State of the Town 2018

Thank you all for coming to this year’s State of the Town address, and special thanks to the Chamber of Commerce for organizing this event. I would like to acknowledge and thank my wife Susan for joining us today and for being incredible support, as well as my daughter Chrissy, who plays a big role in helping me with various town communications throughout the year and daughter Carolyn who has stepped up and taken over my work at my business.

I said it last year and will say it again, we’ve had another successful year for the town of Clarence, and it would not have been possible without incredible Town employees, great department heads and dedicated elected officials. Being Town Supervisor is certainly easier when everyone is pulling in the right direction, and puts the citizens of the town as their top priority in the work they do.

Our goals also couldn’t be met without special help this year from Town Attorney Larry Meckler and Town Engineer Tim Lavocat. As always, my assistant, Karen Jurek, has again done a fantastic job being the anchor in our office, to help make 2017 a great year.

Accomplishments 2017

The Town of Clarence has one of the lowest tax rates, if not the lowest, for a Class “A” Town on this side of the State. The Town budget in 2017 and again in 2018 are within the state mandated tax cap. This year’s spending tax cap is 1.84%. Unfortunately, the state now has limited the rebate checks from the average of $300 last year to around $60 this year. With department heads always coming within budget and solid management from the Town Board, the Town maintains its Aa1 rating. This rating allows the Town to take advantage of the lowest rates possible when borrowing funds for our capital projects.
Kim Ignatowski, our Director of Finance, besides doing a great job managing our funds, has done a great job of getting information to department heads quickly and accurately to help them manage their departments.

Last year I mentioned how not too long ago the Town assessed value was around a billion dollars. We are almost now at four billion. The 2017 total assessed value is now $3,914,261,190. The Town increased in value last year by $55,104,080. The average home price in Clarence is now $368,000 at 2,500 square feet. The average assessment is at $282,000. Town Assessor Al Weber is just finishing up a town wide reassessment. The reassessment is driven by the continued large number of home sales. We have over 13,000 taxable parcels with over 32,000 people now living in Clarence. There were 127 new homes added to Clarence last year.

Our Town Clerk Nancy Metzger and her staff of two were pressed into overtime work last month collecting roughly 905 prepayments of 3.23 million dollars for those who wanted to possibly get an income tax reduction with their property tax. Receiving the prepayments is just a small part of the task at hand. Now our clerk has to calculate the difference and either send refund checks totaling more than $75,000 to residents, or send new bills for what is still owed. We hope to do this without an extra mailing which Town-wide costs over $10,000. All this in an attempt by residents to get ahead of the SALT section of the new federal tax law. After this effort our residents probably can’t write off their prepayment. Last year the Clerk’s office collected almost $1,000,000 in local fees and over $80,000,000 in local taxes with almost 30 percent of our taxpayers walking into Town Hall to pay their bills.

The Town residents enjoyed a full season using the new Main Street Park restrooms. Always receiving accolades for them, it seems strange that my tenure highlight as your Town Supervisor will be the restroom replacement. Certainly the public, especially during a 4,000 person event, has welcomed the replacement of 60 year-old restrooms.
The new pickle ball courts were the most used of any courts (tennis, basketball) in the Town. Most of the time during the day and every evening all six courts were full. Parks Superintendent Jim Burkard headed that and many other park improvements last year. The Town is looking into converting the one remaining Tennis Court at Town Place Park to pickle ball courts.

The Town Parks Department, with help from the Highway Department, has completed clearing and seeding the six additional acres of parkland added to the Main Street Park. This new area, besides adding a huge vista improvement to the park, will provide additional vehicle parking for major events held at the Park.

The Town, to comply with the EPA consent order, has almost completed the maintenance shop drainage improvements for both Highway and Parks. As part of the EPA consent order to control run off of waste water the Town was not allowed to wash our salt trucks that are used to spread salt on our roads. The Town is working on pavilion and handicap restroom improvements to the Town Place Park.

Sewer District #9, after receiving grant funding, has almost completed another phase. Alexander and Elmcroft sewer pipe has been installed with street repaving and final hookups planned for this spring. There is funding in place for completing the District along Greiner Road, Salt Road and Schurr Road. Design work will begin in the near future for the final phase which should fulfill the consent order from the DEC for the Hollow.

I hope my tenure as Supervisor is remembered as one in which, besides keeping taxes low, I worked hard to make Clarence a safer place to live. After a lot of hard work by our Town Engineer, Tim Lavocat with assistance from Town Attorney Larry Meckler our Public Safety Building has been completed and all three departments have moved in. The State Police moved in September. The Court House moved in November, and the Sheriffs moved in December.
Without the Town’s aggressive approach in providing new barracks those agencies easily could have moved out of Town. Between the two police departments law enforcement presence in Clarence has drastically increased due to their new barracks. Both police departments have increased their service to the Town and local area now that they have the room for additional personnel and equipment.

The Court House with its improvements is a far safer place to conduct business for all involved. The move from one building to another for the Court was seamless due to the intense efforts put forward by Assistant to the Supervisor, Karen Jurek. At 2:30 in the afternoon the day of the Court move the phone system and computers switched from one building to the other without losing a minute of operation or information. Thank you Karen.

I mentioned making Clarence a safer place to live. This year the Town partnered with the Clarence School District on a School Resource Office. Special thanks to former State Trooper Mike Ballow for spearheading the project and becoming Clarence School District’s first SRO officer. The 30 year experience he brings to the position helped him immediately hit the ground running serving the young people in the Clarence School system.

Zombie homes in Clarence have become almost a non-issue thanks to the efforts of former State Senator now County Clerk Mickey Kerns. His state legislation allows our code enforcement officers to quickly move forward with property maintenance and encourages banks to find new owners (which are not in short supply) for abandoned properties.

Comprehensive Plan 2030 is now fully in place. It will help guide our Town and Planning Boards for the next ten years.

I was told when I first became supervisor you are only as good as your Highway Superintendent, and the Town of Clarence has a great one, Jamie Dussing.

Last year the department under his leadership resurfaced over 7 miles of roads.
They inspected and accepted 1.4 miles of new roads and removed brush and leaves all year at a record pace. You will remember there was a time when the Town only picked up twice a year and what the Town looked like.

Highway restored over 2.5 miles of ditches including removing over 40 dams and blockages. They rebuilt or replaced 90 drain receivers and completed the Black Creek Number 6 Escape Channel that will help remove a lot of water from the North Country quickly.

The Martin Road culvert failed inspection this year and was in danger of collapsing. This resulted in the closing of the road. The Town Engineering Department along with Highway quickly put out a design spec, bid and awarded the replacement of the culvert. In months the road was back open. What Town does that? No Town, County or State does that. The Town of Clarence did that.

The Town expects now that two culverts were replaced on Salt Road for the Goodrich Road project to be completed. With the help of special efforts from Legislator Ed Rath in 2018, the Tonawanda Creek Road reconstruction should finally be started.

I talked about safety. The Highway Department installed flashing school zone lights on Harris Hill and Greiner roads. There are plans for two more next year on Gunnville and Clarence Center roads. Main Street’s slower school zones are being requested for Nativity and Clarence High school area. These lights and new school zones help slow down traffic around our schools drastically improving the safety for our children.

The Town last year rerouted the drainage from Meadow Lakes Park to help minimize possible flooding in the Crosswinds area of the Meadow Lakes subdivision. It was tested a week ago by the big thaw and worked. For this year the Town has plans for the Old Post area to minimize flooding in that area of Clarence.

I talked about our Towns financial strength and ratings. Similar Towns have as many as 120 employees in their Highway Departments.
The Town of Clarence does all of the above work with 33 Highway Department employees. Thank you Paul Englert and Chuck McNiff for doing a great job assisting Jamie keeping Clarence a better place to live.

The Youth Bureau and Recreation program again this year had a record number of Town residents take advantage of everything their departments have to offer. Directors Dawn Kinney and Clifford Trapper updated their management system to serve the young people better they work with. Besides the pool having a strong year, a Pickle Ball league was started that was almost two times the size planned.

Last year The Town had some noteworthy projects completed and started that I would like to highlight today. These projects are a few of the first that follow the guide lines established by Vision Main Street project which is founded by the Clarence Industrial Development Agency lead by Chris Kempton.

Clarence Fire District #1 finished the remolding and safety updating of their fire hall. Notable is the fact the Fire Hall went “back to the future”. The very seventies style building that really didn’t belong in a traditional neighborhood is gone. Like the Village of East Aurora’s new fire hall Clarence’s building which is at the gateway to the hollow now has a traditional look that fits objectives of Vision Main Street and will hopefully act as a guide for future Main Street projects.

The DeRose Family went “back to the future” by restoring at great expense the first church the Presbyterians built in Clarence over 173 years ago. The now named Brick Hall has a store for their prime beef raised from their own farm. They also have made the former church worship area into a banquet center that can seat up to one hundred people. The Brick Hall is another page ripped right of the Vision Main Street text book. Thank you Dave and Kathy DeRose for really making a difference in your hometown.

Stephen’s Development finished their much anticipated mix use building at Goodrich and Main.
They have started construction of their much larger mix use building at Gunnville and Main. Both buildings have and will bring much needed retail back to Main Street. Stephen’s buildings are also directly from the pages of Vision Main Street.

Kelly Shultz has full Town approval for the remodel of the 1940’s Dodge dealership at Main and Schurr. A mix use design Mr. Shultz plans on using the retail portion for his antique business. 7 luxury apartments are planned with available garage parking. Another project from the pages of Vision Main Street.

The catalyst started in the Hollow with the continued success of the Asa Ransom House. New ownership of the Corner Stone. A major expansion of the Bistro Restaurant. And now four more major project that will help Main Street in Clarence become a destination for the surrounding public. That’s only if they can get past the new Clarence location of the Bar Bill Restaurant at the Old Red Mill. The new AJ’s at the refurbished Clarence Grill location and Penny Lane. All fitting the plan laid out by Vision Main Street.

The Town within days will be placing out for bid the Main Street Sidewalk project. The Town by the end of next year will have sidewalks from one end of the Town to the other making Main Street safer for public walking. Especially in the Dash’s market area the new sidewalks and cross walks will make it easier for the local residents to navigate their walking trip to the market. The down will be investigating a sidewalk snow removal district for both Main Street and Transit in an effort to assure that even in the winter people will use the sidewalks instead of the roads to walk. The State is making lane improvements to Main Street which will include bike lanes. The State is also next year planning on lane improvements for Sheridan which would include turning and bike lanes. We have not seen this type of sidewalk and or pedestrian traffic improvements measured in miles since the creation our bike trail system. This effort is to make Clarence safer for our residents.
The Town is seeking input on two proposed pocket parks for Main Street in Clarence. These parks may include traffic HAWKS that control traffic when the public crosses Main Street. The Town is also pursuing a grant for a bike trail expansion through the Wehrle Drive/Harris Hill area.

The most important and valuable address Clarence has is Main and Transit. Malls once one of this country’s strongest retail outlets are in transition. Across the country malls and box stores are going away as the evolution of on line shopping progresses. The Town Board and our Planning Department lead by Jim Callahan and his associate Jonathon Bluer have been working on a Living Center overlay district for our large area. The overlay district is like having a City within a Town. It’s impotent to our Towns future for this Town Board to protect mall areas by making sure it has the possibility of becoming Western New York’s first real Life Style Center. Main and Transit has all the utilities which is the hardest part of any redevelopment, the thruway exit and easy access to the airport All of this plus a strong School District are the reason people will want to live there.

This could have a minimum $500,000,000 impact to the Town tax base. Last night the Town Board approved a new zoning code creating the possibility of a life style center. Before I turn the program over to Jim Callahan and Jonathan Bluer for more detail on the pocket parks and overlay District I would like thank everyone for attending today and wish you a happy and successful New Year.