



WEST WINDSOR TOWNSHIP

HEMANT MARATHE, Ph.D.
MAYOR

State of the Township Address 2026

June 8, 2026

Thank you to Council President Sonia Gawas and the Members of Council for inviting me to deliver this year's State of the Township Address.

I am a "Nike guy" and have always followed its philosophy: "Just Do It," and people will notice. However, over the years, I have realized that it is equally important to communicate with the public, especially as our Township continues to grow and welcome new residents.

Every year, I start by asking myself, "What am I going to talk about?" I generally prefer to focus on practical matters rather than deliver a philosophical speech. As I prepared this year's remarks, I reviewed many of my past speeches and realized how quickly some topics become outdated.

For a change, I would like to begin with some reflections on the **250th anniversary** of the founding of our nation. I am certain that, in 1797, the founders of West Windsor could not have imagined what our Township would look like today.

When I visit the Dutch Neck World War II monument, I am struck by the fact that 227 names of West Windsor residents are engraved on the plaque, seven of whom died in action. According to the 1940 Census, West Windsor's population was only 2,160. That means more than 10 percent of the town's population participated directly in the war, with many more friends and relatives waiting anxiously for their safe return.

In his 1961 inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy said, "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

Sadly, over the past 65 years, we have focused less on what benefits our country and more on what benefits our political parties. Both parties have, at times, contributed to divisions that serve political interests rather than the common good.

The founders of West Windsor may not have imagined what the Township would look like in 2026, but I believe they would be proud of what it has become. We remain an oasis amid the partisan politics that surround us. I want to thank the residents of West

Windsor for their wisdom in keeping our Township nonpartisan so that elected officials can focus on what is best for the community.

As we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the United States of America, we owe it to those who made the ultimate sacrifice to heed President Kennedy's challenge. Every day, we should act in ways that honor their sacrifice and put our country first.

With those reflections behind us, let me now turn to the practical matters that are on the minds of West Windsor residents.

The most important topic, by far, is the reopening of the Clarksville Road Bridge.

The closure of the bridge is not our fault, but it is our responsibility.

First, a little background.

The bridge is an orphan bridge located on a county road. That means the company that originally built the bridge over the railroad no longer exists. As a result, the New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) is responsible for its inspection and maintenance.

On October 31 of last year, NJDOT informed Mercer County that a recent inspection had found the bridge to be in extremely poor condition. They recommended closing the bridge on Monday, November 3, the day before the mayoral and gubernatorial elections. Once I learned that the bridge was unsafe, I insisted that they not wait until Monday but instead close it on Sunday, November 2. The bridge has remained closed ever since.

The closure has placed tremendous pressure on businesses along Clarksville Road and on residents who now face detours and increased traffic on Village Road and Alexander Road.

Since November 3, we have worked tirelessly with NJDOT to identify the fastest possible path toward reopening the bridge. Unfortunately, the closure occurred during the transition between gubernatorial administrations. As a result, progress moved more slowly than we would have liked until Governor Mikie Sherrill took office and the Senate confirmed her choice for NJDOT Commissioner, Priya Jain.

Commissioner Jain called me immediately following her committee hearing, even before receiving final Senate confirmation. I am pleased to say that both Commissioner Jain and Governor Sherrill understand the importance of this bridge to West Windsor and are committed to reopening it as quickly as possible.

When I met Governor Sherrill at a reception two weeks ago, I mentioned "the bridge." I was pleased that she did not ask, "Which bridge?" She knew exactly what I was referring to.

Commissioner Jain and NJDOT have taken ownership of this issue. I am happy to report that we now have a committed partner with both the authority and resources to help solve the problem. Keeping her promise, Commissioner Jain brought her entire team to West Windsor, right here to this room, to discuss options with us.

I would also like to recognize County Executive Dan Benson, County Engineer Sunny Muzaffar, and Anthony Carabelli Jr., Director of the Mercer County Office of Economic Development. They have been strong partners, advocating for the bridge, committing resources to the solution, and helping affected businesses.

When I spoke with Commissioner Jain, I emphasized that West Windsor's top priority is reopening the bridge as quickly as possible, even if that means doing so in a limited capacity. The most realistic option is to reopen it as a single-lane bridge, using traffic signals to alternate traffic flow.

Commissioner Jain and her Chief of Staff, Mr. Alcazar, remain in constant communication with us. During NJDOT's visit to West Windsor, they committed to pursuing multiple work streams simultaneously to accelerate the reopening. They have honored that commitment.

According to the latest update received on June 4, NJDOT has nearly completed the Site-Specific Safety Work Plan for submission to Amtrak. Approval from Amtrak is required before repair work can begin. Working with Amtrak has presented challenges, but NJDOT has handled those challenges admirably.

At the same time, the design team is evaluating traffic signal requirements necessary to meet operational and safety standards.

Meanwhile, fabrication of the bridge's structural steel components is already underway. Following mobilization earlier this spring, the contractor began work on the steel elements that will support the bridge. Fabrication activities will continue over the coming weeks in preparation for installation.

NJDOT is working closely with the contractor, design team, Amtrak, and all other stakeholders to keep the project moving forward. They remain committed to reopening the bridge within their projected nine-month timeline, which would be by the end of 2026. I continue to encourage them to exceed expectations.

The second aspect of the bridge I would like to address is the community's response.

I am proud that so many residents stepped forward—not only to support local businesses but also to advocate for the attention this issue deserves.

Sharon LaForge organized a petition that gathered more than 2,000 signatures. Maya Kamath organized a fundraiser benefiting Send Hunger Packing while also supporting

affected businesses in Village Square. Many residents have gone out of their way to patronize local businesses during this difficult period.

To everyone who has helped and continues to help: thank you. That spirit of community is what makes West Windsor such a special place.

On the elected officials' side, every Member of Council—Joe Charles, Sonia Gawas, Linda Geevers, Andrea Mandel, and Dan Weiss—contacted numerous state and federal officials to advocate for action. I would especially like to recognize Senator Turner, who has consistently supported our efforts.

I would also like to acknowledge Councilman Charles, President Gawas, and Vice-President Mandel, who went above and beyond in helping both the bridge effort and affected businesses. At times, they even challenged me—friendly disagreements included—about whether I was pushing hard enough or needed to raise my voice a little louder.

Councilman Charles has not only drawn media attention to the issue but has also proactively examined other bridges in West Windsor to help prevent similar situations. I often joke that if I have a question about a Township bridge, I don't need to call the Township Engineer—I can simply call Joe.

President Gawas and Vice-President Mandel visited business owners almost immediately after the closure to assess the impact. Later that month, at the New Jersey League of Municipalities Conference, they met with representatives from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority to seek assistance. Their efforts ultimately helped secure grants and other aid through state programs.

Working with Anthony Carabelli and Mercer County's Office of Economic Development, they also helped secure \$10,000 grants for each business in the Village Square Shopping Center.

After evaluating the many challenges created by the closure, President Gawas and Vice President Mandel worked with our Township Clerk to prepare a comprehensive request to the Governor. They introduced a Resolution seeking a State of Emergency declaration and assembled a 31-page packet outlining the urgency of the situation and the need for expedited action.

These Council Members, along with Senator Turner and County Executive Benson, demonstrate what government should be—a friend in need.

The bridge closure was certainly one of the low points of the past year. However, there were also many high points.

We successfully minimized the impact of Round 4 of the State's affordable housing mandate. We reduced the required number of new housing units by more than 200,

which translates to approximately 800 fewer homes being built in West Windsor. While some issues remain before the courts, we are confident that following our plan will secure immunity through 2035.

We updated our website to make it easier to use and easier to report issues. We also reactivated our social media channels, including Facebook, Instagram, and X, allowing residents multiple ways to stay informed and communicate with the Township.

Thanks to the efforts of our Environmental Commission, we once again earned Sustainable Jersey's Silver Certification, the highest level awarded. Thanks to the Shade Tree Commission, West Windsor was again recognized as a Tree City USA. For the first time, West Windsor was named a Healthy Town to Watch by the Mayors Wellness Campaign. President Gawas continues to work closely with our Health Department to make wellness a priority.

We continue our partnership with the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance to improve pedestrian and bicycle safety. Just last week, we conducted trial striping on Fisher Place and Fairview Avenue to help calm traffic. We will continue monitoring the results.

Our Police Department has now installed nine license plate readers and four traffic cameras throughout the Township. At our most recent meeting, Council approved a first-of-its-kind partnership with a homeowners' association. The Estates at Princeton Junction agreed to purchase cameras for its development and donate them to the Township. This arrangement benefits everyone involved while enhancing public safety.

Thanks to Vice-President Mandel, West Windsor continues to lead regional efforts related to flood control and groundwater quality in partnership with The Watershed Institute.

We completed the first phase of the Vaughn Drive Bypass and connected Washington Road to Alexander Road through the NJ Transit parking lot. Work toward a permanent bypass continues.

We maintained our AAA bond rating. Despite a municipal tax increase this year, our average annual tax increase over the last five years remains just 1.85 percent.

Although West Windsor receives only about 15 percent of every property tax dollar paid, we continue to provide a wide range of services, including garbage and recycling collection, snow removal, police, fire and emergency services, parks and recreation, brush and leaf pickup, street maintenance, sidewalk repairs, and street lighting.

I could spend the next 15 minutes talking about additional accomplishments, but let me conclude this section by noting that others recognize our success as well.

Niche recently ranked Princeton Junction as the best place to live in New Jersey. While we consistently rank highly in state and national evaluations, being ranked number one is something special. What makes the recognition especially meaningful is that we neither applied for it nor knew we were being evaluated.

Of course, we do not intend to rely solely on past achievements. Here are a few projects on the horizon:

The Cranbury Road Sidewalk Extension Design Contract was awarded to Roberts Engineering on April 27. Once completed in 2027, residents living near the Avalon development will be able to travel by sidewalk all the way to the Trolley Line Trail along Rabbit Hill Road.

This year we will continue adding flashing beacons at selected crosswalks, including those near our schools and at the Harris Road and Alexander Road intersection.

The bid opening for improvements to 19 Township roads is scheduled for June 30. If awarded, construction is expected to begin in September.

We are also engaging a firm to evaluate the condition of every road in West Windsor using modern analytical tools. Once completed, Council will discuss additional funding strategies to improve road maintenance beyond current budget levels.

We continue to install new streetlights and upgrade existing lighting where needed.

Finally, we continue evaluating how Township services can be improved. At the last Council meeting, I presented a proposal for a revised leaf and brush pickup policy. I appreciate the feedback we have already received and encourage all residents to share their thoughts before the policy is finalized.

When people ask me about West Windsor, I always give the same answer: it has been a wonderful place to raise my family, and it continues to be a wonderful place to live.

That success is not the result of one person. It is the result of the collective efforts of many people and organizations.

I would like to recognize:

- Members of our boards, commissions, and committees, as well as organizations such as FOWWOS, the Historical Society, and the West Windsor Bicycle and Pedestrian Alliance. These volunteers generously contribute their time and expertise.
- The Members of West Windsor Volunteer Fire Company No. 1 and Princeton Junction Fire Company, along with our career firefighters, police officers, EMTs, and emergency personnel, who keep our community safe.

- Our Township staff, led by Business Administrator Marlena Schmid. Their professionalism, dedication, and expertise make my job significantly easier.
- The Members of Council, past and present. While I know I occasionally test their patience, they continue to work collaboratively in service to our community. We do not always agree on solutions or timelines, but we always find a way to move forward together.
- And finally, the residents of West Windsor. Your contributions make this Township the envy of communities throughout New Jersey.

It has been an honor to serve as your Mayor. Thank you for granting me that privilege. I will always be grateful for your trust and support.

Mayor Hemant Marathe