

Exit ---12/17/25 ---Mayor Josh Cohn

Speaking text – not all remarks, changes/on the fly edits reflected.

Eight years. So much in the rear-view mirror. I often said it when first running for office, and I meant it and tried to live by it, “ I am not now nor have I ever been a politician.” That has worked well and then sometimes profoundly not. Here I find myself wishing to do something politicianish, or maybe it’s just human: that is, to close out with a retelling of some of the things that went well. That will be the major theme of this talk, with a partially repressed minor in things that went not so well.

Let me emphasize that I will refer to things that happened during my tenure. I make no claim that I did them. Municipal accomplishment is a team effort. It takes staff and all the appointed and elected volunteers that make up our government. I get to catalog the good stuff, but I can’t claim I done it.

For a somewhat different tack, please refer to my February 26 Mayor’s Message, on the city website, under the Government and Mayor tabs.

So, here goes:

ZONING - We have finished three zoning text amendments, two zoning code restrictions and one related change to the scope of authority of the Board of Architectural Review.

The first text amendment we did was requested for the initial benefit of the YMCA, seeking to use the empty Mrs. Green’s grocery building for yoga and exercise studios. We said yes, knowing that we might be compounding parking issues. We took that risk to accept needed change, though we still struggle with the parking pressure.

The second zoning text amendment allowed new uses of what had for decades been the Avon building at the corner of Peck and Midland. After many

hearings and much negotiation with the new owners of the property, we approved new uses that have proven to allow the leasing of the existing building to New York Blood Centers. Although some residents living nearby were quite concerned, it appears that the facility has brought new life and new personnel to the long empty building, without disruption. My compliments to the Rye-based purchasers of the Avon property, led by Peter Duncan, who worked hard to make this good for Rye.

The third zoning text amendment was for the Osborn, enabling it to begin planning the new buildings and renovations it says that it needs to stay competitive. This effort was interrupted by COVID and extended by our wrongly (in hindsight) asking the Osborn to rush to present a premature and hypothetical design. (Ordinarily no design would have been required at this stage.) The hypothetical design increased neighbor antipathy. After more than twenty public sessions at Planning Commission and City Council, a much-revised zoning text passed. This was followed by a baseless suit by neighbors alleging environmental wrong. After so many years of delay, the Osborn determined to make small border concessions to settle the suit so that it could proceed with design. The Osborn provides a tremendous service to ageing Rye residents and to ageing relatives of Rye residents who move here to be close to family, as well as a local rehab facility. It is good that the Osborn will stay.

Our new zoning restrictions were on flag lot development and steep slope development. Accompanying these restrictions, was an expansion of Board of Architectural Review jurisdiction to allow it to consider the orientation of structures on their lots to limit “sideways houses.” This trio of provisions was originally suggested by Planning Commission chair Nick Everett. That dovetailed with a consensus separately arrived at among the otherwise divided tree subcommittee of the council that flag lot development presented the principal remaining risk of wholesale tree loss in Rye. The steep slope development restriction echoed this tree protection theme, i.e., steep slope properties previously too difficult or expensive to develop often had provided

welcome green patches that were disappearing, yielding greater development density and environmental pressures.

The fish that got away was the comprehensive plan, just now approaching initiation. We deferred it through COVID, through Ida and through the follow-on period of heavy staff commitments. More than a year ago, two councilmembers and I proposed, consistent with the city planner's advice, that the council immediately appoint a committee of Rye residents to choose the necessary consultant and begin work. This council instead wanted to choose the consultant for the committee before appointing the committee, and here we are, just interviewing consultants. I wish our successors good luck with the plan and the zoning amendments that may follow. I hope many residents will participate in the process, but with knowledge that comprehensive plans generally are "macro" in outlook and don't provide the detailed direction some desire.

FLOODING – We did great with this. "Say what?" you say. We have laid the foundation for easing Rye flood risk, but in doing that we learned that easing will require continued civic attention over many years. Why? First, mother earth put what is now Rye 400 feet lower than where Blind Brook begins, now the Westchester airport. Then the hand of man laid out our little town along the brook, unknowing that later people would render much of the 11 miles upstream impervious, with fast draining roads, parking lots, two super-highways and an airport runway all having the brook as a flash flood prone storm drain. And that brook is girdled with undersized bridges, culverts and channels that become dams spreading flood waters laterally. To fix this requires the cooperation of upstream neighbors, many projects, the studies needed to support funding for the projects and the massive funding to pay for it all.

How have we done in our moment? We sponsored our own upstream engineering study and worked with NYS DEC on a study of projects-to-do in Rye. We asked DEC for a similar Beaver Swamp Brook study, also complete. The Blind Brook upstream study convinced us that we must slow floods

upstream, before they reach Rye. We conceptualized a project on the SUNY Purchase campus that is on hold due to campus hesitation and the recent termination of the FEMA program that may have funded it. We are tackling the replacement of the Locust Avenue bridge (half-funded) and DEC has assigned funds to the County specifically to replace the county-owned Oakland Avenue and Playland Parkway bridges. We commissioned a study to see if channel improvements, possibly with a water retention aspect, can be done for the benefit of the Y, the library and the city, in conjunction with Locust Avenue bridge replacement. And we have installed stream gauges on Blind Brook to help program the Bowman Dam sluice gate, mucked out some of Upper Bowman Pond and improved Milton Road stormwater drainage with old NY Rising funds. We started preliminary discussions regarding a possible rebuild of the brook culvert under BPR near the high school. We have achieved Army Corps recognition as suitable for its initial level of study and our senators have obtained part of the funds needed if we choose to begin. We are in touch with our neighbors and the county, and we are participating in the revived Long Island Sound Watershed Intermunicipal Council.

With Ida, we witnessed along with brook flooding, the overflow of our aged stormwater drainage system. We have invested more than \$1 million in improvements, but that is just a beginning.

Is all this a lot or a little? It is a lot. We now have a plan backed by studies. That represents much time and money spent to qualify for the funding Rye will need in the future. But in truth, all we have done is what is needed to move this generational project, city administration by administration, forward.

**PUBLIC SAFETY – FIRE DEPARTMENT AND PD –** We have had good fortune and cooperation in our necessary conversion from volunteer command to career command. Our thanks are due to Chief Bochiccio for his continued leadership and huge contribution of time and energy. Thanks, too, to retired Captain McDwyer, for his work in keeping our combination department together and now to Captain Pitts for his professional efforts at the helm. I have been quoted in the press as questioning whether our past career

firefighter hiring (four in my time) has been sufficient to allow the city to diminish reliance on overtime. I am for at least the one additional firefighter previously proposed, subject to the budget discussion we are about to have.

As for our PD, it weathered well the Albany-mandated review several years ago, with our Police Advisory Committee a welcome addition to our galaxy of volunteer committees. Our PD, like our FD, is well-liked for its demeanor and well-respected for its professionalism. I hope our budget session today will provide for adding a police hire to help ensure efficient delivery of services.

Our PD and FD are capably supervised by Public Safety Commissioner Mike Kopy. We are grateful for the years Mike has spent with the city. Though he doesn't look the part, Mike is a unicorn. He is that rare combination that our city charter requests, one with both police and fire expertise. Now that our FD leadership is trained to spec, if Mike ever leaves us, it may be that we revert to separate PD and FD command. TBD

NURSERY FIELD – Thank you to the parents' groups that raised the funds and fought the battle to get this done. It wouldn't if you hadn't. Those of us who supported the project on the council did our best to make sure that we answered to the extent possible all concerns. It is a beautiful field. So far, I have heard nothing but compliments, but for one problem that I hope the field users' parents can solve. Cars must leave the parking lot on time to allow those next on the field to get in. Let's make this work.

CAPITAL PROGRAM – This is a tough one. I take pride in the council response to stated need and in the concept, but execution, no. In 2018, we, mostly a new council, were introduced to the capital plan, literally a book of projects badly in need of doing. I think we shocked city staff by saying we would do the most pressing, though the projects were hardly sexy. A new DPW garage, a new salt shed, etc. Hah - the politicians laughed. But we were not politicians. And if the project needed doing, we were there to make it happen. Of course, we had no clue that COVID was around the corner, to be followed quickly by Ida. And we had no idea that our commitment to help clean the sound by settling our STS/DEC lawsuits would require \$14 million in sewer work and

additional demands. We successfully bonded to build, but then we didn't. We did get the new Disbrow fuel depot done and the environment will thank us. But the salt shed, now two years past groundbreaking, is still not done. The new garage bids came in way over budget and after a long pause we will see a new plan tonight. City Hall HVAC has at last been bid, with staging to start in early January. And the new or renovated courthouse/police station – well, we have some ideas, top secret, to be taken up with the Office of Court Administration in January.

Yes, we did amazing things, including Nursery Field. But our bonded-for projects languished. Along the way, we saw progress reports that in retrospect appear as fantasy. We didn't spend bond money and paid arbitrage penalties that reduced investment income. But more importantly, the projects all have become more and more expensive. The lesson: get the work to which we are committed done. If there are problems, air them immediately. If our project needs exceed our staff capacity either add staff or take on the consultants temporarily needed to succeed. Having dollars vaporized by time and inflation is wrong. I believe our Interim City Manager and staff know this and will do what is needed.

A different case has been the Forest Avenue sidewalk. We secured the needed grant, but with it came the task of getting DOT approvals throughout an extended design process that has taken, yes, seven years. I trust that the same renewed energy behind our capital program soon will make this truly neighborhood changing project a reality.

FINANCES – Scoff not, I am going to speak well of our finances in a year with a larger than usual tax increase. Notice that phrase, “usual tax increase.” Why “usual?” Because the city is a service provider with limited sources of revenue. It is subject to the same material, fuel and labor cost increases as the rest of the world. We have been lucky in getting grants, fair in increasing fees and fines, and reticent in increasing taxes in an environment where inflation ran wild and “affordability” became a political trope. We haven't yet found a way to levy tariffs. And so we present tonight a conservative tax

increase, just enough to fund the city as is, though some of us may favor addition to allow staff enhancement in our primary responsibility, public safety.

ENVIRONMENTAL – Put aside flooding and flood resilience. We don't get many kudos for it, but we made a huge environmental investment, about \$14 million worth, in settling the Save the Sound and DEC suits against the city by agreeing to renovate and better maintain our sanitary system. We initiated this as a matter of principle, not knowing exactly what would be involved until we completed the required sewer system study. The settlement process ultimately dictated years of work, accomplished with state funding (thank you, Steve Otis, Shelley Mayer and the Gov) and much resident frustration as roads were torn open. Rye's sewage leakage into the sound is now diminished. Unfortunately, we find ourselves subject to a Save the Sound bureaucracy that appears overbearing and manipulative in its efforts to exact continuing concessions from a city doing its best.

Mentioned as a capital project is City Hall HVAC – replacing the current 60-year-old, energy wasteful heating and cooling system for this building and installing LED lighting. This \$3 million project will be a big energy saver and provide far greater comfort to building occupants.

For the trees we all love, post flag lot and steep slope restrictions, we strengthened our tree law. We intended to be moderate and whether we were too moderate is being looked at by city staff and through 2026's natural resource inventory.. Maybe there is more to do.

We re-enlisted with Tree City USA and we actually have a city tree planting program that accounted for 283 new trees in 2024.

The city is using EVs and electric powered equipment to the extent practicable. We reviewed city properties' suitability for solar power collection and came up short on an expense basis. I hope we will continue to reassess.

A start needs to be made on coastal resilience issues that will intensify with sea level rise.

LABOR CONTRACTS – We started with expired contracts and we finish with contracts in place for another three years. We turned a corner several years ago by doing away with some unhelpful idiosyncrasies. With our contracts regularized, we can fit more easily into the bargaining norms prevailing across comparable munis.

ROADS – Yes, they are better by dint of our decision to have consultant engineering guidance on how much annual investment is needed to maintain an improving trend and on which streets to spend that money each year – entirely without any politics.

BOAT BASIN – Dead as a dodo, a predecessor Rye official said. Not so. With a combination of Boat Basin Commission tenacity (a thank you here to chair Joe Pecora and his predecessor of blessed memory, Robert November) and financial and managerial insight from city staff, we managed a dredge that has more than saved the boat basin. But as the saying goes, silt happens! Before long another expensive dredge will be needed.

On our way to our dredge, we fought a hard but losing battle to keep the Coast Guard maintaining Milton Harbor channel markers. Our senators were particularly helpful, but it will not be until we dredge a little deeper that we can retire our city-maintained markers from what remains a federal channel.

CELL TOWERS – Yes, we defeated the onslaught of mini cell towers that once threatened our streets. And that was the right thing to do, even acknowledging our ever-increasing desire to rely on “devices.” Why? Because the Public Service Commission, in its wisdom, approved withdrawal of the copper wire landline system that provided communications despite power failures. Substitute voice over internet service fails when the power fails. Mini cell towers fail, too. Rye wants more cellular facilities that are generator supported during power failures. Though we have added two such facilities (the tower-not-exactly-where-we bargained-for by the train station and the Rye Town Park installation), city staff continues to try to find a provider to add appropriate facilities in areas desiring more service.

CON EDISON STORM PREP – I remember at least three major storms that produced lengthy power outages, Riley, Quinn and Isaias. I joined an ad hoc group of public officials that called itself “United Westchester.” On the executive committee, I participated in fact finding, report producing and testifying. We brought change. The lights still go out, but they come on again sooner. Now, Con Ed must bring in some of the emergency help it needs in advance and must have extra trucks available to be crewed by linemen flying in from afar, rather than driving their own rigs to get here. That’s why you see a tented staging area going up in the Playland parking lot in advance of major storms, rather than in the days following. Con Ed is also supposed to be storm hardening its system. I understand that is the purpose of the new brawnier wooden poles getting planted around town.

Quality of Life Laws – Revised rock chipping and blasting laws came out of the controversial development of 95-97 Oakland Beach, along with the flag lot and steep slope restrictions. These tighter controls on traumatic excavation techniques were designed with consulting engineer input and hopefully make a harsh fact of Rye life, building on rock, a little easier for neighbors to bear. We also have tried to improve gas leaf blower regulation on the way to an all - electric world, a matter still needing work.

COVID – obviously a disaster but let me pull some good things from it. Rye residents confronted it together in many ways, from the Love Rye campaign to the hand sewn masks. The city had a lot to do, from reinventing City Hall in virtual form so that business could be done remotely to trying to enforce bewildering state mandates on everything from in-person businesses to finding recreation. Creating Purchase Plaza, outdoor dining on Purchase Street, was a heavy lift. We modified and condensed the street closure twice, each time requiring traffic flow and signage to meet state law. Same for pedestrian safety and emergency access rules. Purchase Plaza was difficult to do and not everyone liked it, but it was important to do what we could to buoy some of our businesses -- and many residents enjoyed the outdoor social space in that confining time. And some may remember my broadly

distributed emails – intended to keep us all in some form of touch, if not together.

Board of Ethics – What’s the good part? Well, the General Counsel of the New York Conference of Mayors sent a great letter setting out general principles that our board should adopt and I hired the lawyer that GC recommended who wrote his own letter that brings those principals down to our experience. We now start to know what we should. It’s crystal clear – not a jump ball. But on the down side, where are the ethics in a board and its supporters that can’t acknowledge their errors?

We still have some meeting to take care of, but I will say my goodbye now. There is so much more that I could have spoken about tonight, a rich mix of all the things that make up our city. But it will all be in the movie. Good luck to those continuing on the council. Thank you, Rye, for allowing me to serve as your mayor.