



# Township of Branchburg

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**OFFICE OF THE MAYOR**

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Fellow Residents:

July 2022

I hope this letter finds you and your families safe and well as we enter the long days of summer. I am writing to provide an update on what is happening in our community and to highlight and clarify some of the issues we are facing.

First, I want to update you on the status of our Police Department. As you may know, a few years ago we had a rash of retirements which left us with no clear successor to the Chief of Police. Thankfully, the Somerset County Prosecutor's Office was available to provide seasoned police veterans to fill the vacant supervisory positions. As a result, we recently appointed Michael Schutta as our Public Safety Director. Under Mike's supervision, our police officers continue to gain the experience, knowledge, and skills in all areas of police operations and management necessary to ensure their professional service and growth. We recently promoted 3 officers to the position of Lieutenant, and in the summer of 2023, we should be able to appoint a new Chief of Police. This will be only the fourth Chief in the history of the department, and it is our intent to promote a candidate from within our police force. We are very proud of our police officers, and it bears repeating that our officers display a high level of residential focus, professionalism, and dedication to our community. I believe them to be the best force in the County if not the State and I urge you to take the time and thank them personally whenever the opportunity allows.

Moving on, as you may have read in the local papers, large warehouses are the current development craze. Many towns in NJ are being inundated with these "last mile warehouse" applications, best described as an Amazon distribution center. Although these mega-warehouses are positive tax rateables, the Township Committee is opposed to their development in our town. These large warehouses often operate on a 24/7/365 basis creating unwanted traffic and noise. While we cannot prevent warehousing, the Township Committee has taken steps to adopt zoning laws which restrict the size and use of such a warehouse. We do not permit the "Amazon" mega-warehouse, and any warehouse use must be directly associated with a primary onsite manufacturing function. The zoning also limits hours of operations and prevents continual truck traffic.

As you are aware, we recently lost the golf driving range to a warehouse development. The Township made every effort to acquire the property and prevent this development. Despite multiple offers to purchase the property, the developer was unwilling to negotiate a fair market price and we were unsuccessful in acquiring the property. However, as a result of our discussions, the developer did agree the warehouse would fully conform to the existing zoning laws and we eliminated the threat of a mega-warehouse on that site. It has been suggested that the township should condemn commercial properties through "eminent domain". Although this sounds tempting, exercising our "sovereign" right to take an owner's private commercial land would be an arbitrary and capricious abuse of that power. The Township has an obligation to protect the rights of all property owners. Commercial property owners, like all of us, have a right to develop their property in accordance with our zoning laws. Regardless, we will continue to work with commercial property owners to limit warehouses wherever possible and to mitigate any adverse impact warehouses may have on our community.

Along our highway corridors you may see the residential developments being built that were forced upon us by the NJ state courts to meet our affordable housing obligation. While we could not stop these developments, we have done what we could to limit their impact on existing residents by restricting them to our highway corridors and also requiring they provide 25% of their housing as affordable units. Much of these affordable units will be available to the general public, with some being prioritized for our veterans and local first responder volunteers. We will continue to monitor these developments as they are being built to determine their impact on our infrastructure, emergency services and schools. Despite the courts intervention, we believe the market dynamics of overbuilding, commodity price inflation, higher interest rates and the potential for a long-term recession and economic recovery will ultimately slow the pace of these developments and their impact on Branchburg. Developers simply will not build what they cannot sell. To be continued...

The Township is proactively developing concept plans for the best use of properties along the Routes 28 and 22 corridors. The current zoning along these two corridors does not incent owners to improve and develop their properties for the

benefit of our residents. Due to current market changes and the fact that Raritan Valley Community College intends to grow, the Township is working to be proactive to conceive how these two highway corridors might be used to help create a downtown area in conjunction with the college's plans. This is not a "Redevelopment Plan," and the Township has no predetermined developments or developers. Rather, this effort should be considered an open "reimagining" of these corridors with the sole purpose and goal to establish responsible and appropriate development options for the Township. Please understand that any plan that does not improve the property's current use, and more importantly, does not directly benefit our residents will not be considered and will be soundly rejected. Residents should know that this visioning plan will be done in public settings and public input will be vital in making the final concept a successful tool for our future. Bear in mind, the college is autonomous and is preempted from our zoning laws and, despite any changes to the zoning, the property owners are under no obligation to develop or improve their properties.

I also want to mention to residents that we are proactively working to reduce speeding on our local roads. Our police department has invested resources into a cohesive traffic control plan, and I urge all residents to contact us if your road has speeding issues. If you are a habitual speeder, we ask that you observe the speed limits or risk being ticketed. We need to keep our residents safe – especially our children, bikers and pedestrians who share our roads.

Like every town in NJ, we face many challenges to maintaining our quality of life; but unlike many other NJ towns, we are in a strong and solvent position to face and meet these challenges. Branchburg continues to be a great town with much to offer.

Here is list of recent actions the Township has taken to increase residential amenities, support emergency services, and to protect and preserve our natural resources:

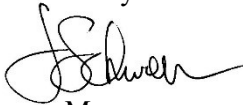
- In 2021 we acquired and opened Branchburg's Silver Saddle Community Pool. The pool is open for our second year, and it is a fantastic addition to our community. Membership is robust; the place looks great; and it is a true community pool in every sense of the word.
- In 2022 the Township Recreation Department took over operating the local Senior Citizens Club. It was a private club but now our recreation professionals are managing the club and expanding its programming. We have doubled the size of the club. Residents 65 and older are urged check it out and join with your neighbors.
- Our local volunteer fire companies (Neshanic, North Branch, Country Hills and Readington), along with our all-volunteer Branchburg Rescue Squad continue to selflessly serve the township residents. These are truly neighbors helping neighbors. Please consider volunteering yourself or sending them a donation. (These men and women are Branchburg's heroes and continue to an invaluable asset to our town.)
- We continue to expand our open space acquisitions and are planning to acquire more lands to be used as active or passive parkland, or just undisturbed lands. The Township recently acquired adjacent parcels on Harlan School Road with the plan to create a pedestrian/bike path connecting Birdland-Staats Farm and White Oak Park.

I would like to leave you all with a guarantee that myself and other members of the Township Committee are working hard to deal with the outside forces that seek to re-shape our community, to be proactive for the future of our town and to make sure that the quality of life for residents is not only maintained but improved. Our residents are priority number one and every thought, action and deed are guided by this single priority without exception.

We are all available whenever you have questions, concerns, or any thoughts you may have about our township. Please do not hesitate to reach out to any member of the Township Committee. We welcome your input and want to hear from you.

Please continue to stay safe and enjoy your summer.

Sincerely,



James Schworn, Mayor

Members of the Township Committee

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Deputy Mayor David Owens

Thomas Young

Brendon Beatrice

Anna Columbus

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