February 8, 2022

Sea Isle City

2022 Budget Message and State of the City

We are now two years into the COVID-19 pandemic that has changed the world as we know it. The fact is that, while we've faced great challenges, suffered through sickness and loss, and struggled with the mental impact of this life altering event, we have adapted. By now, most are familiar with my closing comments in many of my reports - that we remember that we are all one Sea Isle City and together we'll be stronger than ever. There's a very simple reason I say this so often – because it's true, it's powerful, and it's the foundation of our strength.

Of course, our job as public servants only begins by working together with the community. To build on that foundation, it's incumbent on us to effectively plan, manage, and execute all the functions of government. That happens by assembling a skilled workforce, and effectively utilizing a combination of in-house and contracted professionals, along with shared services.

I say this now with the utmost confidence – today the state of the City is better than ever. Our financial position is the best it has ever been. The budget I will present you with today includes no tax rate increase. We are starting the year with an available surplus of over 8 million dollars. That is ten times the amount of surplus we started with in 2009, in the midst of the country's great recession. There will be no increase to our water and sewer rates for the 9th consecutive year. We're accomplishing this budget with no one-time revenues and with no assistance from funding received through the American Rescue Plan Act. Any funds received through the ARP Act will be applied to upcoming flood mitigation projects.

We're also accomplishing a zero increase budget while still providing all of the services that we've provided in the past. In fact, we're providing more than we ever have. We have a new fishing pier and kayak launch at the Dealy field complex, and we added kayak storage racks after we dedicated the facility to former commissioner Jim Iannone. We added pickle ball courts to the marina area to satisfy demands for this popular sport. We added lifeguard protection to the north end of the island, to handle the increased popularity and use of those beaches. We established duty crews for our fire department, in order to provide overnight staffing during the summer and other selected times.

Also in the realm of public safety, as you'll recall, last summer we dealt with a number of issues related to large crowds; often involving juveniles, and sometimes with instances of destructive behavior. We effectively managed the situation with the efforts of our police department, along with assistance from the county sheriff's office; and in no small part through collaboration with the public and the downtown neighborhoods. This was, and is, a statewide issue, as all of the state's municipalities are now subject to laws and guidelines that, quite simply, hinder law enforcement agencies from most effectively doing their job.

Last summer, I initiated discussions with the governor's office, New Jersey's attorney general, and the county prosecutor, with the objective of getting the state and county to provide us with the necessary tools to more effectively handle the large crowds, and just as importantly, the tools to hold those who would do harm to people or property accountable for their actions. Following up on that, I've continued to work with our state legislators on this important issue, and this Friday, February 11th, we'll host a meeting in these chambers with Senator Mike Testa, and Assemblymen Antwan McClellan and Eric Simonsen, to continue our push to get the needed legislation in place to support law enforcement. When this issue came up last summer, I was very clear on the city's position – Sea Isle welcomes everyone; and all we ask for is respect. If you don't know how to behave, this isn't the place for you...and I was also crystal clear that this City stands together on this issue.

Apart from providing all of the city services our citizens have come to expect, we've continued to invest in our infrastructure through our diligent capital planning process. This past year we accomplished significant paving projects throughout the island, as well as continuing with our systematic water and sewer maintenance and improvement program. Very frankly, our water and sewer systems are in the best shape they've ever been. It's no accident that we've had no rate increases for 9 years.

On the bay side of the City, this spring we're scheduled to complete our lagoon dredging program which will continue to ensure proper navigation depths and which is vital to the well-being of our economy. On the oceanfront, our beaches are in good condition, and next year we're scheduled to receive the second cycle of replenishment as part of our 50 year program in partnership with the state and Army Corps of Engineers.

We have several other capital project initiatives for the coming year, consistent with the administration's capital plan that was adopted by City Council this past December. These include a dog park at the north end of the island, for which we're pursuing open space grant funds from the county; improvements to our public restrooms on the promenade; improvements to the public works building at the base of the JFK Bridge; the addition of bunk quarters for our fire department within the existing station; and acquisition of an upgraded radio system for all of our police, public works, and first responders, that will integrate us into the state system and provide for enhanced communication with the county, state police, and neighboring communities.

One of our highest priorities continues to be flood mitigation. We're hopeful we'll be able to benefit from a grant from FEMA for a pump station that will serve the drainage area between 44th and 47th Streets. We're also in the design phase for another pump station project that will address the area between 42nd and 44th Streets. In

addition to these projects, we'll be aggressively pursuing joint flood mitigation projects with the county to address several other areas in the city, which have been identified in our master drainage plan.

Finally, relative to capital projects, is our proposed community center. This project has been in the works for a long time, and on your agenda today is the public hearing and, hopefully, adoption by council of the funding ordinance to build this facility. I've said in the past that the best plans evolve from true citizen engagement, and that has been the case for this project. As a community, we've done our due diligence. The plans have been reviewed and modified several times, and it's time to move forward. This is a facility that will serve our city well and help to ensure we provide the best community services, and I'm proud of how we've all worked together to get to this point. In last year's address, I stated that the strength of our surplus and the soundness of our overall budget is what will enable us to advance the new community center without a significant effect on our taxpayers. The budget being presented today is proof of that statement.

I've talked about city services, programs, and projects; now I'd like to touch a little on city staff. As some are aware, we've had a number of retirements over the past couple years. That's part of life, and it's something every organization has to prepare for. As the old guard moves on, it's up to the next generation to carry the mantle. Last year, Jerry Rutledge took over from Andre Cipaldo in Public Works; and now leads a relatively young department that is tasked with one of our most important missions - keeping the city clean and well maintained. Jerry has embraced the position and I want to thank him for all of his efforts and excellent work in leading the department during a time when many senior employees were retiring.

This past December, Tom McQuillen announced his intention to retire as chief of police, which will become official later this year. First of all, as I've made clear since the chief's announcement, we will not miss a beat in public safety services. I've said before that our police department represents the finest in law enforcement; and I am so proud of what they do for Sea Isle. In regard to Chief McQuillen, he has served with absolute honor and integrity during his entire career, and he's left the department in excellent shape for us to move forward. I also want to acknowledge and thank Captain Tony Garreffi, who has seamlessly taken over leadership of the police department, and is now acting as officer-in-charge of the department.

In our finance department, we have promoted Maureen Conte to tax collector, and a resolution for the appointment of that statutory position is on today's agenda. Maureen has worked for the City since 2013, and we look forward to her stewardship of the tax office for many years to come.

Finally, relative to city staff, also on today's agenda is a resolution to confirm my appointment of a new chief financial officer for the city, Jennifer McIver. Since we were informed last year that our former CFO was retiring, we've been searching for the right person to fill this critical position. By all accounts, we've found that person. Jen comes with all of the credentials, a wealth of experience as a municipal CFO, and with outstanding and trusted references and recommendations. I'm certain that Jen will be a great addition to our senior staff, and will continue to lead the finance department well into the future.

Turning back to the budget, as usual, we will go over the details of the administration's proposed budget at the council workshop scheduled for this Thursday, February 10th, at 9:00 a.m.

In closing, as everyone in Sea Isle knows, we value our veterans and first responders. I believe we show that in the way we do things in our City - in the programs that we offer to show our appreciation; in the manner in which we conduct ourselves; indeed in the values we've adopted and that are etched on our City seal – respect, integrity, tolerance, and excellence. We owe so much to our service members – veterans, police, fire, EMT's; and frankly, we also owe much to many more. I believe the words of Abraham Lincoln may be most fitting, from a letter he wrote to the mayor of New York City in 1863:

"Honor to the Soldier, and Sailor everywhere, who bravely bears his country's cause. Honor also to the citizen who cares for his brother in the field, and serves, as he best can, the same cause…"

I want to end by thanking all the people of Sea Isle City. It is truly an honor to serve as your Mayor and represent you; and it's my sincere pledge that I, along with City Council and the entire city workforce, will continue to do everything we can to earn your confidence, and make sure that Sea Isle remains the place where everyone wants to be.

Thank you; and may God continue to bless Sea Isle City.

Leonard C. Desiderio

Mayor