

2020 Year in Review

2020 has been a year like no other. Some have compared it to 1918, 1929, and 1968 all at the same time as we faced the twin challenges of a global pandemic with its devastating health and economic consequences and the nationwide movement for racial justice that followed the murder of George Floyd and others at the hands of the police.

We want to first express our appreciation to former Mayor Liz Lempert who worked around the clock since COVID hit to keep our community safe. Princeton's rigorous multifaceted response to COVID, spearheaded by Mayor Lempert along with Health Officer Jeff Grosser and his department, the Board of Health and its Chair, George DiFerdinando, and the Office of Emergency Management, has been viewed as a model around the state. Mayor Lempert's unflagging dedication to health and relief efforts also gave Council the ability, despite the pandemic crisis, to continue to focus on -- and in large part to accomplish -- the goals we set for ourselves at the beginning of the year.

COVID required the municipality to transform much of its daily operation. From expanded online services for residents to creatively reconfigured office spaces and work schedules, and greatly expanded remote access for staff ... safety was uppermost.

In order to address multiple aspects of the growing COVID crisis we worked closely throughout the year with our community partners including the schools and university to ensure extensive contact tracing; detailed, real time reporting of data and data analysis and wrap-around services for those needing to quarantine outside their home.

(Leticia)

Princeton Human Services partnered with the Princeton Children's fund to create the Corona Virus Emergency Relief Fund (CERF) to provide rental and utility assistance to our most vulnerable residents, with major funding provided by Princeton University. Regular food distribution was coordinated with various grassroots groups and with delivery support from both the Recreation and Public Works Departments.

Significant time and effort went toward developing a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Plan: that funding will be allocated for rent relief, free Wifi in designated affordable housing developments, as well as Housing Authority capital improvements.

We jump-started the Neighborhood Buddy Initiative, encouraging neighbors to support the most vulnerable in the community by running errands, providing timely information on best COVID-safe practices, and combating the loneliness that inevitably accompanies social distancing.

(Michelle)

In response to the pandemic, we reconfigured our central business district and found ways to help our businesses and restaurants survive. We passed an emergency Ordinance in June to allow for expanded restaurant outdoor dining which streamlined the application process and waived related fees. Special curbside zones were designated for contactless pick and socially distanced customer queuing. The Ordinance also designated special waiting zones for safe contactless pick up. With the generous donation from the University of an initial \$250k, plus a matching fund challenge of another \$100k, the Municipality worked with the Greater Princeton Mercer Chamber Foundation to create the **Princeton Small Business Resiliency Fund**. Grants were used to help offset Covid related expenses, such as cleaning and sanitation supplies, telecom/internet connectivity, cashless payment systems, and retrofitting interior space to maximize social distancing.

Planning ahead for post-Covid financial recovery for our small businesses, we hired an independent consultant, specializing in economic revitalization, to spearhead a study on the creation of a Special Improvement District. A Steering Committee of 20 commercial property and business owners and non-profit leaders was formed to establish the parameters for this process. Their recommendations will be coming back to Council early this year.

(Dwaine)

Despite the ongoing pandemic, and closure or remote-work status of many agencies and organizations, the **Princeton Recreation Department** staff delivered face-to-face service to thousands of residents and patrons, seven days a week, for 10 consecutive weeks. The Recreation Dept. office welcomed just shy of 3,200 visitors, with financial assistance provided to 100% of applicants who applied. While many communities decided not to open their pools, the Princeton Rec Dept took on the challenge of figuring out how to safely and effectively operate the CP pool in a Covid environment. In the end, 123 seasonal jobs were created and more than 33,000 patrons were welcomed to Community Park pool during the summer. Registration sold out for 19 modified in-person summer programs as well as remotely offered mindfulness classes for kids and teens.

(Mia)

On the **Communications** front, we enhanced and increased the frequency of the Mayor & Council newsletter which was released daily during the height of the spring epidemic, and then three times a week for the remainder of 2020. As readership tripled and the open rate averaged over 60%, the newsletter became a crucial component of the municipality's outreach and of its efforts to keep residents informed.

(Michelle)

Together with the Princeton Public library and Princeton Public Schools, we created a website at the start of the COVID crisis, PrincetonCovid.ORG, which quickly became a vital repository of

information ranging from testing site locations and local COVID statistics, to information on accessing federal, state, and local assistance, to ways to donate and volunteer, to resources for remote work and school, to a virtual community events calendar to keep residents engaged and connected during the shutdown.

(Leticia)

Circling back from the direct impact of the health pandemic to the issue of racial justice, Council took a number of steps in this realm as well. Council unanimously approved a resolution declaring racism as a public health crisis and, as part of this resolution, Princeton committed to assessing internal policies and procedures to ensure racial equity is a core priority of all municipal departments.

The municipality will also advocate for legislation at all levels that aims to dismantle systemic racism, as well as reviewing existing and future ordinances through a racial equity lens. Council has adopted a racial equity toolkit that the Civil Rights Commission developed in collaboration with community partners and we will be implementing that in 2021. The toolkit is part of a multipronged effort to ensure that our government and its processes reflect the diversity of our community.

Juneteenth was officially observed in Princeton for the first time by a Proclamation issued by Mayor Lempert.

Our Complete Count Committee Helped promote awareness for the 2020 Census; We worked with community partners to strengthen Census outreach efforts to include underrepresented populations. Despite substantial challenges brought on by COVID-19 and attempts by the Federal administration to interfere with the accuracy of the count, especially as it related to immigrant communities, we managed to surpass the 2010 census participation rates.

Following nationwide protests against police brutality and building on our pledge to confront systemic racism and police brutality, we began actively exploring less lethal force options for patrol deployment. In addition, our police department researched, tested, and implemented a body worn camera program to ensure additional transparency. We are also in the process of exploring a 2nd responder program and are committed to hiring a non-police emergency responder.

(Mia)

Following the Court's approval of Princeton's Settlement Agreement with Fair Share Housing Center in February, Council and staff were faced with the herculean task of meeting the town's compliance requirements. We met regularly with property owners, developers, objectors, interested parties and hundreds of residents as well as working with the School District to address its concerns. In the ensuing months, Princeton satisfied virtually all of the requirements for compliance, including the adoption of: The municipal Housing Element & Fair Share Plan; A

Spending Plan; Affirmative Marketing Plan; Affordable Housing Program Manuals; 11± implementing ordinances; 15± Resolutions adopting various redevelopment, PILOT and funding agreements and implementing actions. In November, Princeton received a Judgment of Compliance and Repose from Judge Jacobson for successful completion of its third-round affordable housing compliance requirements

(Dwaine)

This year the PAH approved an Affirmative Marketing Plan: a regional marketing strategy designed to attract buyers and renters of all groups, regardless of race, creed, color, national origin, ancestry, marital or familial status, gender, affectional or sexual orientation, disability, age or number of children to housing units. We were able to ensure a suspension of rent increases due to Covid-19 in our AH units. The AH Board has created a Financial Counseling Subcommittee as part of its initiative with CRC and Human Services to eliminate obstacles to housing including low credit, no credit and no social security number.

(Eve)

In the area of the environment and environmental sustainability, we took some very positive steps: We adopted an energy aggregation plan for Princeton that provides more sustainable energy at lower cost to residents, passed an ordinance regulating backyard hens, completed an open space inventory, and developed an electric vehicle charging ordinance that we hope will be passed early next year. We launched an initiative to encourage more sustainable and environmentally friendly landscaping practices and, in anticipation of that effort, our departments of Public Works and Recreation each acquired a battery-powered leaf blower to assess their use in grounds maintenance.

Despite the pandemic, we had a successful Shredfest at a new location, diverting 5.3 tons of electronics and computers and 11.5 tons of shredded documents from landfill. Additionally, Council has approved funding for an open space manager and crew, an enhancement that is vitally necessary during COVID when there is such great need for access to the outdoors recreation and socializing.

Council also resurrected the dormant Flood and Stormwater Committee and forged ahead with needed updates to our Stormwater management ordinances to meet and exceed state requirements for green infrastructure and promote crucial resiliency in the face of climate change and the associated increase in frequency of severe rain events in our region.

The Shade Tree Commission's work included the culmination of several years of research, with the passage of the Tree Protection Zone Ordinance, which will protect trees on neighboring lots during construction.

(David)

We supported greater opportunities for residents to safely move about town walking and biking, to foster physical and mental health in the face of mandatory shut-downs and shelter-in-place recommendations. One such measure was to install ten miles of bike boulevards over the summer. We also passed a bicycle parking ordinance, requiring provision of bike facilities along with automobile parking as a feature of every site plan application. As a result of the Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee's efforts on these fronts, as well as many other improvements over the past four years, Princeton was awarded Silver level Bike-Friendly Community status by the League of American Bicyclists, the first community in New Jersey to achieve this level.

(Eve)

Our Engineering and Public Works Departments completed capital improvement and maintenance projects too numerous to mention here but all noteworthy because of their timely completion under the difficult circumstances of the COVID operating environment. These projects, such as the Harrison Street intersection improvements and the safe routes to school project, had a positive impact on both resident well-being and public safety. The Engineering Department also welcomed both a new land use engineer and a sewer engineer. Although invisible to the community, the maintenance of our underground stormwater and sanitary sewer infrastructure is just as important as the maintenance of our above ground infrastructure. To ensure the health of the latter, the Engineering department oversaw the GIS mapping of all stormwater outfalls in the community and the acquisition of new sewer cleaning equipment.

(Mia)

COVID presented steep challenges to effective continuation of the municipality's land use boards. Thanks to Council President David Cohen, Princeton led the way as one of the first communities in New Jersey to re-commence regular land use hearings – Planning, Zoning and Historic Preservation – using digital remote meeting technology, and instituting protocols to ensure that applicants and members of the public had ample opportunity to fully participate in the hearings. Despite an initial hiatus of several months, the Planning Board went on to more than make up for time by adding frequent special meetings in order to process 48 applications in total. Equally impressive, the Zoning Board heard 32 applications in 2020 and approved 788 zoning permits and 61 engineering single family permits that included 30 "C" and 16 "D" variance applications, as well as 5 site plan applications, and one subdivision. Additionally, in the past year, through disciplined adherence to weekly meetings with Planning and Zoning Staff, Council members worked to complete the consolidation of the former Borough and Township codes. We look forward to at last having one unified code book for our consolidated town.

(Michelle)

This year we negotiated a two-year extension of the voluntary payment agreement with Princeton University through which provides a total of \$8.482 million to the municipality over the next two years. The agreement continues the annual 4% increase and includes substantial support for career firefighters and for a new municipal storage facility. This short-term agreement is a key step in continuing to build a relationship with the University focused on our mutual shared interests in maintaining the town's fiscal health, diversity of population, and thriving downtown. Speaking of our Fire Department ... This past year we successfully transitioned from an all-volunteer fire department to one that includes six career firefighters. A new volunteer recruitment effort saw increased numbers of volunteers and, overall, we saw a marked improvement in call response times.

(David)

As with so much else surrounding COVID, with the municipal building closed for most of the year, we were forced to adapt to new information technology realities, enabling staff to work remotely and collaborate from a distance. These changes required significant upgrades to both hardware (our network firewall, servers, and VPN capabilities) and software (implementing Microsoft Teams and One Drive). The improvements have been underway since late spring and will largely be complete early in 2021.

At the same time, we have continued to work on initiatives that preceded the pandemic – upgrading our emergency operations center, making improvements to our 911 call processing, procuring body cameras for the Police department, and replacing outdated computers for most of our staff. No IT report would be complete without a nod to the mammoth effort of overhauling our municipal website. I know for many, finding your way around an unfamiliar new internet landscape has been challenging, but the enhancements are too numerous to list, and will pave the way to true 21st century functionality and online convenience for our residents.

(EVE)

Throughout this extraordinarily challenging year, the Mayor, Council and staff have worked together with our local institutions and our residents to mitigate the impact of this year's difficulties. Council members have worked productively and collaboratively for the betterment of our community and have enhanced the bonds of trust and respect among one another and with members of the community. This solid foundation forged in the trenches of 2020 makes us optimistic for success in 2020 and beyond.

Princeton as a municipality is, fortunately, well positioned to handle the economic challenges of the pandemic; our tax base is stable and, due in part to disciplined financial management over many years, we have a AAA credit rating, allowing us to borrow money at very favorable

interest rates when needed. Sound financial management has also allowed us to absorb short-term revenue shortfalls from our surplus if needed, so we are starting 2021 in an excellent financial position.

With the introduction of vaccines at the end of 2020, the end of the COVID pandemic is now in sight, although a long, tough winter awaits. We've set up the first local vaccination clinics, with more to come this year and we believe that we are ready. We would also like to recognize the work of so many municipal staff who went above and beyond what could have been expected, found new and creative ways to do their jobs, and continued to provide all the myriad services essential to our residents, schools and businesses.

As we emerge from this crisis, we will continue to draw upon the lessons of COVID. We will continue the fight for racial justice, and we will redouble our efforts to both combat and prepare for the impacts of climate change, always keeping environmental justice in mind; rethink the use of our downtown streets and how to make them safe and attractive places for all people and not just cars; strengthen the ties of community among all Princetonians and hold onto the truth that, even after the pandemic is over, **we are all in this together.**