

NEW YEAR'S DAY 2009 MESSAGE

by

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BOROUGH of HIGHTSTOWN

Happy New Year....2009! The year ahead will be full of challenges as we face the financial realities that exist for all municipalities and the State of New Jersey. We need to remember author Stephen Covey's advice on effectiveness and efficiency when he said, "*We may be very busy, we may be very efficient, but we will also be truly effective only when we begin with the end in mind.*"

For us, "**the end**" that we have in mind is a budget that does not include an increase in property taxes. That is the essence of zero based budgeting. This Council is charged with doing this and each councilmember has committed him/her self to finding the solution to this challenge. We will all be working together on this in the next few months and we welcome the public's presence and ideas as we do so. The Yankee adage, that my wife is so fond of telling me, "Use it up, wear it out, make do or do without," has taken on real significance and we consider all our options this year.

We can point with pride to the many steps we have taken to reduce our 2008 budget--our automated garbage collection, our shared services with other communities, our staffing in which we are doing more with less, our use of technology and plans for clean and efficient solar power. We will continue to find ways and add them to the list of efforts being made as we cope with the realities of the current economy. Our controllable costs of operating have been reduced by about 25%; however, our minimal or uncontrollable costs have risen by more than that.

Council members, please carefully review our 2008 budget and our Extraordinary Aid Application for CY 2008. You will find that the borough is running efficiently and effectively. However, there are circumstances beyond our control; namely, the school and the county taxes. They make up about 75% of our total property tax bill. And, yet, the council is the target of criticism because the borough sends out the bills.

Here is a portion of the language in the borough's application to the State of New Jersey for Extraordinary Aid in 2008:

>"In discussing the need for Extraordinary Aid, it is important to note that Hightstown Borough and East Windsor Township share a regional school district. Not only do our school taxes continue to escalate at an alarming rate . . . . ., but three of the District's six schools (including its only high school) are located within the Borough and fall under our jurisdiction. Our police department responds to approximately 150 calls each year at the high school alone, a cost which has been absorbed solely by the Borough's taxpayers, and which is far in excess of the Borough's appropriate share. (The Borough's share of school taxes is less than 14%.)"

>"With respect to the public schools and other tax exempt entities, our residents bear a dual financial burden: these tax exemptions not only reduce our ratable base substantially, but we also incur the costs of providing them with police protection and other services, and they serve a wider community than merely the Borough itself. For example:

\*The Post Office located in the Borough services all of Zip Code 08520, the zip code for Hightstown and East Windsor Township.

\*Hightstown is home to 12 houses of worship, each of which serves not only Hightstown but several of our surrounding communities.

\*The Cedar Hill Cemetery is a large 18 acre tax-exempt property located in Hightstown that serves a much larger community."

Council, the municipal portion (25%) of the property tax bill is the target for your consideration in 2009. The State of New Jersey is in very bad economic times. It must reduce spending to offset reduced revenues. Small and large businesses are shuttering doors. Our residents are loosing their jobs and cutting expenditures to fight this economic recession. Can you do the same? I trust that the answer is "YES!" because you care.

To our fellow Hightstonians, rest assure that we will consider any and all possibilities that will bring benefit and tax relief to you.

There are joys ahead as well as the challenges; however, it is a matter of viewing the glass as being half empty or half full....as we go forward. One of the aspects contributing to the fullness of our town is its .....spirit.

What defines Hightstown? We have called it the “Heartbeat of New Jersey,” ...”One square mile of paradise,” .....the “jelly” in the donut...the sweet part, of course! But, when you think about what makes our town really unique, ....it’s the spirit that prevails, through good times and not so good times, that, I believe, defines us as a strong and vibrant group of people.

Hightstown--your town, my town and ”Our Town”-- thrives on its volunteers! In 2008, our volunteers outdid themselves with a year of wonderful events:

- The Fountain at the Point and the Phase III project of our downtown revitalization from Rogers Avenue to Academy Street.
- Downtown Hightstown Committee and its website [www. Downtown Hightstown.org](http://www.DowntownHightstown.org).
- The local designation of the Stockton Street Historic District through the efforts of the Historic Preservation Commission.
- The 6<sup>th</sup> Annual Community Fair with over 5000 people in attendance and the committee’s purchase of five pedal boats which helped to generate a source of funding for the Parks & Recreation Commission.
- The Parks & Recreation Commission’s first annual Triathlon (coordinated by Darek Hahn) with 70 participants diving into Peddie Lake, bicycling and running throughout our town’s streets. The proceeds went to help fund the skate park that Rick Pratt has spearheaded.
- The first annual Halloween Home Decorating Contest, coordinated by Kathy Patten, which had twenty residences participating.
- The Downtown Hightstown first annual Winter Holiday Business Decorating Contest.
- K&B Tattoo Shop’s Annual Christmas Toy Collection Drive for HPD/EWPD PBAs.
- All done on the same day: The Historical Society and Historic Preservation Commission’s Porch Tour .....and the Memorial Day Parade .....and Joe Mannino’s 160 foot long hoogie that raised funds for the Christina Walsh Foundation.

- The Animal Welfare Committee's Second Annual Paws Walk with over 150 happy dogs and their owners walking throughout Hightstown ...and no doggie droppings left as evidence.....and its efforts in three years to Trap, Neuter, Release or Adopt 170 cats and to have 60 felines adopted.
- The Borough's May and the Apollo Lodge's October borough-wide Yard Sales with proceeds going to great humanitarian causes.
- The establishment of the Community Solidarity Group to promote a community wide understanding and appreciation for our population's diversity.
- The Rocky Brook Garden Club and Santa's elves who decorated the entire downtown for the holidays...on a sub-freezing morning in November. Thank you to Chris Moraitis and the Tellers for creating a spirit for the winter holidays.
- The fabulous historical society's volunteers for its House Tour and green-thumb volunteers of the Rocky Brook Garden Club for its Garden Tour this summer.
- We need to honor those unsung heroes and organizations who are constantly contributing to the well-being of our wonderful town.
- And finally, our incredible Fire Department with its 250 calls answered this year and monthly average of 100 hours by its volunteers, led by Fire Chief John Archer, who is retiring from his office after ten years of extraordinary leadership.

All of these events took place for the benefit of our town... we are blessed by the presence of our volunteers who seem to know very well this quote by Marjorie Moore:

***“Volunteerism is the ultimate exercise in democracy. You vote in elections once a year, but when you volunteer, you vote every day about the kind of community you want to live in.”***

We all owe our hundreds of community volunteers our greatest thanks for creating the kind of community in which we all want to live! Yes, it's that community spirit that prevails in Hightstown. It does define us as a powerful group of people, a real small-town community, a wonderful model of Americana at its best!

Again, have the best year of your life in 2009! Thank you for joining us today.