

Mayor Brian G. Gallagher
State of The Borough Annual Re-Organization Address
Tuesday, January 1, 2008
12 noon

Honorable Members of Council, distinguished guests, friends and family..Good Afternoon to all and Happy New Year!

Somerville is on the move and stands ready now to seize the opportunities we have created. This is an exciting time for Somerville and this Mayor and Council have been entrusted by her citizens to guide her. All at this table hold this responsibility high, and we will continue to prove the citizens of Somerville proud. I am honored and look forward to working with this council once again...we have accomplished some good things, but we all realize we have more work to do.

The past 4 years have seen significant accomplishment in preparing for the future. Somerville is now at a place in time like no other in her history. My goal is to preserve and protect her and to make her better. We have clear direction, specific focus and stated mission as mandated by our citizens in all of these publicly driven projects.

We have embarked on a bold plan of smart development and redevelopment, improvement of our infrastructure, and an awareness of the need to work with our corporate citizens to enhance tax equity. We are returning our rundown and underutilized properties into vibrant, tax paying contributors to the community. We are now poised for a significant series of events in 2008 that will transform and revitalize the borough in a way that most communities will envy. Most of these projects impact each other and we have gone to great lengths to ensure that the planning and execution of each will have a positive effect on the others....

First, the Landfill

This very important project, continues on course and on time; we have successfully created a publicly driven vision plan, adopted a revised Redevelopment Plan and issued a Request for Qualifications to developers. As of December 2007, 50 copies of this RFQ package have been distributed to interested parties. We will begin reviewing submissions in April of this year. This potentially 1/2 billion dollar project has quickly gained the attention of our state legislators and is considered one of the most important in the state by many agencies.

The West End Redevelopment Area

Following more than 18 months of intense litigation the courts ruled in favor of the borough in every instance---confirming that the Borough acted properly. We have since revised the Redevelopment Plan to reflect the current needs of the borough, and we are in the final stages of revising the Redeveloper's Agreement between the borough and JSM to identify the responsibilities of both parties and define the timing of the various elements of the project through completion. Demolition has begun on a portion of the site, with the balance of the demolition commencing shortly.

The East End

The bookend to the west main street area, the east end area has seen fits and starts over its history. During the second half of 2007 we asked residents to provide final feedback and input for revisions of this plan. We now have a final plan that was approved by the Planning Board just a few weeks ago and will be presented to the council this month for review and adoption following a public comment period.

Kirby Avenue Area

In 2006 following two developer proposals to the Planning Board in which residents expressed serious concern, we took planning control of this area and placed the future in our citizens hands once again. We created a resident stakeholders group and initiated a visioning study for the area in which a series of workshops were held where residents developed a vision for this area. This community based Redevelopment Plan will be presented to the Planning Board later this month and, if approved, be passed to council for adoption during the first quarter of this year.

While those are the larger opportunities, many smaller, but no less important redevelopment and infrastructure opportunities have occurred or are occurring throughout the Borough, and these include...

Anthony DeSapio, a proven developer who believes in the potential of our Borough, is nearing completion of his third building on Warren Street which will house county offices that will pay taxes and more importantly turn the parking deck from a burden of debt into new tax revenue.

New Jersey Transit is nearing completion of plans to rebuild the railway station at a cost of over \$20 million dollars. The borough is working with Transit to ensure the design and construction will reflect the character of downtown and other redevelopment projects within the borough; we anticipate a start to this project by early 2009.

The approvals are in place for the redevelopment of the Gaston Avenue Bakery site which will restore a vibrant, local center of activity in the eastern end of town.

Construction has begun at the old D'Allessio gas station which will see 3 new single family homes and retail stores.

The improvements to curbing and sidewalks on Union Avenue and Gaston Avenue as part of the Route 28 Improvements are nearing completion.

The improvements to Somerset Street to extend the look and feel of Main Street to our western gateway are complete.

The abandoned gas station on the corner of Mountain and West End is now a thriving bank

We have been working with the state DEP to develop a plan for the rehabilitation of the former Color Technology property on Cornell Boulevard and anticipate state funding to "clean" the site and return it to public use by the end of 2009.

The lighted Vanderveer ballfields will be completed in Spring 2008

Somerset Medical Center paid over \$300,000 in taxes in 2007

For the first time we are slowing traffic measurably on our streets with speed tables and radar signs.

..and on Christmas Eve I received a call from the state advising us that Somerville received Main Street New Jersey designation which will compliment our redevelopment efforts and help store recruitment, retention and ultimately sales in our downtown.

While the future is mapped out, we are also mindful of where we have come from...in 2009 we will celebrate the Centennial of our Borough, I have asked former Mayor Dave Hollod to head a Centennial Committee to plan for this celebration. In concert with this we have taken steps recently to ensure our Borough heritage is protected....we have begun defining the Historic component to the Borough Master Plan, we recently implemented a bluestone preservation district, our Fire Museum is on the State and National Historic Register, and most recently Borough Hall was also designated to the Historic Register. Recently, Bob Barth, a volunteer with VilleTV said to me...most people don't realize how important Somerville was in history...not only to our state, but to the formation of our country...and we need to get that message out. Our Centennial is a perfect opportunity to do just that.

The measure of our success as a council is not in outlining year end achievements, but in planning for the future of what we need yet to achieve. To look ourselves and our residents squarely in the eye and say here is where we want our next steps to be. Now the question...with all of these plans now under way, what does come next?? Answered simply.... I am placing my direct focus on Neighborhood Quality of Life Initiatives.

One of the goals of any Mayor and Council is to have strong, safe, healthy neighborhoods. This is based on the idea that people seeking a good, secure community in which to make a home, raise a family or start a business should be able to do so. Our Borough is experiencing people from all walks of life realizing the opportunities available to living in Somerville.

In order to keep all of our neighborhoods strong we must move aggressively to address issues that affect each of our residential areas. Each neighborhood has different issues which must be defined, and a plan of action implemented to resolve those issues. Some measures will be more aggressive than others...and some will be long term initiatives. Two issues which rise to the surface consistently and will be dealt with in the short term are problem properties and nuisance crimes...these rob our citizens of the quality of life they expect and deserve.

I am asking our Council President Pat Webster and Councilman Rob Wilson to work with me on this. We will draw upon the talents and resources of a wide range of local, county and state public agencies and neighborhood groups to implement change as we address social, economic, housing, recreational, and many other issues. Enforcement by the Borough and the Police Department will obviously be some of the short term tools we use, but complex neighborhood planning on many levels will be the long term solution.

The success of these initiatives will also depend on the residents themselves. As the people of our neighborhoods work to keep their homes, streets, sidewalks, and public places safe and clean, they will have the strong support of the Mayor's office, the police department, the Borough Council and the rest of Borough government.

Today I send a very simple, unmistakable message: Those who work to improve their neighborhood and be a part of their community will receive this Borough's full support. Those who reduce the quality of neighborhood life by neglecting their property or engaging in criminal behavior will be caught and punished.

I do not look at these and the other challenges Somerville faces as hurdles, but as opportunities for further success. We must view these as steps to making a better community for all of her citizens. While we enjoy success, we do have more work to do.

As with any organization, change is inevitable--it is not easy to make those decisions, and it is not something done lightly by the Mayor and Council. For some this change will bring disappointment and frustration, for others it will bring enthusiasm and a new opportunity to serve our Borough. Both are a part of the process of change.

Change saw the retirement of Chick Sternadori, a legend not only in Somerville, but statewide, and more importantly, a good friend.

We have also sadly mourned the loss of a number of Somerville icons...including John McLachlan, Tony Sena and Ralph Genova--men who helped shape Somerville into what it is today.

There are few communities that can boast what we have...a diverse population, housing for all income levels, people young and old living next door to each other, a thriving Main Street, volunteer services second to none in quantity and professionalism. Above all else Somerville has a sense of community that thrives when others are in need. Life and culture and community are not about our differences, it's about what we all hold in common as people....the love of our children, the pride in our families, the respect for our neighbor and the involvement in our communities.

For what we do as a Mayor and Council, what we do as citizens, and what we do as a community has but one guiding principal and that is to provide for a safe, secure, diverse, affordable and wonderful home for our children, our families, our friends and our neighbors which we call Somerville.

Thank You and God Bless