

Good evening and Happy New Year. Welcome to the annual reorganization meeting of the Wanaque Mayor and Council.

I would like to start by thanking our State Senator Joe Pennacchio and Assemblyman Jay Webber for taking time out of their busy schedules to attend our meeting tonight to swear in our elected officials.

I would like to congratulate Councilman Dominick Cortellessa and Councilman Ed Leonard on their re-election to the Town Council. This will be the sixth term on the Town Council for both Dom and Ed. Both Dom and Ed have worked very hard in the past for our town and we look forward to their continued commitment to our citizens

As I begin my 20th year as your Mayor, I would like to take this opportunity to review the status of several projects and to discuss our vision for the future of Wanaque.

Our annual paving program resulted in 11 streets being paved in 2025. In addition to paving, water mains were replaced on older streets. The cost of these paving projects was substantially offset by a number of NJ DOT Grants. For 2026, there are currently 7 streets on the paving schedule.

The cul-de-sac at end of Glenn Court was deteriorating and falling into the stream below. In 2025, the area was reconstructed, the road was reinforced and the stream was cleared of debris. The curbing and paving will be completed in 2026.

Improvements on Union Avenue near the Route 287 interchange are continuing. The Tilcon project is moving along with the reconstruction of the Susquehanna Ave intersection with Union Avenue recently completed.

The warehouse project has received county and state approvals and has begun clearing the property. Construction is expected to begin in 2026.

In 2020, a Statewide Referendum approved the statewide legalization of Cannabis. The statewide vote was approximately 65% for and 35% against. The vote in Wanaque was the same. The state required all municipalities to elect to opt in or opt out by August 24, 2021. However, since the state failed to issue timely regulations, most municipalities including Wanaque elected out. Any company wishing to enter the cannabis business must obtain a license from the state, only sell tested and regulated products and only sell to people 21 years of age or older. All facilities are fully served with video surveillance equipment to prevent sales to minors. In 2025, we revisited the Cannabis issue. There are several reasons. First, many neighboring municipalities are now approving retail sales of Cannabis. The host community receives a 2% tax on sales. Rochelle Park in Bergen County received \$900,000 of the 2% tax which helped stabilize its municipal budget. We also intend to use a portion of the 2% tax on a youth drug awareness program. Currently, there are numerous small unlicensed businesses selling unregulated and untested cannabis products with no age restrictions. The county prosecutor's office will not enforce illegal cannabis sales unless the municipality has an ordinance permitting legal cannabis sales in effect. Lastly, there is a large manufacturing facility in Haskell that has become vacant with Arrow Metal moving its operations to the Midwest. We desire that this location remain as a manufacturing facility and not be turned into low income housing. As a result, an Ordinance was passed to allow the cultivation, manufacture and wholesale distribution of cannabis products in the Industrial Zone which includes the former Arrow Metal facility. There will be no retail sales allowed in this area. The Ordinance also allows for two retail licenses. One is limited to the properties along Ringwood Avenue south of

Braen Supply and the second license is limited to the Union Court Redevelopment Zone on Union Avenue across from the Stop and Shop. The intent is to redevelop these two areas of town, preserve manufacturing at Arrow Metal, generate income for the Borough in the form of the 2% tax and to eliminate the unlicensed and unregulated illegal retail sales of cannabis products. A Cannabis screening committee has been established to determine who will be eligible for licensing in Wanaque. These facilities are not expected to be operational until 2027.

For the past 30 years, we have been dealing with a developer on Mountain Lakes Drive. The projects consisting of 128 single family homes and 47 Condos were originally approved in 1988. Construction began in 2000 and was abandoned in 2002. After years in court, litigation was recently successful. However, the property owner has the right to file an appeal. We look forward to a final resolution in 2026.

We had been receiving numerous complaints from residents regarding the winter overnight parking regulations. As a result, in December 2025, the winter parking regulations were changed. Under the new regulations, residents are now permitted to park on all Borough streets at all times, except when it snows. When it snows there will be no parking allowed on any Borough streets until the DPW plows the street. After the street is plowed curb to curb residents are allowed to park back on the streets. We ask all residents to help by complying with these new regulations.

In 2025, a new flagpole was installed at the 9-11 Memorial Park at the intersection of Ringwood and Union Avenues and parts of the sidewalk was reconstructed by the DPW. The bricks by the Memorial were installed in 2014. In 2026, the Borough will be selling additional memorial bricks for the area between the Memorial and the flagpole. The cost is \$100 per brick. If interested, please see our Borough Clerk. I will be purchasing the first two bricks. The first one in memory of Forrest Lawson, a resident and musician who composed a beautiful patriotic song after September 11, 2001 and the second in memory of Ted Luciani, a longtime resident and World War II veteran. All additional bricks will be installed prior to the 25th Anniversary Remembrance on September 11, 2026.

Our recreation programs continue to be some of the best in the area. We have a fantastic group of volunteers. Use of the recreation center at St. Francis continues to grow. Our recreation director is doing a great job coordinating activities at the recreation center.

In 2025, we upgraded the Back Beach field lighting with cost effective LED lights and repaved the entire parking lot. The tennis courts are scheduled for resurfacing in 2026. These projects were assisted by a Grant from Passaic County.

In 2025, we received a grant from Passaic County to construct pickle ball courts at Lorrie Field in Haskell. Construction should begin in 2026.

Additional recreational activities are planned for 2026 in conjunction with the 250th Anniversary of our country.

Our DPW Superintendent continues to do a fantastic job. The DPW workers have rallied behind him and continued to step up to take on new projects. The DPW did a fantastic job with the 911 Park sidewalks. Wanaque continues to be one of the safest small towns in New Jersey. Our Police do a fantastic job and we fully support them. One of our top priorities is to keep our town safe.

In 2025, we completed negotiations with both the Police Union and the DPW Union for new 5 year contracts. With the Police contract, we had lost several younger police officers over the past few years due to wages on

the step schedule not being competitive with neighboring municipalities. The new contract included concessions by the Borough to adjust the step schedule wages to be competitive and concessions by the Police in the area of health benefits.

In late 2025 the Wanaque Fire Department received the two new Firetrucks purchased by the Borough to replace existing vehicles that were over 25 years old. The Wet Down is planned for Spring 2026.

Two new ambulances were previously purchased for the Wanaque First Aid Squad. One was received in 2024 and the second is expected in 2026.

In 2025, we received delivery and installation of a new radio system used by the police department, fire department and first aid squad. This new radio system is essential for continued public safety.

In 2025, two of our longest tenured employees, Kathy Falone and Maryann Brindisi, retired and our Administrator's contract was not renewed. After lengthy searches, we hired three outstanding individuals to fill these positions. Our new clerk Leena Abaza came to us from Harrington Park in January; our new Certified Municipal Financial Officer Tiffany Rogers came to us from Haledon in April.

And our new Administrator Rob Hermansen came to us from Emerson in May. All three have worked fantastically with our current employees and I believe that we have a great team moving forward.

In the area of property taxes, we continue to work very diligently to keep the budget below the 2% cap. This is becoming more and more difficult as the Trenton Democrats continue to pass huge cost increases down to local municipalities. The State has already announced a 36% increase in healthcare costs and a double digit increase in pension costs. As in prior years, we have continued to control all other expenses while continuing to provide the best level of services to our citizens. We are currently working on our 2026 budget. Our goal has always been to keep the tax rate as low as possible. We will continue to review every budget line item for potential savings. As a result of our good financial standing, Moody's increased Wanaque's small municipality rating to AAA.

We have accomplished quite a bit and we have a lot of work to do going forward in 2026. We always do our best to provide great services to our residents. Our Police Officers, Road and Water Department workers, and our Borough Hall staff are second to none. Our volunteer Firefighters, First Aid Squad members, Recreation volunteers and people who donate their time and efforts to our community make Wanaque a great place to live. I thank all of them for their efforts.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Borough Council, Administrator Rob Hermansen, Borough Clerk Leena Abaza, Borough Attorney Tony Fiorello, Chief Keith Spilane and the Wanaque Police Department, DPW Superintendent Tad Skawinski, the DPW and all the Borough employees for all of their efforts. I am confident that we will continue to move forward as we continue to improve our community.

I would like to conclude by thanking my wife, Marie and the rest of my family for their continued support.

Thank you and God Bless America.

