Town of Walton

"State of the Town Message"

 Once again we find ourselves at the beginning of a new fiscal year for the Township of Walton and January provides a good opportunity to review some of the highlights from 2017, where we are now, and what we can look forward to in the future.

 To begin, the state of the town's fiscal affairs: The Town of Walton can continue to be proud of the fact that the town is debt free! Expenditures in our 2018 budget went down from 2017 by 2.67% ($51,513) and our anticipated revenues went up slightly. As a result, we were able to reduce the "tax levy" (what we must raise from taxes) by 2.61% ($33,307). Our overall budget for 2018 is $1.27M. We worked really hard to bring down the tax levy this year, and will continue to strive to keep the levy as low as possible, but there are no guarantees that future levys won’t have to increase… Finally, the state has a "Fiscal Stress Monitoring System" which tracks town, village, and school financial data and identifies those that are at risk. Once again, the Town of Walton has earned the state's very best rating of "No Designation."

 The town faced several key challenges in 2017:

1. The Town’s top-to-bottom "revaluation" of the over 3,500 properties in the township was completed in March and the results of this effort showed up in the September school tax bills. The goal of this endeavor was to ensure that everyone paid their fair share and we feel that goal was achieved. Some people saw their assessments go up while others saw them come down. A key factor in these ups and downs was the fact that 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. We are now looking at ways we can maintain our 100% assessed values, which is what the state prefers, in hopes of avoiding such dramatic surprises in the future.
2. In 2015, the Kraft-Heinz Corporation (Breakstone's) challenged their property assessment. Due to the complexity of the case, the town hired a law firm specializing in assessment challenges. In August, we were notified that an agreement between the Town of Walton, the Walton Central School District, and Kraft General Foods, Inc., had been approved. Kraft had asked for a 90% reduction in their assessment (going from $1.35M to $135K). The Town reached an agreement with Kraft establishing a fair and reasonable valuation of the Kraft property. Kraft’s 2015 tax assessment will remain at $1.35M. The 2016 tax assessment and beyond will be reduced to $906K, a $444K reduction or roughly a 33% reduction in their assessment.
3. New York City (NYC) continues to buy up properties in the township. As of January 1, 2017, NYC had purchased 5,501 acres and projects to purchase an additional 6,250 acres by 2025. An analysis by the county planning department concluded that less than 6% of the remaining property in Walton is suitable for development. Based on these findings, the Town called on NYC to place a permanent moratorium on their land acquisition in the township and instead to use these funds for flood mitigation projects.

 Some of the key accomplishments for the Town in 2017 include:

1. Probably our biggest success story for 2017 would be the flood gauges on East Brook and West Brook. Back in 2013 the United States Geological Survey (USGS) deactivated the stream gauge on East Brook. This flood gauge was directly upstream from the Townsend Elementary School in Walton and was critical in providing "real time" flood warning data to both the county emergency operations center (EOC) in Delhi, and the Town EOC at the Walton Fire Station. The Town was successful in getting USGS to not only reactivate the East Brook gauge but also establish a new gauge on West Brook, which passes the school bus garage and Walton's sole grocery store. Both gauges are now up and running and even better, New York City has agreed to pay 2/3 of the annual operations and maintenance costs.
2. Veterans' Plaza provides a perfect site for a wide range of community activities and, during the summer, it was the site of a farmers’ market providing home-grown produce to the public. Many other community events took place on the plaza to include a car show, pet adoption event, a health fair, and the final destination of Walton’s annual Christmas parade. This was the first year that the Town’s Christmas tree (graciously donated by anonymous donors) was lighted by Santa. In addition to the lovely spruce tree, numerous 4-H clubs decorated and placed smaller trees which Santa was miraculously able to light at the same time. The Christmas event was a tremendous success with a huge crowd to witness the festivities.
3. The Town has continued work on getting Verizon and Sprint antennas on the Town’s cell phone tower. A contract was signed with Sprint for the placement of a test tower adjacent to the Town’s existing tower to test the market demand for their services. Although the test tower has yet to be placed on site, beginning in September, the Town has been receiving a monthly check for $500. A contract has also been signed with Verizon and plans made for their antenna to be mounted on the tower by the end of January. The enhanced cell phone coverage will be a boon to both town residents and folks passing through the area and hopefully will entice our visitors to spend more time here and ultimately move to Walton permanently.
4. Another victory for Walton has been the expansion of broadband service to some of our rural areas. Delhi Telephone, under the auspices of phase 3 of the Delaware County Broadband Initiative (DCBI) is bringing fiber optics down Dunk Hill Road to East Brook Road and from there to the village line. The company will install their fiber optics along County Route 21 to the Franklin town line. It will also extend it along Upper Loomis Brook Road, Teed Road, and parts of Abe Boice Road. Overall, the initiative will bring service to 350 unserved homes in Walton. Delhi Telephone has applied, under phase 4, to extend broadband service to even more unserved and underserved areas in Walton and is currently waiting for the results of their application.
5. The Walton Flood Commission was extremely active in 2017, making slow, but steady progress towards completing the Water Street project. This project (to be paid for by NYC) will remove an estimated 42,000 cubic yards of material deposited on the flood plain over the years. When the project is completed, the area will provide significant flood relief to the community.
6. Another flood mitigation project is the relocation of Breakey Motors from its current location to the other end of Delaware Street. The current structures located at 87/93 Delaware Street will be taken down, the soil and the old cars buried on site will be removed, and the property will be lowered to flood plain level, thus eliminating a bottleneck in the river and reducing flooding on Delaware Street and the surrounding neighborhoods. When the reclamation project is done, this land will become Town property.
7. One should never 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. While most of us are home in bed, our team of dedicated drivers and wingmen are out clearing the roads so they are safe for us to drive on when we need to be out and about.
8. Our Highway Superintendent, Walt Geidel, continues to garner huge savings for the town through diligently seeking government surplus equipment. (For instance, the town paid about
9. $700 for a 2007 pickup truck which would normally have sold for approximately $9,000!)
10. Once again, Town Clerk Ronda Williams secured a $50,000 state grant from Senator Bonacic's office **(Thank You Senator!)** for Town projects. This year we replaced the roof on our town sheds and purchased additional land maintenance equipment. Ronda and her deputies, Gladys and Sharon, are unsung heroes. Unlike many Town Clerk offices throughout the state, Walton’s Town Clerk office is open 8-4, 5 days a week!
11. The Town Flood Plain Manager, Steve Dutcher, continues to strive to lower both the Town’s and Village’s Community Rating System score. Currently at Class 8 rating (which qualifies Walton residents for a 10% discount on their flood insurance), Steve is working to improve that score and garner even greater savings for the community.
12. An unsung hero in the revaluation initiative mentioned earlier has been our Town Assessor, Fran Zujovic. His keen attention to detail and dedication to the community have been proven time and again, whether it is helping a senior citizen fill out the paperwork for an exemption they didn’t know they qualified for, or visiting remote building site to ensure the property assessment is fair and accurate, Fran’s selfless dedication to Walton is a blessing to us all.
13. Finally, not everyone is able to attend the Town Board meetings. For those who can’t, there is always the option of watching them on line at (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7SDZXi6t4P1IgSF7q55Q2Q>).

 So what can we look forward to in 2018?

1. We continue to work on the Town's Comprehensive Plan which provides a roadmap for where we see the Township heading in the future and the steps necessary to achieve that vision. A parks, recreation, and open space survey was sent out to the public, the results of which will provide a key ingredient in refining the plan. We look forward to a public hearing on the plan this spring.
2. In July the county planning department hosted a series of workshops designed to seek public input on the use of the riverside property upon completion of the Water Street project, along with the overall revitalization of Walton. Although most of the initiatives put forth in the workshops fall under the purview of the Village of Walton, three properties: (a) Veterans’ Plaza; b) the strip of land along the river starting from Bridge Street to the Town’s cell phone tower; and c) upon completion of the pending flood mitigation project, the “Breakey Motors” property at 87/93 Delaware Street are or will become Town property). At the October 2, 2017, Town Board meeting, the Town Council voted to prioritize the Town initiatives as follows:
3. River Edge Trail Development
4. Enhancement of Veterans’ Plaza
5. Post-Reclamation Development of 87/93 Delaware Street

The Town is already looking into garnering grant money to put towards its top priority, the river edge trail.

1. The lack of on street parking on Delaware Street was a frequently cited deficiency at the July workshops. Also noted was the lack of crosswalks at key pedestrian intersections. The Town petitioned NYS/DOT to address these issues and DOT officials recently met with the Supervisor and Mayor to discuss a way ahead. The meeting was positive and DOT agreed to study the matter and get back to the community.
2. Two key products produced by the Walton Flood Commission were the West Branch Delaware River Local Flood Analysis (LFA) and the East Brook, West Brook, and Third Brook LFA. One of the important findings for the Third Brook portion of the Tributaries LFA was the Delaware Street bridge which is frequently blocked due to its size and right-angle turn. The Town is spearheading an effort to get NYS/DOT to accelerate the replacement of this bridge from its currently scheduled start in 2022.
3. Planning continues on the relocation of the Delaware County Mental Health Clinic which is currently 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 work 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, the Delhi site was deemed inadequate, leaving the two remaining sites in Walton. Hopefully, construction will begin in 2019.

 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, Town 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