

Jayme Stevenson Speaks to Chamber of Commerce About the State of the Town

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Town officials are hoping to extend another natural gas line up Mansfield Avenue to Ox Ridge School. The Legislature will approve some kind of plan for tolls, possibly just for big trucks, in Connecticut.

Expect parking lots and a walking path at the Highland Farms property (just north of Ox Ridge Racquet and Riding Club), improvements (including a walking trail) at Weed Beach Park, a slow and careful review of ideas for improving Pear Tree Point Beach.

Those are some of the topics coming up in 2020 that First Selectman Jayme Stevenson spoke about at a breakfast meeting of the Darien Chamber of Commerce Thursday morning.

In her wide-ranging talk, Stevenson also told the 40 or so people in the audience at the Ten Twenty Post restaurant to expect future traffic delays as the town's three big construction redevelopments get built, that town officials are working on removing improper connections to the septic sewer system and they're hoping more people will recycle food scraps.

Here's an edited transcript of almost all of Stevenson's speech, which was given extemporaneously, not read from a text. When extended comments were removed here, we've summarized them in brackets ("[]").

[Stevenson began by saying that the town's recent Bicentennial opening ceremony was wonderful and that the Bicentennial Committee is still welcoming sponsors for future events. The next event will be on June 6, occurring with the Weed Beach Fest.]

Being that the year's "2020" it gives us an opportunity to not only look back back and see where we've come over the last 200 years [...] but to also play on that and think about the vision that we have as a town for the future. [...]

This group, the Chamber of Commerce, is the lifeblood of our community. [...] Small business is the backbone of why we are successful. [...]

The Big Three Redevelopment Projects

As you all well know, and long anticipated, we are in the eve of transformation and I think it's all going to happen at the same time [*some laughter from the audience*].

So that's good news and that's bad news, because we're going to be disheveled for a little while and it's going to take a little bit longer to get from Point A to Point B, but I think it's all going to be worthwhile in the end. It's the price of progress, as I like to say.

CORBIN DISTRICT

And so most of you who work in the downtown likely know that the Baywater Corbin Properties project has received all their approvals, and they will likely have their first shovel in the ground sometime in the spring. [...]

The east side of Corbin Drive [across the street from the Post Office] will be the first phase of that redevelopment, shifting some of the tenants around. Many of you are engaged in that. And then the major portion of that redevelopment will follow, and then, again, another realignment of the leases and the tenants in those spaces.

The thing that excites me the most about the redevelopments, not only here in the downtown but in the Noroton Heights district, we will be adding almost 300 units of new housing.

In the downtown, I'm not sure how David [Genovese, principal of Baywater, the main partner in the Corbin District development] is settling, whether they will be condominiums or for-rent spaces.

TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

In Noroton Heights it will be over 200 one- and two-bedroom apartments immediately adjacent to the Noroton Heights Train Station, giving Darien a brand-new housing choice amenity, which I think is fantastic.

The state of Connecticut is really encouraging towns to embrace the idea of transit oriented development — that's a fancy way of saying "live right next to transit — trains and buses and our roadways" — so even the Corbin project is a transit oriented development because the train station is literally only a block away. [...]

We know that younger people don't like to get in their cars as much as we older folks do, so we think that there won't be quite as much of a burden on our traffic patterns as there otherwise might be.

THE COMMONS AT NOROTON HEIGHTS

So I'm really excited about that. If you've been down in Noroton Heights, you've already seen some of the heavy equipment in place. There's been some building demolition.

And the first phase of that redevelopment for Federal Realty is the rebuild of the Walgreens building. The current Walgreens will stay in place. A new building will be built right next door, and then they'll move in the stealth of darkness one night, and then they'll take down the Walgreens building [including] the old Stop and Shop and get the massive part of that redevelopment with the housing units underway.

Stop and Shop at Goodwives: Improved Store, Bigger Tax Base

You probably, if you grocery shop locally, see the tremendous investment that the Stop and Shop Corporation has made in the Goodwives Shopping Center. I'm so happy I can finally figure out where stuff is in that store. [...]

I'm very pleased they did a couple of million dollars [worth of] renovation in that building. So that is great for us and great for our grand list.

Development of Places to Gather

I would be remiss in not saying that we're all super excited about new shops, new restaurants, new housing choice, new opportunities for community to gather. People like to come together. We're seeing that with Caffe Nero here. We can never get a seat in Caffe Nero, it's so popular. Because people simply like to get together — whether it's coffee or lunch or dinner, they just want to be with one another.

So I think that probably has something to do with the fact that most of us spend our days with our faces in computers or in our hand-held devices, but when we do have those extra moments, we like to be in community with one another, and these three redevelopments are going to provide new ways for us to come together as human beings and as community members, so I'm really, really excited about that.

I do want to give a sort of public service announcement for shopping local. It occurred to me when I walked out the door today — every single thing that I'm wearing today, I bought in Darien [*applause*]. [...]

I need to hear from you. I need to know what concerns you. What are the things that local government can do to make your life easier and better as a Darien small business? [...]

Civilian Dispatchers at Police Department

So, a few other exciting things that are happening in town. [...]

We're moving to a model of civilian dispatch [at the Police Department] you may not realize that we've always had sworn officers answering the telephone, and now we're moving to a model where we're bringing in professional telecommunicators to do that job so that our sworn officers can be out in the community doing what they do best. [...]

Town Budget: Battening the Hatches

The Board of Selectmen budget process has already been underway. Town Administrator Kate Buch and I have met with all of our department heads and she will present the budget to the Board of Selectmen this coming Monday night. [...]

I don't anticipate any significant changes in the Board of Selectmen budget. We have for probably four years now, kind of seen the writing on the wall, if you will, from the State of Connecticut and the changes in municipal revenue sharing distributions, especially to quote-unquote 'wealthy' towns like Darien.

So we have set a plan in place to become essentially fiscally self-sufficient, which I think is smart, anyway. We want to be in charge of our own future. We don't want the State of Connecticut's either their giving or not giving to impede the things that we want to do.

So with the hard work of a whole lot of people, and especially the fiscal diligence of our Board of Finance and our Finance Department, Darien is on a very, very solid fiscal path.

We continue to achieve Triple A [bond] ratings, which is fantastic, but more than anything else, we have strong reserves, we plan for the future, we take care of our town assets, we value our people, we don't hire indiscriminately, and all of those things really lay the groundwork for a very successful local government.

Housing for the Elderly

A couple other projects that you may or may not be aware of: If you go down the Post Road you will see a large housing development that is well underway. That is the former Old Town Hall Homes, now called the Royle. That's one of two housing projects that's owned and managed by the Darien Housing Authority.

I'm very excited about that redevelopment project. It was 30 units of senior affordable housing. It's now going to be 55 units of senior affordable housing, and that's a constituency of people that we really want to be able to keep in town, so I'm excited about that. The housing authority's doing a great job and we anticipate that they'll get their C.O. [certificate of occupancy] sometime in mid- to late summer.

Has anybody been over to the Residence at Sellecks Woods? That's a phenomenal place. Hopefully some of you have. Another wonderful addition to our assisted living and memory-care facilities here in Darien.

If anybody needs that for your family members [...] we've got three fantastic facilities here, so again, that's another choice that people have in their ability to stay right here in Darien.

We want people to, you know, as they get older and have the ability to move, we don't want them to move. We want to keep a community that is from the youngest to the oldest. I think that makes for a very, very healthy community. [...]

Ox Ridge School Building

Right now there's a committee that is well into design development for rebuilding the Ox Ridge elementary school. It's one of our five elementary schools in town. It is, I believe, the last of the town facilities that was built with — how I will affectionately describe as the 'California experimental' architecture style — not very energy-efficient, certainly doesn't meet today's safety standards for elementary schools.

So it comes with a hefty price tag. That school is going to cost \$63 million, which is a little mind-boggling if you think of Darien High School that opened in the early 2000s was \$75 million.

So this is why we have to take care of our town facilities — because to rebuild them is extraordinarily expensive. We don't want to do that too often.

Highland Farms

In the spring you'll also see construction vehicles up at the newly acquired town property of Highland Farms. We'll be installing two parking lots and an ADA-compliant [Americans with Disabilities Act] walking trail, the first ADA-compliant recreational facility in the Town of Darien, which I'm very, very proud of.

So that will all finish up by summertime.

Sustainability

And another achievement on the part of the Town of Darien, again many hands coming together, probably some of you as well, in the fall we received Bronze certification as a sustainable community from the State of Connecticut's SustainableCT initiative. [...]

Most people when they think about sustainability, they think about recycling and changing your lightbulbs, but the SustainableCT initiative is actually about all aspects of sustainability in your community, including financial sustainability, human services sustainability.

So we have this group of volunteers that has been working diligently to inventory all of the great practices that we already have in place.

Recycling Helps the Town Budget

If you haven't been to or heard about Darien's Transfer Station, also affectionately known as "The Dump," it's actually a remarkable place. And when I first became first selectman we changed to a model of single-stream recycling so that we could reduce our waste costs.

And from that came this fantastic amenity called the Swap Shop, where people can take goods that are reusable and other people can come in and just take those free of charge, but we literally recycle everything at the transfer station — mattresses, paint, lightbulbs, batteries, cardboard, metal, electronics — and most recently, a group of awesome volunteers started a food composting facility at the Transfer Station.

I'm probably telling you more than you need to know [some laughter] but when you look at the town expenditures, one area of high expenditure is all the garbage that goes into the transfer station has to actually go out of the transfer station [...] so the garbage — we have to pay to have that removed, and it's not cheap.

So anything we can divert out of that municipal solid waste stream is a savings to the town and it's the right thing to do for the environment. So, food waste is the heaviest component of municipal solid waste. So if we can get that out of the waste stream, it's just a win-win for everybody. [...]

Two Foundations Helping the Community

We are very fortunate in Darien to have some exceptional community partners when it comes to making our town a better place. [...] I want to name specifically the Darien Athletic Foundation and the Darien Foundation for their continued investment in town assets that make life better for all of us.

[She mentioned the new cross-country track around Darien High School and night lights at the high school stadium fields, contributed by the Darien Athletic Foundation.]

Weed Beach

Right now we have a partnership with the Darien Foundation, the Darien Athletic Foundation and Parks & Rec [Department] developing what's called "Weed Beach Meadow" down at Weed Beach.

It's going to incorporate a new parcel of land that I helped to buy early in my tenure called Short Lane, and it's going to connect the whole facility with a walking trail, also ADA-compliant, and boardwalks. It will be a beautiful addition to one of our treasured parks.

Pear Tree Point Beach

Which leads me to a very interesting project that we're trying to work on, and that is redevelopment of the facilities at Pear Tree Beach. We have amazing facilities in Darien. The facilities at Pear Tree Beach seem to be a bit of an outlier. They're cinder-block constructed buildings and, as we know, our businesses in town, our wonderful, small, New England-community feel are a couple of things that sell our town when people are looking to relocate their family or their business.

But there's no question that it's our beaches and our proximity to Long Island Sound and all that offers is a huge selling point for people to consider. So we'd like to redevelop the buildings at Pear Tree Point.

It's become very controversial. So we're in the process right now of doing a deep dive, coastal engineering deep dive to really understand what's happening in that environment. How has climate change affected or not affected Pear Tree Beach, and how should we be thinking of these facilities in a long-term sustainable way?

So you'll probably hear more about that project in the coming months. We're taking it slow and steady, and we're being mindful that people have a lot of opinions and want to give a lot of input about that. So we're kind of hoping for the best on that.

Sewers Need Protection

A couple other things, maybe not as exciting as the redevelopments, but certainly as important to the infrastructure of the redevelopments here, we will be investing a lot of time, energy and financial resources in making sure that our sewer systems are very well maintained.

I like to say that if you don't have a well-functioning sewer system, nothing else really matters.

So we're going to be taking a look at that. Obviously, we're adding a lot of new capacity with all of these redevelopments, and we have to make sure that we're keeping pace with the work that we need to do underground.

Making Darien More Walkable

And we're also going to be looking at making some nice changes to some of our signaled intersections and making improvements in pedestrian safety. We know that walkability is a great desire of everybody that lives in town.

If you've been watching the news lately, the issue of walking student safety in particular has come to the head for the Board of Education.

So we're undertaking a project where we're going to be looking at all of our sidewalk inventory for safety, for gaps, [for] where can we add new sidewalks, and how that fits with the Board of Ed's busing plan for students.

We want to make sure that kids are safe at all times, particularly as all the construction vehicles are moving around, in and out of the Town of Darien. So I just always encourage everybody to keep a careful eye out for our kids.

State-Level Issues

So just a couple of words on the state of Connecticut. [...] The legislative session is about to begin on Feb. 5, and it's a short session. What that means is it's the second year of the state's biennium budget. So the only thing that the legislators can do this session are things that relate directly to the state budget.

And I know two that are on the hit list. You've been reading a lot about it: Tolls will either be discussed in the legislative session or it will be in a special session just before the legislative session to consider the idea of — I think we're now on Proposal No. 3 from the governor on tolls, and that would be for large-truck-only tolling.

I haven't read any of the details — the details are important — of how much revenue that will bring to the State of Connecticut, but I feel pretty confident in sharing with you that Connecticut will have tolls sometime in the very near future.

You may have also read that Senate President Martin Looney, quoted in the newspaper this week — he says, I guess it's a pun intended, it's high time that Connecticut legalize non-medical marijuana. I like to call it "non-medical marijuana" because I don't think that we should be using drugs for recreation.

You know, I know that's a controversial viewpoint for many. I've spent a lot of time in my roles with WestCOG and on CCM and on my own time researching the impacts of recreational use of marijuana, especially by kids under the age of 25, and I can tell you that the comment that marijuana is nonaddictive is false.

Nine percent of the people that use marijuana regularly become addicted to it and are at risk for using other substances as a result of that addiction. So when I think about state policy, I think it's wrong to lead with the dollar, but that is exactly what is happening here in Connecticut.

You know, well, everybody else is doing it. Massachusetts is doing it, so we should do it too, because we have projected budget deficits and the revenue from a tax on marijuana can help plug those holes. I don't believe that's a wise way to address important state policies.

So we'll be watching that debate very carefully in the legislative session. When I can I know that I will, and so will our representatives, hopefully, bring more information to you about that.

QUESTIONS

[Stevenson had a question-and-answer period at the end of her talk. Darienite.com couldn't hear some the questions that well, so some of these these are our best guess on what exactly was asked.]

[Question: Was the Darien Playhouse building been sold?]

Yes it did. Its sad. I believe — I'm not sure if the movie theater itself is going to survive that redevelopment, but I know that there's some really exciting plans for that building itself that will really fit very nicely into

everything else that's happening here in the downtown.

[Question: What can be done to improve parking in the downtown area?]

That's not an easy issue. [...]

It's a three-legged stool. You have commuter parking that in theory should be in the designated commuter lots. [some laughter] You have parking for all of your customers — that's critically important. And then you have to get to work, and where do you park your car?

So there's a conflict between all of those parking needs at the moment. So we are looking at that. The one thing I'll encourage all of you to consider, too, is, when you can, as business folks, take mass transit to work. Encourage your employees to take mass transit to get here, to help free up some of those spaces that might be taken up by employees.

And, two, if you own a lot that you think that folks who are commuters might be parking in regularly, the town encourages you to consider enforcement of that in your own lots. I know some businesses are very reluctant to do that, but the Town of Darien doesn't have the ability to go onto private property and enforce — you know, kick the commuters out.

So I feel your pain on that. We will be doing what we can and looking at our policies on the parking that we manage, on-street parking and the Center Street lots, Grove Street Lot and the commuter parking lots.

So it's going to be a bit of a — playing the shuffle for a while.

[Question: Will the tenant-landlord dispute at the Noroton Heights Shopping Center delay construction?]

I can't answer that question. That's obviously a pending-litigation question, so it wouldn't be right for me to talk about it. What I do know is that the Palmers are going ahead, and they're doing asbestos-abatement already, so I think they're going to be moving forward with at least a significant portion of that redevelopment while they work out that issue.

[Question: Are there plans in the works to further expand natural gas service in town?]

So, gas has come to Darien. You are all experiencing the fallout of that with roadways that are not in the best condition. We did a huge natural gas expansion over the last two years that has now connected most town-owned facilities.

It took gas from the Post Road up Leroy Avenue all the way to the Darien High School. It connected on West Avenue the City of Stamford down here to the Post Road in Darien.

And now Eversource is busy going out and marketing to residential customers. They have a new model, it's

called a "Portfolio Model." They never used to even consider bringing natural gas into municipalities.

But now, if you can give them enough big buildings, with a big enough volume — gas-consumption volume. So we put together a great portfolio of town buildings that has allowed a number of residential customers to join in.

There will be a Phase 2 to that expansion, and specifically we're looking at gas going up Mansfield Avenue to try and capture the new Ox Ridge elementary school which would open up opportunities to have gas laterals going off on of those side streets.

So the work continues. Thank you for your patience. The reason why the roads are in poor condition is by contract we can't pave them for 18 months. We have to allow residential customers to connect in, so it wouldn't be smart to pave the road, then have them dig it up again. So at the end of the 18-month period we go back and repave the entire roadway surface.

[Question: Has the town studied how the new housing projects in town will affect the need for future classroom space?]

That was probably the first data that was analyzed to look at past redevelopments and what we think will happen. [...]

But yes, the school [district] is already aware of what those projections are.