

February 13, 2018

## **Sea Isle City**

### **2018 Budget Message and State of the City**

Good morning. The budget I'll present to council today is filled with good news. First of all, I'm proposing no increase to the tax rate; and for the fifth year in a row, no increase to our water and sewer rates. In fact, in our utility, the budget is so strong that we are funding our utility capital improvement plan without increasing the City's debt. In our municipal budget, we began this year with an available surplus of nearly five million dollars, an increase of over a million dollars from last year's starting surplus.

How were we able to accomplish this? Three words:

Sound financial management.

We have worked since the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009 to ensure Sea Isle's financial house remained in order. Prudent spending by department heads, while at the same time ensuring priorities were achieved, has been a critical part of the effort. As an administration and council, we've focused on infrastructure and capital improvements over the past decade, all the while carefully managing the debt associated with all of our projects. We've managed personnel costs through selective hiring practices, fair contract negotiations, and controlling healthcare increases by careful oversight of our options and with the assistance of City staff through their contributions toward premiums. We've accomplished a zero tax increase despite the addition of a paid emergency medical services division to the City – an action instituted this past year to ensure that our residents are afforded with the best available response to any emergency situation.

We've also planned for the future of City government by developing succession plans for key positions. In 2017, Cindy Griffith retired as our municipal clerk; and the office was well prepared for the transition, as Shannon Romano had spent several years as the deputy city clerk; and will serve us well

into the future as our newest City Clerk. Last month, Tom D’Intino retired as chief of police. Chief D’Intino had planned to retire for some time – and we made our knowledge of this clear when we appointed two captains in the police department to prepare for the future. Over the next month, my administration will be finalizing the evaluation of these two officers and I expect to appoint a new chief during the first quarter of this year, with a corresponding resolution to be presented to council asking for confirmation of that individual as Director of the Department of Police.

Regarding our police department, they represent the finest in law enforcement, and I’m proud to be their Mayor, and proud of what they do for Sea Isle. Regarding Chief D’Intino, he served this city with honor and professionalism for 28 years and his contributions to Sea Isle City as a leader in law enforcement have left his successor with large shoes to fill.

One of our major priorities is to mitigate the flooding on our island. While we have already tackled many improvement projects - replacing and upgrading deteriorated storm water systems and check valves – we know that we still have much to do. This spring, we’ll build the first storm water pumping station on the island at the bay side of 38<sup>th</sup> St. This summer we’ll receive the findings of our City Engineer’s comprehensive flood mitigation study; after which we’ll be able to design and implement additional capital improvement projects. Let me be clear – we know that this is a problem for our citizens; we know this is an issue that the city government must deal with; and we know that this will require a significant allocation of funding. The fact is that the vast majority of our storm water system is intertwined with the county’s system; and the fact is that any analysis of long term solutions that involves prevention of flooding from the back bays must be done in conjunction with the State Department of Environmental Protection and the Army Corps Engineers. I’m confident that we will come up with solutions that will greatly improve conditions – we have a proven track record over the past decade of systematic planning and design that has served us well, and will continue to serve us as we plan for the future.

Along those lines, consider what we’ve accomplished with our flood insurance program. 8 years ago, during my state of the city address, I acknowledged that Sea Isle residents were receiving no discount on their flood insurance premiums, and I discussed our efforts to become a participant in the National Flood Insurance Program’s Community Rating System, and our goals to

achieve discounts for our residents. Led by our construction official and flood plain manager, Neil Byrne, our progress in this matter has been nothing short of remarkable – from our initial success in achieving a 20% discount to our most recent accomplishment – achieving class 3 status and a corresponding 35% discount – the only community in the state of New Jersey to do so; and ranked among the top 10 communities in the country in the eyes of FEMA’s CRS Program. Our success in this endeavor, and in other long term projects such as beach replenishment and water and sewer infrastructure improvements, show that the establishment of clear goals coupled with careful planning and a sense of urgency will lead us to solutions. I know the administration and City Council are together in our desire to expedite flood mitigation; and I ask all of our citizens to share my confidence in the process we’re undertaking.

Another significant issue we’re dealing with now is the future of the former school property in the 4500 Block between Park Road and Central Avenue. The clear message from the community during the master plan process was to retain the site for recreational purposes. The challenge before us is to determine the scope of work to be undertaken to the current building. There are a number of options and I’ve assembled a committee of residents and council to work with our consultant to prepare concept plans that ultimately can be shared with the public. While the former school building is generally sound, it is situated at an elevation below current standards for flood protection. Given this, we are limited to some degree to the amount of renovation that can be performed to the building. In any event, cost estimates will be prepared for all of our options, and as with past projects, working together as a community we’ll do what is best for the City.

This past August, the Planning Board adopted the Master Plan Re-examination Report, following a two year public process. I know over the next couple months City Council intends to have discussions about prioritizing the recommendations within the master plan report; and I ask that council consider expediting the issues related to commercial zone changes, including a reduction in density in all commercial zones. The re-examination does recommend changes from commercial to residential in several areas, but it does not recommend a change to the housing unit density in commercial zones. I think this requires further review, and I say this as a commercial property owner who could be

negatively impacted by zoning changes. I have been listening to many of our residents who express deep concerns with this issue; and I believe there are potential changes we can make that respect property rights while still assuring and preserving quality of life for our residents. Specifically, I believe reducing the number of currently allowable housing units in some of our commercial zones can have a positive impact on our City. I believe what council set out to do over 10 years ago has been achieved; and now is the time to re-visit the issue.

One of our finest assets is our Excursion Park complex and over the past several years we've worked in partnership with the chamber of commerce to provide events and activities for our residents and visitors. Unfortunately, the chamber sponsored events were not going to happen this year and we were faced with having only 3 nights of entertainment each week at the park. After challenging city staff to address this, I'm happy to announce that included in this year's budget is the necessary funding to enable us to provide 5 nights of city sponsored activities and entertainment each week for the coming summer.

The feedback we've gotten convinced us that an additional night for concerts and an additional night of Movies under the Stars would prove very popular and we have a great lineup set for the coming season.

I know that our entrances to the City have been the cause of some angst over the past few years, with the ongoing construction or closures that have taken place, so I'd like to give an update on the status of TI Bridge, the North End entrance from Strathmere along Landis Avenue, and Sea Isle Boulevard. The current phase of the TI Bridge construction project will be completed prior to the summer season; but the more significant news is that the county is moving towards a total bridge replacement project that may be able to be under construction within the next 3 to 4 years. It is part of a comprehensive program that will utilize county, state, and federal dollars to rehabilitate or replace bridges throughout Cape May County. In the coming year I'll be able to provide additional updates as this project moves through the planning and engineering phase, but be assured that this project does have the attention it deserves.

The north end of Sea Isle is currently being studied as part of a review to determine ways to improve bicycle and pedestrian safety, and next month, I expect

the County and their engineering consultant to hold a public workshop to get public feedback on options for the north end. In conjunction with this, my administration, led by the police department, will be working on a number of activities and projects to improve bicycle safety throughout Sea Isle, including additional signage, additional bicycle patrols, and dissemination of educational materials throughout the City. As anyone familiar with our road layout knows, we have a challenge in this regard due to the narrow width of our streets.

On the Sea Isle Boulevard, the project is proceeding on schedule, with the entire roadway scheduled to be completed prior to the 2019 summer season. The engineers have determined that there will not be the extent of surcharge on the south side that was needed on the north side, so we will not see the previously expected height of fill along the entire length of road.

I know that the construction projects can be aggravating, and I truly appreciate the patience of our residents as they deal with torn up streets, narrow causeways, bridge closures, and detours. In the long run, I think most everyone understands that we need to do these things, but we'll always work to minimize the disruption.

-----

Finally, years ago when we started our bi-weekly newsletter, we had one overriding rule for anything we published – accuracy. This has served us well and I believe it's given our constituency confidence in their government. There will always be a rumor mill and with social media nowadays, there's even more opportunity for the spread of false information. Why am I bringing this up? Because sometimes people have an axe to grind...sometimes they'll use whatever means to stir the pot. Sometimes people make statements without all the facts to deliberately reflect negatively on a person, organization, or situation... that's just how it is - then the phenomenon of whisper down the lane takes over and the rumors run rampant.

Talk is cheap. But it can be damaging. I will always listen; but I will also always work to find the facts and the truth of any situation having to do with the

governing of our City...and this government will not be party to the dissemination of anything but the truth – and the truth is that today we are not raising your taxes, not raising your water and sewer rates, and have made it possible for you to get a 35% discount on your flood insurance. I've said it before and I'll say it again - we have a great story to tell in Sea Isle...it may not always make for juicy reading; but the fact is we do tell the truth - and it makes for a story that we can all be proud of.

Thank you; and may God continue to bless Sea Isle City.

Leonard C. Desiderio

Mayor