

## State of the City – 2015

Mayor Benjamin G. Blake

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is the fourth time I've stood before this group to deliver my state of the City. As I've said in prior addresses, I believe deeply in the resiliency and vigor of this community and I am proud of Milford's continued progress. But, while the state of our City is solid and strong, we are on the path to even greater future success.

The City of Milford remains focused on two primary and animating objectives:

1. Quality services; and
2. The cost efficient delivery of those same services.

I am absolutely convinced that constant process improvements will continue to yield dividends on both fronts.

To those who dismiss the adage “do more with less” by saying “you can't,” I simply reply, “you're wrong!” We prove they're wrong every day we find better, more efficient, and less expensive ways to operate our City.

We need look no further than the private sector to see how, over the past 10, 15, or 20 years that significant operational costs have been driven down through process improvements, technology, and better asset management. I have held that it is time for the public sector to take a page from the private sector playbook, and that's exactly what we're doing.

For example, we looked at energy savings City-wide, took advantage of \$500,000 in UI incentives, and as recently as the past few weeks, we've installed new gas-powered boilers at Fannie Beach and City Hall, and have retrofitted Parsons and several other City buildings with high efficiency LEDs. We've also utilized UI's Incentive Rebate program to extend our web-based lighting control system to the Eisenhower and Fowler tennis courts where

push-button activators will be installed on each of the individual courts by July 1<sup>st</sup>.

Also in line with the private sector, we have taken inventory of our existing assets and seized opportunities to capitalize on past investments. To this end, we partnered with several local communities and negotiated revenue-generating relationships. For example, we have teamed-up with West Haven and Ansonia, and now share our asphalt recycler with these neighboring towns. Nearly a decade ago, Milford acquired this piece of machinery that uses waste asphalt or milled material and turns it into new “hot patch” to fill potholes. Under our new agreement, West Haven and Ansonia deliver broken asphalt from their roads to Milford, and we process it into new asphalt, and then sell it back at a rate of \$50/ton. The machine itself generates over 10 tons of new asphalt per hour, producing more than enough to supply several cities with the quantities needed to repair their streets.

In addition to generating new revenue and providing quality services in a more efficient and effective manner than ever before, I’d like to mention one more crucial priority of mine which is to seek-out and aggressively pursue grant opportunities.

To that end, I formed an inter-departmental grants committee whose focus and hard work over the past year has realized almost \$30 million in new, never-before-seen grants for the City of Milford.

One grant I am particularly excited about is the \$5 million dollars we were awarded from the state to acquire 4 properties, totaling 2.2 acres, parallel to the train station. This purchase will create additional parking in the downtown area and will help alleviate parking shortages. Because our rail station, boatramp, shops, restaurants, and green, as well as our government and recreational amenities, are situated in such close proximity to one another, those wishing to drive into our vibrant downtown have been competing for limited parking for too long. With the purchase of these strategically

important properties, we will realize over 300 new downtown parking spaces, as well as additional opportunities to buoy the economic development of our already thriving New England center.

Another hugely beneficial grant solicited by, and conferred upon the City, is the \$3 million we were awarded for a microgrid that will help keep 5 critical buildings in Milford powered even when the grid goes down. In the event of a power-outage, electricity will continue to be provided to the Parsons Government Center, Harborside Middle School, the Senior Center, River Park senior housing, and City Hall. These buildings are slated to be sheltering facilities in times of need for our community members who seek refuge from a storm. In addition to this new layer of fortification during storms, the microgrid will also create significant energy savings for the City budget year after year.

In addition to the State's investment in Milford, we have successfully secured significant Federal funding, including a Department of Agriculture, NRCS Grant for the conservation of 40 acres of coastal tidal marsh. Under this program, the City and Land Trust will receive \$1.7 million for deed-restricting undevelopable properties like the Calf Pen Meadow Creek and Great Salt Marsh.

Other storm resiliency and restoration grants include funding for several projects awarded under HUD's Community Development Block Grant Disaster Relief program. These CDBG-DR projects, totaling approximately \$5 million, include: the installation of a new generator system at Jonathan Law, drainage improvements at Bayview, Cedar, and Laurel beaches; the restoration and repair of the Morningside revetment; the installation of an erosion control breakwater at Gulf Beach; and the reengineering and construction of tide gates on Melba Street.

Milford has also teamed-up with the coastal communities of Branford and Madison to secure another \$150,000 CDBG-DR grant, in addition to a \$700,000 regional award, to study, analyze and design new shoreline hardening projects.

We've also recently completed several federally-funded undertakings like the \$150,000 repair to the South Street sea-wall, the \$2 million reconstruction of the Trumbull Avenue revetment, and the \$2.5 million nourishment of Hawley Beach.

And starting this month, we kick-off the construction for several significant grant-funded infrastructure projects like the \$3.5 million drainage improvements along Naugatuck Ave and the \$1 million flood mitigation project along Merwin Ave.

The list of grants continues and I can't address them all, but I will leave you with the reassurance that the City of Milford has been very, very diligent and effective in our efforts to identify and obtain available grant money for our City.

If anyone is interested in obtaining a copy of the entire awards list, please let me know, and I'm happy to provide that to you.

As you may know, the Board of Aldermen just recently adopted our annual budget. I'm proud to report that this budget protects our community's core values by ensuring our public safety departments operate at optimal levels, our public infrastructure is properly maintained, and our social safety network is robust. At the same time, this budget challenges our departments to hold the line on spending and to streamline the approach by which services are delivered – guaranteeing that Milford City Government will be more efficient and productive than ever before.

This year's budget included no new net positions, however, in order to better align resources with need, we did make a few personnel adjustments with new positions in Accounting and Open Space, offset by targeted reductions in other areas.

On the topic of the budget, please know that because of our prudent and responsible budgeting, we have once again received extremely positive feedback on our financial management with an affirmation of our high rankings from the

three premier rating agencies. You should note that while we have seen bond rating downgrades for cities and states across the country who have struggled to maintain their obligations to retirees, Milford has kept pace and appropriately funded pensions and retiree health care. Because of these prudent practices, Fitch rated Milford's general obligation bonds AA+, noting that "Management's conservative budget practices, moderate property tax increases, and prudent debt policies have contributed to solid reserve levels providing for financial stability." The agency cited several key factors supporting the high rating, namely, sound financial management, strong and stable reserves, moderate debt levels, well-funded retiree costs, and a history of successful access to the municipal bond market. Fitch also commended the City for its on-going commitment to mitigate its other post-employment benefit liability with its OPEB trust.

Similarly, Moody's affirmed the City's high rating, noting that it reflects Milford's "stable financial position with adequate reserves, and manageable debt profile" while Standard & Poor's assigned its AA+ rating, citing "adequate budgetary performance, very strong liquidity, adequate management environment, standard financial policies, and a very strong debt and contingent liabilities position."

As a result of our impressive ratings and the corresponding high demand for Milford bonds, the City was able to capture over \$700,000 in taxpayer savings by refinancing \$15 million this past December, which is in addition to the \$2.5 million in realized savings from last year's refunding.

Some of the City's more visibly noteworthy accomplishments include the improvements geared toward the walk-able /bike-able City initiative. This is a project that is very near and dear to me. Milford is the kind of city you need to experience by walking or biking to fully appreciate. Through better sidewalks and bikeways, especially for the paths leading to our downtown, our schools, our parks and our beaches, this effort strives to make Milford easier for cyclists and pedestrians to travel for work and for play.

To improve our city's walk-ability, crews are pouring fresh concrete sidewalks in all corners of the city - Milford Point Road, Baxter Lane, Morningside Drive, and Old Field Lane are just some of this month's projects. But over the next year, walkers, hikers and runners will experience continued improvements across Milford as we repair or replace countless broken sidewalks which are difficult and even dangerous to navigate.

The City is also making real efforts to mitigate traffic congestion and parking while improving the environment and health of our community through bike advocacy. We've hosted various cycling events throughout the month of May including a shoreline fun ride, a professional helmet check and a "bike to work day." We installed dozens of new bike racks and partnered with the nation's most ambitious long-distance urban trail, the East Coast Greenway, to develop the first contra-flow bike lane in Connecticut running through Wilcox Park's Shipyard Lane. I do hope you all get a chance to get out there and enjoy the beauty of our City with a weekend bike ride or a pleasant stroll.

Major changes are occurring for our schools this coming year as well. This year, due to popular demand, the Board of Education voted and passed a new elementary redistricting plan which returns our community to the K-5 configuration while balancing enrollment and equity across our 8 elementary buildings. Now that this phase of the redistricting process is complete, school officials will be working hard to ensure a smooth transition for students, families, and staff. Our children and our schools are undoubtedly our most important resource, and finding the balance between excellent educational practices and sound fiscal support is every municipality's greatest challenge.

On the recreation front, we've refurbished the Seabreeze Avenue, Welches Point and Wilcox Circle playgrounds and, over the next several weeks, we will be resurfacing the basketball courts at Fowler Field, Hawley Avenue, Underhill Road, Welches Point, and Beardsley. We are installing additional

ADA enhancements to improve ingress and egress at recreation facilities like the Parsons Gym and Walnut Beach.

I know you are all aware of our River Street Wednesdays. The City of Milford, DMBA and the Milford Arts Council teamed-up to sponsor the program, held each Wednesday at noon on the parkette in front of City Hall. We kicked this off two days ago and it will run through the end of August. The schedule of events includes everything from birding to fencing lessons, yoga to ghost stories; our goal is to provide the community an opportunity to connect for an inspiring mid-day adventure downtown. We encourage everyone to bring a picnic lunch and enjoy downtown and everything it has to offer. The events are eclectic and entertaining - meant to highlight many of the activities offered here in Milford, as well as to create a community place in the heart of our beautiful City.

As I mentioned earlier, this is my fourth state of the City address. Some might find talk of grants and budgets, sidewalks and resurfaced basketball courts tedious and tiresome – but for me, this is the stuff that gets me up and going in the mornings (with a little help from my early-rising 8<sup>th</sup> month old, 3 year old, and 5 year old kids).

Ladies and gentlemen, we are changing the way Milford government operates. We are more innovative, more engaged, and more resourceful than ever before. We are changing stale institutional cultures. We are aggressively seeking alternative revenue sources, adopting cost avoidance opportunities, and seizing regional collaborations.

I am proud to report that our City is stronger than ever and perfectly positioned to meet the challenges and opportunities of this new millennium.

Thank you for your time. I remain humbled by the trust you have placed in me to serve as Mayor, and I will continue to work tirelessly to earn that trust – each and every day.