

Expect to Get More Housing, Retail Options, Says Stevenson in 'State of Town' Address

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Some things to expect in the year ahead in Darien: proposals for housing singles, couples and families without children; proposals to build more retail space, and an effort to cut town government energy usage by 20 percent by 2020, according to First Selectman Jayme Stevenson, who gave her "State of the Town" address on Monday.

Speaking to the Representative Town Meeting, she also said the town government is working to plan redevelopment of the Noroton Heights Railroad Station, get more natural gas available in Darien, considering a project to make street lights much more energy efficient, and she again said she supports more lights for town athletic fields.

Stevenson also said: "I will be seeking support for setting aside funds to dredge the sedimentation basin

below the Upper Pond Dam and here in front of Town Hall. The health of the Stony Brook and Goodwives River are at stake by not doing so."

Stevenson said she expects to support Darien Public Schools projects to provide more classroom space as the student population keeps swelling. She added that she hopes town officials can work together with the Board of Education to provide more non-education services to both schools and town facilities.

STATE OF THE TOWN SPEECHES: Full texts and descriptions on [Darienite.com](https://darienite.com):

- [Board of Ed Chairman's State of Town Speech: Schools Will Need More Space](#)
- [Finance Board Chairman Expects a Higher Tax Rate Increase Than Last Year's 2.5%](#)
- [Planning & Zoning Chair: Decisions on New Housing, 'Unprecedented' Commercial Development Coming in 2016](#)

She said she agreed with Finance Board Chairman Jon Zagrotsky that the town needs more long-range planning when building schools and other town facilities.

Stevenson mentioned several studies expected to be complete late this year and next year and that may well result in new proposals for town government: a study of the town's ambulance services, a parking study and the upcoming Town Plan for Conservation and Development, and a report on increasing bicycle and pedestrian access and safety around town.

FULL TEXT: STEVENSON'S SPEECH

Here's First Selectman Jayme Stevenson's 2015 "State of the Town" speech given Monday night to the Representative Town Meeting, as prepared (we've added subheadings added and minor style changes, but no word changes):

Good evening Madame Moderator, RTM members, fellow elected officials and folks watching from home. It's an honor to be here again this year. On behalf of my fellow Selectmen Susan Marks and our new teammates, Kip Koons, Marc Thorne and Rob Richards, we're looking forward to working with you in 2016.

I'm delighted to extend an official welcome this evening to our new Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Dan Brenner. We're very pleased you've joined our team and we take great comfort in the expertise you bring to help shepherd us through continued improvements in special education and our school facilities puzzle.

[RTM - State of the Town 12-7-15](#) from [Darien TV79](#) on [Vimeo](#).

The Board of Selectmen is here to partner with you and the Board of Education to insure our public school system has the infrastructure necessary to maintain excellence in our public education system. Personally and as a town leader, I'd like to see us move the ball – pun intended – on bringing lights to Darien High School.

On behalf of my board and the town, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Former Selectmen Jerry Nielsen, Kip Hall and Reilly Tierney as well as former Board of Finance Chair Liz Mao for your years of dedicated service to the town. Thanks to Jim Cameron and Dave Deeever our former colleagues can stay engaged from home through Vimeo on-demand video service.

Public Safety and the Threat of Terrorism

2015 has been another very productive and dynamic year, but I first want to address a topic on the top of our minds — public safety and the threat of acts of terrorism here at home. Our country is struggling to find our footing in response to acts of violence that stem from hatred completely foreign to our American value system.

Not since Pearl Harbor and 9/11 have we felt this vulnerable. Our new normal is that state and local law enforcement officials are now specially trained, equipped and routinely collaborate to protect us and prepare for events we pray will never occur.

As a community, we can do our part by staying vigilant, staying rational and supporting our law enforcement professionals. In the words of FDR 74 years ago, “No matter how long it may take us to overcome this premeditated invasion, the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory.” Let's hold on to that thought.

Management Hires

Since last we met, along with 81 appointments to boards and commissions, the Board of Selectmen has welcomed several outstanding new management professionals.

With Karl Kilduff's departure, we seized the opportunity to promote Kate Buch to Town Administrator. Kate's long and exemplary tenure as Finance Director and her in-depth understanding of our organization have made the transition seamless.

I'm very pleased to announce that, Jennifer Charneski officially joined our team today as Finance Director. Jennifer comes to Darien with a master's degree in Public Affairs and 13 years of local government experience. Most recently Jennifer served as budget director and comptroller for the Town of New Canaan. Jennifer, welcome to the home of the Blue Wave!

The Board of Selectmen also welcomed Mr. Lee Palmer as our new Human Resources Director. In his short time here, Lee has settled 3 union contracts, updated key policy documents and is in the process of developing a new employee review system. Lee's 30 years of experience in Human Resources and Labor Relations for local, state and educational systems is a great benefit to our town.

We also welcomed Ms. Pam Gery as Director of Parks and Recreation. Many of you have already met Pam and will, I'm sure, agree that with her 19 years of experience, energy and enthusiasm for our parks and our recreation programs she is a great new member of our management team.

Pam's experience is already proving to be a big asset as the Commission develops new plans for the Short Lane parcel at Weed Beach. If you haven't already taken the Weed Beach Expansion Survey, please take a few minutes to do so. You can find the survey on the home page of the Town of Darien website.

2015 Projects and New Projects

Project highlights from 2015 include the collaborative work on the 10-year update to the Town Plan of Conservation and Development. I want to thank Chairman Susan Cameron, her Commission, Planning and Zoning Staff as well as consultant Glenn Chalder from Planimetrics for the inclusive, comprehensive and transparent update process.

Tomorrow night begins the final draft review process. I encourage everyone to stay engaged as the Town Plan serves as our guidepost for some exciting changes coming to our town. More on that later.

Along with the Town Plan Update, we've updated our Emergency Operations Plan. Our plan update now reflects the State of Connecticut's Emergency Support Function (ESF) format breaking down responsibility centers into 15 functions critical to effective emergency response. I want to thank Emergency Management Director Marc McEwan and my fellow Emergency Operations Teammates for your work on the plan update.

The Town of Darien is now a Clean Energy Community. With the assistance of the Recycling Center Advisory Committee taking on a new role as the Clean Energy Task Force, we have pledged to reduce our town's energy consumption by 20 percent by the year 2020. This is a town wide initiative that includes municipal facilities, schools, homes and businesses.

The Board of Selectmen is currently considering the significant cost saving and energy conservation potential of acquiring and converting to LED our roadway streetlights and other light fixtures on town owned property. We've done admirable work on this already but we must continue to employ best practices in energy conservation to do our part to protect the environment.

We are nearly finished with the "shuffle" project. The property at 30 Edgerton is gone, the Board of Education has adjusted to their new administrative space and the Senior Program in the beautiful new Mather Center is a model for senior center's statewide.

As of November there are 1,328 members of our Senior Program - clear evidence that if you build it, our seniors will come! Let's work together to finish the administrative details of the 35 Leroy transfer in the new year.

Please drive by the Edgerton site when you have a chance. It's good to be reminded that we've removed an expensive building that outlived its useful life from the town's operating budget. This property holds great potential for the future.

Looking forward, we have many important projects and issues to address in the coming year. We're on the eve of significant commercial redevelopment in both our downtown and Noroton Heights neighborhoods. The town plan update will steer these developments so we can preserve our small town character while welcoming new housing choices and an expanded retail base.

Providing housing choice for empty nesters, young professionals, developmentally disabled adults and seniors with limited means would be welcome additions to our community. Thanks to the work of the Planning and Zoning Commission, we will soon be resubmitting an application for a moratorium from CT Statute 8-30g.

In conjunction with the proposed redevelopments, the town will need to partner with developers and the state to expand and update town infrastructure. Work has already begun to bring natural gas to more town facilities and neighborhoods and we are discussing the feasibility of undergrounding powerlines in areas of new development.

We're making significant progress in these areas in large part because we've worked diligently during my administration to build trusting and collaborative relationships with utility and state government partners. Connecticut Department of Transportation has recently committed \$10 million to replace the platforms at the Noroton Heights Train Station.

We're in discussions to partner on a redevelopment of the station building and commuter access points to bring the entire facility up to 21st century/ADA standards and to expand rail service to the station.

We've just completed a comprehensive parking study that we will use to improve downtown and commuter parking management systems and a study is currently underway to review our Emergency Medical Service. We must insure that these key services continue to meet the demands of our residential and business community.

There's growing community support to improve pedestrian and bicycle access and safety town-wide — particularly around our schools and downtown area. The Board of Selectmen is eager to receive the Pedestrian Infrastructure Advisory Committee report on Dec. 14 and to begin the work of prioritizing and budgeting for recommended improvements.

I'm pleased to report that the Town of Darien was awarded funding under the Open Space and Watershed

Land Acquisition Program to acquire 1.24 acres of vacant land adjacent to Town Hall along the Stony Brook River. With the support of the RTM in 2016, the town has the opportunity to partner with the Darien Land Trust to preserve this uniquely situated parcel of open space.

The long-awaited Upper Gorham's Pond dredging and dam replacement project should be underway later this week. I will be seeking support for setting aside funds to dredge the sedimentation basin below the Upper Pond Dam and here in front of Town Hall. The health of the Stony Brook and Goodwives River are at stake by not doing so.

Echoing Board of Finance Chairman Zagrodzky's comments regarding cost effective government, history shows that we have, on more than one occasion, lost sight of long term cost efficiency to satisfy a short term budget goal particularly in the area of building construction.

I urge us to adopt a much longer vision when constructing or renovating our schools and other public facilities. High quality construction by dependable contractors and building flexibility into facility design should be a priority even if it costs us a bit more up front. We will employ this standard as we finalize renovation plans for the town garage.

Regarding personnel, the municipal side of town government is adequately staffed. We're able to provide today's menu of town services with existing personnel. New program offerings or new state mandates may require additional hiring.

When possible, we should look to offset personnel costs with new program revenue. Important structural changes were bargained into the most recent employee contracts. We must continue to seek changes that limit financial exposure while at the same time offering employees a competitive wage and reasonable benefits.

With the collaboration between the town and the schools, we may be able to find additional taxpayer savings by consolidating non-educational services. I encourage us to continue this important dialogue started by the Consolidated Services Working Group. Healthcare is an area we should study.

State Finances and Municipal Aid

Just a word about state government mandates: Tomorrow, the Connecticut Legislature is meeting in special session to define a deficit mitigation strategy. I call this state government "Wack-A-Mole".

Legislators scurry to find short term budget fixes only to see ballooning costs in areas of state government that are seemingly untouchable. I've written to our legislative delegation objecting to unfunded municipal mandates and the impacts of mid-cycle reductions in municipal aid.

Our new regional organization, WestCOG, has also written on behalf of our membership discouraging cuts in municipal aid. One of the benefits of our new region is the combined lobbying power of our 18-member

towns.

When the regular legislative session begins in February, we will again hear state leadership proposals for commercial and residential property tax revenue sharing and other wealth redistribution ideas and new taxes to help fund transportation projects.

While we should continue to be wary of how state leadership plans to use the new COGs, I find my fellow chief elected officials are all very like-minded in our interest to preserve local control.

Several very worthwhile regional initiatives are underway. We've convened a multi-discipline task force to help address the opioid abuse epidemic; staff is organizing a regional GIS database available to all towns and is coordinating a National Flood Insurance Community Rating System project that may save Darien residents money on their flood insurance.

Darien has already benefitted directly from WestCOG support of the \$250,000 Noroton Heights Station access study. My role as vice chair of WestCOG allows me to protect Darien's interests at the regional table.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening. As you can see, we have many accomplishments and much more to do. Let's make 2016 a year of positive collaboration as we embark on new and exciting projects for our town.

I wish you and your family a safe, peaceful and joyous holiday.