

Hunterdon County 2020: Business As More Than Usual

Despite the affects, challenges, and demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hunterdon County's government continued to operate effectively, doing its job for the public in 2020, Freeholder Board Director Shaun C. Van Doren reported in his end of year wrap up.

Van Doren stated, "Maintaining Hunterdon County as a special place to live is the continuing goal of Freeholder Boards past and present. And nothing highlighted those efforts more than when earlier this year the international non-profit Save The Children announced that Hunterdon County is the safety county in America to raise children."

Tax Rate Freeze And Clean Audit Again

Van Doren also pointed to the County's continued fiscal efficiency, noting, "The Freeholders adopted a budget in 2020 with no increase in the county tax rate, as part of our effort to help the local economy and the independent auditor again reaffirmed the soundness of the County's finances with a 'no findings' audit for the fifth consecutive year."

Van Doren said, "From sound fiscal controls, to the excellent implementation of the first ever Vote By Mail elections, to public infrastructure improvements, to supporting our municipalities through shared services, and so much more, the County's operations in 2020 can be characterized as doing business as more than usual."

Jail Consolidation Saves Tax Dollars

The Freeholder Director whose term will end on December 31 continued, "At the beginning of the year Sheriff Fred Brown recommended and negotiated the transfer of shared county jail services from Somerset to Warren County, at a significant savings to the County's taxpayers."

Early in the year we set aside funds for COVID-19 response and with those monies we were able to provide \$50,000 in assistance to all twenty six of our municipalities, to help them deal with the unanticipated costs of the public health emergency.

Economic Grants For Towns

The County's highly successful municipal Economic development grant program kicked into high gear this year with grant awards to Franklin, Frenchtown, Lambertville, Milford, East Amwell, Holland Township, and Kingwood.

With the pandemic affecting the economy throughout the county, these grants are designed to assist municipal governments in improving the economic climate in their communities."

Van Doren pointed to the Economic Development office's roll out of programs aimed at promoting local business sectors, including the Hunterdon 579 Trail, which promotes the county's many agribusiness and agritourism assists, and the Hunterdon Main Streets initiative, which promotes the restaurant and retail business districts of the county's popular main streets.

Preserving Farmland and Open Space

"The Freeholder Board, worked with our volunteers serving on the County Agriculture Development Board and the Parks Open Space Advisory Committee, to continue the county's commitment to the preservation of open space and farmland, through the approval of the preservation of over 287 acres of farmland, and over 562 acres of open space properties across the County.

And the Board continued the battle to protect land owners' rights and prevent the abuse of eminent domain, when we joined with farmers and other property owners, and environmental organizations, in calling for a re-examination the faulty draft 'Environmental Assessment' by FERC for PennEast pipeline," Van Doren added.

Van Doren, recently re-elected to a second three year term on the Board, offered a litany of exceptional County services that met the needs of the public despite shut downs, quarantines and other pandemic related issues, including;

The county Clerk, Mary Melfi, her team, and the Board of Elections team successfully implemented total Vote by mail elections three times during the course of the year, a special election in West Amwell, the primary election in July, and the recent general election. A tremendous job was done.

The County Library provided virtual opportunities after the Governor closed down libraries, demonstrated creativity in offering curbside pick-up of library materials, brought in self check out kiosks for patrons once the libraries were again opened and continue to provide service.

The senior center staff demonstrated versatility and creativity in developing virtual programming for the county seniors, while the senior center has been closed to use.

The LINK buses rolled, and continue to roll, with masks and plexiglass partitions, and social distancing on the buses, helping those most in need of transportation during the pandemic.

The county's human services and social services unit continued to serve those most in need, without any let down in service, while working remotely and on a schedule that ensures proper social distancing between work units.

The Parks Division successfully provided the public with safe diversions through a program of drive in concerts in the park and movies in the park at South County park. And the Rangers worked tirelessly to protect the public in the parks in very challenging circumstances.

Residents were still able to avail themselves of the county's three Ident-A-Shred, three hazardous household waste and three electronics recycling drop off events, which were implemented following health safety requirements.

The County's Department of Public Works gave the roads, bridges, culverts, and rights of way the maintenance and improvement attention necessary to protect the driving public, while meeting the COVID-19 health safety requirements.

The County's Health Department team worked tirelessly as the pandemic escalated. Providing testing, contract tracing, and advice and direction to local governments, businesses, schools and individuals.

Because of the virus, the Veterans medal program could not be held at the 4H Fair, which was postponed. Not to be deterred, the county staff put together a creative and respectful program to honor our Veterans virtually on Veterans Day. What a great program that was. It can still be viewed on the County website.

Sheriff Brown would not be deterred either in ensuring that Hunterdon County remembered those lost on 9-11, by holding a socially distant in person ceremony on the Courthouse steps. The Sheriff said the Remembrance event is too important for our county and our nation, one that should not be postponed or cancelled by the pandemic. And we all agreed.

County Surrogate Susan Hoffman kept her office operating, with health protections in place, throughout all the shutdowns and pandemic issues, ensuring estate administration, probate, protection of minor services, and other activities of the office continued unabated.

And through it all, the County's communications center and 9-1-1 telecommunicators were on the job, 24/7/365. Always there for people in need, as were the OEM team and the entire first responder community.

Van Doren remarked, "And all of the achievements by the Freeholder Board, our Constitutional officers and the County government itself would not have been possible, without the dedication and commitment of the county's employees. We thank them for their steadfast service to the public in the face of extremely trying circumstances."

Van Doren, recognizing a law that changes the title of Freeholder to County Commissioner in January, told his colleagues, "In closing, it has been a heck of a year for all of us to be Freeholders. Even if it is our last year as Freeholders.

None of these accomplishments would be possible without the teamwork of the members of this Board. I thank my colleagues for their partnership throughout the year, and again express my appreciation for being selected to lead the Board in 2020.

As I stated, in 2020 here in Hunterdon County, I believe our proudest achievement is the fact that we have been able to do business as more than usual."