

First and foremost, I want to congratulate Councilman Kearney, Councilwoman Boto and Councilman Foley. Councilman Kearney, no one can ever doubt your work ethic and you've proven yourself to be one of the hardest working Council members I've served with. I know you will continue that hard work for the residents, and I look forward to many more discussions and disagreements, but also many compromises and new ideas for Garwood. Councilwoman Boto and Councilman Foley, I have gotten to know you both a good deal over the last year and I so I can attest to just how big your hearts are. I know you come into this job simply wanting to do what's in the best interest for Garwood's residents and I am positive that your open minds and willingness to listen to all sides will make you successful and productive Councilmembers. I look forward to this great new year with you.

Today marks my second year as Mayor of Garwood. It was a very busy first year, one where we made great strides; and though there have been a few hurdles, we met them by coming together and working together -- making it a successful year for our residents. At the start of last year, I set some ambitious goals for myself, our councilmembers, and for our Borough and I am proud to say we've met and exceeded expectations on most of these initiatives.

For the first time, we now have a full-time Recreation Director who has hit the ground running since the end of September. Katya Lysak has been working with the Recreation Committee on several activities and has kicked off a successful youth basketball season. Resident surveys that went out in the Fall will be instrumental in planning activities for the spring and for Garwood's Summer Rec Camp. Next year promises to be filled with fun activities for all ages. Working closely with all of our departments and volunteers, our Rec Director also planned and organized this year's holiday events including our Christmas Tree Lighting and Menorah Lighting.

Ms. Lysak was also hired as Garwood's part-time Public Information Officer. Through her work, we've been able to increase engagement on our social media platforms and ensure that more information is dispersed to our residents. From street closures for road work, to Board of Health announcements, to garbage pick-up changes to community events and activities, more information is able to get in the hands of Garwood residents. We've also been able to close the gap between communication with our school and the Borough about the many activities and classes that Lincoln School families can participate in. Communication with residents is key to any flourishing town, and we took a big step forward with the re-instatement of this position.

This year also saw a brand-new initiative, the Garwood Partnership for Arts and Culture, a new committee that is the brainchild of Councilwoman Clarissa Nolde and that is run with the help of volunteers and artists of all genres. GPAC kicked off the start of their committee with a photographic art exhibit and partnered with the local business community to display photographs capturing artists' interpretation of what art means to them. You can take a walk around our local businesses and check out the photos on the walls of artists ranging

from children to adults. There is more to come in the next year, which of course I'll detail in a bit.

As we moved through 2023, the Council also made some big policy changes to protect our residents. Garwood initiated rental registrations and codified rental turnover inspections, to be completed by our new part-time Rental Code Enforcement Officer, Chris Czuba. Not only does this allow Garwood to comply with new state mandates, but it ensures that the safety of our residents who rent is a top priority by ensuring all properties are kept up to safety and fire codes between leases.

Improving public safety overall was a top priority for me, as well as for our new Police Chief, Doug Stoffer. Chief Stoffer was sworn in as Chief in March following the retirement of Chief Jim Wright. Chief Stoffer and our police Department are working to crack down on speeding with increased patrols and added technology. This year, they also implemented a number of new initiatives meant to improve relations with the community and promote tolerance. From Safe Place, to Blue Envelope to the Arrive Together program, which pairs mental health workers with our police officers, Garwood is working to ensure each resident feels safe and supported and gets the proper care needed. The hiring of Garwood's first female police officer was another big step in that direction, and we are proud to welcome Officer Jada Shucaï to the Garwood team. We also welcomed other important additions to the squad, Officer Schoenberg and Officer Zimbaro, and we worked together to sign a four-year contract for the Garwood PBA Local No. 117.

We also saw more businesses flocking to our Borough and opening their doors in 2023, with more grand openings than ever before. Working together with the Greater Westfield Chamber of Commerce, we cut ribbons at Jacava, Elegance Barber Lounge, Alonso's Café, Chas and Chas Pharmacy, Cozy Corner Cuban Bistro, V-Salon and Black Sheep. We also saw a grand re-opening of a longtime Garwood staple, the Garwood Lanes, following a fire that necessitated some rebuilding. Hottworx and the Smoke Shop have opened in town, along with a relocation from Academy Performance and Training which moved into the old Blue Ribbon Cleaners spot. We saw Crossroads dive into the comedy world, becoming a filming venue for stand-up shows, and we will soon see the opening of Everbowl, an acai bowl and smoothie café, right across the street at Vermella. Garwood's own Small Business Association has become a force in Garwood, sponsoring A Taste of Garwood Restaurant Week once again this year and with a new initiative, Wellness Month beginning this new year. Our local businesses have always been vital to our Borough and this past year we reaffirmed our commitment to them and pledge to continue to find ways to connect our residents with the local business community.

These were just some of the highlights of this past year and I'm proud that many of the priorities I set forth from this dais one year ago have come to fruition. As we move into next year, we will continue to implement ideas and programs initially discussed in 2023. Our Police Committee and Emergency Management will begin exploring the creation of

Community Emergency Response Teams to help improve flood response. These teams will be able assist in pre-emptive tasks such as going door-to-door to remind residents to move their cars or efforts such as assisting in moving barriers to block flooded streets. Many other towns use community volunteers such as this to aid Police in emergencies and as we see more and more quick intense storms, these teams could make a real difference.

Last year, I also initiated forums to discuss parking improvements we could make in the downtown center. These forums provided valuable feedback and will help guide us with next steps. To help our downtown businesses ensure there is parking for their customers, Garwood will begin the roll-out of an app-based parking system that will help drive parking spot turnover. We have already introduced new parking rules in the surrounding residential streets and have put into place a structure for some downtown employee parking, which will also be rolled out in the new year.

Our new Arts and Culture Committee will also be making some big moves in this new year, starting with a new art exhibit centering around the theme of reflection and new beginnings. They will also be initiating a new speaker series with hands on learning from Garwood's most creative artists. In February, residents from teens up to adults can learn how to better their iPhone photography skills from a professional Garwood photographer, with the spring bringing a poet and a nature artist to add to the series. In line with bringing more arts and culture to our Borough I will be asking our Community Development Committee to look into what we in Garwood can do to welcome the NJ Motion Picture and Television Commission and to make Garwood film ready, including applying for certification and creating the proper ordinances and permit fees. Our surrounding communities have seen the exciting benefits of this new surge in filming in NJ and I am looking forward to Garwood seeing those benefits as well.

And of course, the new year brings new budget meetings as well. Mr. Harris and I will begin meeting with Department heads once again this year prior to the department budgets going to the Finance Committee. The Council worked hard last year to bring a budget that continued the services Garwood provides but of course inflation and rising salaries to meet that inflation did make maintaining the low impact we had seen in previous years a challenge. That challenge continues this year. This Council will have to reflect on where they want Garwood to be, not only this year but five, ten, twenty years in the future. It is necessary to now make some decisions that will need to outlast any of us or our terms up here.

When I became Mayor last year, I actually had a conversation with a resident and I hope I'm not speaking out of turn when discussing some of the content of this conversation, but the resident said to me that they don't envy the challenge my fellow Council members and I will have to deal with in the coming few years, that managing and continuing to thrive as a small town with the many forces pushing and pulling on it will be difficult and there will be some fines lines to walk and areas to balance. I am certainly aware of those challenges

and I know everyone up here is as well. As we move through budget season and whether we have discussions about sewer fees or salaries or garbage or dispatch, I ask the Council members, and I ask the public, not to shy away from those discussions. The more education, information and feedback any of the topics receive the better off we all are as a community. I know the temptation to often react emotionally to change, I've been guilty of it myself. My job up here, and the job of every Councilmember is to look at everything presented to us from every angle and represent what we think in the end is in the best interests of all residents. We know that sometimes temporary costs can lead to long-term savings. Or that we can sometimes figure out how to share services without losing Garwood's identity. We've figured out ways to keep Garwood running and to make it a place that new families continue to flock to and that longtime residents still feel at home in. We will continue that work this year. There will of course be changes as we go along, that is all but inevitable. But I ask this Council and I pledge myself, to make thoughtful, balanced decisions that will allow Garwood to thrive and continue to be the best value in Union County.