

ORCHARD PARK, NEW YORK

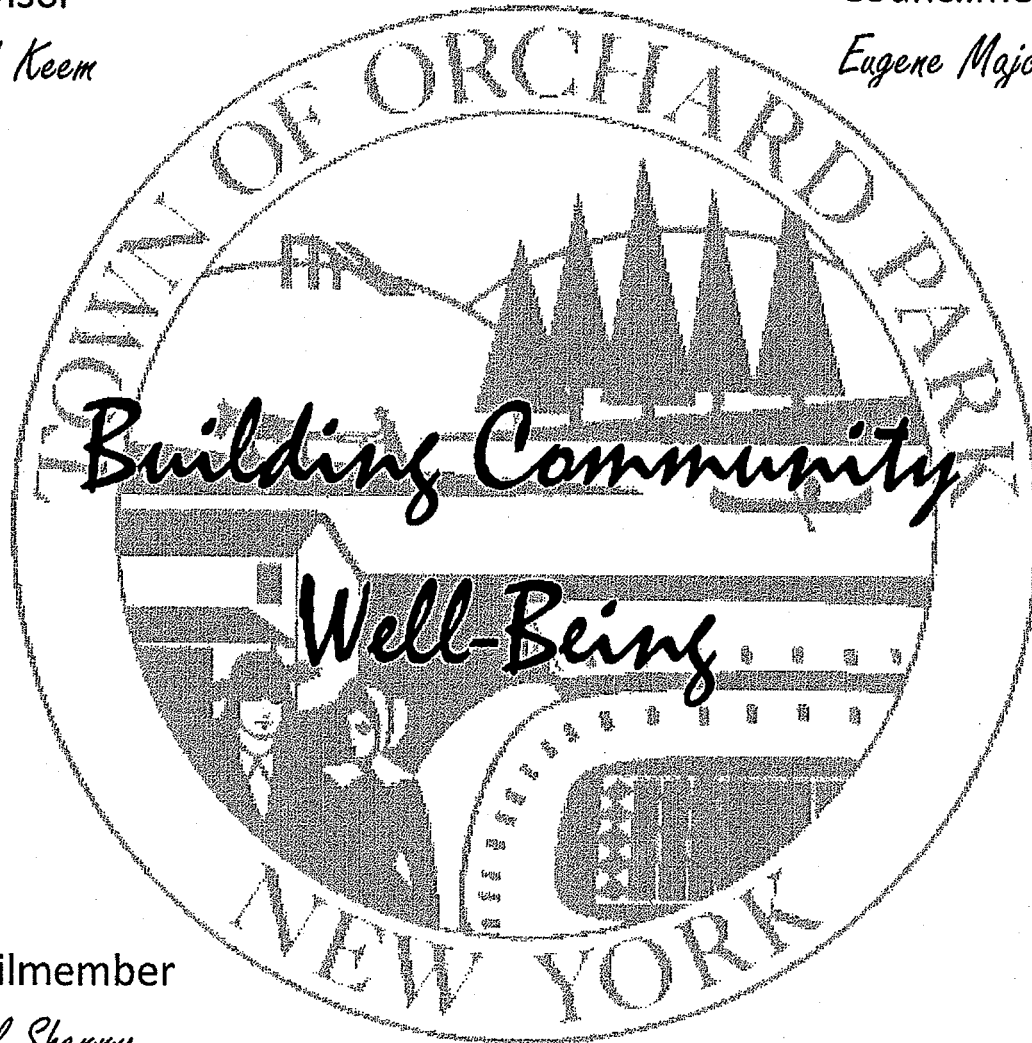
STATE OF THE TOWN

Supervisor

Patrick Keem

Councilmember

Eugene Majchrzak



Councilmember

Michael Sherry

February 15, 2017

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

WELCOME.

"Thank you" Mayor Litwin and trustees of the Village Board. It remains a real pleasure to deliver this annual Address with all of you. It seems that each year the collaboration and relationship between our two boards only deepens.

And "thank you" (audience) for taking time out this evening to be a part of our fourth annual State of Orchard Park Address. For any who may have been present for our first three Addresses, you may have noticed the emergence of a simple outline. In addition to a brief opening and closing, it has consisted of two main sections that we title RETROSPECTIVE and PROSPECTIVE - a look back and a look forward. But in preparing for this year's Address we decided to add a third section with which we will begin, namely, PERSPECTIVE - seeing all the relevant data and information in that more meaningful relationship that represents the community that is Orchard Park.

PERSPECTIVE.

In our previous Addresses we have tended to shy away from the kinds of idealistic evaluations and nebulous proposals that all too often characterize government Addresses and, instead, to simply report on key indicators, issues and challenges affecting our community. So, for example, we have not tired in pointing out the inequities and shortcomings of the current tax cap and its threat to local finances and autonomy, calling not for its abolishment, but for its improvement. Nor have we hesitated to point out any challenging goals that were not fully achieved as intended. We aim to continue in this vein.

But it's important to see the various indicators, issues and challenges within the context of a holistic or more global assessment of our community. Attempting to offer this kind of a perspective, however, if it is to be fair and accurate, gives rise to two preliminary questions: [1] what should be the standard and benchmarks for an assessment? and, [2] who should provide them? Furthermore, relevant to both questions is a more fundamental consideration, namely, the very purpose for which communities, of any size, emerge.

To that end we will rely upon a very ancient and simple description of that purpose. Some twenty-four centuries ago, from within the very cradle of democracy, the Athenian philosopher Aristotle wrote that communities come into existence "for the

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

sake of a good life." Consequently, the ten-thousand foot standard against which Orchard Park should be measured is the extent to which a good life is promoted and afforded the residents of our community. We also propose to allow outside sources to supply the comprehensive benchmarks for and rate the level of our success.

All of the following ratings of Orchard Park for calendar year 2016 can be accessed through the internet.

According to *Buffalo Business First*, among the towns within the eight counties in Western New York, Orchard Park ranked among the top three for quality-of-life. This rating took into account well-rounded communities with robust employment bases and income levels, strong records of growth and residential stability, impressive house stocks and transportation systems, excellent schools, established traditions of racial and gender diversity and equity, and positive environments for children and seniors. Of special note is that the Village of Orchard Park was ranked number one among the 59 cities and villages of Western New York. Fantastic!

Whereas the Buffalo Metro area is ranked 57th in the *U.S. News and World Reports* in the category of "best metropolitan areas in the U.S.," and is rated 2nd in *Sperlings* best city areas to locate to in the U.S., Orchard Park is the only upstate town rated as "best places to live in New York" by *Areavibes*.

Niche.com rates Orchard Park as one of the best suburbs to "raise a family" in New York State based upon public schools, crime rates, cost of living and family-friendly amenities. Outside of the suburbs of New York City, we ranked #6 in New York and #1 in Western New York in this category.

So overall it appears that Orchard Park is doing well in its efforts to afford our residents a good life. We can attribute this success to the cultivation and combination – across many years – of the care, attentiveness and priorities of our residents, the largely volunteer work of our many committees and organizations, the dedication of our employees, and the leadership of and collaboration between our village, town and school boards. It is a formula that our community must remain committed to if we are to continue to be successful well into the future.

Moving on from that macro level, let's focus in on the micro level, that is, on some particulars relative the past year as well as the current year. But before doing so, and consistent with past years, we wish to avoid a gross dereliction on our part should

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

we fail to recognize the essential kinds and volume of work accomplished by the members of our community that constitute our many committees and organizations, as well as the employees who provide the services we depend upon. We would ask that any members please stand so that we might, as a community, give expression to our sincere gratitude.

RETROSPECTIVE

Infrastructure.

One area that has a tremendous impact upon both our economy and our quality of life is our infrastructure. This includes the facilities, systems and structures that supply the services and commodities that we depend upon to sustain and enhance our living and economic conditions; things like, roads, bridges, water lines and sewers, among others. Because infrastructure is so costly, if it is carefully managed financially and operationally it will yield a return on investment that is certain over time.

Utilizing our own human and materiel resources allows the town to reduce some infrastructural costs. For example, in 2016 thirteen town roads were milled and resurfaced by our highway department – including Braunview Way, Briar Hill, Dale Road, Edgewater Drive, Fairway Drive, Henning Drive, Old Hickory Court, Kingswood Drive, Mt. Airy Drive, Mt. Airy Court, North Lake Drive, South Benzing Road, and Timberlake Drive. Town Highway also did a total reconstruction project on Philson Drive and Weiss Ave. These investments in our road infrastructure allow our residents and the traveling public to travel safely throughout our Town.

Another example would be work overseen by our Engineering department in 2016. Waterlines were replaced on Chestnut Ridge Road, Philson Drive, and Duerr and Milestrip Roads. Sewers were replaced on Hazel Court, Eaglebrook and Mid County Drive, and drainage issues were rectified on Draudt and Benning Roads.

Other infrastructural work accomplished in 2016 includes the repair and/or replacement of retaining walls and buildings at Green Lake, Brush Mountain and the Little League Fields, as well as contracted work for the Municipal Building's heating and air-conditioning system, and the replacement and expanding of its parking lot.

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

Of course the very large, very costly and long awaited dredging and dam replacement at Green Lake finally occurred in 2016. Originally dug in 1912, it was deeded to the village in 1942 and then conveyed to the town in 1963. Besides making repairs to the existing spillway channel and building an auxiliary spillway, extending the dam height, making improvements to the outlet control structure, the paved bike path on top of the dam was reconstructed and foot paths along the stream connecting to the Little league Park were installed. The dam is now in compliance with current regulations, potential erosion areas have been stabilized, and the risk of flooding eliminated. 120,000 cubic yards of silt and settlement was removed resulting in a new depth of twenty-eight feet and allowing for an additional 24,235,200 more gallons of much cleaner water. This "Jewel of Orchard Park" will now be preserved for future generations. The natural setting of Yates Park has been beautified, recreational use will be enhanced, as will be the water quality for swimming, sailing, canoeing and fishing

Another long-hoped-for project took a big step forward in 2016: a multi-generational community activities center to be located at Brush Mountain Park. After two years of research and planning, involving so many individuals and two task forces, a referendum was overwhelmingly approved by one of the largest voter turnouts in Orchard Park history this past November 8th. Necessary preparatory work is continuing on schedule with an anticipated ground breaking in the spring of 2018.

From the town board's perspective, one of the most satisfying outcomes of this multi-year project to date was the level of patience, tolerance and civility that characterized a very difficult community decision. Whether in favor or in opposition to the proposed center, noticeably absent from any public comments or private communications was any demagoguery or denigrating of individuals or positions. Would that this kind of communal spirit would descend upon our nation so that the words of President Abraham Lincoln would prevail: "Let us at all times remember that all American citizens are brothers of a common country, and should dwell together in bonds of fraternal feeling."

In 2017 infrastructural work performed by our engineering and highway departments will include the reconstruction of Burmon, Lexington and Brenner, the beginning of a very large drainage project in the Bussendorpher area, as well as some of the work associated with building a community activities center.

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

Financial.

Providing a full range of services – including police protection, water and sewer sanitation services, highway and road maintenance, recreational activities and cultural events, as well as general administration – it is imperative that the town board closely monitor, assess and regulate the financial condition of our community throughout the course of each fiscal year so as to ensure sound financial health and effective operation of our services. Our financial condition may be defined as the ability of the Town to balance recurring expenditure needs with revenue source, while providing services on a continuing basis, that is, both in the present and into the future.

While there is no single measure that fully captures the financial condition of the Town, we regularly track our fund balance levels, as well as our actual financial results to budgeted financial results. Preliminary financial information on the 2016 year indicates that our General Fund balance at December 31, 2016 has remained rather consistent with the December 31, 2015 level, meaning our revenues almost matched our expenditures. Again these are preliminary numbers. Assuming this is the case, our General Fund balance at December 31, 2016 will approximate \$5.5 million dollars or approximately 40% of our combined General and Public Safety Fund annual operating expenditures. Rating agencies deem this a healthy financial position.

Our Highway Fund is expected to have used about \$75,000 of its fund balance which will bring its total fund balance to about \$500,000 or approximately 10% of its annual operating expenditures. Although this is an acceptable level, we would like to see it increased into the 20-25% range.

During 2016 the Town approved over \$10,000,000 of projects to keep our roads, Town Hall and Town state of the art. The Green Lake project, while costly, in excess of \$4 million, was needed and well received by the community and environmentalists. We utilized almost \$2 million to replace various water and sewer lines; \$1.4 million to construct and reconstruct the Town-wide drainage; \$2.5 million to reconstruct and resurface various Town highways and roads; and, \$500,000 in much needed repairs to our Municipal Center.

The Town was able to pay for current services, reinvest into its capital assets, and maintain a healthy reserve fund by utilizing a moderate increase in its 2016 real property taxes along with increases in sales tax revenue and mortgage tax revenue.

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

While county-wise sales taxes were stagnant, Orchard Park's sales tax increase was owing principally to an increased proportion of the Town's assessed value as a percentage of the county's assessed value as a whole. Meanwhile, expenses were monitored closely as belt tightening continued to be a common theme of the Board.

2016 Goals.

Three significant goals were proposed for 2016. The first was to "present a fully developed Community Activities Center plan to the community for a determination of its practicality and scope." This was accomplished and approved by the community through the November 8th referendum. Our second goal was to "adopt a five-year rolling strategic plan by and specifically for the town council." With the assistance of citizens, committee chairs and department managers, this too was accomplished, although given the pace at which change occurs today, it was reduced to a three-year plan. We encourage our residents to visit the Town's web page and review our strategic plan and then, if so moved, offer us some feedback. Our third goal was to "implement outcomes-based government services." With the adoption of the strategic plan, this process is now underway. Department managers have submitted goal proposals that align with the identified priorities and goals of the strategic plan. They are under review and will eventually be posted on our web page and will become drivers of short- and longer-term budgeting.

PROSPECTIVE

Financial.

Within Erie County, Orchard Park has the second highest bond rating, and we retain our status as having the lowest equalized tax rate of our peer communities. Looking forward financially, at our local level the budget adopted for 2017 increased taxes at a level that was \$30,131 less than the State Tax Cap. The total tax levy increase was 1.2475%. But at the state level, the Governor has created a shared-services mandate. And facing projected state budget deficits for the next three years, he has begun another round of the blame game, yet again shifting responsibility for high property taxes from Albany's mandates to local governments.

As our 2015 Address noted, first he gave us an unsustainable version of a "tax cap," a Trojan Horse that threatened the financial walls of local communities. As the shortcomings of that cap became evident, he then gave us a Charybdis vs. Scylla like choice of evils in the "tax freeze." With more and more communities selecting the lesser

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

of two evils, namely, exceeding the tax cap when necessary to maintain the kinds and levels of services their residents expect, he has now created and placed in our midst a Pandora's Box.

Similar to the tax cap and tax freeze, the impending danger is hidden by the promise of relief from our oppressive property taxes. Under his shared services mandate, local governments will have to develop a plan for consolidating services beneath the umbrella of a county-wide plan. If the legislature does not give its approval, and a plan is not developed, local communities will not receive their annual state aid. What should we call the intentional withholding of a needed and known good unless you bow the neck and yield?

As the Association of Towns of the State of New York describes it, this proposal "undermines representative government." Furthermore, it threatens our autonomy, that is, the right to self-determination and control at the local level. Non-residents will be able to determine, to some as yet to be determined extent, the kinds and levels of services we will receive. Gone is the enticement of a spoiled vegetable; we will now be beaten into submission by a financial stick. Pandora's Box will have been opened. Please visit our town web site from time to time for updates.

Goals.

In addition to the many other objectives identified in our strategic plan, we will pursue the following four goals in 2017:

- [1] Working plans and preparatory work for the building of a community activities center at Brush Mountain Park.
- [2] Assessment and restructuring of the town's youth services.
- [3] The establishment of department goals which will be posted on the town's web site, encouraging community input and response.
- [4] Assessing and development of charters for town committees.

You may have noticed or otherwise be aware that all but the last of these goals are already underway. Although we have been able to get a jump on them, significant work remains to be accomplished for all of them.

2017 STATE OF THE TOWN ADDRESS

CLOSING

This three-person board is now into its fourth year together. Continuing along the same vein as the previous three State of the Town Address – *Protecting Our Community* (2014), *Strengthening Our Community* (2015), and *Serving Our Community* (2016) – the theme of this Address has been *Building Community Well-being*. In our first Address we laid out our vision and values for how we would execute our responsibilities moving forward. In the subsequent two Addresses we traced those efforts. And in this Address, being time, we paused to step back, as a board and a community, in order to listen to the several voices of those who rate communities. As a community we are always in a state of development. It is important to have that development assessed.

The guiding vision and values have now been incorporated into a three-year strategic plan as a kind of blueprint by which to further build upon our outstanding quality of community life.

