

THE CITY OF SUMMIT

N E W J E R S E Y

CITY HALL 512 SPRINGFIELD AVENUE SUMMIT, NJ 07901

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STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

by Summit Mayor Nora G. Radest

January 4, 2022

Good evening. Welcome to the 2022 Organization Meeting of Summit Common Council. Thank you for joining us whether it is in Council Chamber, on You Tube or HTTPV.

My heart felt congratulations to Councilmembers Lisa Allen, Beth Little, and Greg Vartan on their re-elections to council, and congratulations to Andy Minegar on his election to council. Congratulations to Councilmember Marjorie Fox on her re-election for a third term as Council President.

Council and I worked hard together in 2021 and I expect nothing less in 2022. Despite the divisiveness in our nation at large, members of council and I strive to find common ground and consensus on the issues facing our community. Although from time to time we do not reach unanimity, there is great respect for various points of view among your elected officials. Our role is to listen to the community, balancing the needs and concerns of residents and business owners with any governmental legal requirements. After careful deliberation, council and I make decisions that we believe are supported by and in the best interest of the community.

As we all know, 2021 was yet another year of significant challenges. In the late summer and early fall many of us felt optimistic that the pandemic was nearing its end. Unfortunately, the Omicron variant is rearing its ugly head, causing a spike in positive cases. Summit's monthly positive case numbers ranged from a high of 263 in January to a low of 16 in June. The number of positive confirmed cases in December topped more than 500. The Omicron variant is highly contagious, although symptoms are not as severe for most of those who are fully vaccinated. Fortunately, Overlook Medical Center has not experienced an overwhelming number of COVID hospitalizations. I encourage you to follow the CDC's recommendation to get vaccinated, wear a mask in indoor settings, and to test when appropriate.

I am incredibly proud of our staff and residents who have met these challenges, and because of our combined efforts our city is in a strong position to continue to manage the pandemic. COVID-19 has brought us deep personal losses, financial reversals, educational and childcare challenges, not to mention the countless small disruptions to everyday life. I truly believe we are nearing the end of the pandemic as an increasing number of people get vaccinated and new treatments are approved by the FDA. As you know children as young as five may now be vaccinated and on Monday, the FDA authorized the first Covid-19 booster shot for teens aged 12 to 15.

I would like to thank everyone who has done their part by getting vaccinated and boosted, wearing a mask, and getting tested before joining gatherings with family and friends. Your diligence is working. We are a strong community and the continued support and generosity among residents, our business owners, and our terrific city staff make me genuinely hopeful for a healthier and productive 2022.

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The **Summit Public Schools** opened their doors to all students for a full day of classes in September, although masks are mandatory for all people in the school buildings. Everyone, including the students, were very happy to be back in their classrooms learning with their peers. I want to applaud the students, parents and teachers who had to adjust to remote learning and adapt to a challenging learning environment.

When the city opened the renovated and expanded Community Center, we had great hopes that programs that would reach residents across the city. In designing the building, we did not want just a second gym, but rather a community center for all. The **Department of Community Programs** continues to offer an extensive selection of special needs, sports, summer camp, and enrichment programs, and special events including the 4th of July celebration that had a record number in attendance this past year.

Another event that I am proud to mention is the community Thanksgiving Day dinner. With close to 300 meals prepared for those in need, people alone for the holiday and for all first responders working that day, the gathering was a wonderful success. More than 120 volunteers helped during the special meal. All of this happened while still following COVID 19 guidelines. When I attended the meal, I was thrilled to see the elegant table settings, beautiful floral centerpieces and dozens of placemats and decorations made by school children. Over 60 of the volunteers were high school students. The atmosphere was warm and festive, and smiles were widespread. I am sure this was the first of many Thanksgiving dinners at the Community Center.

When council, city staff and I attended the ribbon cutting at the new Community Center in June 2019, we were excited by possibilities for its use. Looking back who would have guessed that the Community Center would be converted into a vaccination site. Since February 2021, close to 50,000 residents and nonresidents have come into our building to receive the COVID 19 vaccine. In addition to the added traffic, DCP staff has handled well over 5,000 phone calls relaying information about vaccinations and helping people to get vaccinated. The staff was also responsible for coordinating and transporting Summit's wonderful seniors to the Community Center for their vaccinations.

The Summit Family Aquatic Center and the Municipal Golf Course generated record breaking numbers in 2021; both facilities eclipsed their highest total in revenue, memberships, and attendance. The Aquatic Center had 1,843 members with just over 48,000 coming through the gate this past summer, while the golf course had 1,550 members, with nearly 16,000 rounds of golf played.

The DCP team was able to resurface the Investors track this past summer to the delight of the many residents that walk and run daily on the track, along with the Summit High School track program. By adding additional triple jump and pole vault runways and pits, the Summit High School track team will now be able to host larger events and competitions in the future. Capital projects underway for 2022 include a playgrounds master plan with options and price tags for Mabie, Tatlock, Brayton and a new playground in East Summit, perhaps at the Community Center. Resurfacing will create new state of the art basketball courts at Memorial and Tatlock fields sometime during the spring, and repairs will be made to the Wilson paddle tennis courts. The DCP will also work on a master plan for the Wilson School recreation area. Finally, the show mobile that has hosted so many great special events over the past 20 plus years will be replaced. The DCP received \$81,000 in grants to cover a portion of these capital projects.

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I am very grateful to the staff of the Department of Community Programs for always striving to best support the Summit community with unceasing motivation and positive attitudes.

I am thrilled that so many residents and visitors spent time in Summit, enjoying our downtown last year. Summit's very successful outdoor dining was a source of pleasure, in fact freedom, for many of us in the summer and fall. 25 restaurants participated in sidewalk cafés which, due to an ordinance passed by council in late 2020, now allows for the operation of sidewalk cafés all year long. Also, 15 restaurants took part in additional outdoor dining options, whether by use of parklets or the Maple Street closure.

At the request of the restaurant owners on Maple Street, as well as many residents, council, in 2022, will consider the idea of permanently closing Maple Street. It is a very complicated issue, and we will do our due diligence gathering feedback and information before any decision is made. Certainly merchants, residents and first responders will be consulted.

According to several merchants, diners wander around town before and after their meals and take advantage of our shopping options. Obviously, Summit becoming an outdoor dining destination is good for our restaurants as well as our business owners. Recently the New Jersey chapter of the American Planning Association designated downtown Summit as one of the Great Places in New Jersey. And I quote "Downtown Summit has returned residents and visitors to the days when downtowns were the hub of the community. And the beauty, walkability, vitality, events, and mix of businesses are the reason Downtown Summit is worthy of a Great Places in New Jersey award." I am grateful to every business owner and employee, shoppers and diners, and the hard-working leadership of **Summit Downtown, Inc.** I remain hopeful that a commitment to shopping local continues to grow even after the pandemic is behind us.

As we know, our downtown is not the only commercial area in Summit, and the Economic Development Advisory Committee has spent time focused on the Ashwood and Park Avenues area in 2021 with plans to improve lighting and walkability. In 2022 the EDAC will focus on improving the marketing of the many wonderful businesses in that neighborhood.

In 2021, the **Summit Police Department** saw the retirement of Chief Andrew Bartolotti after 22 years of service. Captain Zagorski was promoted to Acting Chief allowing for promotions to the rank of Captain (Peters), Lieutenant (Treiber) and two Sergeants (Erikson, Medina). Four new officers were also hired.

The agency has been actively pursuing accreditation through the State Police Association, updating policies and procedures, rules, and regulations. Accreditation is a lengthy process and will be a significant professional achievement that enables the department to calculate and improve its overall performance. We expect to receive notification of accreditation early in 2022.

The police department is the recipient of the 2021 AAA Community Traffic Safety Awards Program gold award for actions taken to create safer traffic environments for all roadway users in the Summit area. This award comes from AAA Northeast and reflects the ongoing commitment from the department to traffic safety.

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In addition to training implemented throughout the year, all sworn personnel received more than 30 hours of extensive training on de-escalation as part of the NJ State Attorney General's new use of force policy guidelines that will go into effect at the start of 2022.

A goal for the department in 2021 that will continue into 2022 is to keep officers and civilian staff safe and healthy to provide uninterrupted service to the Summit community. In 2022, the department will continue to emphasize enhanced community engagement, and work to reduce criminal activities in our neighborhoods through outreach, education, and active policing.

As many of you know we recently broke ground on the new headquarters for the **Summit Fire Department** located on Broad Street between the Broad Street garage and the Salerno Duane showroom. The completion date is expected to be in the late spring of 2023. The architectural firm is LeMay, Erickson & Wilcox, a group that specializes in firehouses and Brahma Construction Corp was awarded the bid for the construction project in the amount of \$15,017,650.

When the new fire headquarters is completed, the old building will be taken down; in fact, the process of taking down the building will be used as a training exercise for firefighters. The parcel of land housing the existing firehouse will be sold as part of the Broad Street West redevelopment process, allowing additional flexibility in negotiations with developers, and significantly defraying the essential costs. As I said at this meeting last year, 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.

Aside from the increased size of the fire engine bays, key features of the new firehouse include decontamination areas and safety zones for firefighters within the building, training features incorporated into the building design, a dedicated fire prevention and education room, and a state-of-the-art Emergency Operation Center for the city.

Like we did when building the new Community Center, there are some features not included in the budget that will be secured through a fundraising campaign with residents and businesses. These items include a physical fitness and wellness room, ready room furniture for the firefighters living room area, training props, and a dual-purpose fire prevention/education and historical room. The total estimate of this fundraising initiative is \$400,000.

Shared services are often discussed and praised, but the actual implementation is quite complicated. I am happy to report that the Springfield Fire Department joined the Automatic Aid Agreement with the Summit and Millburn fire departments. This agreement provides an extra engine company and valuable resources to respond to any report of smoke or fire within the three municipalities. In addition, Springfield's fire department and EMS squad joined the Mountain Valley Dispatch Center that also provides emergency communications service for Millburn, New Providence, and Summit.

The fire department updated the pre-incident planning for all commercial and business properties in Summit in 2021. Pre-Incident planning allows emergency responders to anticipate the resources and procedures needed to meet specific emergency demands within the City of Summit. The complexity of today's fires, suppression systems,

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and the changing building construction techniques, make pre-incident planning imperative to ensure firefighter and public safety.

2021 saw the retirement of three long-time firefighters. We value their service, and we wish them well.

The **Summit Volunteer First Aid Squad** is a very dedicated team of members that help the community by covering 911 calls and by filling administrative and operations positions within the organization. They not only respond to emergencies, but also ferry residents to doctor visits when necessary. The last two years have been quite a challenge for our volunteer squad members, and we owe them an enormous debt of gratitude.

Just for some perspective regarding their activity: In the entire year of 2019, the squad responded to 1,957 calls, provided coverage to 35 standbys and to 101 mutual aid calls to other towns. During 2020, the Squad responded to 1,706 calls and provided coverage for 16 standbys and 80 mutual aid calls to other towns. The drop in the number of calls during 2020 was almost certainly due to COVID as hospitals saw a steep decline in visits after the initial surge. Many people were afraid to access treatment at a hospital. That changed in 2021 and is reflected in the number of calls received. From January 1 to December 28, 2021, the Summit Volunteer First Aid Squad covered 2,189 calls, and provided coverage for 28 standbys and 163 mutual aid calls to other towns.

Standbys are events where the presence of the squad is very valuable. From football games, high school graduations, Stokes trips, Halloween parades, Easter egg hunts, the annual turkey drive, Special Olympics Torch Run, 4th of July fireworks and many more.

I am happy to report that the **fiscal condition** of the city is very strong. As the city budget is only about 20% of the total tax levy, this council and city staff have taken several actions to ensure that services have continued without interruption. In 2020 and 2021 collectively, the city secured \$854,000 in CARES Act funds from Union County to assist with unforeseen city-wide pandemic expenses. In 2021 the city received its first tranche of American Rescue Plan funds in the amount of 1.14 million, with the second tranche expected in 2022. These funds will continue to be used in the operating budget as a source of revenue. In 2021, Summit applied for FEMA reimbursement for additional pandemic expenses in the amount of \$117,000, and we are waiting for confirmation of payment.

The 2021 Summit Municipal budget was 64.26 million, down .41% from 2020. Council has begun to work on the 2022 budget with the express intention of keeping any potential 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 condition, but we must maintain a long-term vision for the health of the city's infrastructure and prioritize capital projects. While this may seem mundane, in 2020 the City of Summit received no recommendations in its annual audit. This is truly a strong indication of a very well-run city.

As I have said before, we are fortunate to have a strong residential ratable base that has shown positive incremental growth in recent years; the tax base increased by 28 million dollars in 2021 and we expect the 2022 tax base to increase by approximately 37 million dollars. But frankly, that is not enough to avoid tax increases while delivering the world class 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. Our largest commercial owner, Bristol Myers

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Squibb is renovating facilities on its west campus. When completed hopefully later this year, the project will improve the campus and increase the commercial valuation of the property.

In 2021, council and I have been working diligently on the **Broad Street West Redevelopment** Agreement with our planning professionals, the steering committee, city staff, and the redevelopers - a consortium of L&M and Toll Brothers. Progress was slower than we would have liked because of prolonged financial negotiations with the redeveloper. Council members and I were determined to get the best deal possible for the taxpayers of Summit. There was a great deal of back and forth over land acquisition costs as well as on future payments to be made to the city. I am confident that we will have a signed redevelopment agreement in the middle of 2022. The agreement will detail specifics on buildings to be constructed, including the amount developers will pay for the city-owned property, a timetable for construction and phasing, sustainable design elements, penalties for missing deadlines, and more. The agreement will also include an escrow account established by the redeveloper with funds to be paid to city professionals during the planning phase.

Phase 1 Broad Street West Redevelopment will be located where the existing firehouse stands and will include up to 140 rental units, mostly one- and two-bedroom units with a few three-bedroom units. Approximately 21 will be affordable housing, seven at workforce-level pricing and the rest at market rate. Council intends to have a public meeting in the early part of 2022 to inform the public more fully. I know that progress seems slow, however, this is a very complicated project, and we want to be sure we get it right. Furthermore, construction cannot begin until the new firehouse is built and the old one demolished. We are fortunate to be positioned to take advantage of this opportunity for 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 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. We love our movie nights and concerts on the Village Green, and the Farmers Market, and shopping and dining downtown. Adding another pedestrian-friendly area to our current downtown allows us to increase opportunities for more experiences like these, increasing our desirability as a community and adding to our residents' well-being.

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 municipality and provide as much assistance as possible. In 2021, the County Commissioners delivered a budget that was flat for the second year in a row. This demonstrated their understanding of the impact of the pandemic on municipalities. Conveying an understanding that cities like Summit cannot continue to pay exorbitant taxes to the county, we received \$528,000 in grants from Union County and the State. Maintaining an informed dialogue with county commissioners and state representatives is critical to our cooperative relationship.

Establishing solid community connections remains a major priority for me as mayor. In 2021 messaging continued to play a crucial role in our continued work to guide Summit's pandemic response. The City of Summit **Communications Office** has been delivering weekly and monthly updates on COVID-19 cases locally from the Westfield Regional Health Department along with information on actions taken by federal, state, and local

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governments. Daily they provide residents and business owners with information on changing guidelines, programs, recommendations, and testing. This continues to require hours of searching county, state, and federal websites to verify and clarify all information before it is distributed to the public as quickly as possible.

It has been our mission to keep you informed through website postings and notifications, social media channels and media outreach, distributing more than 2500 robust and thorough general and emergency communications to members of the public and the media in 2021.

At the recent NJ League of Municipalities Conference in November, Summit was asked to participate on an expert panel discussing effective communications during the COVID-19 crisis. Our content was lauded as some of the best in the state and I wholeheartedly agree.

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 and uncertain times.

Traffic on our website continues to exceed an average of 30,000 visits a month with our COVID-19 page receiving the most traffic these past two years. The City of Summit actively posts on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram with three to four posts each day. We continue to expand our social media followers, growing Facebook followers to 8,337 with 448 new followers in 2021. Interactions on Twitter increased to 100,400 people reached with 302,051 tweet impressions this past year. On Instagram followers grew to 4,362 with daily posts reaching between 3000 and 6000 followers. Our video capability and YouTube channel has been an asset with 215 new subscribers this year generating 4,723 hours of watch time.

Please like and follow the City of Summit on social media. There is so much current information you can find there. 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.

I look forward to continuing office hours at City Hall, Meet the Mayor events on weekends and meetings by appointment. I appreciate you taking the time to share your ideas and concerns with me in-person, and by email and telephone. 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 want to encourage anyone with an interest in this work to reach out to me or to the Office of the City Clerk.

While the commuter **parking** situation in town has not returned to its pre-pandemic levels, the number of people that park in town has certainly increased. The city removed the Deforest Avenue parking lot gates in the late fall because they needed to be replaced and would have cost \$750,000, money that council did not feel was worthwhile. Parking patrons now pay for parking at the corner kiosks or by using Parkmobile. The gates were never a favorite of most residents, but they did enforce payment. We now are relying upon an honor code, as well as parking enforcers.

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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 members of the **Department of Community Services**, despite the immense challenges of the pandemic, continue to provide the services that residents and business owners expect. I thank them for their dedication this past year.

The Engineering department repaved and installed sidewalks on Butler Parkway and Pine Grove Avenue. The cost of the Pine Grove Avenue project was covered by a \$530,000 grant from the New Jersey Department of Transportation. The DPW micro-paved 13 streets for a total of 38,000 square yards. In addition, West End Avenue, Edgar Street, Westminster Road, portions of Locust Drive, upper Blackburn Place, and a portion of Manor Hill Road were repaved.

While it may seem mundane, it is imperative to maintain our underground infrastructure. To that end, the department performed 27,000 linear feet of storm and sanitary video inspections, allowing them to assess areas in need of repair in advance of any malfunctions. In addition to repaving and to address pedestrian safety issues, Butler Parkway was narrowed with shoulder striping and raised intersections. Also, pedestrian activated flashing beacons were installed at the intersections of Summit Avenue and Union Place and Maple Street and Railroad Avenue.

DCS completed the design and accepted bids for the long overdue municipal golf course dam project. They also responded to over 1,000 calls from residents, contractors, and real estate agents. During Hurricane Ida, the department responded to more than 50 calls about flooding from residents. The city received \$470,000 in funding from the NJ Department of Transportation for improvements to Prospect Street. Lastly, because of the strong business activity in DCS and the construction office, total revenues increased approximately 94% compared to November 2020.

In October 2016, the city executed an agreement with the Fair Share Housing Center (FSHC) to settle litigation between the city and the FSHC and establish a “fair share” of the regional need for low- and moderate-income housing. The settlement agreement also delineates actions that Summit must take to satisfy its legal requirement of fair share housing. The city began creating and implementing zoning ordinances to support the plan. Progress continued in 2021 with affordable housing initiatives, which includes several additional 30-year affordable deed restrictions at various locations throughout the city. One new affordable rental unit was occupied, and several were re-rented. More than \$1.4 million was spent from the city’s affordable housing trust fund for Morris Habitat’s all affordable 12-unit housing project at 146 Morris Avenue. The city’s affordable housing webpage was overhauled and now includes an income qualifying table, an online prequalification form and new affordable housing-specific email address and phone number for easy contact regarding inquiries. As I mentioned earlier, there will be affordable housing apartments in the Broad Street West Redevelopment. Finally, following the retirement of the Summit Housing Authority Director, Common Council appointed Marc Leckington of Leckington Advisors, LLC, to oversee our affordable housing process.

Summit residents continue to prioritize a thoughtful stewardship of our **environment**. The new Summit Free Market building, funded by the Summit Conservancy through generous donations from members of the Summit community, is a resounding success. Summit received an award in 2021 from the State of New Jersey Department

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of Environmental Protection for excellence in a student-run environmental initiative. We will continue Free Market days throughout 2022 on the second Saturday of each month under the strong leadership of Summit High School volunteers. Also, the Virtual Summit Free Market group on Facebook, created in 2020, currently has nearly 4,000 members. This is yet another way to share items and keep reusable materials out of the waste stream, all done in a socially distant manner.

The Environmental Commission has embarked on a “Tiny Forest” project in the area behind the Community Center. The idea is to reforest the section of land with native plants and trees, establishing a healthy albeit small ecosystem for vegetation and animals to thrive. New Jersey American Water donated \$10,000 to the project. The city has also been negotiating with New Jersey Transit to build a new bike shelter on the east side of the Summit train station. With a \$40,000 gift from the Summit Conservancy that secures naming rights for the shelter, the project will now be completed in 2022.

In this speech last year, I said that Summit’s greatest asset is its people, and that was never truer than ever in 2021. Tonight, we recognize 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 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 truly superb men and women who work for the city. They did not hesitate to assist Summit residents and business owners throughout the many challenges of this past year, and I am confident they will maintain that excellent work ethic through 2022.

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 dedicated city staff responds with professionalism and integrity. These requests come to us because people believe that we will help them. And they trust us because sworn and civilian municipal employees work hard and take pride in their jobs and in our city.

I am proud to be your mayor and look forward to the year ahead. Thank you, God bless, and I wish everyone a happy and healthy 2022.