

Dear Fellow Residents,

As I do each New Year's Day, I would like to review some of the events and accomplishments that took place in our town during the past year and to announce some of the plans we have for 2025. First, I'd like to welcome back Anthony Picarelli and Patrick Fierro to the Council and congratulate them on their recent election victory. They are our youngest members of Council. Anthony was first elected as a Councilman in 2012. He has chaired several committees over the years and presently is the chair of the Finance Committee. Patrick was first elected in 2021 and chairs our Legislation and Ordinances Committee. You heard from each of them earlier. I know that both Anthony and Patrick will work hard throughout the year for our residents. They will be involved in many of our town's operations. I rely on their counsel and advice, along with the entire Council and Joe and Kristin, in making decisions for Totowa. I know you can count on them to serve you well.

Beginning with community events and recreation, in June 2024, our Totowa Day townwide celebration moved to the PAL complex. We again drew a record number of residents for the occasion. Residents were treated with music, many varieties of food, amusements and bouncy houses, a hot dog eating contest, and a star-studded wrestling match to end the festivities.

Our summer concerts on the front lawn of the municipal building were well attended. We had a few new performers to complement some returning musicians. During the summer months, we held camp for our youth and our town pool again enjoyed a record number of members. There were special events at the pool that attracted many residents and a new park with playground equipment was installed at the pool in 2024 and added more activities for our younger members. The cost of the park was funded by a grant that the Borough received. In 2024, we applied for and received a grant from the State of New Jersey to install safety surfacing at the park on Floyd Drive. While the grant will not cover the entire cost of the installation, the Borough will pay for the remaining cost of the improvements.

In November, we held our annual 5K Turkey Trot with a record number of participants-over 1,000 in all. And through the generosity of participants, 120 turkeys were donated and given to a women's shelter. Our two blood drives held in 2024 collected much needed blood donations. The fire truck parade with the Totowa, West Paterson, and Little Falls Fire departments was also held again and the number of trucks in the parade reached over 280. The toys collected by our volunteer firefighters surpassed the prior year totals and were donated to children at St. Joseph's Hospital. We also held our annual tree lighting ceremony with the school choir and musicians. And our trolley carrying residents singing carols could be heard in the streets. There were other events throughout the year, such as the car show, bunny breakfast, Trunk or Treat and more, both inside and out of doors, that our residents enjoyed.

With respect to our infrastructure, we received a grant from the NJ Department of Transportation in 2023 for the entire length of Battle Ridge Trail and a portion of Columbus

Ave. With our own funding, we also paved Vita Road and Willow Court. These roads were all paved this past October. In 2024, we received a grant from the DOT to pave Duffus Ave., Mair Ave., Sandra Drive, and other smaller streets in Echo Glen. As I reported last year, Totowa applied for and received a grant from the State of New Jersey to replace all of the trash cans and planters along Union Boulevard. The new trash and recycling receptacles were installed in 2024 and the new planters should be installed in 2025.

We applied for another grant from Passaic County to continue relining our sanitary sewers. Our most recent award is for the entire length of Willard Avenue, which will begin in 2025. We also completed the relining of the sewer lines on Lincoln Ave. from Union Boulevard to Totowa Road. We have applied for two more streets in 2025. These efforts will help alleviate some of the infiltration that enters our sanitary sewer system. We are nearly complete with the project to replace the pumps and infrastructure at the William Place pump house. We are ready to go to bid on the upgrades to the Riverview Drive pump station and are awaiting notification of a grant that we applied for to help defray some of the costs of this project. We will continue looking at ways to improve our water and sewer system while alleviating flooding to our residents. During the soaking rainstorms about a year ago in late January, the check valves we installed near Lincoln Ave. at the Passaic River several years ago worked as designed and the flooding in that part of town was not as significant as compared to other major water events.

Real estate development continued in Totowa in 2024. We are pleased that developers and retailers have confidence in our borough and consider it a desirable location. In 2024, the planning board approved applications for Tesla and LIDL at the old Marshalls and Bed, Bath and Beyond locations, which should open in 2025. New restaurants have opened in town as well as new businesses coming into our industrial park. And Union Boulevard continues to get a makeover. The additional ratables from this type of project mentioned and other construction taking place should provide ratables and ease the tax burden on our residents.

Totowa continues to be strengthened by the support of our professional staff at town hall, our police department, our Department of Public Works, and all of our dedicated employees. We are fortunate and thankful for our volunteers in our town. Our fire fighters and first aid squad members are vital to our community as they give up their time to serve selflessly for you, our residents, in your time of need. There are also volunteers at the PAL and on our municipal boards who donate their time in the best interest of our community and all of these efforts are truly appreciated by the Council and me.

Our Totowa Public Library continues to flourish with new and expanded programs offered as well as assistance to our senior citizens and residents in need. A program that the Council started in 2022- honoring our Totowa veterans along our main streets, is being administered by the Library staff. If you have not visited the library lately, you will be surprised at how many events are run there. Under the direction of the Library Board of Trustees and its director, Anne Krauthem, the library has become more than a library- it truly is our community center.

One issue that we must address in 2025 is the affordable housing mandate by the State of New Jersey. Due to a law that was signed in March, the Department of Community Affairs has determined that Totowa must commit to building 528 affordable housing units in the next ten years, which means developers can build five times that amount of market rate units, or approximately 2,500 units altogether. As you know, Totowa is only 4 square miles and has less than 20 acres of developable vacant land scattered throughout our town. Yet we were given the second highest quota in Passaic County. Therefore, in order to protect our community from this disastrous mandate, we have entered into a lawsuit with about 30 other towns in NJ to challenge this law. Concurrently, we are working with our planners, engineer, and attorney to reduce our mandated goal should the lawsuit not be successful. More to come on this.

On the property tax front, in 2024, our total tax rate did increase. This was attributable to several factors, including significant unfavorable tax increases from Passaic Valley High School and the County of Passaic. As you have heard me say countless times, we are determined to be fiscally prudent. Just like you, we were not happy with the increases and will work to lessen the impact. In Totowa we have made tough financial decisions before and will continue to make tough choices in order not to place a financial burden on future budgets and future generations. We have now achieved our thirteenth consecutive year without any long-term debt in our municipality, a claim only a handful of municipalities across New Jersey can make. Our core belief is that we should pay currently to meet our obligations where we can and not borrow if possible. By freeing ourselves of debt, we can utilize those funds for much needed improvements to our infrastructure and replacing outdated equipment. In 2024, Totowa continues the distinction of having the lowest tax rate of the 16 municipalities in Passaic County. The Council and I will once again work hard to maintain the lowest tax rate for our residents.

Totowa has a rich history of volunteerism, low taxes, and caring neighbors who make our town feel like a community. I believe our future is a bright one and I am confident that we will continue our improvements to our town as well as our stability here in Totowa. On behalf of our Council members, I would like to wish everyone a healthy and peaceful New Year.

Thank you.