&L and PSE&G for street lighting. This is an annual expense out of operating budget. This year after Council requested an increase above **and beyond** what the administration had already proposed we have budgeted \$450,000. We have not finalized all locations but can confirm the following **locations**:

- Rabbit Hill Road, including intersections with Cranbury Road, ~~Route~~ 571 and all side streets; ~~replace will be replacing~~ 6 existing light fixtures **with brighter lights** and ~~install~~ **installing** 8 new lights;
- Bennington Drive; **will** upgrade 4 existing street lights;
- Cranbury Road in the area of the new sidewalk and crosswalks; 5 new street lights and 1 ~~street light~~ upgrade
- North Post Road ~~existing curve~~; 2 new street lights
- Conover Road ~~existing~~ **exiting the** s-curve; 4 new street lights.

These are all light's we've agreed to with PSE&G.

In addition **to that**, we are in discussions with PSE&G for

- Installing 10 new lights on Bear Brook Road from Windsor Haven to Meadow Road, at intersections and the curve ~~in-the~~ **on that** road. **There are no lights on that road at this time.**

We continue to evaluate locations in town where upgrading or installing new ~~street~~ lights is appropriate. **If you have suggestions, please pass it on.**

Please be mindful **that** it takes PSE&G approximately 4 to 6 months to install or upgrade lights after we give **them** approval. So, it may be early fall before these projects are completed.

Regarding flashing beacons at crosswalks -- these are far more expensive to install than street lights and the cost varies depending on the location ~~and~~ **based on what** available infrastructure **is there**. Every time **we do** a road ~~is redone~~, we look for opportunities to make it more pedestrian and bicycle friendly ~~including~~ **which includes** whether a flashing beacon **and sidewalks, and crosswalks** will be appropriate.

This year we are evaluating crossing beacons at a number of locations:

- We have already installed two on Bear Brook Road and one on Rabbit Hill Road **near the Trolley Line Trail.**

- One is designed for Alexander Road at crosswalk to Nash Park and ~~will be out to bid this~~ **which should be installed by late** summer.
- One on Penn Lyle Road ~~at the~~ **and** Trolley Line crossing we are ~~working with the contractor on pricing~~ **discussing the pricing with the contractor. And we hope that, too, will be installed by end of summer.**
- We are actively looking at three school ~~crosswalks~~ **crosswalk locations** on New Village Road ~~at near~~ **Village School** and Grover Middle school. **And** also, at Penn Lyle and Canoe Brook near High School South.

The ~~location~~ **locations** of these improvements is based on input from the Police and engineering. Thank you to the Bicycle & Pedestrian Alliance, the Rabbit Hill **Road** residents and other residents who have given input on crossing areas around town.

Lastly there is always requests for **more** sidewalks. It's a complicated issue because sometimes the residents who are responsible for maintaining the sidewalk after it's constructed are not **as** enthusiastic about the project **as other folks. The Township does install the sidewalk, but once we install it, it's local resident's responsibility for snow cleaning and other maintenance of the sidewalk.** As evidenced by the two phases of **the** Cranbury Road sidewalks these projects take a long time. We are committed to extending the Cranbury Road sidewalk to connect ~~it~~ to the Trolley line Trail near Rabbit Hill Road. ~~The~~ **This** budget **that will be voted on tonight** allocates \$50,000 to design ~~the~~ **that** extension. We hope to fund the construction cost of over \$400,000 over the next two budgets.

There is no argument that traffic has increased in town over the past 30 years since my family moved here. Residential developments both in West Windsor and surrounding towns contributed to this increase. The state requires us to build new housing under the affordable housing legislation. As Mayor I am committed to doing whatever I can on both fronts to reduce development resulting in increased traffic and find solutions to the existing traffic problems. The fact is ~~the~~ traffic in West Windsor will continue to increase due to developments approved by us and neighboring towns **that are still under construction.**

In order to reduce the burden, I am committed to reviving two ~~bypasses~~ **bypass** projects that have only been talked about ~~for a number of years~~ **since I moved to town** -- the Vaughn Drive Bypass and Penns Neck Bypass through SRI property.

I am happy to report that **the** first part of the Vaughn Drive Bypass, **that is** connecting the new road "A" from Avalon development to the New Jersey Transit Train Station **lot** is planned to be completed before this Fall. ~~It~~ **That** will provide an **access** alternate path to residents of Avalon Development to get to Route 1 via Alexander Road. **You'll have to go through the parking lot, but you can get there.** We are in active discussions with the County to complete the remaining portion of the bypass to provide a proper connection to Alexander Road. I can't commit to ~~a~~ **the** timeframe **because lot of other parties are involved**, but it has been my priority every year since I got elected Mayor. **And I am fairly confident that with the County Executive we will get it done.**

Any development ~~application~~ for SRI property **that comes before me** ~~will~~ require construction of ~~the~~ Penns Neck Bypass connecting Washington Road through SRI property to Route 1 near

Harrison Street. Since the **proposed** road will be entirely through West Windsor we will not have to worry about objection from ~~other~~ **any of our neighboring** Townships.

The good news is that ~~once again~~ **in spite of these spending increases** there is no tax increase in this budget - the municipal taxes are flat at 0.428 cents. Since I became Mayor in 2017 ~~January~~ the total tax rate has increased from 0.418 in 2018 to 0.428 in 2024 ~~for~~ an increase of 2.4% over a period of 7 years or approximately 1/3rd **of a percent** ~~(0.34%) annual increase in taxes every year~~. This while increasing our surplus from \$1.5 million dollars when I got elected Mayor to \$7.8 million dollars in the proposed budget an increase of over 420%.

No wonder we continue to maintain our AAA rating making it less expensive to borrow for capital projects.

The Township's excellent financial performance is a direct result of welcoming businesses to Town. When I became Mayor, I started TRC **or** (Technical Review committee) to review applications before they ~~came~~ **come** to the Planning Board. **That has smoothed the process down and has moved applications much faster.** We have attracted more businesses to Town. As a result, our total assessments increased by over \$225 million over 7 years in spite of a temporary drop during Covid.

From naysayers you **will** constantly hear about warehouses, but the fact is although all our neighboring towns have built many warehouses, we don't have a single one in town **yet**. Instead, we have attracted many small businesses, just to name a few as examples **and you will see Council members going for ribbon cutting all the time:**

- Kid Strong in ~~Southfield Commons Shopping Center~~ **McCaffrey's mall**
- **I can't pronounce it** Tous Les Jours, Mango Mango in ~~Windsor Plaza~~ **Woo Ri mart**
- Liberty Martial Art, Hutchinson Homes in Ellsworth Plaza
- Jersey Mike's Sub, ~~Smile Flossophy~~, along 571
- Rumble Boxing in ~~Windsor Green~~ **Whole Foods Market mall**
- More Than Q, The Container Store, Starbucks in ~~the Square at West Windsor~~ **Trader Joe's mall.**
- Oceans Job Lot, Floor & decor, Bluestone Lane Cafe, just salad, Goldfish Swim School, Burn Boot Camp, Planet Fitness, Pasar Malam, Playa bowls, in Nassau Park Pavilion

And I have probably not named many more that have come to town.

Many new ~~small~~ businesses will be part of what will ~~be~~ **become** the bustling, walkable downtown area on Princeton Hightstown Road that many have asked for over the years. We have been working closely with Mercer County on redoing that section of ~~Route~~ 571 **between Cranbury Road and Clarksville Road** to improve bicycle, pedestrian and road safety with sidewalks and safer crossings. **Again**, I am optimistic that with the new county executive the project will move ~~quicker~~ **much faster than it has moved during the last six years.**

I am happy to report that the retail environment in West Windsor is healthy. **I** ~~I~~ **I'll** encourage all residents to support these great businesses and all others in town.

This brings me to unfortunate wasteful spending that we must include in the budget. Last year we spent \$125,000 out of budgeted \$275,000 defending a baseless lawsuit against approval of the Bridgepoint 8 warehouse complex on Quakerbridge Road **which is** at the edge of **our** town. The courts ruled in our favor on every count of the lawsuit in an unambiguous fashion. Sadly, the plaintiffs who are West Windsor residents and taxpayers chose to appeal which has forced us to budget another \$254,000 this year to defend ~~the~~ **that** lawsuit. **That's like pulling four or five crossing beacons.**

With the approval of new affordable housing legislation and potential of the site to house over 3000 apartments I had hoped the plaintiffs would see the light but sadly we are forced to spend taxpayers' money in an unproductive fashion.

This brings me to the topic of affordable housing, a state mandate I have spent considerable time making sure does not adversely affect West Windsor. The legislature came up with a new law and process for each Township to fulfill ~~their~~ **our** affordable housing obligation. The new process has never been used so it's ~~anyone's~~ **anybody's** guess how well it will work. However, West Windsor always has ~~the~~ bull's ~~eye~~ **eyes** on our back because every builder wants to build in ~~town~~ **West Windsor. It's easy to sell the houses and make profit.** I want to make sure we do everything possible to prepare ourselves for the next round.

Under the new legislation passed The Township is required to file various reports with **the DCA** the Department of Community Affairs between June and September. By October 20th of this year the ~~Department of Community Affairs~~ **DCA** will publish their non-binding obligation of each town. **So they will essentially tell us how many units we are responsible for. And again, our ratio in our town is 25%, so if they say you need one unit, then we need to build three regular price units for every one affordable unit. So we end up building four times as many units as they tell our obligation is.** By January 31st of next year West Windsor Council is either required to adopt a binding resolution either accepting the number assigned by the ~~Department of Community Affairs~~ **DCA** or a number based on ~~its~~ **our** own determination of our fourth-round obligation. A lengthy process will follow that resolution and ~~the~~ potential of landing in court is significant. **Just as a reference,** During the last round West Windsor spent ~~about~~ **over** \$500,000 coming ~~up~~ with a settlement with **the** Fair Share Housing center. I hope given how proactive West Windsor is, we will not have to spend unproductive money on lawsuits to come up with our fourth-round obligation.

I want to assure residents that we have already started work to protect our interests. When ~~Department of Community Affairs~~ **DCA** determines our obligation by October 20th, **2024** we will be prepared with the homework. I will keep **all** residents updated as the process moves along.

Since I ~~was~~ **became** elected Mayor, every year a group of volunteers have hosted the Mayor's Ball. It's not an official Township function but run by a group of volunteers. They raise funds for a non-profit organization and **have** so far, ~~have~~ raised funds for both Volunteer Fire Departments, Police Department, the Historical Society and ~~the~~ Arts Council. **And we sadly lost two years during COVID.** This year's recipient is Attitude in Reverse **or** "AIR". AIR is a great **local** organization that does work in breaking down stigma associated with mental illness. The founders Trish and Kurt Baker, local residents **have** channeled their personal pain into

helping others. **And I've been fortunate to know them all these years.** The Mayor's ball committee will hold various events around town throughout the year. The first event of the year is Dive into Summer at West Windsor Waterworks, on June 21st. Please support this worthy cause in whatever form you can.

As the Mayor I may be the face of the Township, but the Town is run by various Township boards and committees appointed by the Mayor and Township Council. Many volunteers continue to serve for a number of years **without any compensation** ~~on our~~ **Some of the committees and boards are:** Agricultural Advisory & Affordable Housing Committee, Human Relations Council, Environmental ~~Commission, Board of~~ Recreation and Shade Tree Commission, Planning and Zoning Boards.

We are also blessed with **some** other volunteer organizations not related to Township government such as **the** two Volunteer Fire Departments, FOWWOS **or Friends Of West Windsor Open Space**, WWBPA **West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance**, Farmers' Market and ~~the~~ Parking Authority. They all make West Windsor a great place to live. **You will find many of those volunteers in the audience today so please thank them.**

Please thank these volunteers for their selfless service to the Township.

Before I close, I would like to acknowledge one special individual for whom this is her last State of the Township Address as an employee. Gay Huber our Township Clerk is going to retire in a few months after ~~over~~ 35 years of service to the Township in various capacities. She is a lifelong West Windsor resident having ~~been~~ born and brought up in West Windsor **graduating from "the" High School, as she would say.** If any of you want to complain about all the taxes you have paid over the years, she has **beat** you ~~beat~~ by a mile ~~so don't complain.~~ Apart from being a Township employee, she and her family ~~volunteer~~ **have volunteered** for the Fire Department and Historical Society among other volunteer activities. Although technically ~~the~~ Township Clerk works for the Township Council and ~~thus the~~ **that mean's she's my** opposition, I am thankful for **all** the support she has given me since I got elected Mayor.

Gay thanks ~~to~~ you and your family for your service to West Windsor ~~in every capacity.~~ You will be missed. **Thank you.**

As I meet ~~many~~ people around town, I am honored and humbled by your kind words and support. Thanks for the opportunity you have given me since 2001 to serve in various capacities as School Board Member, **School Board** President, Council Member and **currently** as your Mayor.

Given the craziness going on in partisan politics today, I am glad West Windsor has a non-partisan form of government. It's a privilege being the Mayor of one of the best towns in the country. God bless West Windsor; God bless the State of New Jersey and God bless America. **Thank you.**

[Address concludes at 29:28 into the video after 24m38s]

* * *