

Welcome to the 2012 State of the Town

Today I will speak about where we are as a town, then set forth what we've been doing during the course of this administration, and close by addressing an issue of importance to so many in our town, the present status of the Town's Buildings Department.

In regard to where we are today, according to the 2010 census, the population of the Town of North Hempstead is 227,000 people, up from 223,000 ten years earlier. North Hempstead's population makes us the 7th largest municipality in New York State out of approximately 1500 towns, cities and villages.

In regard to what people think of us, during the last few years of my administration we have been recognized as being one of the top 100 best places to live in America and one of the top 25 healthiest places to retire in America if you are a senior. (We are number two, behind Anaheim, California).

This past year we were recognized for our outstanding and comprehensive "performance measurement" system by the ICMA, the International City/County Management Association.

We recently received New York State's highest environmental award for our School Recycling Program and a national environmental award from the Environmental Protection Agency for our Pharmaceutical Take Back program where we now have collected over four thousand pounds of unused pharmaceuticals.

In 2010 both Moody's and Standard and Poor's upgraded the town's bond rating to Aa1 or its equivalent, the highest credit rating in our town's history. This achievement is even more

impressive when we consider that other communities in Nassau County, including the county itself, have had their bond ratings downgraded recently.

The Moody's designation was based on the Town of North Hempstead's "conservative fiscal management practices." The Moody's rating report concluded that they expect the Town to "continue to maintain a strong fiscal position through conservative budgeting, strong internal controls and revenue augmentation." Standard & Poors also reported that the Town of North Hempstead's "management practices are considered to be strong."

I certainly appreciate the recognition that the town has received for its professional and effective municipal financial management during the course of my administration. The success we have in this area means real savings to the residents of our town.

Accordingly, the North Hempstead financial picture is strong. In this sense, the state of the town is good, albeit challenging in these difficult times. Our 2011 budget is balanced and our reserves have been maintained in a manner consistent with financial industry standards.

My administration continues to be aggressive in its pursuit of grants and continues to bring in millions of dollars in grant money helping to stretch our taxpayers' dollars further.

Like many governments throughout America, we have reduced our work force and worked with our municipal employees union to keep costs down during these difficult times.

Our workforce has been reduced from 427 just a few years ago to 405 today. Our most recent union contract limited raises to 0% in 2010 and 2% in 2011. I would note that in the Town of North Hempstead, employees contribute up to 15% toward the costs of their medical benefits.

The most difficult financial challenge for the Town of North Hempstead today remains having to deal with the impact of Nassau County's failure to pay millions of dollars owed to the town. First and foremost, the county owes the town millions of dollars in judgments awarded to the town in court decisions.

Millions of dollars more are owed by the county, but are being withheld from the town in order to subsidize FIT students to the tune of \$11,000 per FIT student who come from North Hempstead. The county is pursuing these subsidy payments even though the courts agreed with the town's position that neither the county nor the town should be paying those multi million dollar subsidies to begin with.

Of major concern to schools and towns alike, is the county's decision to end the county guarantee, which covers the costs of the mistakes that it, the county, makes in setting property assessments. The result will be that Towns and School Districts will be paying millions of dollars to cover bad decisions made by the county while being denied any role in the process.

Like all towns, cities and villages in New York State and across America, North Hempstead remains concerned about the economy and its impact on our municipal finances as well as our residents' pocketbooks. However, we see glimmers of hope in the positive economic indicators that seem to be gaining momentum.

Locally, our community continues to grow jobs. A number of local businesses, in fact, have recently been awarded multimillion-dollar economic development grants through Governor Cuomo's effort to stimulate the New York Economy through Regional Economic Councils.

Through our own BTDC, the town's Business and Tourism Development Agency, we too have monitored job growth and participated in efforts to create jobs here. The Town of North Hempstead presently has the lowest unemployment rate of Long Island's 13 towns.

From an economic standpoint, then, the state of the Town of North Hempstead is good and we remain cautiously optimistic about the future.

I would now like to spend a few moments speaking about some of the investments that my administration has made during the last eight years, in good times and in bad, in order to continue to make our town the wonderful place it is to live, work and raise a family.

Even in bad times, it is critical that local government maintain, its infrastructure, provide essential services, meet the needs of our local residents and invest dollars to solve community problems while also investing in long term improvements.

It is in bad economic times when a government must strive the hardest to continue to invest in infrastructure and maintain the quality of its operations that made the community so successful to begin with.

To let properties, buildings and programs deteriorate during bad times can lead to a downward spiral that results in lower home values, reduced local investment, closed stores and shuttered businesses. It can lead to deteriorating infrastructure that costs many times more to repair when maintenance requirements reach a crisis level. We have not, nor will we let that happen in the Town of North Hempstead.

We continue to budget conservatively and cautiously and, at the same time, maintain our ability to invest dollars in long term capital projects at the lowest interest rates that we have seen in years and will probably never see again. These long term investments at these historically low interest rates will give the town a solid foundation for many decades to come.

So, what is it that we have invested in during these last eight years? What have we accomplished?

Permit me to present to you a partial list of our initiatives during the last eight years:

We have, during this administration, initiated the first suburban 311 system in the country that now handle over 180,000 calls a year;

We established Project Independence, a unique program for our senior citizens enabling them to better age in place through a network of visiting nurses and social workers, home improvement assistance, and an exciting public private partnership that provides medical and shopping transportation for our seniors. This program now receives tens of thousands of calls from seniors each year.

We established our school recycling program winning New York State's highest environmental award as mentioned before. This program includes 9 school districts, soon to be ten, with more than 34,000 students participating.

We added a school composting program in conjunction with our botanic garden; we created a virtual recycling store where anyone can go online and find out how to recycle just about anything and everything.

We partnered with Este Lauder to recycle plastic bottle caps;

We partnered with the New York Mets and New York Giants with our Food to Feed program where we collect unused packaged foods to give to those in need at our local food pantries;

We provide our residents with biodegradable leaf bags, home composters, and soon we will include rain barrels, in order to help residents go green at home.

We started Long Island's first e-waste collection program which we initially offered four times a year, then once a week, and now five days a week at our Solid Waste transfer station. Plus several times a year we go to local schools and other locations to allow people to bring their e-waste to a location close to where they live.

We started Long Island's first pharmaceutical take back program where we collect unused pharmaceuticals that would otherwise inevitably end up down the toilet and into the environment or worse, in some teenagers hands. To date, we have collected over 4,000 pounds of unused pharmaceuticals which we dispose of through incineration.

We have obtained hundreds of thousands of dollars of grants just to convert our vehicle fleet to hybrid cars and trucks.

We have refurbished our ponds and waterways (such as Mill Pond, Ridders Pond, Searingtown Pond, Hempstead Harbor, and Manhasset Bay) enhancing their appearance while making them more environmentally friendly.

We started several years ago a town wide “spring cleaning” called Clean Sweep. Each spring our sweepers sweep each street in the town picking up the winter’s dirt, sand and debris with all of its oils and other contaminants that would otherwise end up in our storm drains and ultimately our bays and harbors. Our sweepers pick up over 2000 pounds of sand and dirt each spring and they continue to maintain our streets throughout the year. We’ve also installed new sponge technology in many of our storm drains to further filter out contaminants and pollutants that would otherwise drain into our bays and harbors.

And by reseeding the towns bays and harbors with shellfish, our waterways are cleaner then ever and are now visited each year by hundreds of dolphins.

During these last eight years the town acquired a number of county parks that were deteriorating and have revitalized and improved them. In many of our parks, we have built state of the art turf and natural baseball and athletic fields.

We built this Clubhouse here at Harbor Links, which brings in millions of dollars of revenue each year through catering, the grill room, and the pro shop. We improved the miniature golf course bringing in more people and more revenue.

We put lights up on our soccer fields, and turfed our stadium at Tully Park . We then brought Beatlemania to Tully where over 5000 residents enjoy an old fashioned Beatles concert each summer.

We made improvements to almost all of our parks, including major renovations to several such as Manorhaven Beach Park where we built a beautiful, fun, state of the art pool complex. We completed construction of the entire project in between swim seasons. Our membership increased from 1200 members to 4400 members in one year, increasing town revenue substantially.

We rebuilt the indoor pool at Tully Park with new slides and other water features, making the pool family friendly and a great place to bring your kids. Our memberships increased in that pool from 511 members in 2008 to 1,833 members in 2011, and daily passes increased from 4,777 in 2008 to 11,876 in 2011 increasing revenue there substantially as well.

We are building a new community center in New Cassel that will be a platinum LEED certified building with solar walls, 60 geothermal wells, reusable grey water and many other green components. It will house two NBA size basketball courts, a dance studio, a TV studio, an internet café, a seniors lounge, computer rooms, a multipurpose room, a stage and more. And best of all much of the cost is being covered by a ten million dollar private grant as well as federal stimulus dollars.

We joined with the private sector and the community and all levels of government to revitalize New Cassel with \$80 million in private development. We had setbacks and bumps in the road, but the job is almost done with a brand new main street,

new housing, and dozens of new stores already filled to the brim bringing this community to life like never before.

Across the town we have established a number of festivals and programs including North Hempstead Day, which commemorates the town's historical beginnings when we separated from the Town of Hempstead and Great Britain on September 23, 1775.

We started an annual two day EcoFest at Clark Gardens where thousands come to learn, have fun, and celebrate the environment.

We started our annual Family Beach Fest where we launched an end of summer celebration; we started an annual Asian festival to celebrate the cultures of so many that live within our town and We brought back our famous Memorial Day Fireworks commemoration.

We had our first Greek Festival which was a huge success and, of course, we continue to enjoy our two Sons of Italy feasts in New Hyde Park and Port Washington.

We started an annual film festival, the Gold Coast Film festival and we kicked off another new event, Kidstock where we have hours of live kids music hosted by Roscoe Orman (aka Gordon) from Sesame Street.

We also launched, several years ago, our annual polar plunge where my family and I, along with hundreds of other brave souls, go diving into the frigid waters of Manhasset Bay each winter in conjunction and support of our friends from the Special Olympics.

We also came up with the idea of expanding the town's two day Spooky Walk into Spooky Week and even added – the Not So Spooky Walk where we invite young children to do the walk during the daylight hours when the trails are not so scary. We now have almost ten thousand people go through our Spooky Walk each October.

We expanded our town's animal shelter and initiated and then dramatically expanded a feral cat program that now handles hundreds of feral cats in a humane and safe manner reducing the feral cat population.

We continue to support and benefit from the Shelter Connection program, a private volunteer based organization, which works with our animal shelter walking and training our dogs so that they are highly adoptable. The town of North Hempstead does not euthanize adoptable animal shelter dogs.

Over the last eight years, my administration has established a very aggressive grants program bringing in over \$50 million in Federal, State, and private grants. This has resulted in huge savings for our taxpayers.

Several years back I established the OIC, the Office of Intermunicipal Coordination where we provide shared services to our villages, districts and schools. We presently have over 60 intermunicipal agreements and have saved our taxpayers millions of dollars by working with our other local governments.

We built and now maintain the beautiful SandMiners' monument in Port Washington which was accomplished through a generous contribution by one of our town's

extraordinary residents and organized through the efforts of a committee led by Leo Cimini.

We have also built a skate park, crew boathouses, kayak floats and acquired two fireboats that we share with our local fire service.

We have improved town security and emergency management operations and we have been working on implementing a new Agenda Management system, which will make our agendas and back up information more easily accessible to all of our town residents.

We've renovated town hall and a number of our other buildings and put up more attractive fencing around town parks and facilities.

We have resurfaced miles and miles of roadway, built sidewalks and crosswalks throughout the town and we do it with green products and green machines.

We plow snow, but we first treat our roads with our new salt brine machines that are used in Nova Scotia, which jet a salt water brine mixture onto the surface of the road that lasts for 12 hours melting the snow and ice faster than traditional salt and reducing the amount of time and cost that it takes to plow our roads during snow storms.

We have done so much in the last eight years I could stand here all day talking about the great things we do here in the Town of North Hempstead and about the wonderful professional managers that we have running our departments and all the great work that they do.

I could speak of the great innovations that our Town Clerk and our Receiver of Taxes have each implemented that save money, provide better service, and do things that preserve our history and protect our money in ways that most of us will simply never know about.

I could speak about each of the council members who work so hard and do so much on behalf of our residents and local businesses. They work more hours than you know and they make a difference in their communities in so many ways through the efforts they make, the committees on which they sit, and challenges they meet head on throughout the course of the year.

The fact is so many do so much that it would boggle the mind if I actually attempted to list it all.

Suffice it to say, this administration has made an effort to create an interconnected community. We pursue easy access to local government, creative and innovative programs that meet the evolving needs of our residents, and we invest in the long term infrastructure that will meet the needs of tomorrow.

I would now like to focus on an issue that has become very important to so many of us here in the Town of North Hempstead, the Town's Buildings Department.

Late last year in the state of Connecticut, a family was doing construction on their home. A fire broke out in the middle of the night and a couple lost their parents and their children Lilly, Grace and Sarah ages 9, 7 and 7 on Christmas day.

The investigation showed that the house was under construction and that it was not sufficiently Buildings Code compliant for people to be sleeping in that house.

Buildings Codes can be inconvenient, time consuming and sometimes very expensive. They are, however, important, they are the law, and they save lives.

Unlicensed contractors, plumbers, and electricians who do work contrary to the code put people in danger. And working without permits or in violation of the code is unfair to those that play by the rules. It also may put other people in jeopardy who are just visiting a home for coffee, for a sleepover, or simply having a play date.

Most people want to do the right thing when it comes to making improvements to their home or business. The culture of beating the system, however, makes it very hard for anyone, on their own, to simply play by the rules.

Our job as the town is to make sure that those on the government side and those on the private side can all have confidence that the rules matter and that they are being applied consistently, fairly and professionally.

In 2005, the Town of North Hempstead issued 4765 Buildings permits. This is when the economy was at full strength. Construction and home improvement applications were going through the roof.

In early 2006, during the planned implementation of a new auditing and control system in the Buildings Department we discovered that things were not as they should be. As we looked through records, we soon discovered problems within

the department that were serious in nature and required further investigation by internal and external agencies.

Let me just say here that my approach to administering town government from the first day I took office in 2004 was to assess and review the operations of each department in order to make government accountable, efficient and effective. Every department has had complete reviews of their operations, procedures, and practices. Major changes were made in almost all departments, usually bringing them into the modern world in regard to best practices.

When we reviewed the practices and operations of the Buildings Department it became clear that a full overhaul was going to be necessary. This was, in fact, one of the inspirations for the 311/TownStat system. As we began to implement that overhaul in 2006 we realized that we needed to launch further and deeper investigations and that was exactly what we did.

The bottom line was that the Buildings Department was broken. While we believe that the problems were decades in the making and that they were exacerbated by employees that were playing the system in the worst possible way, we knew that we had to change the system completely to prevent abuse by those on the outside and those on the inside.

The result was that we made the decision, I made the decision, to virtually shut down the department, clean house and start over. We added new technology, new managers, new personnel, new policies, made new laws, and advanced a new approach. It was painfully slow and it was frustrating as hell. But we were going to fix this thing and we were going to do it right.

By 2007 permit approvals and certifications were significantly slowed as we continued to overhaul the system and further scrutinize the process. In that year we issued only 2734 permits (as compared to 4765 two years earlier) and we issued only 1891 certificates of completion (as compared to over 3500 certificates two years earlier).

In 2009 we issued approximately 1300 certificates (again, down from over 4700 in 2005).

We did not give up, and we did not give in. We simply moved the pile forward and held our ground. It was a painful, tedious process, but I believe it had to be done.

Fast forward to today. Our permit and certification processes are much faster than they once were although problem applications can find themselves delayed for months. This will continue to get better, but there is more to this than meets the eye.

The process can be long and arduous (although nothing like it was several years ago), but the reason for that has changed. Now it is because our review is extremely thorough and when we find a problem we hold onto it until it and all others are resolved. We have gotten to the point where we now catch everything and we forgive nothing.

We have set high standards and require rigid compliance, but the system is credible, honest and fair.

And now, just last year in 2011, we issued 4753 permits and 3589 certificates. Let me repeat that, we issued 4753 permits just 12 less than 2005. We are back. We are issuing permits at the same pace that we did 7 years ago. The difference is that

these permits are all correct, vetted properly, and held to the highest of standards.

Today we are holding everyone accountable, including ourselves. But there is more to this story.

We have learned that even strict enforcement, ultimate code compliance, and intense investigation are not the only goals. We have learned that we need to respect the impact of our policies on our residents and businesses. Delays cost money, strict enforcement of violations, new and old, create stress, frustration, and have financial consequences.

And yet what are we to do when someone is before us with portions of their house constructed without permits. What do we do when the records are incomplete or inaccurate?

For example, one couple came to us with an application to put in a den and they were frustrated that their permit was being delayed. It turned out that we found two illegal bathrooms and a second story added to this house without permits. It was done many years earlier on the advice of their contractor who said it would be easier and cheaper if they just made the improvements without going through the town.

So they violated the law by not getting permits, they didn't pay the taxes on the improvements because they never reported them, and they submitted false documents to the town when they put in plans for the den without the additional bathrooms and second floor listed on the plans. Should we have certified that property without correcting the records?

And what about the guy who criticized the Buildings Department at a recent public meeting because the department unfairly, he says, refused to permit a fence that he had built

without a permit and was only slightly encroaching on his neighbor's property – by ten feet.

Are we really supposed to ignore these mistakes? What if the second floor wasn't constructed properly or didn't have the proper egress in case of a fire. What if someone gets hurt climbing over that fence? Who is responsible? And if the town knew about it, why didn't we do anything about it. Isn't that our job?

Are we really doing people a favor if we let them get away with something when it might come back later in horrible or costly ways?

What about the next people who buy the house, don't they deserve to know that the town records are accurate and that the house they bought was safe and constructed properly. What about the parents of the children who come over for a sleepover in a basement that has no vents or proper wiring? How do we ignore that basement once we've discovered it?

I can't be alone in thinking that the answers to these questions are pretty obvious.

Clearly enforcement matters, at the end of the day you want us to enforce the code.

As I stand here in January of 2012, I can tell you that the Buildings Department is on its way to becoming a nationally accredited buildings department. It is working, it is professional, and it can be trusted with the great responsibility that is its mission.

With that being said, we have learned, I have learned, that it is not simply about enforcement. It is also about process, timing, cost, and how we treat people. It is about how the town can help people get their problems solved and their project completed.

We are now meeting regularly around the table with architectural, contractor and real estate broker associations along with attorneys, government managers and those that are involved in the enforcement of our codes. In fact, we are planning to hold a public conference in March to broaden this discussion and give everyone an opportunity to share their experiences and ideas.

Together, we will create paths to resolution that both honor the code and respect the need for the homeowner or business owner to get through our process in a manageable amount of time. In many cases, this should be a matter of days or maybe even weeks, but never months.

This is a two way street where all players on both sides of an application need to be part of the same approach in pursuit of accurate documents, consistent interpretations, realistic expectations and safe buildings.

I am confident that the North Hempstead Buildings Department will be a model for others throughout the region and throughout the country. We are not there yet, but we are well on our way.

In closing, I can tell you that the Town of North Hempstead remains an extraordinary place to live and work. We are on solid ground and always striving to do better. Our good works have been recognized and acknowledged by independent

analysts in various fields and the public is getting the benefit of a government that truly works for the people on so many levels in so many ways.

Thank you, once again, to the League of Woman Voters for hosting this event. God Bless those who serve the public in any capacity, with special recognition and thanks to those who are serving or who have served in our military. We also give special thanks to our police, fire and other public safety personnel who put themselves in harms way to protect us. Thanks to all who have helped make our town one of the best places to live in America.

Thank you and Good afternoon.