

BOROUGH OF RARITAN

2025 State of the Borough Address

Mayor Nicolas J. Carra

Good evening and Happy New Year! Thank you for joining us today as Raritan reorganizes for 2025. Like the previous year, 2024 was a year of change for the Borough of Raritan. We expanded the size of our committees to include more volunteers and residents, helping shape the future of our town by adding seats to the Historical & Cultural Committee and the Board of Health. I'd like to take a moment to thank all those who served Raritan last year on a Board, Commission, or Committee. These volunteers drive significant change and progress year after year for the benefit of the Borough and all its residents. We look forward to working alongside those who will continue in this capacity for 2025. May they have great success in all their endeavors.

At my request and with the council's support, the town created a new Redevelopment Advisory Committee to make initial meetings with developers more public than past practices. No longer will redevelopment projects just appear on our meeting agenda. From start to finish, a public record will exist for each project. When initial discussions take place, residents can know which area of town is being reviewed, what the committee's initial reaction is to a proposed project, and what changes can be made before any action by the governing body. This transparency began with all projects introduced in 2024 and will continue into 2025. While the committee serves solely in an advisory capacity, it remains the responsibility of the Borough council, the elected representatives, to ultimately make decisions on redevelopment within the Borough.

The Redevelopment Advisory Committee also assisted the Borough in advancing the stalled Downtown Sustainable Economic Development plan. In my address last year, this was outlined as a goal and priority for the Borough Council. Having received a \$300,000 grant to complete the work in 2020 and 2021, I wanted to see the plan implemented so that taxpayer dollars do not just sit on a shelf. I am proud to say that the council authorized the committee and the planning board to begin the initial study to implement that plan. I look forward to adopting an ordinance to designate the full study area, from the river to the train station and from Route 206 to First Avenue, as an Area in Need of Rehabilitation. This designation will create a connection between our train station and one of our great assets, access to Duke Farms, and lead to more foot traffic downtown, allowing our small businesses to grow and thrive.

Another aspect of Economic Development that the town has pursued is re-establishing our relationship with the Somerset County Business Partnership and finally connecting with Somerset County's Economic Development Manager. Through these new relationships, we were able to meet with key contacts at the state level: the Business Action Center and the NJ Economic Development Authority. During their respective visits to town, we gained valuable insights into how to improve our downtown with simple ideas, like increasing striped parking on side streets, rotating benches to face our businesses, emphasizing our beautiful historic buildings, and informing business owners about grants available for lease payment assistance and façade improvement reimbursements. The final piece to improving our business climate is creating an organization that will promote our businesses and craft events throughout the year, with the best financing such a group

has ever had. I have a meeting scheduled later this week with experts on the subject. Making this our number one goal for 2025, I ask the council to be ready to support this initiative, as it will finally establish a real organization to support our small businesses.

In 2025, we will continue to improve our park facilities. We received a grant in 2024 for design and planning work for Washington School Park. We held a community feedback day to solicit feedback and ideas for that space and look forward to presenting the results within the first half of 2025. Hearing feedback from local neighbors, we will keep the park for passive recreation, with improvements to seating and the addition of a nice walking path for residents to utilize. We authorized rehabbing our tennis court, constructing pickleball courts, repairing our pool for 10% of the original estimate, and installing a splash pad at the site of our non-functional pool. I believe park facilities are one of the main responsibilities of local government and are a showcase of the town to residents and visitors who may decide to call Raritan home.

Borough finances continue to be strong. Raritan maintains its AA bond rating. Our municipal budget last year kept the tax rate flat, causing no increase to the Borough's portion of resident's property tax bills. We continue to seek grants for funding and look forward to working with our grant writers to secure even more grants in 2025. This year will present a challenging budget, but with the trust I have in our CFO, Auditors, and our Administrator, I am confident we will introduce a budget that continues to provide excellent service with a low impact on taxpayers. Also, I want to remind residents that the county has ordered the Borough to conduct a re-evaluation of all properties, which will begin this year.

Also, we continue to save taxpayer dollars by increasing shared services with neighboring towns, helping maintain municipal services while reducing total costs.

I would like to take a moment to thank those who are often unseen but are vital to the continued success of Raritan. The governing body would not be able to accomplish anything without the continued support and knowledge of our employees. A lot goes on behind the scenes between the two weeks that pass during council meetings. Day-to-day business can take up a lot of their time, but they still find a way to help residents with municipal issues or services. They are the backbone of our town, and none of us up here would be successful without their tireless efforts on behalf of us all.

To continue our thanks, we also need to give a big shout out to our public works department. Day after day, they are there to make sure our town continues to look its best. When the council wanted to improve Somerset Street, they were there to help trim our trees, repair our sidewalks, ensure all our streetlights are operational, install our new holiday decorations and tree, maintain our parks, and handle garbage and bulk pickup. As I enter my ninth year of service to the Borough, I have never been more impressed with our Public Works department. We have a great group, and I will continue to support them with whatever they need to get the job done for our residents.

I would also like to thank our Police and Fire departments. The police continue to represent Raritan in the best light. Last year we had some issues with break-ins for cars and homes. The police were quick to respond to resident concerns, deploying all types of technology to keep everyone safe and being ready at a moment's notice if action was required. They put the community of Raritan first, and we must never forget their service to

us. I look forward to working with our new police chief and continuing to build trust with residents, as well as growing our community policing efforts. The same goes for the Raritan Fire Department. This group of volunteers also puts their lives on the line in service to the residents of the Borough. For those unaware, the level of training and certification for firefighters continues to grow, and our department embraces these challenges to continue protecting us all. We congratulate the department and their new slate of officers for 2025. I know I speak for everyone when I say we look forward to their annual food truck festival at Washington School Park.

As with 2024, my goals for the Borough in 2025 are ambitious, but I feel it is our duty as elected officials to continue progressing forward. In my opinion, I have seen many councils afraid to act or make changes. As it is said, the only constant is change. We should embrace change, not fear it. But let's focus on positive changes that support residents and our small businesses on Somerset Street, Thompson Street, Anderson Street, and throughout the Borough of Raritan. Raritan is at a crossroads, and it is time to welcome growth as it will help the Borough financially, which in turn helps taxpayers keep more of their hard-earned dollars. We are part of an emerging center here in Somerset County, and we can shape our future to be the best vision for Raritan.

Lastly, I would like to wish everyone a happy, healthy, and successful New Year. I look forward to continuing my service to residents as your mayor and to "Taking Action" for Raritan in 2025.