

Remarks by Mayor Edward P. Zimmerman  
Reorganization Borough Council Session  
January 5, 2009

There is a saying, “May you live in interesting times”. Well, they don’t get much more interesting than this past year. On a world level we saw several natural disasters, wars and terror attacks. Nationally, we lived through a never ending Presidential campaign that ended with a historic choice. We saw the economy turn sour, the stock market drop like a rock and yes Tina Fey become the most recognized actress on TV.

On a local level we have seen a state government that has thrown one curveball after another at our fine borough and we are still standing to talk about it. In February the Governor announced that he was cutting all municipal aid to our Borough for no other reason than our small size. His stated intention was to force us to consider merging with a larger more bureaucratic municipality. He hired a County Executive School Superintendent whose first act was supposed to be shutting down the School Districts of Rocky Hill and Millstone. Using the budget legislation this year the state tried to subvert the state constitution by demanding that we enter into an agreement to pay for State Police service or be treated as if we had. On top of this we had new and inaccurate COAH numbers thrust upon us.....add to this more local issues like the fact that South Brunswick may be ending our inter-local agreement for Health Services in favor of outsourcing their own department, Montgomery is threatening to end our inter-local agreement for recreation, again, and the lawsuit against the Borough by a small group of residents about the Pulte development doesn’t seem to want to go away even though we were vindicated by the courts and it continues to cost our taxpayers thousands of dollars.

So you have to ask yourself, why would anyone in their right mind want to be a volunteer Councilmember or Mayor these days? The answer is pretty easy....these are the times that we can make a difference....these are the times when fighting for what is right counts...these are the times that when good things happen, they feel that much more enjoyable.... Let me give you some examples

In February we held a town meeting, the turn out was impressive and our residents asked us to make some noise. We did and it paid off. Through a concerted effort of resident letter writing, lobbying on my part and working with organizations such as the League of Municipalities, STAR Mayors and the NJ Conference of Mayors we were able to get 75% of our aid restored. Our School Board and I met jointly with the Millstone Borough School Board and Mayor and the new Executive School Superintendent. Several options were presented and are being considered but a shutdown of the district without voter approval is no longer imminent. In July, I filed a complaint with the Board of Local Mandates that the budget requirement regarding the Sate Police was an unconstitutional unfunded mandate. The Borough Council quickly joined in the action and we were successful. The language in the budget was declared unconstitutional and struck from the bill. This issue was much bigger than just us paying for the State Police. It was more about how the state budget was being used to override existing legislation and it affected every municipality, not just the 89 who use the State Police. I am really proud of this win and it’s a pretty safe bet that I am not one of the Governor’s favorite mayors. In fact I don’t recall a holiday card this year.

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This council did a lot of other, not so glamorous stuff this year. In Administration and Records, after years of failed efforts, we modified and codified the ordinances of the borough. There is still more to do but getting it done has been talked about for over fifty years. We have upgraded the computer systems of the borough which has increased productive work time. We continue to look at new technologies to improve the efficiency of the borough. Our participation in the county PARIS records project has caused our records to be properly cleaned out and catalogued. A new records room funded by the PARIS Grant is being built in the next room.

In Building and Grounds several projects were completed and several are underway. In addition to the new records room, a new mail area and storage facility is being completed downstairs. The interior of this building is being painted. Van Horne Park is completed and opened and the new county funded Tennis Practice Facility is being built behind borough hall.

In Finance, we crafted a budget within the caps imposed by the state and held the municipal tax rate increase to pretty much just enough to cover the aid cut and continuing litigation expense caused by the Concerned Citizens Group.

In Public Safety, we were able to negotiate and sign a multi year deal with the South Bound Brook Police. We continue to have the service of the New Jersey State Police who have been very responsive to our requests. Through grants, our fire department was able to upgrade and replace their turn out gear. And lastly, through hard work and cooperation with the Rocky Hill Hook & Ladder Company, the council approved the purchase of a new fire engine which is due for delivery this spring.

In Streets and Roads, we also accomplished a lot. The first phase of the long awaited sidewalk repairs is complete. The next phase was delayed to coincide with the sidewalk project on Washington Street for which we received a state grant and are awaiting final approvals from the State Historic Preservation Officer. Additionally we have applied for and been approved for a 100 thousand dollar grant to refurbish Hickory Court. Also, PSE&G has completed the replacement of the "leaky" high tension cable running along Rte 518.

In Water and Sewer we continued to negotiate arrangements with Montgomery and are working on a formal contract for our back up water supply from New Jersey American Water.

Our Planning Board has readied a new COAH plan and it has been submitted, on time, for review by the state.

This year we have seen the Cycling Classic return for a second year, we are continuing to improve our recreational facilities and have held successful events such as the park nights and July 4<sup>th</sup> Parade and Picnic.

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As you have heard we got a lot done and I didn't even mention everything. This council is without a doubt one of the hardest working group of volunteers I have had the pleasure to be around.

Looking forward, what do we see on the horizon.

First, we will work on completing the ordinance updates and complete the new records storage area. The computer system upgrades will continue from a productivity standpoint now that the hardware is in place. We will continue to look to newer technologies such as phone systems and wireless access to continue to improve our ability to serve our residents. I would like to especially thank Mark Germain and Sean Dineen for all of the time they have volunteered to help Linda and me through this project. Several of the other projects inside and outside the Borough Hall will get completed. I would especially like to find a way to resurface the parking area outside as it is starting to become a problem. The soccer field will be renovated and the new goals purchased last year will be set up. The sidewalk projects for phase two and Rte 518 will get done this year as well as the refurbishment of Hickory Court. I am going to ask our Fire and First Squads to look at the cost savings and productivity gains, if any, of a merger of the two organizations. Both have seemed receptive to that discussion understanding that if we find it makes sense it could take years to facilitate. I expect that renegotiating the recreation agreement with Montgomery Township will get completed as well as a move to Somerset County for health services should South Brunswick do away with their department in favor of a shared services agreement of their own.

This year we will begin the property revaluation. This is a big project that we are required to do. Last year we were able to get a delay until 2010. With the real estate market what it is the council and I have decided to start it this year. There will be several public meetings on this in the near future.

This year will be a difficult year for all of us. With the economy being what it is and Trenton being what it is, we can expect more cuts in aid and a shifting of the states budgetary problems to small towns like ours. I strongly suspect that our municipal aid will be cut again in 2009 given that the Governor announced over the weekend that he will trimming municipal aid by at least another 15 million dollars. This will cause us to look long and hard at where we can reduce the expenditures of the borough. The good news is that we work on tight budgets and small tax revenues so there isn't much to cut...the bad news is we still have a problem to solve and some tough decisions will need to be made.

I know it is the intent of this body to continue to provide services to our residents that a lot of other municipalities don't. It is also the intent of this body to hold taxes down and maintain the lower taxes we have all become accustomed to. To do this we need your help.

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We are a volunteer government and we need more volunteers. We need you to not only volunteer for committees and projects, but we need you to volunteer to work with our children and our seniors.

One of the biggest pleasures I have gotten from this job was back in February when we held the town meeting regarding the state aid cuts. What I saw that night was that everybody put away their partisanship, their disagreements and their decades old personal feuds to come together and work for the good of the community. Rocky Hill is like a big family. We may argue and call each other names, but when the chips are down and one of us is in trouble, we all stand as one.

I am going to ask everybody to do that again. As we enter into 2009 and one if the worst economies in a generation, things are going to get tough. Some of your neighbors will unfortunately lose their jobs. The retirement accounts of some of our fixed income seniors have already shrunk or disappeared. We need everyone to step up and help your neighbor. We will get through this but we are too good a community to let our friends suffer. If you know of a family or senior that is in trouble, let us know and we, maybe more as neighbors than government, will do our best to help.

Being a volunteer that works for the good of the community is a very rewarding exercise. That's why we do what we do as your elected officials. Sometimes we will hear from folks who disagree or don't like us much, but you know what, that's ok because I have found that most of the people in Rocky Hill understand we are all volunteers and really appreciate what we do and the effort we put in. But again, we need your help.

So in closing, as you have heard, we accomplished a lot and we still have a lot to do. One thing we will continue to do is make some noise and make sure that Rocky Hill is held up as the shining example of how things can be done and not some forgotten little town nobody has heard of. Most of you have experienced the blank stare when you say you are from Rocky Hill. That's changing. Now when I go to conferences no one has to ask any more..."where is Rocky Hill"? Now, instead, I am constantly being asked "how do you guys do it?"

So, it is with a great sense of pride that I want to congratulate and thank the Borough Council on all they do and finish by saying....let's get to work....