

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

State of the Town: First Selectman: Darien's Strengths Will Help Us Weather Challenges

Author : David Gurliacci

Categories : [Government & Politics](#)

Tagged as : [Jayme Stevenson 2020](#), [State of the Town 2020](#), [State of the Town Addresses 2020](#)

Date : December 7, 2020

First Selectman Jayme Stevenson's State of the Town report to the Representative Town Meeting Monday night was long and covered a lot of topics, including the impact of COVID-19 on town spending, operations and its affect on local business; continued interest by state lawmakers in overriding local zoning; and the possibility of state laws on the town budget.

She also touched on the events of the past year and praised the town's accomplishments.

Here are some of the highlights (with the full text of her speech, as prepared, below; Darienite.com will add the Darien TV79 video when it becomes available):

Stevenson gave this COVID-19 statistical update: "As of today (Dec. 7), 492, or 2.26% of Darien residents (21,775) have tested positive for COVID since the first week of March. Twenty-one residents have been

hospitalized and sadly, five of our residents passed away due to COVID complications. COVID deaths aren't data points. They are our loved ones and we feel the pain of every loss."

She warned that state legislators are still very interested in taking zoning control away from towns in order to promote affordable housing:

"Legislative proposals to require towns to approve, as-of-right (without public input), more dense multi-family housing in single-family neighborhoods are already in draft form. [...] You will hear this housing model referred to as 'gentle density' or 'missing middle housing.' Passing this legislation will essentially be the state taking control of local zoning decisions."

State legislators are also looking at ways to force consolidation of town services with services in other nearby communities, she said.

Looking to the future, Stevenson said that the state's impact on upcoming town budgets just can't be estimated: "There are simply too many unknowns at this point to hypothesize on what impacts, if any, legislation will have on future town budgets. Conservative financial leadership over the years has Darien as well-prepared as we can be for what might come. Conservative financial planning is a key to building a resilient community."

Finance Board Chairman Jon Zagrodzky (who announced that he won't be running for re-election and expects this to be his last State of the Town message) made the point in his speech (delivered off the cuff rather than from a prepared statement).

Zagrodzky said the town's reserves are higher than they need to be and perhaps higher than they ought to be, and should be enough for Darien to easily finance extra COVID-19-related spending and cover the costs of the Ox Ridge School building — which is coming in under budget. (Darienite.com will publish a transcript of his speech on Tuesday.)

Stevenson added: "2021 holds the promise of an end to the pandemic so we can get back to living our lives free of COVID-19 and too much government control."

Here is Stevenson's speech, as prepared:

Good evening Mr. Moderator, members of the RTM, my fellow board members and town officials. This is my 10th State of the Town Address as your First Selectman.

Each year brings new and unexpected challenges, but this one is one for the history books. Through it all — a novel coronavirus, protests and racial unrest, two significant storms, drought, the most divisive presidential election of my lifetime and the passing of [a dear member](#) of our Town Hall family — what I've seen is a resilience in our community beyond measure.

Looking back on my remarks from last year, I realize we are now looking at our lives through some new lenses. One clouded by the fear and uncertainty of a virus we still know little about that has instantly reshaped our lives, masked our smiles, and forced us into isolation, taken our livelihoods and with profound sadness, the lives of five of our town residents. Yet, through another lens, the pandemic has given us the treasures of family time uninterrupted by busy schedules, a resolve to not take the simple things in life for granted, a renewed love of the outdoors and a deepening of our commitment to supporting our friends, our community, our local businesses and the most vulnerable among us. There are lessons learned — "silver linings," if you will — that come from every challenge.

Tonight, I will start where I usually end — with deep gratitude to the long list of extraordinary people who have not only risen to the myriad of challenges we've had this year but who have gone above and beyond, risking their own well-being, to keep us safe, our children in school, businesses open and the wheels of government turning.

First, I want to thank you and your families for doing your part to keep our community safe and healthy. We've had to learn along with the scientists about how COVID-19 spreads and to respond to well-intentioned guidance on how to stop it until vaccines are available. Since March 10th, when Governor Lamont issued his first of two Health Emergencies, you've respected the 90 executive orders that have been issued to date that set parameters under which we can or cannot work, socialize and govern. You wear your face coverings when you can't distance yourself from others. You wash and sanitize your hands. You stay home if you are at risk. You haven't traveled to see family and friends. And you get tested and quarantine if you've been exposed. Not everyone agrees on these rules or the underlying assumptions used to create them but I believe we are all doing the very best we can under extraordinary and unfamiliar circumstances.

It's true, we've missed many beloved town happenings: a year of Bicentennial birthday events, the Memorial Day Parade, town fireworks, the Darien Road Race, holiday tree lighting and many other nonprofit events. What's extraordinary is how folks have innovated by going virtual or finding new ways to achieve their mission.

Pandemic response has redefined the role of local public health by adding new responsibilities like mask distribution, contact tracing and the regulation of public gatherings and businesses not traditionally the responsibility of the health department. Darien's health department has been on the front lines as the State Department of Public Health intermediary and local enforcer of the state's pandemic policies. Health Director David Knauf and his staff have done yeoman's work questioning, deciphering and communicating COVID health policies. Drought and storm-related power outages added additional burdens to their busy work load.

The coordination between our health department and the Darien Public Schools team is a shining example of best-practice collaboration. I want to thank Dr. Addley, Alicia Casucci, Dr. Tim Kenefick and our school nurses who stepped forward to help with in-town testing in the spring and school community contact tracing. Chairman Dineen and I meet regularly to share information and I'm confident that with open minds and good communication we can find other areas where working together makes sense and improves outcomes for both the district and the town. Collaboration is a key to building a resilient community.

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

With careful planning and innovation by the district, our students were able to return to hybrid learning on Sept. 3 and in-person learning on Sept. 29. Building a remote learning environment in the course of a few short months is extraordinary. Thank you to our wonderful teachers, administrators, staff and Board of Education for their commitment to keeping kids in the classroom as much as possible. Our district was one of the first to return and I congratulate our school leaders for making that a priority. Parents, you too deserve enormous praise for your support of virtual home schooling. Many of you had to set aside your own jobs to keep your children on track. Strong parent engagement has always been foundational to the student success-formula here in Darien. Setting priorities is a key to a building a resilient community.

I can imagine a time, soon, when town boundaries are irrelevant and all Connecticut school children can attend the virtual school of their choice. The pandemic has proven we have the tools to make that a reality. An extraordinary silver lining, to be sure! Until then, let's work together to bring school choice to our district. Innovation is a key to building a resilient community.

Executive Order 7H, issued in March, mandated the closure of all businesses deemed to be "non-essential." Town Hall staff, however, didn't miss a beat in responding to the need to stay fully-functioning. Under the excellent direction of Town Administrator Kate Buch, our departments moved services online and adopted a virtual meeting platform that allowed for full government transparency and public engagement. I wish I had a \$1 for every time I've heard, "you're on mute" during the last eight months of Zoom calls. Perhaps this is a metaphor for what we've all been living through. Another silver lining is that public engagement has increased since all you need to do is log in from the comfort of your own home like you are tonight.

I want you to know that I believe every person and every job is essential to the lives of our residents. You and your job matter!

Public Works staff adapted our working environment so the public could transact business safely and our custodians (Geoff, Lucien, Glenn, Ramon and Anthony) deserve special thanks for all the extra cleaning and sanitizing of our facilities. Parks & Recreation modified programs and hired park monitors to help enforce safety policies at our parks and beaches. Our Senior Center programming has gone virtual and our seniors continue to receive a nutritious drive-thru meal each and every day thanks to the Corbin Cares initiative and our own Chef Judy.

For those who haven't heard about Corbin Cares, it is a privately funded non-profit initiative founded by David Genovese and The Darien Foundation to provide meals, prepared by Darien restaurants, to families in need, essential workers, healthcare professionals, Darien police, teachers, firefighters and Post 53. This public/private partnership is feeding the hungry and helping to keep our restaurants in business. What a blessing to our community!

The COVID pandemic has brought hardships in many different forms. To help ease financial burdens and with the support of the RTM, we offered a property tax deferment program. We facilitated business support and mentorship through the Small Business Administration, the SCORE business mentoring program and the Darien Chamber. We authorized outdoor tents for dining and shopping and deferred health department

license renewals. We extended parking permit renewals and eliminated parking tickets. And we teamed with regional mental health providers to create a wellness video series to support folks who are struggling with the social and emotional impacts of the pandemic. We've yet to see the full extent of negative impacts to the mental health of our residents caused by the pandemic. Leveraging the power of community partnerships is key to a resilient community

While we may be faring economically better than many other small towns, our small businesses are struggling. Many would have trouble surviving another shut down. The employees of our local businesses need their jobs to keep food on their family's table. Please do all you can to shop local this holiday season and remember the Darien Human Service Department this year in your giving plans.

As of today (Dec. 7), 492, or 2.26% of Darien residents (21,775) have tested positive for COVID since the first week of March. Twenty-one residents have been hospitalized and sadly, five of our residents passed away due to COVID complications. COVID deaths aren't data points. They are our loved ones and we feel the pain of every loss.

Darien was one of the first towns in Connecticut to provide in-town COVID testing. Testing began on March 23 at a drive-thru clinic at the Darien High School. We are pleased to continue to provide testing through Everpoint Health and will enhance testing as opportunities arise.

Vaccines are planned to be distributed in three phases with appropriate priority given to front line healthcare workers and first responders, the elderly and the medically vulnerable. The general population may have access to vaccines in the summer of 2021 if manufacture and distribution goes as planned. Vaccines have not yet been mandated and it remains to be seen how many people will opt in.

We have developed a robust COVID-19 information portal on the town website where you can find local, state and federal guidance. Additionally, the Darien Public Schools have an active COVID dashboard where you can find information on the status of impacts to our school community. The State of Connecticut's [COVID website](#) has a vast library of COVID-related information. Darien's Code Red reverse-911 system is the most useful tool for reaching the greatest number of residents and businesses with critical and timely messaging. If you are not registered to receive my weekly phone and email messages, you can register at public.coderedweb.com.

During emergencies, Emergency Management team decision-making and communication are the key to successful community response and recovery. While we are well-trained and have access to emergency operations planning documents, there's nothing like the real thing to illuminate the gaps. There have been many valuable lessons learned since March. We must operate under the premise of "continual improvement" so our lessons learned will inform better ways to deliver emergency services and public health policy going forward. I want to express my gratitude to [the] governor and his team for their accessibility and responsiveness throughout the pandemic. We don't always agree, but we dialogue and questions get answered promptly. Timely and effective communication is a key to building a resilient community.

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

Linda O'Leary and Karen Dunn in the Selectmen's Office are critical team members for all the work we do but this year, they've truly gone above and beyond in providing support to our entire organization. Thank you to the best support team a First Selectman could ask for!

Now back to our regular programming ...

Winter 2020 was relatively kind to us but Storm Isaias on August 4th left many residents without power for 7 days and the surprise storm on Nov. 15 hit us very hard with significant tree damage and another three days without power and internet service. Better coordination between Eversource and our telecom providers to get cable, internet and wireless service back online more quickly is essential to support our new work and learn from home environment.

Our staff has done a great job of getting things done in spite of COVID. The Department of Public Works paved 5.5 miles of roadway, installed new sidewalks on Locust Hill Road, began a robust sanitary sewer system study and upgrade plan, developed policies to reduce inflow and infiltration of our storm sewer system, completed the installation of the Town Hall generator and began upgrades to the Town Hall HVAC system. Planning continues for intersection improvements at Noroton and West Avenues and Noroton Avenue and Ledge Road. Significant time continues to be spent assisting the Darien Police Department with facilities-related problems and interfacing with the CTDOT on planned renovations at the Darien Train Station. We are currently negotiating to extend canopies at the Darien Station through a unique public/public partnership that could become a demonstration partnership statewide. Developing positive working relationships with statewide partners is a key to building a resilient community.

DPW was integral to the construction of the Highland Farms improvements. It's wonderful to see so many families enjoying this beautiful open space and our first ADA-compliant walking path. I especially love seeing children learning to ride 2-wheel bikes for the first time there! The town has received a STEAP grant (Small Town Economic Assistance Grant) to help with our landscaping plan for Highland Farms. Planting should occur in the spring. We are very excited to be including the Pollinator Pathway in our planting plans and hope to transition Highland Farms to a no pesticides/organic property.

The pandemic required the pause of the Pear Tree Beach Improvement Project with the exception of continuing to seek state guidance on what is required for approvals to fix the boat ramp and to raise the parking lot. Raising the parking lot may be a wise investment for the resilience and longevity Pear Tree Beach.

Parks & Recreation staff and Commission worked closely with us to keep our beaches and parks open. Hiring temporary Park Monitors was critical to our safety plan. Given the valued added, hiring Park Monitors during beach season should be considered each year. While indoor Parks & Recreation programming suffered, outdoor and virtual programs have been extremely popular. 2020 beach permit sales were up nearly 10% over 2019 sales. Our parks and beaches are well-loved and deserve our continued investment.

The cross country running path at Diller Park is complete and being enjoyed. Given [Caryn Diller's recent](#)

[passing](#), it warms my heart to know this park will forever carry her family name. The Garden Club of Darien has been very busy beautifying our town spaces with 21 new cherry trees planted, appropriately, at Cherry Lawn Park and new plantings in front of Town Hall. The Cherry Lawn basketball court has been refurbished and is wildly popular! I recommend we look to find space for additional outdoor basketball courts in town and perhaps work with the Board of Education to refurbish the courts on school-managed property.

You've heard from Chairman Olvany about all the fantastic new developments happening in Darien. We've benefitted greatly from residents fleeing New York to escape the pandemic health risks of a densely populated city. Our housing market has seen a very positive rebound. Home sales have increased 55% over 2019 and average sale prices are up 15%. As people discover all that Darien has to offer, I know they will want to say awhile. We were sad to say goodbye to a few beloved businesses this year but we've welcomed a number of new ones who see the incredible opportunity here. There's a tremendous buzz about the development underway in Darien! Another silver lining for our local economy.

Organizing for an historic and politically divisive Presidential election, even in normal times, is no easy task. Kudos to our Registrars of Voters, Town Clerk staff and poll volunteers for flawless execution of a COVID-safe election even when the rules changed mid-stream with the authorization of absentee ballots for all. 87% of registered Darien voters voted in November...46% voted by absentee ballot and 54% voted in person.

Kip Koons and his co-chair, Duke Dineen, are doing a fantastic job leading the Ox Ridge Building Committee. The school rebuild is complex given site conditions and access limitations. Final design was complete in June and state approvals have been granted. Project bidding was complete in October and I'm pleased to report that combined bids have come in \$5.3 million below the June 2019 appropriation of \$63 million. More savings may be achieved when all the "soft costs" are confirmed. Construction will commence in two phases and will begin before year end. The project is projected to be completed in the spring of 2023. The new 100,000sf facility will include a separate 10-classroom wing for a consolidated district-wide Early Learning program.

Our first responders have been put to the test this year with protests, fires, storms and all the routine responses made more challenging in our COVID environment. As always, Darien Police, Darien, Noroton and Noroton Heights Fire and Post 53 are a shining example of the benefits of exemplary professionalism and volunteer spirit that is a hallmark of our community. Community volunteerism is a key to building a resilient community.

The Darien Police assisted with several peaceful protests in response to the May 25th murder of George Floyd. There is absolutely no parallel to be drawn from Mr. Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police and the policies and operations of the Darien Police Department and Police Commission. The men and women who wear the Darien Police Department uniform are some of the most highly educated, trained and skilled officers in the country. To paraphrase many law enforcement professionals I've spoken to since May, "no one hates bad cops more than good cops" who go to work every day, putting themselves in harm's way to protect the rest of us.

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

The protests across Connecticut this summer resulted in a hastily called special legislative session on July 21 to pass Public Act 20-1: An Act Concerning Police Accountability. Typically, a piece of legislation of this importance would have months of public hearings. Not the case for this bill. Several parts of this legislation will be revised during the regular session beginning in February 2021 which is apparently slated to be held virtually in spite of the Governor's Emergency Declaration expiring on February 9th. Given the uncertainty, the public hearing process is an unknown at this time. Municipal government has figured out how to fully engage the public, I hope the legislature will find a way to do the same.

I want to thank Chief Anderson, Captains Shreders and Marron and the Darien Police Commission for your transparency and willingness to join me in months of dialogue with protest organizers that allowed for valuable information and ideas sharing.

In 2020 so far, there have been 235 stolen and burglarized vehicles. On behalf of the Darien Police Department I ask that you please lock your cars — every time!

As we look ahead to 2021, I'd like to highlight some of the work on our plate.

The Board of Selectman commissioned an Information Technology Assessment for our IT infrastructure, software and systems management for town-side IT operations. By way of background, the town's IT system is managed by the Darien Public Schools IT Department at an annual cost to the town of \$217,000. The assessment documented 15 key findings. The areas that need immediate action are providing dedicated support for our Public Safety IT systems, Mobile Device Management and updating the IT Support Agreement between the town and the Darien Public Schools. I expect the Board of Selectmen will make this a 2021 priority item.

Because I've been elected to serve in leadership roles on regional and state boards (WestCOG, SWRMPO, CIRMA, CCM) I'm at the table for discussions about the state's problems and proposed solutions. This is how I know developing affordable housing in "high opportunity" communities like Darien is a priority for current state leadership and housing advocates. Advocates believe that single-family zoning practices in towns like ours perpetuate economic and racial segregation by imposing barriers to the development of affordable housing. Legislative proposals to require towns to approve, as-of-right (without public input), more dense multi-family housing in single-family neighborhoods are already in draft form. In plain speak, this means that single family zones could be transformed by the legislative pen into zones that allow for 2-8 family homes. You will hear this housing model referred to as "gentle density" or "missing middle housing." Passing this legislation will essentially be the state taking control of local zoning decisions.

I strongly recommend the Planning & Zoning Commission inventory our current regulations and assess them against pending legislative proposals. I also recommend undertaking a housing survey to understand clearly the kinds of housing development residents hope to see or not see here in Darien. Public input is an important component to our state-mandated Affordable Housing Plan due in 2022. The public deserves to have a voice.

For many cities and towns, especially those who have a disproportionate amount of tax-exempt property,

property tax alone is failing to adequately fund their budgets. Legislative proposals to “diversify municipal revenue streams” is also on the legislative agenda for the coming session. Ideas being advanced include a local sales tax, a local income tax and a variety of new fees such as impact fees, franchise fees, waste management fees, storm water management fees and a motor vehicle excise tax.

Forced regionalization of government functions within the COGs (Councils of Governments) is back on the table too. Draft recommendations are being prepared for multi-town consolidation of dispatch centers, tax assessment and property revaluation, economic development, animal control, health and human services and back office services such as municipal procurement, IT, finance and Human Resources. More “equitable” distribution of education funding has a renewed focus and goes hand-in-hand with these property tax and zoning reform proposals.

The current state budget has an \$800,000 deficit and a projected \$4 billion deficit for the 2021-2023 biennium. Newly-elected House Speaker Matt Ritter is hopeful there will be federal stimulus dollars headed to Connecticut from the Biden Administration to help fix our growing list of budget problems. There are simply too many unknowns at this point to hypothesize on what impacts, if any, legislation will have on future town budgets. Conservative financial leadership over the years has Darien as well-prepared as we can be for what might come. Conservative financial planning is a key to building a resilient community.

Priority setting, innovation, collaboration, building strong community partnerships, volunteerism, effective communication, conservative financial planning and experienced leadership are foundational to building, managing and sustaining a resilient community. We are doing well on all fronts but we can always do better.

2021 holds the promise of an end to the pandemic so we can get back to living our lives free of COVID-19 and too much government control.

I wish you and yours a happy, healthy and peaceful holiday season! Happy Birthday Darien!

Jayne J. Stevenson

First Selectman, Town of Darien