

2010 Rocky Hill Borough Council Reorganization Meeting

Mayor Zimmerman's Comments

January 4, 2010

Before we start I would like to welcome all of the new residents that moved to Rocky Hill this year and take a minute to remember some of those we lost. When a community is as small as ours, every passing of a resident takes a personal toll, but it gets even harder when we lose a current and a recently retired employee of the Borough in the same month. We will miss Lillian Durling at the time our oldest resident, my neighbor and friend Dr. Robert Albahary, lifelong resident Jean Bianco, Former Rocky Hill Fire Chief Doug Merritt, Former Rocky Hill Firefighter Harold Hinkson, Rocky Hill CFO G. Ross Bobal and former Rocky Hill Zoning Officer, Larry Rafaelli. Please rise and join me in a moment of silent remembrance of those and others that have passed on in 2009. Thank you.

It's hard to believe this the fourth and final reorganization of my term as your Mayor. As I looked back at the comments of the previous three re-orgs I was moved by how much has gotten accomplished by your municipal government during some very difficult times. I was just as moved by knowing that over these three years, the members of this Council have worked hard, disagreed mightily at times but always stayed friends and never, not once, made a partisan or personal attack on another councilmember. For that they all deserve the gratitude of all our residents. Putting the residents of the Borough first has always been an overriding element of everything we do. I also really appreciate the fact that in these very difficult economic times, while a lot of our residents are hurting or out of work, this last election was handled with dignity and respect and not the usual partisan name calling that we saw on the state level. It shows once again that the residents of this Borough are good people that care about their neighbors and will, when times are tough, let their personal feelings take a back seat to the greater good of the community.

So, today we are welcoming two new council members in Jeff Donahue and Bob Steen. They need to know they have very large shoes to fill in replacing Courtney White and Council President, Professor Bill Hallman. When Bill agreed to run with me four years ago it was on the condition that I wouldn't push him for a second term. That is definitely one of those promises I am kicking myself over. The loss of Bill on this Council will absolutely be felt, especially his unexpected but well timed witticisms aimed at the Mayor. What can I say about Courtney, she is the ultimate volunteer. In her three years on Council, Courtney holds an interesting distinction, she was appointed by the Council once and elected twice. That's probably a record for the most election wins in the shortest period of time. She handled her job as the Chair of Streets and Roads, probably one of the most difficult jobs, with incredible determination. In a few minutes I will begin to talk about some of accomplishments in the Borough and you will realize that a good portion of them are Streets and Roads Projects. I know both will continue to serve our Borough in some capacity. Please join me in thanking them for their service.

While the economy turned sour and aid all but dried up coming from Trenton, we were able to accomplish a lot this year without a major raise in taxes. Most of the increases you saw this year were

based on the school budget which at the time was based solely on a per child formula that we did not have control over. This year we stayed under the levy cap instituted by the state. Unfortunately while a 4% cap makes sense on a \$20 million dollar budget, putting a 4% cap on a \$450 thousand dollar budget puts us in a position that forces us to raise taxes each year so we can build the base up in case we have a large emergency like a water main break or something similar. I have asked Senator Bateman to look into the possibility of legislation that would allow a small town like ours to bank whatever tax levy cap we don't use for a period of up to three years so that we are no longer forced to raise taxes each year by legislation that was actually intended to help lower taxes. In general, the Borough is in good financial shape. In addition to accomplishing a lot while keeping our spending to almost 10% below what we budgeted this year, we did a good job of obtaining grants and finding new sources of revenue. This year we added a new wireless carrier to the water tower with a contract that contributes \$39,000 a year to our income. We received grants to do the sidewalk work on Washington Street, renovate Hickory Court, build the Tennis Practice facility out back, build a pathway from Crescent Ave to Van Horne Park and to do a complete energy audit of Borough owned buildings. For 2010 we have already received grants to renovate Montgomery Ave, renovate Panicaro Park Memorial Area and implement some of the findings in the energy audit.

As I mentioned, 2009 was a busy year. In addition to the Tennis Practice Facility, the completion of sidewalks that now stretch the north side of Washington Street from east end of the Borough all the way to the western border, the re-surfacing and re-curbings of Hickory Court....We completed Phase II of the Borough-wide sidewalk repair project, completing all but what remains on Washington Street. We repaired a water main break on Hickory Court. We purchased a new fire engine and celebrated its arrival with a very special July 4th celebration attended by almost 500 people. We continued to clean up the old ordinances of the Borough and now all existing and pending ordinances are available to the public on the web site. In Borough Hall we completed the new coat closet/mail room downstairs and the new records room next door. We resurfaced and relined the Borough hall Parking Area while improving the two basketball courts. The Soccer field was aerated and seeded, the new goals were assembled and put in place. In finance our insurance policies were reviewed and unneeded coverage dropped to save taxpayer dollars. Our Board of Health has changed service providers from South Brunswick to Somerset County this year in an effort to improve service and reduce cost. Our Shade Tree committee is working with the Montgomery Township Shade Tree Committee on a new plantings plan for Van Horne Park.

I will say it hasn't all been fun and accomplishments this year. As you are aware, the outgoing administration in Trenton decided on June 30th to arbitrarily shut down our school board, merge it with Montgomery and fire our elected school board members. All this without even so much as a public meeting. We have in fact challenged the constitutionality of that decision and will be appearing before Judge Accurso to deliver oral arguments in the next few weeks. Our reserve fund has been returned to us and has been set aside in case we are able to bring back our own school board. Additionally I have asked Senator Bateman to consider proposing new legislation that would change the merger to a regionalization so that we would be guaranteed representation and oversight on the merged Montgomery/Rocky Hill School District Board of Education.

We continue to struggle with Montgomery Township on other issues such as sewer fees, the inter-local agreement for recreation and the charging of permits fees at Van Horne Park. I am aware that they are

starting with a new administration this year and I intend to do everything I can to work with their new Mayor to get these things resolved and behind us as quickly as possible.

On the upside of not fun accomplishments this year, the Borough did submit its third round COAH certification plan and was one of the first of the 566 municipalities to be certified. Another not fun accomplishment is that after thousands of dollars of taxpayer legal fees and two appeals of the Pulte/Shafer approvals by a Concerned Citizens group, the planning board's decision was upheld for a second time and the suit finally came to an end. Unfortunately because of the three year delay, the market has now changed, Pulte has withdrawn and as per the new law signed by Governor Corzine this year, there is now a discussion of removing the age restriction, something we may not have the legal standing to deny since ground was never broken on the original project.

So, what do we do for an encore this year? In addition to continued moves to resolve the sewer and recreation issues with Montgomery, we will be addressing any application coming in for the Shafer Tract. We will continue to fight for the rights of Rocky Hill residents with regard to the School Board issue. We will be implementing new financial models and revising the chart of accounts to make budgeting in these difficult times more easy to understand. We will continue work on the ordinances. We will negotiate and implement a new long term policing agreement with South Bound Brook. We will negotiate and implement a new long-term garbage contract. We will, depending on grants and budget, complete the final phase of the sidewalk repairs. We will resurface the southern end of Montgomery Avenue. We will start to implement the recommendations of the Energy Audit. And, most importantly, we understand that tough times are coming from Trenton as far as aid, consolidation and shared services and we will be prepared to deal with them as they arise.

I ask that as we move into the New Year and things start to recover economically, that our residents continue the care and compassion they have demonstrated to each other as we make it through to the end of the worst economic downturn in a generation. I am so proud to tell people I am from Rocky Hill and how great our residents can be when times get tough. As I said in the beginning, I really appreciate the civility and compassion of residents this past year as we dealt with some really tough issues.

So now I'd like to take a few minutes and talk about what some people in this room insists is my favorite subject...me. We now enter the last year of my term as your Mayor and the question keeps coming up, will he or won't he run again? I have said all along that the plan was one and done. Out of fairness to anyone else who is considering a run, it is time for me to make a decision.

Here is a little history. In 2003, I had won my fight with cancer, I owned two successful companies and was making some money, my oldest had just started in an Ivy League School, Randie was President of the Board of Education and I was playing to 16 handicap. Life couldn't have been better. So when the Mayor Nolan asked me to get involved and run for Council, the smart thing to do would have been to run away and enjoy my life...but I didn't. I ran for council with George Morren and immediately went to work on renovating this building. When a year later, I supported incumbent Martin Engelbrecht and Jared Witt for Council as independents, the party in power decided to make my life as miserable as possible and challenge everything I tried to do. The easy thing would have been to throw in the towel and go back to work on my handicap... but I didn't. Instead I changed my mind at the last minute and ran for Mayor, fighting a challenge from a sitting councilman supported by both parties that ran one of the roughest campaigns in recent Rocky Hill history.

Early in my tenure, the Governor decided to cut all municipal aid to towns with populations of less than 5000. The easy thing to do would have been to blame the Governor for the tax increases it would cause and go work on my golf game...but I didn't. Working with Mayor Heck of Millstone, we organized the Committee of Small Town and Rural Mayors, we held town meetings, we started a lobbying campaign involving all 192 towns and in the end were able to get a fair restoration of 75% of the aid....now move forward 5 months and the borough receives a letter from the state saying that as one of the 89 towns that uses the State Police, we will enter into an agreement with the treasurer to pay additional dollars, which just happened to be the same amount as the restored aid, or be treated as if we had. The easy thing to do would have been to leave it to the 88 other towns to fight and spend the summer practicing my chipping and putting...but I didn't... I was one of the first to file a complaint with the Board of Local Mandates and amazingly, working with the League of Municipalities we were able to get the move by the administration declared unconstitutional. Now, we face the school board issue, the Montgomery Sewer issues, the Montgomery Recreation and public works issues and the Shafer Tract issues.

So we get back to the question will he or won't he? I said in my first re-org speech that I only wanted to serve one term. My son's golf game has now gotten better than mine as I've only gotten to play four times all year this year. So earlier this year I decided I would stick to the plan and be done at the end of 2010. Over the last several weeks many of you have asked me to go at it again. Surprisingly, even many who opposed my election the first time. I hear you, there is still a lot to do and experience is going to matter as things get tougher. But, after 8 years of service to the Borough, the smart thing and the easy thing for me to do is stand down and focus on my family and rebuilding my businesses. It has been a terribly hard decision and I have talked at length about how torn I am about it with my family. But truthfully, I do love being your Mayor and I still have some fight left in me. The pride and the passion don't just evaporate just because the term is ending. I cannot in good conscience walk away in the middle of all these serious issues and my family reluctantly agrees. Therefore, let me make it official right now. I will stand for re-election as your Mayor one more time. I will submit my paperwork in June to run as an independent or "nominated by petition". If elected, I will serve with the same passion and pride, and if the people of Rocky Hill happen to think someone else is a better fit for what is coming our way, so be it, there is always golf. It is my hope that like last year this will be a quiet and dignified campaign that focuses on issues and not partisanship or personalities. If so I know the fine people of Rocky Hill will make the right choice. They usually do. But all that is a long way off and we have work to do right here, right now. Let's get started by working on my appointments for 2010.