

Montclair Township Council looks back at 2014, ahead to 2015

This week, individuals the world over will be reflect upon the year gone by and look forward to future endeavors.

Robert JacksonRenée Baskerville

In Montclair, the tradition is no different, particularly for the Montclair Township Council. Speaking with The Montclair Times, Montclair's councilmembers focused on the successes of the past year, including street repairs and an improved municipal bond rating, and expressed their hopes and noted the challenges ahead in 2015.

Robert Jackson

Montclair Mayor Robert Jackson told The Times that, when looking back at 2014, he is particularly happy with township's financial status, including the increase in its bond rating and a flat municipal tax levy.

Jackson also described the nearly 12 miles of roads repaired as a record investment for Montclair, an investment he was proud of.

The mayor said that he was pleased with the transition between former Township Manager Marc Dashield and Acting Township Manager Timothy Stafford.

Looking ahead to this year, Jackson said that he seeks to "keep a lid on taxes" and work to continue road repairs. This year likely will welcome the opening of the Valley & Bloom mix-use development on Valley Road and Bloomfield Avenue, and the groundbreaking of The MC hotel project at Bloomfield Avenue and Orange Road, noted Jackson. The mayor said that he is looking forward to how the projects will benefit the township's finances.

Robert Russo

As with Jackson, Robert Russo, the township's deputy mayor, is pleased with the flat municipal budget that 2014 brought and the increase in Montclair's bond rating. Russo said that he was pleased to see the Montclair Public Library receive an increase in funding.

Despite the flat municipal tax levy, a 4 percent school budget increase raised taxes for Montclair residents, noted Russo, attributing the increase to an inadequate level of aid provided by the state to the Montclair School District.

Moving forward in 2015, Russo said that he intends to work with his council colleagues to spur changes in the state aid formula that would provide districts surrounding Abbott Districts with additional state funding. New Jersey's 31 Abbott Districts currently receive more state aid than other districts. East Orange, Orange and Newark are all Abbott Districts that are adjacent to, or near, Montclair.

Russo said that he is also upset that the state did not grant any sort of financial award to Montclair for entering in a



shared fire services agreement with Glen Ridge, which began in 1990. Russo said he hopes for more state aid for Montclair in 2015.

Rich McMahon

Rich McMahon, Montclair's at-large councilman, told The Times that the township saw several significant improvements in 2014, from the lowering of its debt to significant road repairs and a decreased crime rate. Through the past year, McMahon said that he was proud of how he and his colleagues worked together and expressed happiness with Stafford's performance.

Come this time next year, McMahon said he hopes that there will be a new municipal building and water well in the works, along with a new infrastructure bringing Montclair into the 21st century, all while keeping municipal finances in check.

Bill Hurlock

This past year was a busy one in Montclair's 1st Ward, according to the ward's councilman, Bill Hurlock. Local projects such as repairing the Mountainside Park tennis courts and repairing roads all while improving the township's finances were big steps, noted Hurlock.

In the coming year, Hurlock said that he seeks Montclair to continue being fiscally responsible while also staying committed to improving its road infrastructure. While perhaps not realistic for 2015, Hurlock said that he'd like to see the township earn an AAA bond rating before the current council's term expires in 2016.

Robin Schlager

Watchung Plaza's historic designation was among the highlights for 2nd Ward Councilwoman Robin Schlager.

"I think it's most important to keep some pockets of our town intact and to keep them familiar and let them reflect the small-town feel, which is the reason most of us moved here in the first place," said Schlager.

The councilwoman expressed enthusiasm for improvements made and coming to the Edgemont Park House, new benches and walkways at Rand Park and the ongoing work of the Pedestrian Safety Committee and the Drive with Care in Montclair campaign, both of which she founded.

In the coming year, Schlager said that she seeks continued curbing and paving throughout the ward, along with a resolution of concerns involving the Montclair Animal Shelter. The councilwoman said she looks forward to ongoing communications with the Frog Hollow community on the fate of the former Frog Hollow Daycare Center.

As for upcoming projects to keep an eye on, Schlager said that she will follow the redesign of the former vehicular inspection station on Label Street, the redevelopment of the Georgian Inn, and the addition of six affordable housing units at 127 Valley Road.

Sean Spiller

Montclair moved on several big initiatives this year, according to Montclair's 3rd Ward councilman, Sean Spiller. As with many of his colleagues, Spiller highlighted street repairs and debt reduction, and increased funding of the Montclair Public Library and the Montclair Community Pre-K. Spiller said that he was pleased with the Montclair Police Department's community policing activities, saying that Montclair is ahead of the curve in terms of community and police relations.

In 2015, Spiller hopes for Montclair to continue its momentum in municipal finance and road repairs. Other items on Spiller's wish-list include a new municipal building and a municipal community center, he said.

Renée Baskerville

Montclair 4th Ward Councilwoman Renée Baskerville provided a list of initiatives coming out of 2014 and to be continued in the coming year.

Baskerville stated that she was pleased to have initiated township-wide dialogues regarding the Nishuane Well project, which resulted in the presentation of several alternative options and the Township Council's decision to postpone selecting any particular plan. Working with the Housing Commission and HOME Corp to find affordable housing options outside the 4th Ward was also a highlight, Baskerville stated.

Community engagement during Planning Board meetings regarding the unified land use and circulation element of the Master Plan was also a key takeaway from 2014, Baskerville noted.

In 2015, stated Baskerville, she seeks to increase the number of residents who are engaged in municipal planning and the local government.

"I would like to lead an effort to ensure that township hiring, training and promotion practices are aligned with 'best practices' for attaining and maintaining an excellent, diverse municipal workforce, and that we are encouraging and supporting Montclair residents to compete for Montclair jobs; and supporting affirmative actions to attain the level of excellence and diversity in our municipal workforce that is envisioned by Township and New Jersey laws, policies and practices," Baskerville stated.

The councilwoman observed that she looks forward to working to maintain Montclair's diversity "that has been a cornerstone of the Montclair ethos."

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