

# THE CITY OF SUMMIT

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CITY HALL 512 SPRINGFIELD AVENUE SUMMIT, NJ 07901

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## News Release

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**For immediate release**

Summit Mayor: Nora G. Radest (908) 273-6400  
City Administrator: Michael F. Rogers (908) 522-3600  
Media Contact: Amy Cairns (908) 277-9418

### **The Honorable Nora G. Radest State of the City Address 2021**

SUMMIT, NJ, January 5, 2021

Good evening. Welcome to the 2021 Organization Meeting of the Summit Common Council whether you are joining us by Zoom or watching on YouTube or Facebook Live. Congratulations to Councilmembers Marjorie Fox and Susan Hairston on their re-elections to Council, and congratulations upon Re-election as Council President, Marjorie. Council and I worked hard and worked together in 2020 and I expect nothing less in 2021.

As we all know, 2020 was a year of significant challenges. Nonetheless, I am proud to be able to stand here and tell you that our staff and residents have met those challenges, and our City is in a strong position to continue to weather the pandemic. COVID has brought us deep personal losses, financial reversals, educational and childcare challenges, not to mention the countless small disruptions to everyday life. But the outpouring of support and generosity from my fellow residents, our business owners, and our best-in-class City staff make me genuinely hopeful.

In the beginning, we received mixed messages and were not sure how to minimize the spread of COVID-19, but it is now clear that we need to wear masks, maintain social distance and avoid indoor gatherings and large outdoor crowds. I thank every one of you who is complying. Your sacrifices directly aid in the safety of our fellow residents, as well as that of our heroic first responders, and the educators and staff in our schools. Now is not the time to lose our patience and resilience. Vaccinations are here and being distributed, but we must remain vigilant for a while longer. Typically I do not discuss schools in this speech, but I would like to recognize the strength of our community in supporting our teachers, staff and administrators in the public and private schools in Summit. They made difficult decisions and personal sacrifices to maintain excellent educational standards in the face of the pandemic. And, of course, I must recognize and applaud the students and parents who had to adjust to remote learning and adapt to a challenging learning environment.

When Governor Murphy ordered the lockdown of stores and restaurants last spring, residents immediately recognized the economic blow this would be to our business owners. Working with The Summit Foundation and Summit Downtown, Inc., our community raised \$350,000 to provide grants to businesses in Summit. An anonymous donor matched that amount and another round of grants ensued. This money together with \$120,000 of CARES Act funds allowed us to grant over \$800,000 to Summit businesses. Many business owners have told us that the grants were critical in helping them survive the lockdown and the moral support of the community was tremendously helpful.

When the temperatures increase we will be able to spend more time in our downtown; it was a source of pleasure, almost freedom, for many of us in the summer and fall. I think that many of us have begun to appreciate our beautiful downtown more than ever before. I am hopeful that this will lead to an even stronger commitment to

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shop local even after this pandemic is behind us. I appreciate the many residents who have made sure to patronize local businesses, bought gift cards, and checked in to see how they can help.

Another area in which residents rallied was in efforts to cushion the serious blow of the pandemic on our most vulnerable residents. One group began shopping for seniors who were unable to leave their homes, leading to the formation of SHIELD (Summit Helping its Elderly and Disabled). City staff at the Community Center fielded phone calls from seniors and directed them to SHIELD. Our two food pantries, GRACE and Loaves and Fishes, distributed much-needed provisions to well over 600 families in Summit (an increase of almost six-fold to the numbers needing help prior to the pandemic). Again, many Summit residents volunteered to help package and distribute food and the staff at the Community Center was instrumental in coordinating food donations from the Community Food Bank and food distributions. Finally, yet another group founded FLAG, (Front Line Appreciation Group), to deliver meals prepared by local restaurants and food purveyors to healthcare workers at Overlook Medical Center. And then we saw all the many smaller, private acts of kindness and care that have been taking place throughout our City during these difficult times; from cookies, notes, and meals given to neighbors and first responders, the meals on wheels volunteers who kept seniors fed and less lonely, and the resident who purchased 620 holiday goodie bags from Sweet Nothings to give to the recipients of food from our local food pantries.

At the same time that so many thoughtful and generous residents were finding ways to be of help to their neighbors, our staff worked tirelessly to continue to provide essential city services as seamlessly as possible. In early March every city department reorganized operations and staffing to mitigate the spread of the virus. Remote accessibility was expanded to ensure that citizens could still access needed programs and participate in municipal meetings and activities from the safety of their homes. Creativity was the order of the day: before becoming equipped with Plexiglas shields, the Department of Community Services maintained a table in the atrium of city hall to handle essential in-person business.

The diligence and flexibility of our City Clerk and her assistants, along with the vision and commitment of Common Council enabled us to have a plan in place once outdoor dining was restored. This allowed us to add seven parklets to the downtown, close a portion of Maple Street, and create curbside pickup areas so that local restaurants could maximize the number of meals they could serve, and residents could enjoy these very needed and appreciated amenities. I have received many positive comments about the Maple Street dining and numerous requests to close the street again this spring. I am sure Council and I will discuss this. In the same vein we were able to quickly agree to stop charging parking fees April to mid-July to support our merchants as much as possible.

It would be impossible for me to describe every single gesture of commitment and compassion that this pandemic has brought about here in Summit. Many have occurred, publicly and privately, in ways large and small. In the middle of so much uncertainty, worry, and stress, they have been a very bright spot for me personally, and yet another reminder of why we are so very fortunate to call Summit our home. To all of you who have given of yourselves so kindly, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I want to begin my reports with our First responders starting with the first aid squad. Sometimes it is hard remember that this group is composed entirely of volunteers. We are continuously in their debt, but this year in particular put them to the test. Hundreds of residents needed their assistance, which was provided while keeping all squad members safe and shifts staffed 24/7.

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A number of their older members had to take leave, often at the urging of concerned family members. Some younger members lived with vulnerable people, and also had to take leave. So at the outset, they were down nearly a dozen members, and with real concern that they would be in even worse shape if some members still working got sick.

And while it was particularly difficult in March, April, and May, all shifts were staffed. The senior members who stayed on duty carried a heavy load. A number of alumni from the Juniors Program, now in college, were sent home from school. Several of them jumped right back into active duty, and made immeasurable contributions in carrying the load.

Members adopted stringent protocols and laborious decontamination procedures in order to protect themselves on the front line and back at the Squad base. Members worked hard to protect each other, always recognizing how interdependent they were. The Squad members never wavered, going into people's homes in the heart of the outbreak when few others were doing that; they always wore proper protective gear.

I'd also like to note that Squad members derived a great deal of strength from the kindness and generosity of the community during the darkest days of the pandemic and lockdown. The moral support and a fair amount of financial support helped keep them going.

POLICE: 2020 started off as any other year for the Summit Police Department; the administrative staff was working collaboratively in budget preparation and goal setting for the year ahead. In early March when the seriousness of the coronavirus became clear, the department quickly addressed the possible impact on operations, staffing and the physical and mental state of personnel. In an effort to mitigate the spread of the virus to staff, and by extension their families, the administrative staff reworked the entire operational aspect of policing in Summit by dividing the workforce into four separate and distinct units.

This innovative approach to resource allocation became a model framework for other agencies throughout the state and has proven instrumental in protecting our officers and their families. With the community and state in a near total lockdown, police calls for service increased as people faced uncertainty and fear.

During the height of the pandemic, the police department was challenged once again when Chief Robert Weck retired after 31 years of service. This would normally have been a strategic and celebratory transition, now necessarily complicated by the demands of the pandemic. Our police administration rose to the occasion, meeting the challenge of maintaining continuity of police services and command and control of the department. The appointment of a new Chief of Police in June brought about a series of promotions and appointments throughout the department as it continued helping the community weather the storm of COVID-19.

And just as the new administration was set to embark on their strategic planning, the nation was rocked by demands for social justice and police reform. Working in collaboration with local organizers, the Summit Police Department assisted with a series of peaceful protests throughout the City to ensure that all voices could be heard. Despite the challenges faced by the Summit Police Department throughout 2020, our officers found themselves in numerous lifesaving incidents. Whether it was their quick response and actions of clearing the airway of a choking infant to several incidents of resuscitating members of our community, or our most recent life-saving event -- the coordinated effort to locate an 81-year-old resident who had wandered from home, being lost for almost 12 hours

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in sub-freezing temperatures -- the women and men of the Summit Police Department performed heroically and without hesitation.

**FIRE:** The Summit Fire Department rose to the challenges of the pandemic in 2020 by responding to over 2000 calls for assistance, 82 were fire related, 301 were EMS related (many COVID) and 520 were related to hazardous conditions. The department worked closely with all city agencies to acquire and ensure that adequate COVID supplies were available for Summit employees. Because of COVID restrictions, the fire department delivered fire prevention education through online activities, video presentations, drive-by parades and worked with the schools to get materials to students. The department conducted over 500 fire safety inspections of commercial and business properties and began a three year process of pre- incident planning every commercial and business property in the city limits. This process involves collecting and storing critical site data and characteristics about the properties. Pre-incident planning improves the effectiveness of emergency responses and terrorist preparedness.

As you know Council made the decision to build a new firehouse to replace the 100-year old antiquated and inefficient current building. City and fire department staff have been working diligently on the firehouse project. To date, fire personnel have completed the design and development phases, the project has been value engineered to ensure maximum cost savings and the bid documents have been submitted to the state for approval. We received several minor comments from the state and we are ready to get to the bidding phase as soon as we receive state approval.

This is indeed a very large capital project: the anticipated cost is approximately 12 million dollars. Fortunately, the current building can be sold as part of the Broad Street West redevelopment process, allowing additional flexibility in negotiations with developers, and significantly defraying the necessary costs. A new building is an absolute necessity, and this is one of those tough decisions that council and I are elected to shepherd our community through. I am confident that we will find the most cost-effective way possible to make this investment in our public safety.

**FISCAL HEALTH:** The city budget is only about 20% of the total tax levy, but this Council and city staff has taken several actions to ensure that services have continued without interruption. In addition, the City worked diligently to obtain more than \$850,000 in CARES Act funding to cover the City's cost of COVID-related expenses. Council has begun to work on the 2021 budget with the intention of keeping any increase at a minimum. We face many pressures on our budget, not least of which are increasing demands for capital projects. All of us want the city to be in the best possible repair, but we must maintain a long term vision for the health of the city's infrastructure and prioritize capital projects.

The good news is that we are fortunate to have a strong residential ratable base that has shown positive incremental growth in recent years; in 2019 we experienced an increase in tax base value of approximately 30 million dollars and we expect similar healthy growth in 2020. But frankly, that is not enough to avoid tax increases while delivering the services we all have come to expect from the city. Increased ratables, both residential and commercial, are a crucial component in a healthy city budget.

This is why I believe it is absolutely imperative that we finalize the Broad Street West Redevelopment Agreement this year. When I moved to Summit in 1989 the community was talking about the need for thoughtful change in

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the Broad Street corridor; that was over 30 years ago. It was also the clearest mandate to come out of our 2016 Master Plan re-examination process. One responsibility of the governing body is to provide the opportunity for economic development and we need to act now. We are fortunate to be positioned to take advantage of this opportunity for the redevelopment of an underutilized part of our downtown, at no cost to taxpayers—and with the future benefit of an increased tax base. This crucial project will provide value not just for current residents, but for future generations in Summit.

The national housing market now places a premium on the ability to live within walking distance of a vibrant town center with proximity to shops, restaurants, places of work and mass transit. The obvious opportunity for redevelopment is the 10-acre Broad Street West, which Council declared an Area in Need of Redevelopment in 2018. This designation allows the city to offer tax incentives to redevelopers and it also allows the city to maintain control over the type, quality and quantity of redevelopment initiatives.

A steering committee made up of council members, city staff, members of the Planning Board, and our planning professionals has chosen a consortium of L&M and Toll Brothers to be conditionally designated as site developers. The agreement includes an escrow by the developer for funds to be paid to city professionals during the planning phase. Negotiations have been somewhat delayed due to the pandemic, but nonetheless we have made great progress. The steering committee plans to hold a public meeting to share the current vision and get feedback, hopefully in the first quarter. Simultaneously we will begin to negotiate the Redevelopment Agreement with the developers. This agreement will lay out the specifics of the buildings to be built, including such details as green-friendly elements, amount developer will pay for the city-owned property, time table for construction and phasing, penalties for missing deadlines, etc.

The pandemic has been a blow to our normal rhythms of life. But if anything, it should reinforce the importance to our quality of life in protecting and improving our downtown. It was such a ray of hope to see people venturing downtown when the lockdown began to lift. We love our movie nights and concerts on the Village Green, we love the Farmers Market and we love shopping and dining downtown. Adding another pedestrian-friendly area to our current downtown allows us to increase our opportunity to have experiences like these, thus increasing our desirability as a community while adding to our residents' well-being.

Finally, to maximize the impact of our tax dollars, I continue to stay in close contact with our Union County Commissioners and the Governor's office to ensure they understand the needs of our city and provide all of the assistance they can. In 2020 the Commissioners delivered a budget that was flat – a zero percent increase. This demonstrated the Commissioners' understanding of the impact of the pandemic on municipalities, but also that cities like Summit cannot continue to pay exorbitant taxes to the county. We received \$574,000 in grants from Union County and the State. I am also happy to report that Union County is sharing 50% of the cost for planting 1000 trees in Summit over the next 4 years. Maintaining an informed dialogue with county commissioners and state representatives is critical to our cooperative relationship.

COMMUNICATION and establishing solid community connections remains a major priority for me, and in 2020 particularly, messaging played a crucial role for me in working to guide Summit's pandemic response. The City of Summit Communications Office has been delivering multiple daily updates on COVID-19 actions by the federal, state and local government, keeping residents and business owners educated on programs, recommendations, testing, requirements and guidelines. This was no easy feat as it required hours of searching county, state and

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federal websites such as the CDC and the World Health Organization. At the start of the pandemic, information was disorganized and not always accurate. Our Communications team worked tirelessly to verify and clarify all information before they distributed it to the public, all the while trying to disseminate the information as quickly as possible. Our team also revised the City's website at the height of the pandemic in order to simplify the way the public could access COVID-19 information. Thank you for your dedication and attention to detail.

It has been our mission to keep you informed through website postings and notifications, social media channels and media outreach, distributing more than 2000 robust and thorough general and emergency communications to members of the public and the media over the past nine months. If you have not already done so, go to the city website and sign up to receive email or text notifications. It really is an essential way to stay connected and receive the information you need during normal times and particularly in these uncertain times we need our residents to be fully informed. In addition, these alerts can help our City staff to help all of you—alerts from our police department were crucial in helping us mobilize residents in the search for an 81-year-old missing person just last week.

Traffic on our website continues to exceed an average of 30,000 visits a month with spikes of more than 40 to 50,000 visits during March, August and October. The City of Summit actively posts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram with three to four posts each day. In April 2020, our Facebook post reach exceeded 43,000 individuals and continues to draw consistent views for the instructive content we post. We continue to expand our social media followers, growing Facebook followers by 25%, Twitter followers by 15% and Instagram followers by 84%. Our video capability and YouTube channel has been a valuable asset, broadcasting Common Council meetings, and public service announcements from my office, police, fire and EMS. Please like and follow the City of Summit on social media. And if you have another idea about how we can better reach you with information, we would like to hear it. Please email [pressoffice@cityofsummit.org](mailto:pressoffice@cityofsummit.org).

I look forward to continuing office hours at City Hall, Meet the Mayor events on weekends and meetings by appointment. I have enjoyed and miss in-person meetings with residents and business owners but appreciate you taking the time to share your ideas and concerns with me over Zoom, email and telephone. Until we can meet in person, I am happy to set up Zoom meetings by appointment. As a city, our strength lies in our ability to define our priorities and work together to make them a reality. To do that, we need to be informed citizens, and we need to be able to share our ideas, experiences and skills. At the end of this speech, I typically thank the many volunteers who step forward to help do the hard work to shape our city's priorities and progress. We could not be the city we are without all of them. I am delighted to say that we have had an even greater interest in volunteering in these boards and committees over the past year, and I want to encourage anyone with an interest in this work to reach out to me or to the Office of the City Clerk.

And speaking of the City Clerk, that office was instrumental in establishing our Zoom meeting capabilities and created successful protocols for active public engagement as we moved Common Council meetings to a virtual platform. Their ability to pivot was critical in allowing us to have a seamless transition. They also expedited permitting for the businesses throughout the city enabling them to operate as effectively as possible during the lockdown.

**PARKING:** In this particularly challenging budget year, the general operating budget is in a strong position, in spite of the fact that we have lost nearly \$1.2 million in parking revenue due to Council's decision to waive parking fees

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from April through mid-July to ease the burden for residents and businesses. At the same time, commuter parking demand plummeted. To address this lost revenue, Council established what is called a COVID-19 Special Emergency which allows the city to amortize this lost revenue over the course of five budget years beginning in 2022. This year the issue of parking is not in the context of a lack, but rather, in abundance. Very few people are commuting into New York at this juncture, although I believe that number will increase as the pandemic abates. We are not going to make any capital improvements to the parking infrastructure in 2021 and we will carefully monitor parking trends as the year unfolds.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY PROGRAMS: The staff of the Department of Community programs has been yet another fine example of dedication and willingness to be creative and flexible in the face of the pandemic. While our wonderful new community center building was not utilized to its fullest, and many programs could not occur, the staff truly delivered on their mission of providing recreation and services that the community needs, going above and beyond to make sure that as many programs as possible could take place and providing a very welcome source of recreation and fun for residents.

As I mentioned earlier they helped support assistance for seniors and our GRACE food pantry. As the lockdown was lifted they safely opened both the Aquatic Center and the Municipal Golf Course surpassing all revenue and membership, despite the restrictions of social distancing. The DCP provided camp to over 125 families who desperately needed a safe and fun environment for their children over the summer, and supported outdoor sports with strict protocol guidance for all coaching staff. In addition, they offered a scaled down, safe version of concerts and movies on the Village Green. In the fall they were able to offer indoor programs for seniors and special needs children, including running the Senior Bus for those seniors needing assistance with shopping. Lastly, they provide a place for 50 children to attend school remotely with staff supervision.

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNITY SERVICES: One of the most important responsibilities of the city is to maintain and improve its infrastructure, crucial to resident safety and public health. I am proud to report that the members of Department of Community Services, despite the immense challenges of the pandemic, continued to provide the services that residents and business owners expect. These staffers had even greater responsibilities, being the only City department to remain open for in-person essential business during pandemic closures. And in addition had the added work of doing everything needed to erect the parklets for restaurants and set up the on-street dining on Maple Street. I thank them for their dedication.

Residents always happy when streets are repaved or otherwise improved and the pandemic did not prevent us from addressing this important element of our quality of life. In 2020, the city repaved 2 miles of roads and micro-paved 3.3 miles of roads. We completed eight major infrastructure projects improving drainage, sewers, sidewalks and roadways throughout town, including Pine Grove Avenue, Huntley Road area, New Providence Avenue area, Wallace Road, Henry Street, Franklin Place, Elm Place and the Safe Streets to Transit project that made improvements to four intersections. These projects are not exciting, but good stewardship of our physical surroundings is a hallmark of what makes Summit such a well-run and desirable place to live.

The Department of Community Services has many areas of responsibility beyond roadwork. The department continues to use technology to improve service to residents and business owners. In 2020 they processed 5,179 SeeClickFix requests (almost 60% more than 2019) and replied to 480 OPRA (Open Public Records Act). The department created Traffic Calming Guidelines that will assist Council in determining whether traffic safety

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measures need to be implemented. Lastly the department oversaw the planting of more than 400 trees around town in year one of the goal to plant 1,000 trees in the next few years.

**ENVIRONMENTALISM:** Summit residents continue to prioritize a thoughtful stewardship of our environment. The new Free Market building, funded by the Summit Conservancy, was completed in the fall and its' successful opening was attended by hundreds of residents. In the final stretch of the construction, DCS staff worked hard to ready the building for the first Free Market event. We will continue monthly Free Market days in the spring under the strong leadership of Summit High School volunteers. Also, in 2020 a virtual market was created on Facebook, The Summit Free Market, which currently has 2800 members – yet another way to share things people no longer need and keep items out of our landfill, all done in socially distant manner.

In 2019 Council enacted ordinances to restrict single-use plastic bags at checkout, ban the use of polystyrene (Styrofoam) food containers, and make plastic drinking straws available by request only. Enforcement of these ordinances was postponed for six months due to pandemic, but went into effect on January 1, 2021. Council also entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the Parkline Foundation further clarifying the responsibilities of the City and the foundation as work on the Parkline continues.

**SUMMIT FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY:** Like everyone else in town, the library also pivoted to address the needs of the community during the pandemic. As soon as the lockdown went into effect, the library switched their programs to Zoom, You Tube and Facebook Live. They offered lectures, story times, book, movie and current event discussions, how-to crafts, concerts, Story Walk and more for children, teens and adults. They also provided telephone reference and assistance for state benefit programs. Curbside pickup of library materials was prominent and a "Little Free Library" was installed at Investors Field to distribute books. Having access to library books and services was a boon to many residents during and after the lockdown.

**THANK YOU:** In this speech last year I said that Summit's best asset is its people, and that was truer than ever in 2020. Tonight we recognized the many men and women who have volunteered on various boards and committees. They are all committed to making Summit the best that it can be and their hours of service are invaluable. We received a record number of volunteer applications last fall and we are committed to engaging even more citizen volunteers to help create a plan for the future of our city; we are fortunate to have community members who have tremendous talent and are willing to share their expertise.

I also want to thank our paid professionals--the men and women who work for the city—they are superb. They did not hesitate to assist Summit residents and business owners throughout the pandemic and I am confident they will maintain that excellent work ethic. We live in a world where trust is in short supply, but I do not find that to be the case in Summit. We receive thousands of requests for assistance and/or improvements from residents and business owners and our professional and dedicated city staff responds. These requests come to us because people trust that we will help them. And they trust us because the men and women who work for the city work hard and take pride in their jobs and in our city.

Of course we are still angry and frustrated about the many challenges that have pummeled us this year. But if I've learned anything these last nine months, it's how incredibly adaptable, resourceful, courageous and loving we are as a community. We cannot predict the course of this crisis. But we can model the behaviors we know make this pandemic bearable, and livable. We can remember to be grateful for what we still have. We can remember the



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many kindnesses and acts of generosity we shared with one another – friend and stranger – and we can resolve to continue those kindnesses going forward.

Thank you, God bless you, and I wish a happy and healthy 2021 to everyone.