

State of the City - 2012

Mayor Benjamin G. Blake

Today, I've been asked to share with you the state of our city. I would be remiss if I did not begin my comments by first thanking former Mayor Richetelli who worked tirelessly with me to ensure a seamless transition, and whose management of our city over the past many years left us well positioned to meet the demands of today, and the challenges we face as we look to the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, the state of our City is strong. In the face of a stubborn and nagging recession, we have responded purposefully by facing these challenges responsibly and making the tough choices needed, by looking at City operations with a new set of eyes, looking for ways to do more with less. Better, faster, cheaper.

A moment ago, I thanked our business owners for creating Milford jobs. The latest unemployment figures from April 2012, show that Milford has a 6.3 % unemployment rate compared to 7.7% in State and 8.1% Nationally. In fact, since last fall when I took office, Milford's unemployment rate has dropped over 2% from 8.4% to 6.3%. It's clear we are headed in the right direction. Please keep up the good work.

The poor economy which has gripped our nation these past several years has not spared Milford. We have fought back, sharpened our pencils and made difficult choices. With the commitment and support of City Department Heads, Superintendent Feser and our City Employees, we drafted and adopted a 2012-2013 budget which preserves and enhances core and essential City services while meeting our very real and pressing obligations to Milford's taxpayers already under unprecedented financial pressures.

I am proud to report that the final budget represents less than a 1% spending increase on the City-side, or a modest total spending increase of just 1.24%. --

Because of the Revaluation and the growing Grand List, Milford's mill rate has actually dropped from 28.89 mills to 25.6 mills. We were able to do this while ensuring that all essential services remained intact and that our police, fire, health, and other public safety departments remain among the finest in the nation. The budget also funds our network of social services which protect the most vulnerable of our citizens. The budget maintains our public works and invests in our fundamental infrastructure, all without dipping into the "rainy day" reserve fund.

We have negotiated new contracts with 7 of the 9 Collective Bargaining Units in the City. These are good and responsible contracts. Like in the private sector, City employees, who had never previously contributed toward their health insurance, will now be required to fund a premium cost share.

I came to office believing we could, and we must, look to improve City operations by driving out inefficiencies and seeking new ways to meet the demands of our operation. I firmly believe we can yield substantial savings with simple, yet effective changes, while also improving service quality.

On the cost savings side, we installed programmable thermostats in all city buildings which will save tens of thousands of dollars in heating and cooling costs annually. -- Now, we are moving forward with a Comprehensive Energy upgrade to Parson, taking advantage of the financial grants and incentives through UI and the CT Conservation and Loan Management program, to retrofit antiquated and inefficient controls for the heating, cooling, and lighting systems with new upgrades which will yield energy conservation savings of over \$92K per year.

We recently purchased a lighting control system to monitor and manage the recreational lighting at Washington field. We expect to realize huge energy savings by being able to control the field's lighting schedules from the internet, email, phone, or fax. No longer will you see an empty softball fields lit-up during a rainstorm. We hope to expand this program to better control the lights at Fowler Field and the Eisenhower tennis courts.

In February, after monitoring the electric supply market, we determined that it was advantageous to renegotiate our rate with TransCanada to take

advantage of the favorable energy market. This will produce savings of approximately \$1,243,000 over the course of the contract.

We also took advantage of the lowest interest rates we have seen in 45 years and, in February, saved the City \$913,000 by successfully refunding \$8.3 million in bond issues from the previous decade. In addition, the bond rating agencies each reaffirmed our solid AA+ rating, citing our manageable debt and prudent reserves.

As you may know, we put the Administration of our health care out to bid, used the opportunity to leverage a slow economy, and allowed the competitive market to yield cost savings for the taxpayers. As a result of tough negotiations, a willingness to look beyond Anthem, and some passionate input from some city workers, we were able to extract over a \$1 million dollars per year in Health Care Administration cost savings.

The other side of spending, of course, is revenue. While we rely primarily on taxes, I'm committed to seeking out new, additional and alternative revenue sources wherever possible. One example, and something we are currently pursuing, is to take-over the billing of EMS services in Milford. Since our paramedics presently perform Advanced Life Support, it is only appropriate that the City should be billing insurance companies for the services it performs. Many other cities have begun this practice. This could potentially net substantial revenue for the City.

Beynd budgets and spending, we have made, or are making, substantial progress on many other fronts: Milford's police, fire, health and public works responded in exceptional fashion immediately after Tropical Storm Irene and they continue to shine as the clean-up and repairs are completed. While FEMA has already reimbursed Milford for some costs associated with Tropical Storm Irene, we still anticipate millions in additional FEMA funding upon completion of the large scale capital repairs at the Trumbull Avenue and Beach Avenue in Woodmont.

Speaking of the Borough, the Engineered Beach in Woodmont had over 9,000 cubic yards of new sand trucked in from Cape Cod to replenish the area of shoreline damaged by Irene. -At Gulf Beach, the pier and parking lot were

restored, and a major Erosion Control and Rehabilitation project was recently completed which shifted the sand from east to west along the shoreline, rejuvenating the entire section of beach. Walnut Beach had a series of site improvements to the parking lot over the winter, and the sections of the boardwalk damaged in Irene have been repaired. Finally, the Bulkhead replacement, repairs, and renovations to the Town Dock at the end of High Street are nearing completion.

We are pushing forward with an Agreement to sell a portion of the John Downs property to Milford Hospital and save the historic home, repay \$860K to the taxpayers, and generate new economic development from the construction of a new medical facility on the Post Road.

We are actively and vigorously pursuing additional parking for Downtown. As an accessible, regional center, Downtown Milford, as you know far too well, faces tremendous parking challenges. Over the past several months, the legislative delegation and I have been lobbying for funding for a new parking structure.

Also, on the downtown front, we have teamed-up with the Milford Technology Advisory Council to develop a plan to bring WiFi coverage to Downtown Milford. We are also committed, over the next 12 months, to make Milford a more walk-able and bike-able city to get around, for both work and play. We will pursue better sidewalks, crosswalks, and bike paths, especially in Downtown.

Turning to the tough challenge of changing or reengineering the way we do business. We have realized some success in recent reforms to streamline processes, promote proper development, improve consistency and customer service within our Department of Permitting and Land Use. Customers can now complete and track building applications online, and pay for the associate fees through Paypal. City departments can now sign-off on applications electronically through View Permit without the cumbersome paper-chase of the former system. Still, additional process improvements need to be fine-tuned in order to enhance Milford's permitting reputation. We must continue

to attract good businesses and corporate citizens who want to build or expand operations in the best city on Earth.

During this last legislative session, I worked closely with the Governor and State Leaders, and through the tremendous advocacy of Milford's State Delegation, a new law was enacted which restores local control over solid waste facilities who could otherwise threaten the environment and health of our citizens - in particular, the welfare of neighbors adjacent to 990 Naugatuck Ave. This new legislation re-establishes Milford's ability to directly protect our way of life. --- In addition to this legislative victory, the City has positioned itself extremely well in its opposition to Recycling Inc's Application for an expanded permit before CT's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

Ladies and gentlemen, I should stop here. Trust me, I could go on for some time about the many exciting things we have been fortunate enough to accomplish, and on the many things for which we are currently working, be it our communication upgrade for police and fire, our investment in city and school infrastructure, E-books for our Library, our veterans assistance program at Parsons, or flood mitigation plans - the list goes on. Of course, I love talking about these issues, people sometimes have to walk away when I get into the details of our successful single stream recycling program. But, I'd like to leave time for questions.

So, I'll end here by saying, we have a lot to be proud of as residents and business owners in Milford. But, we have an ongoing responsibility to make Milford a better place for the next generation. So, thank you for your continued support and continued investment in the community. Next year we'll do even better.