Township of Lopatcong

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
Douglas J. Steinhardt

July 15, 2003.

Dear Lopatcong Township Residents:

During my first three years as Mayor of Lopatcong, I wrote on six occasions regarding the State of the Township. It was my intention then, as it is my intention now, to share with all of you my thoughts and insights into the policies, decisions and debates that mold our Township. That being said, please accept this as my first of six more letters on the State of the Township.

Lopatcong continues to thrive. Undaunted by certain obstacles, Council remains committed to preserving our rural community and protecting the way of life that prompted so many of us to either move here or remain here. Unwilling to accept the status quo or remain passive while the rural characteristics of our community slowly dwindle or are eroded away, we have embarked upon a pro-active path intended to defend the last vestiges of a more rural Lopatcong and the rights and privileges of our residents to live comfortably and affordably and our community to plan and zone for its future. Consequently, we have endured lawsuits intended to deter us and initiated claims of our own intended to protect us. With the singular vision of promoting, protecting and perpetuating our rural community, I am pleased to say that Lopatcong Township remains strong.

Many of you are familiar with the recent media frenzy surrounding the so-called "two bedroom rule". As I wrote to the *Express Times*, I want to make clear that the ordinance applies only to multi-family dwellings in the Township's R-MF zone. It does not apply to existing or proposed single-family, apartment or other dwellings in other than the R-MF zone. Most important, it was not created in a vacuum. It was well researched and well reasoned and based on the sound advice of our municipal professionals. It was also in response to several concerns. Among them, we believe it our right to practice municipal planning aimed at keeping Lopatcong a rural community. Second, we believe that in or about 1998, a certain developer represented to Council and our planning board that it would self-limit its development to no more than two bedrooms per unit as an inducement to the then Mayor and Council to rezone its property from seven units per acre to twelve and satisfy the Township's COAH obligation. It was a position that developer maintained repeatedly until as recently as last year. However, we believe it reneged on that promise when it demanded the right to build three bedroom units, its promise notwithstanding. In response to those and other concerns, Council introduced,

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upon the advice of our two professionals, Ordinance No. 2003-13, limiting the number of bedrooms in the R-MF zone to 2, consistent with that developer's promise. It prompted yet another lawsuit, which we are committed to defending. Finally, contrary to the allegations of that developer, we believe our intentions are honorable and the rural integrity of our community worth protecting.

The remaining lawsuit filed over the proposed development at Belview Road and contemplated to condemn the 40 acres of vacant land in Morris Park continue. I will update you again as they proceed. I also want to reassure the residents of Brakeley Gardens that despite statements to the contrary, Salem Management has not filed any lawsuit against Lopatcong Township nor is there any presently pending. We continue to maintain the status quo with them and stand by the decisions of Council and our Rent Leveling Board.

From a fiscal perspective, 2003 marked the first time since my taking office in January 2000 that we were forced to impose a tax increase. Earlier this year, Council voted to impose a one cent tax increase, but only because our municipal auditor required us to increase our tax reserve (our account for unpaid taxes) by more than $220,000.00 to cover unpaid taxes from a pending tax appeal. Although we had worked hard the past three years to keep taxes flat and were hoping this year to reduce them, with approximately $50,000.00 equaling one cent in our tax rate, we were forced to impose the one-cent increase pending the outcome of the appeal. Moreover, knowing that the school board was proposing a thirteen cent increase in its budget, we were forced to prioritize our spending this year to keep the municipal increase to just one cent. It was particularly disheartening, since the need to raise taxes was the result of an action beyond our control. Nonetheless, Council remains committed to providing the best possible services in a fiscally responsible, economically viable environment.

I am pleased to announce that the Township has funds available in an "economic development account" to be used by small businesses to finance business opportunities on a loan basis or to develop or construct infrastructure to service one or more businesses in the community. For additional information concerning these loans, you may contact the Township Industrial Committee.

The Township will shortly begin a Home Rehabilitation Program designed to facilitate rehabilitation of certain existing housing units. Homeowners will be determined eligible through established annual income limits that are defined by the number of persons per household. The home systems that are eligible for repairs, if found to be faulty, include electric, plumbing, heating, roofing, energy-related needs and any structural problems. You may contact the Municipal Clerk's Office at (908) 859-3355, Ext. 221 if you have any questions concerning these grants.

I note that in a July 6, 2003 memorandum to the Brakeley Gardens tenants, Salem Management Company, the property's manager, pointed its finger at Council, the Rent Leveling Board, the Rent Control Ordinance and me (in retrospect, at everyone but itself), for the backlash it has faced from the Brakeley Gardens Tenants Association. I

want to reassure the residents of Brakeley Gardens that Council has no intention of abandoning the Rent Control Ordinance or disbanding the recently resurrected Board in response to Salem's name-calling and baseless threats. In fact, in assessing the truth of the allegations espoused by Salem, I merely ask you to consider who stands to gain from deleting the Rent Control Ordinance or seeking to have it overturned.

In 2003, Council adopted a $1.5 million bond ordinance to begin construction on Lopatcong Park, our 30-acre recreational complex surrounding the municipal pool facility. We have applied to the State of New Jersey, Green Acres Fund for an additional $500,000.00 to complete the project. We hope to be able to go to bid in August and begin construction in the fall. I will keep you apprised of our progress.

As in 2002, clean up sites will take place this year at the Delaware Park Fire Co., Lopatcong Fire Co. #2, and the pool parking lot. Although we had hoped to provide curbside clean up this year as in the past, given the nearly $60,000.00 price tag associated with that program, we were forced to postpone it a year in order to keep our tax increase to just one cent. Council has not yet set a specific date for this, but it will be a Saturday in late September or early October. Please watch for an ad to appear in the *Express Times* and the *Star Gazette,* or you can contact the Clerk's Office for information.

As always, I want to ask you to support our local volunteers, firefighters and emergency squad. They work hard helping the residents of this Township, and you never know when you too may need to call upon them to help you.

This past March, five of our volunteers, Jim Beacham, Melinda Forster, Cliff Shannon, Bill Taggart and Jim Vainella, were honored at a Volunteer Recognition Dinner held at the Delaware Park Fire House. Our Volunteer Recognition Committee has been honoring as many as five or six volunteers every year since 1984.

I wish to commend Council for its unified efforts. Having appeared before several other governing bodies in my capacity as attorney, I can think of no finer persons with whom I could serve.

Finally, Council meets the first Wednesday of every month with every effort being made to start promptly at 7:30 p.m. Please feel free to join us. I look forward to seeing you there.

Sincerely,

Douglas J. Steinhardt
Mayor