

MAYOR'S ANNUAL ADDRESS

Mayor's Address – January 4th, 2020 – Council Reorganization

I would like to welcome everyone again to the 91st reorganization meeting of the Mayor and Council for the Borough of Manville, my hometown. It's nice to see so many dignitaries, family, and friends attending today.

It's an honor to stand here before you as your re-elected Mayor to lead and improve our Borough over the next four years by serving all residents. I'm humbled to be given the opportunity to continue work efforts that are on-going and will impact the future of our town for the better for years to come.

I would like to thank Bound Brook's Mayor Fazen for administering the oath of office today. I respect Mayor Fazen's leadership and his military service to our nation. Mayor Fazen is a West Point graduate and retired Lt. Col. from the Vietnam War. My dad is also a retired Lt. Col. from that era and due to health reasons could not be here today. He was happy to hear the news of who was administering the oath of office when we spoke on the phone recently.

As I look forward to this next term, I reflect on why I ran for elected office again. I lost my mom a year ago, and I made a promise to her that I would live out my life serving others. There is no better way to do this than by serving the people of Manville. The town she loved, the town I love.

I would like to thank my running mates, Ted and Suzanne, for working together we put out a campaign message that resonated with our residents. Also, many thanks to my family and friends, especially my wife Sharon and to my father-in-law Pete Keller, a US Marine from the Korean War for doing me the honor of holding that bible today. Veterans have a special place in my heart.

I am proud of the new council's makeup. A well-balanced team of committed residents to make Manville better. I am proud to serve alongside 3 United State veterans, (Councilman Lukac Army, Councilman Szabo Navy, and Councilman Petrock retired Air Force) and 3 councilwomen. We are all on the same team as we serve the residents of our Borough putting our personal, political views aside.

We are a team and I believe in teamwork. I have a picture hanging in the mayor's office that depicts the United States hockey team's victory over the Soviet Union back in 1980 at the height of the cold war. It is inscribed, "do you believe in miracles?" Well, I do for sure, but it also suggests that anything can be accomplished through coordinated teamwork and the willingness to work hard. The picture is a constant reminder we can

accomplish great things here in Manville and we must never lose sight of our patriotism – our love of Manville and our freedoms we enjoy living in the United States of America.

It's a new year. And with every new year, you have a fresh start. We can look back on our accomplishments and look ahead to what still needs to be accomplished. 2019 was a pretty good year for our Borough. Our 90th anniversary year. No major flooding occurred from any named hurricanes and we all hope that trend continues well into the future. We had a fabulous Community Day celebration with a great band, food, and evening ending fireworks.

The number one concern of our residents are property taxes and keeping Manville affordable. In 2019, we focused on keeping any budget increase under the 2 percent hard cap on the tax levy as we continue to provide services to our residents and acquire the necessary equipment to do so with minimum property tax impacts.

We have been focused on paying down prior bond debts from over \$10 million in recent years to under \$5 million ending 2019. This past spring, we had a new fire truck delivered to replace an engine that was 25 years old and we did so with minimum property tax impacts. Fiscally conservative management of Borough finances will continue in 2020 and beyond given the constant threat of flooding we face.

Stabilizing property taxes is a top priority as we are one of the few towns in Somerset County actively participating in the State's Blues Acres buyout program. We are actively making Manville more storm resilient as climate change is upon us. But with that comes with a price, the loss of property tax revenues and the burden of maintaining more open space around the homes that remain at risk. Restoration of our flood plains back to their natural state got us recognized and awarded an \$800,000 federal grant for construction of a new nature park along the Millstone River. The new park will be tied into the Somerset County's Greenway initiative and is a positive for the Lost Valley area.

Another major accomplishment in 2019 was a full review cycle of our active participation in FEMA's Community Rating System which reviews our actions to make Manville more storm resilient.

We achieved a class level 5 rating one of the best ratings in the state which will give a 25% discount on flood insurance premiums to homeowners carrying flood insurance policies this year. We are one of the few towns that participate in this program. It is a lot of work and another great example of teamwork within our Borough.

In April we held our 3rd annual Arbor Day celebration in support of our recent Tree City USA designation. Our shade tree commission volunteers led by Chairman Jack Kuhlman do a great job. We also held our 3rd annual National Night Out event in August promoting community involvement with our first responders. Unfortunately, times

are different today in our society. We have all seen recent reports of our law enforcement under attack in our country, so it was a nice night to thank our police force for keeping us safe. Our fire and rescue volunteers also participated, and they are second to none. I would like to thank our police force and first responders who help keep Manville a safe place to live. You have my respect.

I am a proud supporter of the Manville Arts Council, an independent 501C3 that brings the arts to Manville residents. They are just a small group of volunteers dedicated to the love of the arts. From their annual art expo held at our library and the painting of our first community mural depicting some of Manville's history to their recent bright lights fundraising contest at Christmas, these events help build our community spirit as the arts help unite our town.

And the Manville Rocks movement continues! A simple painted rock left for someone to find puts smiles on faces of all those who have found rocks hidden around town or were given a painted rock for a special occasion. I would like to give a shout out to Mark Steinberg. The primary investor in bringing Royal Farms convenience to our Main Street. He made a generous donation of \$7500 to the Arts Council to be used to help beautify our underpass.

We ended 2019 by receiving the high honor of being designated a Purple Heart Community by the Military Order of the Purple Heart – Chapter 27 and by participating in our nation's annual Wreaths Across America Day to honor and remember over 1,300 of our local veterans buried at our three cemeteries.

Our veterans are very special. There is no greater love than the love expressed for our veterans. And we have proven that in our community. Over 1,400 remembrance wreaths were sponsored and that speaks volumes for the generosity of those that live here.

Please, never lose sight of this fact. We live in a very special town, a walkable 2 square mile community of 10,000 residents with a great community spirit that one can surely feel. Our diversity today makes Manville a better, stronger community.

Looking ahead to 2020, obviously property taxes are still the number one issue in Manville and in New Jersey. We will work towards keeping the municipal tax rate at the 2019 value as we head into another budget cycle during the first quarter of this year. (Mention resident moving out because of high taxes)

Our State representatives in Trenton and our liaison to Governor Murphy's office are aware of Manville's need for additional municipal aid to offset the property tax losses from buyouts. 70 more homes are actively participating in another round of buyouts this year. We will be meeting in Trenton to discuss plans for acquiring more municipal aid for Manville as we participate in the Blue Acres program. All remaining homeowners

simply pay more because of this and it is not fair because our flooding problems in Manville have been caused by over-development all around us. Fortunately, there were no strict stormwater management laws on the books until 2004.

Our Main Street will also be our primary focus. We will be reviewing finalized plans for the reconstruction of our Main Street to enhance pedestrian safety and to slow traffic down. The Main Street project is a \$5 million dollar federally funded project with construction planned to begin in early 2021.

New plans have recently been developed for the old Rustic Mall area. They will be adopted with every available option to spark redevelopment. Sections of our south Main Street will be designated areas in need of rehabilitation opening the door for business tax breaks and grants for revitalization. We need to resurrect an active chamber of commerce so we can partner with our small business community and listen to their concerns and ideas.

We will be working to improve our storm resiliency going after federal grants for secondary power generation for Borough Hall, our Library which is our designation warming and cooling center, and our Department of Public works building.

Quality of life issues will also be addressed. Absentee landlords will be held accountable by a new ordinance introduction. Parking regulations in our municipal lots and residential roadways will also be addressed by ordinance to prevent on-going abuses.

In closing, keeping Manville affordable, improving our storm resiliency, fixing our Main Street for pedestrian safety and strengthening our community spirit will keep Manville as a very desirable place to live. God bless the Borough of Manville and all its residents.

Now it's my honor to call up my friend and adopted Mother, Pastor Rollins from the Faith In Action Church for the benediction. Everyone is invited to the Sahara restaurant across the parking lot for some lunch.

Thank You,

Mayor Richard M. Onderko