

Town of Walton

"State of the Town Message"

January marked the beginning of a new fiscal year for the Township of Walton and as such, it provides a good opportunity to review some of the highlights from 2016, where we are now, and what we can look forward to in the future.

To begin with, the state of the town's fiscal affairs: With all the news about our nation's increasing debt, Walton can be proud of the fact that the town is debt free! This is a result of conscientious budgeting and close scrutiny of spending by the town board over many years. An aggressive "pay-back" in 2004 resulted in the retirement of the town's outstanding municipal bonds and the associated interest payments that accompany such bonds. Expenditures in our 2017 budget went down from 2016 and our anticipated revenues went up slightly. As a result, we were able to keep the "tax levy" (what we must raise from taxes) at the same level as 2016's budget, approximately \$1.3M. Folks may wonder why taxes didn't go down if spending is going down and income is going up? The answer is that in previous years, we had more "unspent" money to offset anticipated expenses. Unfortunately, that was not the case this year. In spite of maintaining the same tax levy, some residents may have noticed their town taxes went up this year. This can be attributed to two of four town fund accounts; the "General Town-Wide" and "Highway Town-Wide" accounts having a smaller than usual carry over balance (Highway) and the cost of town wide revaluation (General). With the final payment to the revaluation company occurring later this year, and barring any major unexpected expenses, we anticipate some relief in next year's budget. Finally, the state has a "Fiscal Stress Monitoring System" which tracks town, village, and school financial data and identifies those that are at risk. The Town of Walton has garnered the state's very best rating of "No Designation".

The town faced several key challenges in 2016:

1. Probably the biggest challenge to be faced by the town was a complete top-to-bottom "revaluation" of the over 3,500 properties in the township. The goal of this endeavor was to ensure that everyone paid their fair share of taxes and newly appointed town Assessor, Fran Zujovic, has been extremely busy overseeing this project. The last time this was done was in 1971. Over the years buildings were constructed, structures were torn down, and additions were made but not always captured in the town's records. The "Revaluation" company sent staff to each of the properties to verify our records and make corrections as needed. Based on an analysis of the property and comparison to similar properties, each individual assessment will be adjusted to fairly reflect the property's true

value. Property owners can expect to be notified of the results in early March.

2. Sidney Federal Credit Union (SFCU) challenged their assessment in 2015. In response to this challenge, the town hired a law firm that specializes in such matters and, in the process, commissioned an independent appraisal of the property in question. Based on the results of the appraisal, it was determined that SFCU's assessment was indeed too high and the records were adjusted accordingly.
3. The Kraft-Heinz Corporation (Breakstone's) has also challenged their assessment, asking for a 90% reduction. As was the case with SFCU, the town has hired a law firm specializing in assessment challenges. This challenge is more complicated than that of SFCU, necessitating both a real property appraisal and a fixtures appraisal. The case is still under litigation and hopefully will be resolved by spring.

Some of the key accomplishments for the town, in 2016, include:

1. Much progress was made on the site of the old Reporter Company building, now known as "Veterans' Plaza". Grass, shrubs, and trees have been planted. A pavilion was constructed and an anonymous donor donated a spruce tree and red, white, and blue Christmas lights to compliment the plaza. In July, the town hosted the first major event at the site whose focus was "10 Years of Building Resilience" and featured numerous displays of before and after photos showing Walton flooding events over the past 80+ years.
2. In an effort to ease the property tax burden on our low income senior citizens, the town council voted to offer a senior citizen exemption identical to the one already offered by the county.
3. The town executed a land swap with the owner of the stone quarry adjacent to More Park. This turned out to be a win-win proposition as the quarry owner gained land immediately adjacent to his operation to form a safety buffer in exchange for an equal amount of land in immediate proximity to the Christmas star. Upon conclusion of the agreement, the town public works crew cleared brush and trees, greatly expanding the view of Walton from the park and the view of the star from up and down the Walton valleys.
4. Many old time residents may recall the beautiful view one used to get driving down Bear Spring Mountain. Due to the hard work of the state highway crew and their effort in clearing brush and trees, folks can once again take in the breathtaking view from the lower pull-off.
5. One should not overlook the work of the town's highway department. With nearly 100 miles of paved and dirt roads to maintain, the crew has kept extremely busy, not only with plowing and sanding in the winter months, but also over the summer as they sealed in excess of 20 miles of pavement, thus extending the life of the roads and saving money.

6. When looking back at the past year, one can't help but notice the thousands of dollars of taxpayer money saved by Highway Superintendent Walt Geidel through diligently seeking government surplus equipment. (For instance, the town paid \$2,400 for a 1997 Ford vacuum truck which would normally have sold for approximately \$59,000!)
7. Not to be out done, Town Clerk Ronda Williams secured a \$50,000 state grant from Senator Bonacic's office (**Thank You Senator!**) to offset the cost of converting our newly acquired dump truck into a plow truck.
8. The Walton Flood Commission has been very active over the last year and spearheading this activity for the town has been Flood Plain Manager Steve Dutcher. His hard work has had a direct impact on the residents of both the town and village as Walton received a community Rating System Class 8 rating which qualifies Walton residents for a 10% discount on their flood insurance.
9. Finally, the town has spearheaded an effort to reestablish a flood gauge on East Brook. In 2013 the United States Geological Survey (USGS) removed the gauge upstream from Townsend School. Letters signed by key leaders throughout the community were sent to state and federal elected officials and administrators, requesting their support in not only getting the East Brook gauge reinstated but also installing gauges on West Brook and Third Brook. The flood gauges would provide real time monitoring data to emergency operations centers in Delhi and at the Walton Fire Hall and could provide early warning for school administrators and Walton residents in times of potential flooding.

So what can we look forward to in 2017?

1. The Town's Comprehensive Plan provides the a roadmap for where we see the Township heading to in the future and the steps necessary to achieve that vision. The plan was last updated in 2006 and the planning board is actively engaged in overseeing the rewrite of the plan.
2. Veterans' Plaza provides a perfect site for a wide range of community activities and we hope to see its frequent use over the months to come. Already a community health fair has been scheduled for June 10, 2017 and the town board is planning a dedication ceremony for sometime in April. Finally, with its central location and ample parking, the plaza would make an ideal location for a recurring farmers market.
3. If all goes well, 2017 will see the installation of the abovementioned flood gauges.
4. Currently, the Delaware County Mental Health Clinic is spread out over three locations, 18 employees work at the Adult Care Center adjacent to Delaware Valley Hospital, 10 employees work at the Family and Children's Services Center on the corner of East and Sheppard Streets, and 12 employees at the Substance Abuse Center located in rented space at the Delaware Opportunities complex in Hamden. The county is looking to

consolidate these activities in a new facility. Although the final location of this new facility has yet to be determined, two of the three leading sites are in Walton. Construction will probably not start until 2018, but a decision is expected to be made by the Board of Supervisors this summer, if not before.

5. The Watershed Agricultural Council (WAC) currently works out of two locations: A converted farmhouse on Route 10 between Walton and Hamden and rented space at 44 West Street in Walton. The WAC too is looking to consolidate in a newly constructed facility, some place along the Route 10 corridor between Walton and Delhi. There are several potential locations that could accommodate this new facility and the town will continue to advocate for a facility in Walton.
6. For several months, the county Industrial Development Agency (IDA) has been working with an entrepreneur interested in opening up a slaughter house in the Walton industrial park. In December the proposal came before the Town Planning Board and was approved. It is anticipated that the plant would employ five people and the owner is open to taking on apprentices. If all goes well, the goal is to open the facility sometime in 2018.
7. The town will continue to seek new job opportunities and businesses while supporting our existing merchants and businesses. Although our efforts to bring ALDI to Walton proved unsuccessful (they require a population of 30,000 - 40,000 within a 15 mile radius), we will not stop looking for new prospects.

Finally, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the town council members, the members of the Zoning Board of Appeals, the Planning Board, the Board of Assessment Review, our deputy clerks, attorney, dog catcher, code enforcement officer, and our town judges and court clerk for all their behind the scenes work that contribute so greatly to the smooth operation of our town. We are truly blessed to have such a competent and dedicated cadre of community servants.

Respectfully Submitted

Charles F. Gregory
Walton Town Supervisor