



Town Council Opening Remarks September 14, 2021

(The following remarks were delivered Mayor Brindle at the September 14, 2021 Town Council meeting.)

Good evening, everyone, and welcome back to the regular bi-monthly meeting schedule now that summer is coming to a close. Thanks to all who are joining us in person and online tonight.

As a reminder, public comment will be accepted in person only. As always, the replay will also be available afterwards on Facebook, YouTube, and TV 36.

Tropical Storm Ida

Following Jim's report on the storm debris pick up being nearly complete, I'd like to take a moment to recognize the incredible job that Public Works has done over the past week. This is the first time that the DPW has ever conducted a Town-wide bulky waste pick up, and it was a big lift on top of their ongoing other responsibilities -- including field preparation and maintenance, beautifying the 9/11 memorial for our annual ceremony, patching roadways, and responding to residents' requests. Please give them a shout out next time you see a DPW employee -- they were incredible.

And while we did not experience the catastrophic devastation we witnessed in other communities, we do have a number of residents with substantial property damage and financial and emotional losses. I want to remind everyone that Union County is now included in the FEMA Major Disaster Declaration, and residents with losses can apply for assistance at [disasterassistance.gov](https://www.disasterassistance.gov), and can call 1-800-621-3362 for application assistance.

We continue to receive inquiries about infrastructure improvements following the impact of Ida. For some context, municipal stormwater systems are designed to control stormwater for the average types of storm events municipalities might reasonably endure.

Overall, our region received 7.3 inches of rainfall, or 164% of an entire average month, in just over 24 hours. Over four inches of rain fell in just two hours between 7:00 and 9:00 PM on September 1. The rainfall from Ida also came on top of the already saturated ground from a July that was 173% of the average and an August that was 145% of the average rainfall.

Stormwater systems were simply overrun, not only in Westfield but around the state, with many towns suffering catastrophic losses. While this storm is far beyond what the average municipal drainage system is expected to handle, we have to act with urgency to fortify our infrastructure to manage the severity of storms that are happening more frequently. Westfield has had ongoing pockets of flooding

that we've been attempting to address on a localized basis, but Ida has made it clear that we need to take a more holistic, strategic approach to address our stormwater issues for the short and long term.

Tonight I'm announcing the formation of the Westfield Infrastructure Resiliency Committee (WIRC), which will be tasked with assessing our current Town wide stormwater infrastructure and its capacity to handle these severe weather events in the future, and making short and long-term recommendations for how best to fortify it, as well recommendations for ensuring we are proactively thinking about climate resiliency in everything we do going forward.

It will be a significant undertaking, and will take all contributing factors into considerations such as engineering and current zoning and construction practices, future development, and input from public works and finance, who will all be represented on WIRC.

This Council will be co-chaired by Finance Committee Chair Linda Habgood and Public Works Committee Chair David Contract, and will also include:

- Jim Gildea, Town Administrator
- Greg O'Neil, Director of Public Works
- Don Sammet, Town Planner
- Dave Battaglia, Town Engineer
- Frank Vuoso, Construction Official

We will also be seeking resident volunteers to fill several additional seats -- specifically those who have a unique perspective from personal flooding experience or professional experience in the areas of flood mitigation or related zoning or construction expertise. More details about how to apply will be available shortly.

Cell Tower Proposal at Houlihan/Sid Fay

I'd like to provide you with an update on the cell tower proposal for Houlihan/Sid Fay fields. We worked closely with our consultant -- who, as a reminder, is retained at no cost to the Town -- to issue a public call for bids, which, we recently learned, yielded no responses due to the upfront investment in park improvements we required. As a result, we are discussing our potential next steps with our consultant, which may include a revised re-issuance of the call for bids in order to prevent the cell tower potentially being erected across the tracks in Clark, limiting our ability to realize some of the benefits we had hoped for, including the installation of restrooms and additional parking at the complex. I'll continue to keep you apprised of next steps.

Edison School Fields Project

Thanks to all of the residents who continue to provide input on the Edison Fields Project. As we announced at the last Council meeting, in response to the concerns we've heard, we are scaling back the

initial proposal by almost half, and residents can expect to hear more at the meeting next Monday night, September 20, at Edison.

I am going to ask Recreation Commission liaison Scott Katz to provide more details about the current process.

[Comments from Councilman Katz:

In the last few months, we have heard from many neighbors regarding the proposed project at Edison fields. We've held two public meetings, as well as a very productive neighbors' advisory meeting -- which will be meeting again tomorrow. In addition, we also heard from the neighbors at length again at the last Town Council meeting and watched their comments at at the BOE meeting.

As I announced at the last Council meeting, in response to residents' concerns, we are scaling back the initial Edison fields proposal by almost half. This is consistent with the Strategic Parks Plan recommendations which proposed two full size turf fields.

Members of the Recreation Commission will be presenting a more detailed revised proposal at the scheduled September 20 public meeting at Edison, and will also be addressing many of the questions and concerns that have been raised to date. The meeting will be at 7:00 PM in the cafeteria.

The plan that will be presented reflects a balance of addressing the current fields shortage, neighbor concerns, and costs. A scaled back plan will reduce the overall neighborhood impact, while leaving grassy areas for both Edison students and neighbors. And to be clear, Edison is not and never was intended to be the only location for new fields. It was the first place to start, as it provided the most immediate increase in capacity. This will enable us to plan for adding more fields in some of the other recommended locations, whether it be Tamaques Park, Elm Street, or possibly Memorial Park.

Edison alone will not solve the field shortage. We understand this. It's a great first step, and it's finally time to start somewhere. I strongly encourage everyone to attend the September 20 meeting, and I am confident that we will arrive at a solution that works for all.]

Charles Morrison Dedication

This afternoon, I had the privilege of overseeing the ribbon cutting ceremony at the newly installed memorial for Charles R. Morrison, Sr. in Memorial Park.

Mr. Morrison, who passed away in 2019, was a civil rights and civic improvement leader in Westfield. I'd like to take a moment to share the words on the memorial's plaque that we unveiled today:

In the early 1960s, Mr. Morrison founded the Westfield Civic Improvement Association to advocate on his neighborhood's behalf for the creation of a community recreational facility in what is now known as Memorial Park.

Labeled by some as a troublemaking Black resident, Mr. Morrison's "good trouble" was pivotal in establishing the Westfield Memorial Pool and Park Complex. To this day, his legacy lives on through one of the Town's most valuable community assets enjoyed by many residents over the years.

Thanks to the Morrison family for allowing us to honor Charles' memory today as a beloved Westfield resident who gave so much to his community.

Tonight's Agenda

We have another busy agenda tonight!

- We will be voting on a resolution to file an application with the Union County Open Space, Recreation & Historic Preservation Trust Fund for a "Kids Recreation Trust Fund" grant to replace the playground in Windsor Park.
- We will also hear an ordinance on first reading to address the issue of renting out private property amenities, including backyard swimming pools, which has recently been of concern with a specific property in Town that was causing disruption to the neighborhood. I'd like to thank the neighbors for bringing this issue to our attention so that we could swiftly introduce legislation to mitigate the problem.
- Following a review by the Finance Committee, we are voting on a resolution approving a tax agreement for the property at 226 North Avenue, which is the site of AR Workshop. As a reminder, in May 2020, we passed a resolution designating the downtown Special Improvement District as an area in need of rehabilitation in order to incentivize downtown property owners to improve and invest in their properties. This agreement provides them a five-year tax abatement on the value of their improvements only, which was also extended to include locally historically designated properties in October 2020. The owners of this particular property upgraded the quality of their improvements once they learned of the designation, which is exactly the outcome this designation is intended for. I'm thrilled that they are the first property in the SID to take advantage of this incentive in order to monetize their property improvements over a five-year period, and it's wonderful to see the property owner's commitment to long-term success in Westfield.
- I'll be reading a proclamation declaring the week of September 26 through October 2, 2021 as Green Energy Week in Westfield. I know that the Green Team has many exciting initiatives planned -- including the first-ever Tour de Westfield bike parade on September 26, and The Alternative Energy Fair on October 2. I'll have Councilman Contract and Councilman Katz speak to these events in more detail.
- Finally, I want to spend some time discussing the importance of a resolution, as well as an ordinance on first reading tonight, that are particularly relevant on this night before Yom Kippur. In light of the recent swastika found on playground equipment in Mindowaskin Park, which followed several graffiti incidents in the past year, we will vote to authorize a resolution recognizing the growing problem of antisemitism in America and calling for the adoption of educational tools to address it -- specifically endorsing and adopting the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism in full, and working to ensure that it is available as an educational resource for all Town departments and staff responsible for addressing antisemitism and other forms of discrimination.

The Working Definition of Antisemitism was adopted by the IHRA in May 2016, which has become the internationally recognized, authoritative definition of antisemitism for use by governments and international organizations. That definition reads in full:

Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.

In addition, tonight's ordinance on first reading is to increase fines for bias crimes, from what was previously up to \$200 per violation to up to \$2,000 per violation.

A recent American Jewish Committee report from 2020 entitled *The State of Antisemitism in America* found that more than one in three American Jews (37%) say they have been victims of antisemitism over the past five years. Incidents here in Westfield, including the etching of swastikas on playground equipment and other public property, are wholly unacceptable and must be addressed both through words and actions. Last year, I signed on to the American Jewish Committee's Mayors United Against Antisemitism campaign, and recently met with their Director, Rabbi David Levy, to discuss a closer collaboration to support their mission. His recommendations included tonight's resolution, as well as the inclusion of the American Jewish Committee's "Translate Hate," a digital glossary of antisemitic terms and tropes, which we've posted on the Human Relations Advisory Commission portion of our website (westfieldnj.gov/hrac).

We, as an elected body, take our responsibility seriously to protect our residents from acts of hate and bigotry. As our Jewish neighbors and friends observe Yom Kippur beginning tomorrow evening, this Council calls upon the community at large to reflect on what role we can play in contributing to the inclusive community we aspire to be.

With that, let's get to work. I want to remind everyone that I will be enforcing Robert's Rules this evening to ensure we stay on topic and the meeting runs efficiently.

Thank you.