

ORCHARD PARK, NEW YORK



STATE OF THE TOWN

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WELCOME

It is with great anticipation and a sense of real privilege that we, your Town Board, give this *State of the Town Address*. We put a lot of thought into how should we approach it, and what we should say. We took as our starting point a particular truth and belief, namely, that local governments have always been and must always remain the very bedrock of American democracy. It is, after all, at the local level that government is closest to the people; and it is at the local level that most of the services citizens see every day are delivered. Our *Address*, it follows, shall endeavor to demonstrate our closeness to the community, as well as the manner in which we do and will seek to oversee and attend to the services our residents demand. In other words, we trust that this *Address* will demonstrate an awareness of, be accountable for, and offer a vision for moving forward which is in accord with the particular needs and expectations of our community.

We will accordingly, and especially in the light of this being our first *State of The Town Address*, begin with a sketch of our community. This will be followed by an inescapably brief assessment of the committees and services by which the needs and expectations of our community are most directly attended to. Our *Address* will, thirdly, share a vision for governing that this Board holds in common. It is a vision, as you will see, that gives rise to particular commitments and goals.

SKETCH

So how should we characterize Orchard Park? The first thing to note is that we are a **growing community**. Over the course of the past fifty years our population has nearly doubled, growing at an annual rate of about one-half of one percent a year. At present our residents number over thirty thousand, with approximately eleven-thousand mostly residential, single-family homes.

We are also a **well-educated community**. Not only do we have one of the very best school districts in Western New York and all of New York State, but overall educational attainment is also higher among residents of Orchard Park than in the county as a whole at both the high school and college levels.

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We are, thirdly, a **safe community**. According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting statistics, the number of violent and property crimes is consistently low in Orchard Park. Data from the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services also confirms that the number of physical and property crimes within our community falls well below that of the other first and second ring suburbs of Buffalo. In fact, very recently the website safewise.com listed Orchard Park 26th among the safest communities to live in in New York State.

We are also an **environmentally conscious** community. On the one hand, in our pursuit of smart growth the Town has worked diligently with developers and outside businesses to bring needed products and services to the community. In addition to senior housing, examples include Quaker Crossing, Sterling Business Park, Quaker Center Business Park, Krog (Kalieda) Medical Park, Orchard Fresh, and Ellicott Development.

On the other hand, the Town has been tireless in protecting our environment, our open spaces, and the integrity of our diverse neighborhoods. An architectural overlay district was created along North Buffalo Street from the Village line to Southwestern Boulevard based upon good aesthetics and consistency with the appearance and character of existing structures; conservation easements have been created which provide tax incentives to keep land natural and undeveloped; parks –such as those at Birdsong, Honeycrest and Brush Mountain – have been added or expanded; and the Town has successfully waged court battles to keep large and intrusive billboards out of our community.

Orchard Park was one of the earliest communities to begin recycling, and in doing so reduced the cost of garbage services. Our Milestrip Road composting facility not only saves the Town disposal expenses, it generates revenue by selling compost and mulch made from yard waste, as well as by charging other municipalities for taking in their leaves and brush. The savings and revenues amount to about \$500,000 per year. We were the first highway department in New York State to go solar, with grants covering the full cost of installation. Energy savings amount to about \$6,000 per year. Our highway department, once again utilizing grant money, has begun the use of hybrid diesel dump trucks, realizing a fuel cost savings of between \$2-3,000 per year.

Innovative fiscal initiatives such as these, which enable residents to keep more of the money they earn, contributes to Orchard Park being, fifthly, a **financially adept and**

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sound community. For more than twenty years in a row we have been recognized by the State for excellence in financial reporting. And over the course of the last decade the Town has faced and very successfully dealt with its fair share of fiscal challenges. For example, while annual health insurance costs have increased 8 to 15% nationally, through collaboration and the use of alternative solutions the Town's health care costs have been kept to a manageable 2.41% annual increase. And while State and Federal mandates have continued to pile on, even as their aid has dried up, the Town has been able to stabilize its General and Highway Town Real Property Tax Rate which has increased an average of 2% per year, for a total of \$1.03 per thousand over the course of the past decade.

We have been able to do this by finding efficiencies on other areas of the budget. For example, we have fewer full-time employees. Grounded in needs assessments, our full-time equivalents are down 5.6% from ten years ago. Additionally, we actually spend less on general government support today than we did a decade ago. General government support represents services such as the town clerk and receiver of taxes, buildings and grounds, town engineer, the supervisor's office, and our parks and recreation programs. Revenue enhancements such as purchase card rebates, inspection fees, and parks and recreation fees have also contributed to the stabilization.

And now for our balances and assets. Our unassigned fund balance approximates \$5.6 million, which represents 25% of annual Town-wide spending. Our operating fund balances, both reserved and unreserved, are nearly \$20 million, a level deemed fiscally conservative and prudent. Our investment in capital assets has doubled over the last ten years and now is in excess of \$50 million. Moving forward, our fiscally prudent annual budgets will be complemented through a longer term capital plan that has the Town providing for the future capital needs of the Town – things like roads, bridges, highway equipment, and so forth.

ASSESSMENT

So here we are, a growing, well-educated, safe, environmentally conscious and financially sound community. How did we get here, and how do we maintain what we have in the wake of so many pressures and demands? In a word – people. It is through the know-how, good will and dedication of so many people that we have and will continue to move forward as a distinctive community. Time and the purpose of this

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Address will not allow for the identification of the innumerable individuals who through the years have led Orchard Park into its present state. But they, and many others, know who they are. And to them our community remains indebted. Nevertheless, let's take just a moment to consider the nature of the work performed by the Town's committees and service departments.

With all but a few exceptions, the members of the Town's twenty-three committees, boards and task forces are made up of volunteers who bring unique skills, experience, energy, and a good dose of motivation to the Town's business. It might surprise you to find that these priceless individuals are not of the opinion that a committee is the perfect weapon for killing time, as so many committees do. Why? Because their work matters; it produces results. Our committees are directly involved in the development and delivery of the Town's many services. How? By assessing needs, investigating solutions, and then shaping and making recommendations for some of the most important work of the Town – planning, zoning, assessment, conservation, public safety, economic development, recreation, and historic preservation, to name but a few. Again, most regrettably time constraints prevent us from offering the individual descriptions and public accolades our committees deserve.

We would, however, like to offer a word of praise for those working in behalf of our seniors through our newly created Senior Services Task Force, the Senior Council, and the Senior Center. The population in Orchard Park, as with the rest of Western New York, continues to age. Currently almost one-third of our community is age 55 and older. And while all age groups within our community under the age of 45, except for those 15-25 years of age, are shrinking, all groups 45 and older are growing larger. For example, the number of residents between 60 and 64 increased by more than 40% in the past decade. Although our seniors may have distinct needs and interests, as does every age group, they are **not**, as the Director of the Orchard Park Senior Center – Anna Willems – recently put it, they are not “people who are old, frail and helpless.” They are, rather, valued and vibrant residents of our community.

Let's turn, now, to consider the services provided by several of our departments. Once again, being limited by time and purpose, although we would love to catalogue the nature and quality of work performed in all our departments – such as in the Town Clerk's office, engineering, technology, and the assessor and maintenance offices – we have time for only a few.

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We begin with our **recreation department**. Recreational activities are essential community functions and governing responsibilities. In point of fact, research has identified four major categories of benefits: personal, community, economic, and environmental. Research has also demonstrated that recreational activities are directly related to a higher quality of life within the general population. Thus governments at every level within our Country recognize that recreation and leisure constitute major forces of economic development and societal well-being, and reflect, in part, a community's values and character.

So it should come as no surprise that over the course of the past decade our recreation program has come into its own under the direction of its Director, Ed Leak. After eleven consecutive years of growth, Orchard Park's recreation program is acknowledged to be one of the best in New York State, and its staff has been recognized on both the state and federal levels. To identify just a few of the significant changes: Yates Park has seen the addition of new bathrooms, a playground, shelters, a rollerblade park, and a splash pad; the Orchard Park Soccer Complex was built and is considered to be one of the best maintained and operational facilities in the County; the Thorn Avenue baseball complex has been refurbished and expanded; and our Brush Mountain facility has been updated and expanded to include football. And get this, in 2013 community participation topped 33,000, while revenues exceeded costs, confirming the research we just alluded to.

Moving on, without even getting into the outstanding work our **highway department** does in its day-to-day responsibilities, including roads, parks and drainage systems, and having already identified many of their distinctive successes under the leadership of Superintendent Fred Piasecki – our solar power system, our composting facility, and hybrid diesel trucks – we bet you didn't know that they are one of only a few highway departments which engage in road construction projects. Using our own talented personnel, and always coming in on time and on budget, in 2010 our highway department received an award from the New York State Materials Association for the reconstruction of Ellis Road.

In another area, the construction slump of recent years appears to have turned around according to our **Building Inspector**, Andrew Geist. Building is up and 2014 is expected to be a busy year. He reports that in the past three years new residential and commercial building has more than doubled. Many subdivisions are already being built out, while others have been approved and the infrastructure is going in. Some of the larger commercial projects either underway or already approved include the Krog

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Medical Park, the Buffalo Medical Group build on North Buffalo Street, the West-Herr dealerships, Ray Laks Honda, the Orchard Heights expansion, and the Young Development retail project on Southwestern Blvd. at Angle Road. In response to this growth, the number of persons employed in that department has been increased, and training is underway.

Finally, let's consider our **police department**. A number of months ago Orchard Park Police Chief Mark Pacholec and a number of officers conducted an open forum to provide the community with an overview of the state of policing in Orchard Park. Two trajectories were of particular note: first, the volume and complexity of calls for police response continues to increase; second, the police department will be moving further in the direction of what is called community policing. Community-policing is a model which values and emphasizes partnerships, problem-solving, accountability, and service to citizens. Collaboration and shared responsibility are its key principles – police partnering with other agencies, private and public organizations, and especially neighborhoods. The promise of this model is that it will not only control crime, but that it will do so by identifying and ameliorating some of the conditions which may be associated with its occurrence. Although our officers are presently inundated with complex and time-consuming calls for service, it is hoped that community engagement and attention to underlying conditions and quality of life issues will ultimately reduce the number of calls for service that are placed to police.

Once again, it should come as no surprise that the Town Board has and will continue to support the police department. Additional police officers have been hired, we now have a full cadre of public safety dispatchers putting more officers on the road, new equipment has and is being procured, and the command structure and accountability protocols have been improved.

VISION

Hopefully we have given you some sense of the dedication and contribution our committees and departments make towards our community and the quality of our individual lives. Now it's time to consider what kind of dedication and contribution your elected officials, this Town Board, proposes to lay out on the table. In a word, what is our vision for Orchard Park? In one sense, that's an easy question to answer. When you've been handed the appropriate blueprint for 'what' to build, then build. Quite

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frankly, this Board envisions doing those things which previous Boards have done so successfully. Don't misunderstand us. We're not talking about **settling in** with the accomplishments of the past. Rather, we're talking about **building upon** and in accord with those things that have made Orchard Park the distinctive community it is today. In other words, we will continue to focus, intensely, upon the things that protect our lives, protect the integrity of our neighborhoods as well as our environment, and protect our money, that is, the taxes we pay.

But there's another aspect to the vision question: 'how' is it that we will go about building upon the work of our predecessors? That 'how' aspect of our vision can best be understood in the light of the seven values we are committed to.

We value... a particular kind of political **leadership**, namely, one which is responsive to the community that elected them. Benjamin Franklin, at the Constitutional Convention of 1787, gave expression to an attitude, a mindset, that is embraced by this Board:

"In free governments the rulers are the servants and the people their superiors and sovereigns."

The residents of Orchard Park are our sovereigns, and we intend to provide the kind of leadership that is eager to serve their needs, interests and desires.

We value... community building, that is, promoting opportunities to identify with and participate in Orchard Park. To the degree practicable and appropriate we intend to actively support our residents and community organizations by creating vehicles for local people to express and act on concerns and interests, by helping them to utilize and build networks and skills, and by actively working with and even partnering with them. Our very recently implemented Senior Services Task Force is an example of a community-building initiative.

We value... those members of our community who most directly serve the needs, interests and desires of our residents – our **employees**. We intend to not only support them in their work, but to foster a climate of respect, trust, and appreciation. And because we agree with business executive Jack Welch, who said

"We know where most of the creativity, the innovation, the stuff that drives productivity lies – in the minds of those closest to the work,"

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we will work to improve labor-management relations.

We value... exceptional **performance** and results, so we intend to promote a culture wherein employees are motivated and enabled to exercise their knowledge, skills and good will.

We value... transparency. The residents and community of Orchard Park rely upon the Town Board to work on their behalf, that is, to provide direction for and oversight of those matters that significantly impact their quality of life. We shall endeavor, therefore, to ensure and reciprocate the public trust through proactive and appropriate efforts to release information about government matters, as well as by encouraging and facilitating public feedback and engagement.

We value... accountability. Accordingly, we shall do our utmost to promote and protect the public interest by intentionally and regularly assessing and reporting on performance activities and progress, including the allocation of resources.

We value... collaboration. We shall be alert to opportunities to build connections and consciously work together with others to share resources and services so as to achieve more efficient and effective outcomes for our residents and community. Tonight's joint *State of Orchard Park Address* and the appointing of a liaison to Orchard Park schools are early examples of this value being put into practice.

But we must do much more than simply identify our values; we ourselves must and will strive to be led by and to lead others into them. In this we are reminded of how General and President Dwight Eisenhower was known to demonstrate the art of leadership. He would take out this, a simple piece of string, lay it on a table, and say:

"Pull it and it will follow wherever you wish. Push it and it will go nowhere at all. It's just that way when it comes to leading people. They need to follow a person who is leading by example."

This Board does not intent to push others into the values we have identified; rather, we hope to lead the way by our example.

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GOALS

Our vision for Orchard Park, that of building in accord with the blueprint bequeathed to us and the values that we hold, would remain little more than ink on paper were we not to devote ourselves to managing it in accord with our belief in continuous improvement and widely recognized best practices. Accordingly, and in addition to the many routine and not so routine fiscal and operational duties of the Board, we have identified three significant goals for this year:

Goal 1. Implement annual performance evaluations for all department heads.

Used properly, that is, to both assess and provide direction, performance evaluations are a management tool through which expectations and goals can be established and clarified, responsibilities and standards can be reinforced, needs and priorities can be disclosed, and performance can be enhanced.

Goal 2. Initiate the (re)accreditation process for the Orchard Park Police

Department. Although the majority of police departments in Western New York and throughout New York State are not accredited, and although the receiving and maintaining of accreditation is costly in terms of money and work, we are of the opinion that pursuing and obtaining accreditation will further advance the professionalism of our police department and the confidence and pride our community places in it. According to the New York State Department of Criminal Justice Services: Office of Public Safety, there are a number of advantages accruing to an accredited agency, specifically: greater administrative and operational effectiveness; a greater overall standard of professionalism; enhanced understanding by agency personnel of department policies and procedures; independent confirmation that policies comply with professional standards; greater public confidence in and support for the agency; diminished vulnerability to civil suits and costly settlements; and some insurance benefits.

Goal 3. Begin to develop strategic plans at the department and committee

levels. It is anticipated that these Board-led rolling strategic plans will contain not only goals and objectives, but the targets and measurements by which progress will be benchmarked. Although it will take a number of years for plans to be developed for most areas, as they come on board the individual plans will

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be posted on the Town's web site. The expected benefits of developing strategic plans include greater Board oversight, improved department and committee performance, an improved budgeting process and projecting, enhanced transparency and accountability at both the governing and department levels, and improved *esprit de corps*.

As the particular initiatives whereby these goals will be achieved are implemented, we will be sure to share them with the community.

CONCLUSION

So there you have it; the *2014 State of The Town* as this Board has inherited and perceives it to be. We are a unique community that continues to grow, prides itself on its commitment to education and public safety, and is devoted to protecting its charm, its diverse environments, and its tax dollars.

Moving forward, we anticipate that the combination of our current financial condition – along with the vision, values and goals we have set forth – will enable Orchard Park to maintain our distinctive character and receive the excellent services we are accustomed to, while minimizing our tax burden.

We end this *Address* with a story.

A sea captain and his chief engineer were arguing over who was most important to the ship. To prove their point to each other, they decided to swap places. The chief engineer ascended to the bridge, and the captain went to the engine room.

Several hours later, the captain suddenly appeared on deck covered with oil and dirt. "Chief!" he yelled, waving aloft a monkey wrench. "You have to get down there: I can't make her go!"

"Of course you can't," replied the chief. "She's run aground!"

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Members of a team don't excel each other; they depend on each other. As members of the Village and Town Boards, we not only depend upon each member of our respective Boards; we also depend upon each other's Board so that together we can serve the community of Orchard Park in a way that our residents deserve.

On behalf of your team, thank you...