

2016 Mayor's Speech

The first thing I want to speak about tonight is something that is probably going to change Mountainside a little bit and will certainly change Mountainside for the better. This is going to be the first year that we are going to start to implement our fair housing plan. I know there has been a lot of talk about it so I just want to talk a little bit about it with everyone. Over the years, the borough has been sued on a number of occasions by builders seeking to put high density residential housing in Mountainside. Back in 2003 was the first lawsuit which was filed by a developer who wanted to develop a property between Lackland and the Spanish Tavern. They were planning to put up two four-story apartment buildings with 132 units. Fortunately, our borough attorney was able to stay off that challenge to our housing ordinances. It certainly woke up the Mayor and Council that we needed to start to do something. Fast forward to the second suit that was filed by a developer who wanted to develop the Pond which is a tract of land on Route 22. They also wanted to put some high density housing on a relatively small parcel. Again, as a result of the efforts of our borough attorney and as a result of that lawsuit we were able to develop our fair housing plan. We also had the assistance of retired Judge Eugene Serpentelli who is one of the foremost judges in NJ that wrote many opinions on the Mount Laurel status, so as a result of that we got the court to approve our fair housing plan. What that really did for us is it created immunity from builders trying to build high density residential housing in Mountainside. We were able to restrict any type of low density housing to 6 units per acre. The average across the state for this type of plan is anywhere between 20 and 25 units per acre so we did very well. The first part of that plan was actually approved two weeks ago by the Planning Board. It was a 23 unit townhouse development which is the first of its kind in Mountainside that is going to be built behind Sunrise Manor which is formerly known as Brighton Gardens. There will be 4 affordable housing units in that project. The next implementation of the plan has to do with the tract of land that the borough owns on Mountain Avenue between 7-Eleven and the first few houses, a five acre site. Over the past few months, between the Planning Board and the Borough Council we've designated that site as an area in need of redevelopment. The reason that we did that was so the Borough would become partners with the developer and we could assure that whatever development goes there will certainly continue the character of Mountainside. I know that there has been a lot of talk about some of the issues that may arise as a result of that type of development. The biggest one being traffic and because we will partners with the developers we are also going to be working with the County to make sure that the development enhances the downtown of Mountainside and will certainly be built in the best interest of all our residents with all the concerns that people are going to raise. This fair housing plan is a very good thing for Mountainside to address our Mount Laurel obligation and it is not going to change the character at all of Mountainside.

To move on, this past year we certainly had our ups and downs in town. In July of 2014 was when things started to happen. Chief Debbie retired from the police force and the plan at that point was to appoint Rich Osieja as our new Chief. Unfortunately, he was not able to fill the role at that time, but our current Chief now did step up. He was made the Officer in Charge for a while and

then appointed Acting Chief. In January 2015, I received a call on a Sunday during the playoffs from Jim Debbie and he said it doesn't look like Rich is doing so well so we would like to go down to Sloan Kettering. Jimmer picked me up along with Keith Turner, Bob Beatty, a former Councilman, John Post and we drove into NY. I remember watching the game on my phone on NFL mobile as we were driving in. When we got there, the Osieja Family was there, a number of caregivers and I swore Rich in as our new Chief. I know that it was a great day for his family and in retrospect, I never realized just how important it was especially for someone like Rich and his family to be made the Police Chief and that day was a very good day for Mountainside and I will always remember that. Unfortunately, a few weeks later Rich passed away and Mountainside, his family and the community celebrated his life and honored him with a full police funeral. It was well attended and to me was one of the most spectacular, I am not even going to call it a funeral, it was an event. It was a celebration of Rich's life. The police did a fantastic job, Jim Debbie did a fantastic job in getting everyone where they needed to be, again a sad, but a good day for Mountainside. Shortly thereafter, we swore in our current Chief Al Attanasio that was another great day for Mountainside. I know it was a celebration for him and a fulfillment of a lot of dreams and goals that he had. As I stated at the PBA dinner back in November, I wanted to thank the community, the Osieja Family, Jim Debbie, Al Attanasio, the entire police force. They handled that whole series of events with respect, compassion, dignity and love. I commend everyone who was involved in that process. Another great thing for Mountainside, the way those things transpired.

In the same spirit, like we did today for the Veterans we continue to honor our Veterans. I think especially in this day in age with what is going on around the world we need to continue to do that. We have our Memorial Day festivities over at Constitution Plaza. We had our 3rd annual Memorial Day Parade which was well attended, people along the route with flags. It was an honor to see how the whole town came together for our Veterans. Afterwards, back at our Lady of Lourdes Church it was very well attended by our Veterans, their families, friends, the boy scouts, the girl scouts, the daisies, the brownies, I am sure I am going to forget somebody. We also had volunteers from MYB and MSA that helped with the cooking. We had the Fire Department and Rescue Squad who assisted with the event and was another great day in Mountainside. The honoring of the Veterans continued on Veterans Day where the children at Deerfield had a fantastic ceremony for the Veterans. They sang songs, there were speeches and the kids participated in a poster and essay contest. Then they moved back inside and they continued to honor the Veterans. I think it is a testament to Mountainside with the way we treated them. They are currently in the process of constructing a new Veterans Memorial over by the Library. In fact, it is going to be right by the Levi Cory House with money from the Watts Foundation that will help with the construction and the help of local contractors that are contributing towards it. I know that they are going out with a program to sell bricks to try to raise money to pay for the funding of that project. I encourage everyone to buy a brick and continue to honor our Veterans. In a time like this, it's important that we continue to honor our past and

present Veterans. You can see how proud they were standing up here today, one guy could barely get up and he was going to make it up here because he is one of our Veterans.

As I have always said what makes Mountainside a great community is the volunteerism. We have a great volunteer Fire Department and Rescue Squad. I can remember five years ago scrambling for volunteers. They were struggling, but with the leadership they have in the Fire Department and especially in the Rescue Squad they have gotten a lot of young people involved and they have more volunteers now than they have had for as long as I can remember. It doesn't mean that we can't use more volunteers so if anyone wants to volunteer for the Rescue Squad or the Fire Department they are here tonight and always around so you can contact them. The Fire Department, Rescue Squad and Police Department, they are the ones who provide fire protection, emergency services, and they are responsible for the safety of the community without them Mountainside would not be the safe community that we know. We also have a number of volunteer organizations: MYB, MSA, PAL, VFW, Lions Club, Rotary and the Elks. All those volunteer organizations make Mountainside an extremely strong community. Also, the Watts Foundation which was set up for the benefit of Mountainside, we can see all the good things they do in the community and they are going to be donating money to the new Veterans Memorial. Another thing that makes Mountainside the great town that it is.

I'm also proud to say this is the 3rd or 4th year in a row that I can say that Mountainside is striving and is fiscally sound. Even though we have a 2% cap, with the staff and all our volunteers, the residents get the services that they expect from us and we do it in a fiscally responsible fashion. We do it the old fashion way, we get grants, we share services with the Board of Education, other towns and the County that's how we try to keep the costs down and the level of services I don't think ever goes down, that is a testament to the staff at borough hall. I also would like to commend the Board of Education. They did a fantastic job in passing the referendum and even a better job of making sure that the monies were properly applied and the school looks fantastic. I can remember 10 years ago when we had the last construction renovation and that was a total disaster. This year it went smooth. If anyone has been to the school, it looks fantastic. I understand the media center is just about open, I don't know for sure if it's fully functional yet. They did a fantastic job to improve the physical plans of the school and to help improve our education especially our K through 8th grade children.

I do have one concern, it's the same concern I expressed last year. Mountainside is a town of volunteers, but one thing I hear from our organizations is it's the same people that are the ones that are always volunteering that's not going to sustain the great town that we have here. It's nice to volunteer when your son or your daughter is in a program where you have a direct benefit to the town, but it's even more important to volunteer for the community. If you go down to Our Lady of Lourdes on a Saturday in the fall, or you go down to the MYB fields in the spring, or you go to the MSA in the fall, summer and spring, you are going to see people there who are volunteering not just because they have children in the program, but because they love community and through their volunteerism it makes it a much better community. I can see one

of them in the back smiling, Tom Murphy and the work that he has done over the past years. He does it because he gets a great sense of pride. When you get out there and see not your own kids, but all kids out there playing on the field, we need to make sure that it continues. The only way it will continue is if everyone tries to volunteer and instill this in our children. I remember meeting with the boy scouts and they were asking me about what does volunteerism mean and I told them volunteerism doesn't mean that you have to do a great project for the community, go to your neighbor who is having trouble wheeling his garbage can down the driveway because he's elderly, shovel their sidewalks, help a kid in school who maybe is having trouble in athletics or with schooling. These random acts of kindness are really simply acts of volunteerism that's what's going to make this town the great town that we know. Thank you very much.