

Reflections on 2017 by Mayor Carolyn Gaziano

2017 was a very busy year in Bernards Township with many accomplishments. One of my new initiatives as Mayor was to showcase the diversity of the people, places and things of Bernards Township by posting one photo each day on our Township Facebook page. On the screen you will see a selection of some of my favorite of these photos from 2017. A side benefit of this project has been that it has steadily increased our communications with the public, our Facebook page followers increased from 1200 up to 1740.

In 2017 Bernards Township continued the conservative fiscal policies of controlled spending, pay as you go, avoidance of debt, and maintaining low municipal taxes. We paid off all remaining open space debt in December, making Bernards Township now entirely debt-free. Over the life of the open space tax Bernards Township has purchased and preserved 770 acres of land. Overall 20% of Bernards Township Land Mass, 3211 acres, is protected open space.

In 2017 Bernards Township continued to provide the highest levels of service while keeping municipal taxes as low as possible, with an increase in the tax rate of only .006 from 2016 to 2017; and of only .023 from 2005 to 2017. Bernards has the second lowest equalized municipal tax rate in the state of NJ of towns with populations of 7,500 or more. Construction activity is up, office vacancies are at a low 2%, and major corporations are moving employees into Bernards. The 2017 budget contained reductions in salaries and wages, health benefit premiums, and utility costs.

The Township paved 14 roads and continued maintenance and repairs on roads, sidewalks, and guardrails. We installed traffic calming measures on Spring Valley/Acken Roads and a traffic study of the intersection of Mine Brook and Canterbury Roads is underway. The Township is partnering with Somerset County on 2018 pedestrian safety initiatives on Allen Road. We made improvements to park facilities, playgrounds, the Liberty Corner tennis courts, the platform tennis courts, and began work on replacing pedestrian bridges.

The Township contributed \$750,000 from the affordable housing trust fund to Valley Brook for Veteran's Housing.

The Township purchased an ambulance for the Basking Ridge First Aid Squad and a rescue truck for the Liberty Corner Fire Company.

Bernards Township enjoys statewide recognition as a leading municipality in the Sustainable New Jersey program, attaining silver certification. We have large scale solar panel array projects on the Township's former landfill, and at the township sewerage treatment plant, which bring in revenue and produce approximately 1,150,000 kWh in excess of our total electrical usage (Twp, Street lights, BT Sewerage Authority). Our carbon footprint (electricity, natural gas, vehicle fuel) has been reduced to near zero for Bernards Township sewer and municipal operations.

In 2016 the Islamic Society of Basking Ridge (ISBR) and former Bernards Township Mayor Mohammed Ali Chaudry filed suit against the Bernards Township Planning Board and Bernards Township for religious discrimination by the planning board for its denial of a mosque in 2015. On December 31, 2016 United States District Judge Michael A. Shipp ruled that the Planning Board discriminated against the ISBR by using a different standard for determining the number of parking spaces required than the standard used for churches. In 2017 Bernards Township and the Bernards Township Planning Board reached a settlement with ISBR with the cost to taxpayers limited to the small insurance deductible. The settlement allowed the Town to avoid the tremendous time and cost of continued litigation and the risk of a potentially huge financial jury award. We also settled a lawsuit with the United States Department of Justice keeping all of the stronger provisions of our ordinance while making only one change to satisfy the DOJ.

This year I attended and participated over 180 events including township, school and community events. Some of the highlights were:

- *Presenting at the court of honor for 13 Eagle Scouts.*

- *Officiating 10 wedding ceremonies.*
- *Speaking at the school events such as the JSA Leadership Summit at Ridge High School, Participating in a panel for the US Government and Economics classes at Ridge, Attending presentations by the Ridge AP Environmental Studies Classes, and having lunch meetings with the William Annin 6th, 7th, and 8th grade student council members*
- *Participating in township events such as Charter Day, The Memorial Day parade, Plays in the Park, Pumpkins in the Park, and the Veterans Day Field of Honor.*
- *Attending groundbreaking/ribbon cutting ceremonies at Daiichi Sankyo, Bonnie Brae, and Fellowship Village.*
- *Celebrating Holi and Diwali with the Basking Ridge Indian Community.*
- *Attending dinners for Veterans with venison provided by the Bernards Township Deer Management Committee.*
- *Attending the opening reception for the U.S. Women's Open Golf Tournament at the USGA Headquarters.*
- *Attending the Mental Health Resources Fair, Scared Straight by Michael DeLeon, the Twilight Challenge, the Stigma Art Show, and Knock Out Opioids Day.*
- *Attending arts events and concerts at the Ross Farm and the Farmstead Arts Center.*
- *Marching in the Basking Ridge Presbyterian Church 300th Anniversary Parade.*

This year one of my projects as Mayor was to showcase the diversity of the people of Bernards Township through a Speakers Series on Diversity, Inclusion, Immigration and Culture. Each of the five speakers; Leona Kral - Czechoslovakia, Arthur Yu - China, Nasrine Shadpoor - Iran, Rugh Klippel - Norway, Oahn Ngo Usadi - Vietnam, told their riveting stories of escape, immigration and assimilation into American culture.

In 2017 the Township Committee continued to work on the quarry redevelopment project started in 2015 by the quarry advisory council for the 180 acre quarry property. The goals and objectives for the quarry redevelopment plan include that it should:

- *Result in permanent cessation of quarry operations.*
- *Include a usable future lake with public access; require a future lake management structure and design that minimizes Bernards Township's liability and maintenance obligations.*
- *Incorporate water-based recreation with safe public access to the lake.*
- *Yield positive fiscal impacts for Bernards Township. It should establish privately built and managed amenities that allow public use, and allow for a variety of uses that will result in a positive fiscal impact on the Township's tax base.*
- *Establish walkable connectivity with pedestrian links to surrounding neighborhoods.*
- *Be consistent with Bernards Township's Green Building and Environmental Sustainability Plan Element of the Master Plan.*
- *Incorporate sustainable and innovative environmentally friendly design into all aspects of development.*
- *Enhance habitat for native plants and wildlife.*
- *Improve the quality of life for Bernards Township's residents.*

It is my hope that as we continue to work on this in 2018 we can develop a plan that meets these objectives and satisfies the community.

Finally, Basking Ridge's 600 year old Great White Oak Tree died in 2016 and was removed on April 24, 2017. It is said that George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette picnicked underneath the iconic tree, the oldest known White Oak Tree in America. The story of the tree was documented by local film producer, Michael Reynolds, CBS news, the New York Times, NJ.com and others. The large pieces of wood from the tree will be made into a communion table for the Presbyterian Church, a conference table for the Township, and a cross section of the trunk will be preserved for education and to serve as a memorial to the tree's history. Since being cut down the tree's rings have been counted and it was

determined that the tree began life in the year 1398 and was 619 years old. A lead musket ball was also discovered embedded in the tree, presumably from the revolutionary war period.

The tree will live on, however, thanks to Professor Tom Ombrello of Union County College, who grew saplings from acorns collected from the great white oak. One of those saplings, now 16 years old and 25 feet tall, was donated to the Presbyterian church and planted on the north side where it will have room to grow.

I would like to thank our Township Staff for their tireless efforts this year, in particular, Bruce McArthur, Denise Szabo, Terri Johnson, Tom Timko, Dave Schley, Pat Monaco and Township Attorney John Belardo. It has been my honor and pleasure to serve as Mayor. I wish everyone a happy and healthy New Year.

*Thank you.
Carolyn Gaziano
January 2, 2018*