

Township of Lopatcong

OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

Douglas J. Steinhardt



January 24, 2005

Dear Lopatcong Resident:

Five years ago, I approached elected office in Lopatcong with an eye at making it a better place to live and raise a family. I envisioned an affordable, service-oriented community where people not only wanted to live, but could afford to live too.

Five years later, Council has endured no fewer than five developer lawsuits. We were successful in keeping some development out and, in the case of our infamous "two-bedroom rule," even re-wrote the law in the process. Where we were forced to concede to modified, diluted versions of other developments, it was only because of the staggering cost of keeping them out. In every instance, we remained cognizant of the careful balance between our fiscal security with rural integrity.

It was during this same five years that the Lopatcong Park recreation project materialized, the Architects Golf Club opened, and the declining Hillcrest Mall was refurbished. As a Council, we pursued open space where practical, commercial development where favorable, and infrastructure improvements where needed. We are pursuing the redevelopment and reconstruction of Lopatcong's 100 acres of Ingersoll-Rand property. And we continue to formulate long-term, infrastructure and planning improvements to stay ahead of the day-to-day needs of running a Township. We overhauled the municipal government by streamlining its operations and expenses. We emphasized the good and investigated and eradicated the bad. We did all of this while raising municipal taxes just one cent in five years. In fact, I am pleased to report that five years later, our municipal tax rate flat is as low in 2005 as it was in 1996. It is for those reasons and the reasons set forth below that I am proud to report on the positive outlook for Lopatcong. I am proud to report that Lopatcong remains strong.

In June 2004 we contracted with Aqua New Jersey to operate and maintain our wastewater collection system. It was the first phase in an early and on-going effort to analyze and update that service.

In July 2004, Council adopted the ordinance that created Lopatcong Park, our approximately 80-acre active and passive recreation complex situated behind the

Township pool, and awarded the \$1.2 million contract to Bob Viersma and Sons, Inc., the project's low bidder. Construction began almost immediately thereafter and continued into the fall. Consisting of biking and walking paths, football, soccer, baseball and softball fields, outbuildings and ancillary facilities, portions will be open this summer, with the ball fields ready for use by Spring 2006.

For years Lopatcong did the bulk of its banking business with Phillipsburg National Bank [PNB] and enjoyed the convenience and benefits of a local banking institution. However, PNB was acquired by VISTA, United Trust, and then by PNC Bank. And while we continued our accounts with PNC for some time, in August 2004 I recommended and Council decided to solicit proposals from other financial institutions. With more than \$7 million in account assets, we felt ours was business that banks would compete to attract, generating services and savings in the process. In the end, Council settled on Skylands Community Bank, a Hackettstown, NJ-based bank and part of the Fulton Financial Group, with branches in Warren and Hunterdon Counties, including at the Strykers Crossing Mall on Strykers Road in Lopatcong. Through aggressive marketing, we were able to obtain fee-free accounts, significantly better rates and more benefits generating \$51,000.00 in savings for Lopatcong Township in the first five months alone.

In September 2004 I recommended and Council hired Jersey Professional Management of Cranford, NJ, a professional service and consulting firm owned and operated by former county and municipal administrators, managers, clerks, and officials, to review and make recommendations on restructuring the Township's road and buildings and grounds departments. It is my hope that by going to a single department of public works, with a single supervisor employed outside of the Township's bargaining unit, that we will achieve greater efficiency and accountability for substantially less cost. It is my hope that that report will be presented in the immediate months to follow and its recommendations considered and implemented immediately thereafter.

Fall clean up was held on October 9, 2004 with locations at the Delaware Park Chemical Company, Lopatcong Fire Company No. 2 and the municipal pool. Thanks to all the volunteers, and our fire service men and women for volunteering to make the event a success. Although curbside cleanup has not been forever forgotten, the move away from it was a conscious decision that saves more than \$55,000.00 a year and reduces unwanted traffic and visitors during those weeks. We will continue to assess the need for curbside on a year-to-year basis.

It was also in October that Council adopted ordinance number 2004-11 amending Chapter 227 entitled "Vehicles and Traffic," prohibiting left hand turns onto Route 57 out of the road commonly known as the "Baja" (the small stretch of road between Route 22 and Route 57, just east of where these two State roads merge). Please take note, as the ordinance became effective in late October and will be enforced for all our safety.

In keeping with the traffic enforcement theme, Council likewise adopted ordinance number 2004-16, again amending Chapter 227 entitled "Vehicles and Traffic," this time to include the Phillipsburg Professional Plaza (former Hillcrest Mall) as an area of enforcement. Since the complex's roadways are used extensively by through traffic, Lopatcong Police will now patrol them and State and local traffic laws will be enforced.

December 2004 requests by the Scott's Mountain developer to approve release of its performance surety bonds for phases I and II were denied after review and recommendation by the Township engineer. Incomplete engineering, punch-list and other items compelled his recommendation and Council's action. Almost immediately thereafter, though, Council was again called to act on the Scott's Mountain development after its developer refused to provide plowing and salting services for its residents. However, insofar as those residents are Lopatcong residents and because of our foresight in not releasing the developer's bonds, we were able to instruct our road crew to provide those services and charge the Scott's Mountain developer's bonds the time and materials associated with them.

For all of us awaiting our Court ordered property reevaluation, its completion was postponed one year after a December 2004 recommendation by Township Tax Assessor Lydia Zdrodowski and decision of the Warren County Tax Board. Concerns by the Assessor and Board over the accuracy of the information collected and employed by the reevaluation company and, therefore, the accuracy of its values prompted the delay. Council is monitoring the situation closely and our attorney examining our rights under our contract with the company. I will update you in the summer as to our progress.

Our last remaining litigation, this one with Salem Management Company over the viability of our long-standing Rent Control Ordinance, is still pending. Our attorneys advise that we are still in the discovery phase (the fact-finding, document-exchanging and deposition-taking phase of the suit). I want to reassure all of our Brakeley Gardens residents that we remain committed to defending our ordinance and the rights and privileges of those protected by it. The Rent Leveling Board meets every other month at 7:30 p.m. and questions can be directed to the Township attorney during those meetings, to the Board, or to Council and me anytime.

Currently, there are seven municipally owned detention basins in the Township. Due to the enormous task of maintaining these basins, Council is considering eliminating the fencing around all or most of the basins. If you have any comments regarding the removal of these fences, please contact the Clerk's Office.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize and thank the Chairs of our several Boards and Committees. They include Planning Board Chairman Gary VanVliet, Zoning Board of Adjustment Chairman Joseph Barcik, Environmental Commission Chairman Frank Brockerhoff, Rent Leveling Board and Shade Tree Committee Chairwoman CJ Koop, Athletic Association, Recreation Commission and Industrial Committee Chairwoman Kathy Degan and Open Space Recreation Acquisition Committee Chairman Robert Shandor. Thanks to each of them and to their members for

their time and dedicated service. A list of meeting dates and times is available at the municipal building and on-line at the Township's official website, www.lopatcongtp.com.

My thanks to last year's Community Day Committee for the tremendous effort, Mother Nature's cooperation notwithstanding. Community Day is scheduled this year for June 18, 2005. Comments, suggestions and participation information can be directed to and obtained from Kathy Degan and Diane Hall through Beth Dilts, our Clerk/Administrator.

Retired Superior Court Judge John Kingfield, through whose generosity we obtained the Lopatcong Tennis Center, advises that it is up and operating and will be open for activity this spring. The Township is accepting memberships for the 2005 season. The cost is nominal and the proceeds are, like our community pool, used to defray the costs of maintenance and upkeep. Facilities include two recently resurfaced, hard tennis courts and an accessory building located at the end of Park Avenue in Delaware Park. Depending on the amount of interest, tennis leagues, tournaments, social events and lessons will be available. The courts will open in late March and remain open through November each year, weather permitting. Membership applications are available at the Clerk's Office.

Congratulations to Council President Victor Camporine and Councilman Matthew Curry, Esq. on their November 2004 reelection to the Lopatcong Township Council. I am pleased and privileged to work side by side with them and with Councilmen Jim Mengucci and Bill Baker. Their commitment and dedication to the Township cannot go unmentioned.

In other personnel news, Council hired, in January 2005, Gary and Betty Wysocki as our new, municipal, Animal Control Officers. They can be reached at 908-689-6657. As a reminder, if you haven't already done so, please renew your dog license, which was due January 31, 2005. They are now available at the Clerk's Office.

Council recently hired its 14th police officer, Delaware Park Chemical Company member and Lopatcong resident Louis LaFord, Jr. Congratulations to Lou and his parents, Louis, Sr., and Iris LaFord, also of Lopatcong.

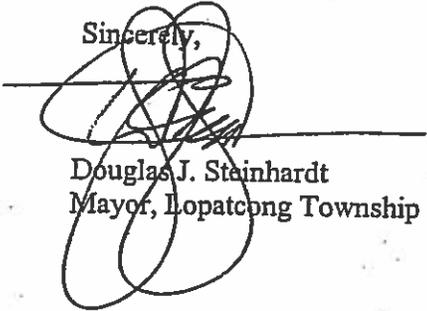
Please be aware that a snow emergency is in effect upon the accumulation of four or more inches of snow. All vehicles must be removed from the streets. In addition, our ordinances require that all sidewalks be kept clear of snow and ice within 12 hours of daylight after a storm. For those of us corner properties, please clear the section of sidewalk between the curb and walk, especially if your street is a designated walking route to and from the schools.

As always, my heartfelt thanks and gracious appreciation to all our fire and emergency servicemen and women. Please make it a point to support their departments and thank them for their efforts. I should also like to note that as of January 1, 2005 the

newly elected Fire Chief is Pat Rivoli and Captain of the Emergency Squad is Don Obley. Best wishes to them and their respective departments.

Finally, and as set forth in my ten prior letters, Council meets on the first Wednesday of each month, with every effort being made to start promptly at 7:30 p.m. I look forward to seeing you there.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Douglas J. Steinhardt", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is somewhat stylized and loops around the line.

Douglas J. Steinhardt
Mayor, Lopatcong Township

