

# **STATE OF THE TOWNSHIP ADDRESS**

## **MAYOR VICTOR DE LUCA**

**January 1, 2012**

Happy New Year to all!

On November 7, 1922, the Township of Maplewood was formally established by voter referendum. As we get ready to celebrate Maplewood's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I am pleased to report the State of the Township on the first day of 2012 is great.

We are recognized as being a diverse and family-friendly community. Over the years a number of surveys have ranked us among the most desirable places to live in America. Maplewood continues to be an attractive place for people to move to and raise a family, and for business owners to set up shop.

Houses for sale are on the market for less than 70 days and the average 2011 sale price was over \$486,000, two percent higher than sales in 2010. Developers cite our "strong demographics" when speaking to retailers about opportunities here.

And if we needed further affirmation, unlike other towns around Maplewood the 2010 Census found no reduction in our population from 2000, well actually just one person less. As people leave our community, others move in because we continue to be a popular place to live.

But 2011 was not without its challenges. We had the wettest summer in the state's history, an earthquake, Tropical Storm Irene and half of foot of snow just before Halloween. In response to each event, our Police, Fire and Public Works Departments did an excellent job. Let's thank them for their work.

We also faced the test of the two percent property tax cap. I am happy to report that we passed with flying colors. The Township Committee adopted a 2011 budget with no tax increase for the average homeowner. Our goal going forward is to live within our means and keep within the two percent cap. Among the 197 resolutions passed by the Township Committee in 2011, there are four we just approved that will help us keep taxes under control. We negotiated contracts with our employee unions with salary increases of no more than two percent per year through 2015. This was an outstanding achievement and I want to thank the union leadership and Township Administrator Joseph Manning for their work on these labor agreements.

The downside is that another year has passed without any real solutions from Trenton for the property tax crisis that affects the entire state. Governor Christie points fingers at local government officials and public employees while failing to mention the tremendous cuts over the years in state aid to municipalities. In 2006, Maplewood received about \$2.8 million in state aid and five years later, in 2010, state aid totaled only \$1.8 million. Our message to the governor and state legislature is that real tax reform is still needed and it is needed now.

I see some former members of the Maplewood Township Committee here today..... We thank you for the countless hours you put in while on the Committee and want you to know that your contributions will never be forgotten.

Additionally, our appreciation goes out to the dozens of volunteers who give up their time to sit on the Township's boards or committees, helping us shape public policies. Would all board and committee members please stand. Let's thank them.

To my colleagues, the community thanks you for your commitment and willingness to give of your time and talent to Maplewood. Welcome India. We know that you will be a great addition to the team. In fact, with your presence we now have a majority of Mets fans. Thanks to all of you for choosing me as Mayor for 2012, my seventh year as Mayor since 2001.

I mentioned earlier that we passed 197 resolutions in 2011. We also adopted 27 ordinances. Most of these were fairly mundane, such as changing zoning and parking regulations, approving bond sales, adopting various fees, and establishing employee salaries. Oh, another ordinance, which passed three to two, was allowing the raising of backyard chickens for household egg gathering. This one did generated interest; in fact dozens of people came to meeting after meeting to let us know their views. This ordinance did ruffle a few feathers.

There are two ordinances I would like to highlight. Under the leadership of Mr. Ryan, we created the Maplewood Arts Council so that we could properly support and coordinate the many cultural offerings in the Township. The Arts Council has taken off with a lot of energy and we will be hearing more from them as the months pass.

Most people don't even know that Maplewood is a river town. That's right we have the East Branch of the Rahway River running through Memorial Park, providing a natural connection with South Orange.

Kathy Leventhal has led the effort to establish a "river corridor" between the two towns to provide recreational and educational opportunities along the river. We established the Rahway River Corridor Task Force to work on this project.

On the economic development front we were very busy. We negotiated for the sale and residential development of the former police station building with construction to start this spring. We held our first town-wide restaurant week with over 30 food establishments participating. We cut ribbons for the opening of new bakeries, dance studios, coffee shops, gyms, and the new Walgreen's on Springfield Avenue.

Speaking of Springfield Avenue, in November we finished ten years of work on the roadway, creating a place to go rather than just to pass through. In my 2003 State of the Township Address, I spoke about a short parade we held when we kicked off the Avenue's reconstruction in October 2002. Well on November 8th we held another parade, a much longer one and again with the high school band, to celebrate the conclusion of the construction work.

Some have asked whether the cost of the Avenue's revitalization was worth it. My question is what would be the cost if we had not taken on the project. Without any action, we would have a declining commercial strip, producing less and less taxes and becoming more of a dividing line, separating parts of town based on race and economic status. We now have an Avenue whose vitality is growing and boosting property values in adjacent residential neighborhoods. I think the \$10 million spent, with \$6 million coming from the state, was well worth it and will pay dividends for years to come.

And there is nothing that compares to Maplewood Village, our quaint, vibrant downtown shopping district. You can easily stage an "Around the World" progressive dinner there with all the different food establishments we now have. Here's the list: Italian, French, Mexican, Chinese, Indian, Thai, Middle Eastern, Greek, Japanese, Irish and American. You can also get ice cream, frozen yogurt, a slice of pizza and a cup of coffee. Oh, and don't forget cupcakes and cookies.

Parking in the Village is a concern and we just finished a parking study that will be analyzed and acted upon in the upcoming months. We also are moving forward with plans to redevelop the current post office site. The Township Committee has declared the property as an area in need of rehabilitation and a planner will be conducting community meetings to gather input on what should be built there. The Township has had preliminary talks with Kings Supermarket, which is very interested in relocating across the street to a larger, new store on the post office site. The first community meeting is on Thursday, January 19<sup>th</sup> at 7:00pm at the Burgdorff Center for the Performing Arts.

There is probably no more important municipal service we provide than public safety. In the first ten months of 2011, the Fire Department fought 81 fires and responded to 872 emergency medical service calls. Sadly our discussions with South Orange on a merged fire department were not successful. This year we will explore entering into a shared fire service agreement with one or more of three other towns that adjoin us.

Our Police Department is doing an excellent job. During the first 11 months of 2011, there has been a 15 percent reduction in the eight major crime categories, from 478 offenses to 406, a drop of 72. Burglaries are down 46% and robberies down 9%. No amount of crime is acceptable and we will work to make Maplewood as safe as it can be by using a multi-faceted approach to addressing crime problems throughout the township.

In 2012, Mr. Brownlee, as chair of our Public Safety Committee, and Mrs. Larrier, a safety committee member, will increase our attention to strengthening neighborhood associations and watch groups. Our goal is to have the community more engaged with the Police Department, serving as the eyes and ears in the community.

When you think of Maplewood, you think green, the environmental kind. We are a community that cares about the planet and the environmental imprint we are making individually and collectively. Fred Profeta deserves credit for the green initiatives we have undertaken and the respect we have earned across the state.

I can assure you that Maplewood's commitment to sustainability will continue. One example is the new residential building going up at the former police station, which will have solar energy collectors on its roof as a result of the Township's – shall I say - encouragement. Another example is the continuation of Maplewood Green Day, which will be held in April in Memorial Park.

We did a lot more in 2011. The first year of the Maplewood and South Orange municipal court and violations bureau was a rousing success. We created one of the largest non-urban court systems in the state with over 32,000 filings each year. This was a real win for Maplewood in terms of new revenue and a more efficient way of providing court services.

We paved Tuscan Road from Valley Street to Springfield Avenue, installed a new elevator in the main library building, re-designed the Township's website, entered into a shared service agreement to provide code enforcement services to South Orange, issued over 1,000 building permits totaling more than \$14 million dollars in construction work and performed 900 code and zoning inspections. We rebuilt and enlarged the parking lots at DeHart Park and made substantial improvements to the Newark Way entrance to the park.

As you know last year was the tenth anniversary of the horrific terrorist attack on the World Trade Center that killed nearly 3,000 people. A little over a year ago, Megan Kashtan, a Columbia High School senior, wrote me with a suggestion of obtaining a piece of steel from the towers to create a memorial in Maplewood to those who lost their lives on tragic day. It was a great idea and we did what she suggested. On September 11, 2011, we dedicated a memorial at the Hilton Branch of the Maplewood Library, with a piece of steel from the Trade Center. More than 100 people came out that day, participating in a very moving ceremony to remember those lost ten years ago.

So what's up ahead for us? Well, we will be holding celebrations throughout the year to celebrate Maplewood's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The Maplewood Pool will receive a \$1 million dollar upgrade, including the installation of a new water slide. I can't wait to cut the ribbon for that. Ridgewood Road will be repaved from Hoffman Street to the South Orange border and traffic calming measures will be completed on Prospect Street in front of St. Joseph's Church and at the Jacoby Street and Springfield Avenue intersection. We will start work on the Upper Ridgewood Drainage Project to address flooding that occurs in that area.

Construction will start in the spring on a mixed use two story building at the corner of Springfield and Burnett Avenues. We expect construction to begin this summer on 124 apartments and 8 townhomes at the site of the former Universal Chain factory on Burnett Avenue. The Wyman Ford dealership on Springfield Avenue is scheduled to be sold and converted into a retail shop. A developer has a contract to purchase and build on 1.1 acres along Springfield Avenue between Jacoby Street and Chancellor Avenue. And the Woman's Club property is scheduled for a major upgrade.

And to help our local businesses, the Township will sponsor an information fair for local business owners interested in learning how to do business with the Township. We buy hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of goods and services each year and we want to keep that business and those dollars in Maplewood. Thanks to Joe Manning for this idea.

As part of our commitment to accessibility, the Township Committee will maintain the monthly Talk to the Township Committee sessions, adding two more times at the Public Works recycling depot and changing the Springfield Avenue location from Prospect Street to Walgreen's. We also will continue to use the Township's website to post documents, reports, studies and other information of interest to the community. Our position is that if it is a public document, you should and will be able to find it on our website.

We could not do what we do without a terrific supporting cast. Joe Manning, Township Clerk Elizabeth Fritzen and Township Attorney Roger Desiderio do a great job. Our department heads and the Maplewood employees are first rate professionals. We thank all of you. Please stand.

This is my seventh State of the Township Address and I am more excited about the future than ever before. I think we have hit the "sweet spot" with the economy slowly turning in our favor and major projects coming to fruition.

I thank the people of Maplewood for giving us the opportunity to serve you and be part of this exciting time. Sure there are real challenges ahead. But if we continue to work together, as government, as residents and as the business community, we will overcome anything that comes our way.

Today, January 1, 2012, is the starting point for that effort. In our 90<sup>th</sup> year, let's make Maplewood better each and every day. Get active, stay involved, let's work together.

Thank you.