

## **State of the City - 2018**

### **Mayor Benjamin Blake**

As we look out over this magnificent vista, we see Connecticut's most popular recreational harbor.

We see Long Island Sound where it meets the rock jetty - but, the Harbor is also fed by two other bodies of water: the Indian River as it flows into Gulf Pond, and the mighty Wepawaug.

These two rivers bring the natural flow of silt and debris downstream requiring that we regularly dredge the Federal Channel so that it remains at a safe depth for boat traffic.

This year, instead of using our traditional approach to harbor maintenance, we moved upstream to dredge.

For the first time in over 40 years, we've dredged the ponds along the Wepawaug removing 15,000 cubic yards of sediment and restoring the walls along the ponds' edge. This project returned the natural beauty to our iconic ponds and enhanced the charm of our community.

There's just one issue, flocks of Canada geese have literally soiled the splendor of these newly restored areas.

While all communities have challenges, and Milford is no exception, one great big obstacle amidst our flock of successes is the Canada goose. My office receives more feedback about goose poop than just about any other matter of city business.

The first time I spread my wings to deliver this address, I was a younger man — I was a fledgling mayor, I didn't know precisely every duty of the office.

As I stand here today, I now know the many tasks and undertakings expected of Milford's Mayor. From saving cats in trees, to securing our neighborhoods from the threat of coyotes, bobcats and bears, I've encountered obligations and hazards of the job for which, in my wildest dreams and nightmares, I never thought I'd be responsible.

But these days, as unbelievable as it sounds, one of Milford's greatest problems is the challenge we face from Canada Geese which are wreaking havoc in our parks and public spaces.

We've tried just about everything to address this scourge:

- We've helped educate young residents about the harm of feeding our waterfowl, placing a copy of the book The Soggy Truth in each of our elementary classrooms;
- Our girl scouts troops installed kiosks around our ponds with informational flyers outlining the health effects associated with feeding the geese. Over the course of the past two years, approximately 1,500 flyers have been distributed;
- During nesting season, our Health Department sanitarians search-out and locate Canada Geese eggs to oil and addle in hopes of controlling the goose population;
- We've installed fencing along our rivers, ponds, and harbor creating an impediment for the birds between the water and land;
- We've installed spring-loaded dog silhouettes to frighten the birds away;
- Our Public Works has sprayed an organic grape juice concentrate on the grassy areas of our parks. Apparently, the bitter taste of the concentrate isn't appetizing to the birds.
- Believe it or not and as silly as it sounds, we've even investigated border collies and tactical drones as a deterrent to the geese.

At this point, we're open to any new suggestions.

I'm ready to call President Trump and ask that he refocus priorities from building a wall between the United States and Mexico, and instead look to our northern border and build a wall to keep out the Canada geese.

But in all seriousness, other than our challenges with geese, Milford is flying high.

Our business development continues to soar like an eagle as we outpace all other Connecticut towns and cities.

This past year alone, we had approximately 450 new businesses migrate to Milford. That's a 9% increase in business starts from the previous year.

We've grown our tax base to over \$6.7 billion, and we now have the largest Grand List in New Haven County and one of the top in the State.

Over the next year, we'll see continued investment along the commercial corridor of the Boston Post Road with significant projects at sites like the Beard Gravel Pit, Howard Johnsons, and the Connecticut Post Mall.

We see new businesses and breweries moving into Devon and Woodmont, and we appreciate the tremendous renaissance of Walnut Beach - a neighborhood that's bustling with incredible activity.

And at the heart of our City, downtown continues to thrive with new shops and businesses.

Downtown is growing with all the amenities expected of a world class 21st Century city, and yet it's a place steeped in history and charm.

For those who haven't heard, the Milford Green has just been formally listed on the State Register of Historic Places - a most impressive designation.

So while we work to protect the character of our downtown, we're also doing things to make our city center even more livable - small things like installing new bike lockers at our train station, and big things like the downtown development along Railroad Avenue.

As an update, the Downtown Development Committee completed its RFQ interviews and the City will be partnering with MetroStar to develop the former Agro site.

The vision of the project is to bring-in a small grocer and increase parking with approximately 125 parking spaces underground and 200 more at grade to help buoy the shops and restaurants in the center of town.

All this business development means good things for Milford. Our taxpayers have now experienced back-to-back-to-back tax cuts, THREE

consecutive decreases in the amount of local taxes due. No other town in the State can boast this experience - when it comes to tax cuts, we rule the roost.

And while commercial growth is a big part of our fiscal success, our path toward prosperity is grounded in our continuous drive toward efficiency.

Our workforce is leaner and more streamlined than ever before and we work very hard to feather our community's nest. This year, for example, the City seized upon a competitive healthcare market and drove down our annual insurance costs by \$2M. We saved several million more by re-lamping our streetlights with high efficiency LEDs, by leveraging our AAA credit rating to refund \$17M in bonds, and by renegotiating our electrical generation costs.

So, let's talk turkey. What's been the secret of our success? What's allowed Milford to spread its wings while other Connecticut towns fowl-up?

Here's what we've done: Instead of winging it or frittering our resources away with silly goose spending sprees, we've put our ducks in a row and assembled a strategic flight pattern for our community's future - we've invested in our organizational operation and worked hard to build a nest egg.

This week, for example, we launched a new cloud-based financial software system that affects all aspects of our government operations from purchasing to HR to budgeting - it's a huge change in how the city of Milford does business - no longer will we use a 30 year old DAS-based system, but state of the art financial technology.

This is a real feather in the cap for our core MUNIS implementation team led by our Finance Director who has worked, non-stop, 80 hour weeks for the past year to ensure this technology upgrade takes flight.

But in addition to strengthening our internal operations, we're also investing heavily in our public infrastructure that improves our quality of life.

From paving more miles of street than ever before, to making Milford a more walk-able and bike-able town with new sidewalks and bike-paths, we have been able to do more and invest more in improvements that make Milford more livable.

One of my favorite improvement projects is the new "beachway" along Nettleton Road - it's a reclaimed biking and walking loop down to the shore at Walnut Beach.

We've also rehabilitated other recreational facilities like the new playgrounds at West Shore, Five Corners, and Meadowside and we'll soon renovate the playscapes behind Fowler and Fannie Beach.

July 4th marked the opening for some very well used amenities at Eisenhower Park.

For those who participate in America's fastest growing sport, Milford is now on the map with 8 new dedicated pickleball courts.

We also now have an incredible splash park that's helped kids cool off during the hot summer heat.

In our schools, we continue to make capital investments in our athletic facilities, in our security infrastructure, and in those critical learning environments - including West Shore Middle School for which a \$20M renovation will be substantially complete by the end of this month.

Over the next year, we'll stay focused on improving public spaces like:

1. enhancing the West River dog park with new amenities;
2. refurbishing the North Street barns into usable arts and event space;
3. boosting coastal resiliency in our shoreline neighborhoods.

Ladies and gentlemen, I could go on for some time and crow about the many exciting things underway in Milford today. What's quite clear is that our city has seen lots of success and everyone in this room should feel proud as a peacock for being part of this very special place.

We are a small city with lots of charm that continues to prosper and fly high.

So, without feather ado, I thought I'd open it up for a few questions.