



## Town Council Opening Remarks December 7, 2021

*(The following remarks were delivered by Mayor Brindle at the December 7, 2021 Town Council meeting.)*

Good evening, everyone, and thanks to all who are joining us in person and online tonight for the final Town Council meeting of 2021. I think we can all agree that it's been quite a year!

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.

### **VOLUNTEER APPLICATIONS**

Thanks to the 157 residents who submitted applications to serve on our 2022 Boards, Commissions, and Mayor's Advisory Councils! We are in the process of reviewing the applications and ensuring diversity of experience and ward location so that the final appointees are representative of the community at large. We'll be making notifications within the next two weeks, with formal appointments to occur at the January 4 Annual Organization Meeting.

### **HOLIDAY EVENTS**

Thanks to everyone who came out to our annual Christmas tree and menorah lightings! With the holidays upon us, don't miss the various events around town to celebrate the season and to support our local businesses. As a reminder, the new Downtown Westfield Gift Card is an easy way to keep your holiday spending local! For a full list of participating stores, and to purchase a gift card, visit our website.

We also have the Fourth Annual Westfield Gingerbread Display and Competition underway, with registration open through the end of this week on our website. And while you're out and about in Downtown Westfield, don't forget about the free gift wrapping available at the Holiday Welcome Center in the North Avenue train station.

### **BOARD OF EDUCATION**

Today, Jim Gildea and I held an update meeting with School Superintendent Dr. Gonzalez, Business Administrator Dana Sullivan, and the President and VP of the Board of Education to discuss opportunities to work together, next steps in the Edison Fields Project, and very importantly, our joint

commitment to combat hate speech and bias crimes in Westfield, particularly following the most recent discovery of an antisemitic hate symbol at the high school.

We both feel strongly that we need to take meaningful action beyond denouncing these abhorrent acts. Dr. Gonzalez is meeting with a number of community and religious organizations in the area to gain their perspectives, and I have agreed to sign onto an upcoming statement being issued by the JCC of Central New Jersey and will continue to engage with the American Jewish Committee about their work to denounce antisemitism. As you know, we recently passed a resolution adopting their definition of antisemitism and passed an ordinance raising fines for graffiti bias crimes from \$200 to \$2000, which is clearly not enough.

It was clear after our meeting that the school district and Town are united in our solidarity with our Jewish friends and neighbors, and these heinous acts won't be tolerated. To further the conversation, the Human Relations Advisory Commission, in partnership with the MLK Association and the AJC, will be hosting a Town Hall in February to discuss how we can do better. Details to come after the new year.

## **TONIGHT'S AGENDA**

We have several important items on the agenda tonight, and I'd like to cover a few of the redevelopment topics upfront to provide some additional context.

### **Prospect/Ferris Proposal**

I have received many comments and concerns regarding the Prospect/Ferris redevelopment plan that we are voting on tonight. Last night, the Planning Board concluded that this proposed project is consistent with the Master Plan, but there are many more steps to take. Tonight, I'd like to clarify some of the facts, and make sure you are aware of the process, the benefits and purpose of this redevelopment plan, and next steps.

#### Timing and Background

I have heard from many that this project came "out of the blue" and is being fast tracked, when in reality it has been in the works for many years, pre-dating my term as mayor. I was initially made aware of it in 2018, and property owner James Ward was advised to wait until the 2019 Master Plan Reexamination was completed to ensure any proposed project was reflective of the Master Plan. Since then, Mr. Ward consulted with many stakeholders, including historic preservation, the site review committee of the Planning Board, the redevelopment team, and the Town Council -- and that feedback has been incorporated into the redevelopment plan presented today. This proposal is still very conceptual and stakeholder input does not reflect approval -- far from it.

#### Public Benefits

In an effort to better control the outcomes of development projects, we are using the tools of redevelopment law to require redevelopment agreements with key high profile projects to hold

developers accountable. These agreements provide us the opportunity to assert a tremendous amount of control over projects, from architectural standards, to traffic and parking, to historic preservation requirements, to sustainability -- all of which result in several key public benefits. With the project being proposed this evening, we have required the restoration and designation of the historic home, an 8,000 square foot green roof, a comprehensive traffic study and plan, and below grade parking. Additionally, and very importantly, they are building ten affordable housing units that will count towards our affordable housing unmet need.

### Process and Public Input

To clarify, the action we are taking tonight is a vote to adopt the redevelopment plan, which sets the development standards for the property. It is not an approval to begin construction. The next steps would then be an executed redevelopment agreement between the developer and Town, which would be followed by an application for site plan approval to the Planning Board. A public hearing would be held on that application. In addition, final approval from the Historic Preservation Commission will be required regarding the restoration and use of the historic home.

So please be assured that there are several opportunities to shape and amend this project going forward, and tonight's vote is only the beginning of this process to collect additional input and information for the best possible outcome.

### **Handler Building**

Also on tonight's agenda is a resolution to approve the redevelopment agreement for the Handler Building. As you may recall, back in July, this Council voted to adopt the redevelopment plan for this site, where Westfield residents Michele and Greg Redington will launch Redi-farms, a vertical hydroponic farm that will produce locally grown organic produce year-round, in addition to education classes about indoor farming, an eatery, and an event space.

Just this week the court approved the changes in our Fair Share Housing plan to allow for this project. It's worth noting that, at the court hearing, the Town received glowing praise from the judge for our plan and the ingenuity of the amendments to allow for the Handler project. As a result, we will now gain a vertical farm to serve as an economic development driver with significant social impact potential, rather than an additional apartment building on North Avenue.

This agreement outlines the scope of the project and ensures that the redeveloper will build in accordance with the previously approved redevelopment plan. It also represents the next step in this process -- the same process that will be in place for the proposed Prospect/Ferris project.

And on a final note about redevelopment, because there was lengthy discussion about PILOT programs during the Westfield Crossing public hearing, I want to remind residents, as I had said at that time, that not all redevelopment projects warrant a PILOT agreement. And here tonight, we have both the Handler

Building and the James Ward properties moving through the appropriate process -- both of which are redevelopment projects -- without a PILOT component.

With that, we have a lot to cover tonight! I'd like to hand the meeting over to Chris Colley from Topology to present the Prospect/Ferris Redevelopment Plan for those watching tonight. Once again, I'll be enforcing Robert's Rules to make sure the meeting stays on track.

Thank you.