

STATEMENT OF COUNCILWOMAN HEATHER HOWARD
PRINCETON COUNCIL REORGANIZATION MEETING
JANUARY 2, 2014

It's a great pleasure to be here celebrating the one year anniversary of a consolidated Princeton and to look ahead to 2014. I want to start by thanking my colleagues for their hard work – it's been a pleasure serving with you. I want to particularly call out Jenny, who has been a terrific neighbor up on the dais, and Mayor Lempert, who led us through our first year with grace, dignity and a clear vision of the public's priorities.

I also want to thank my family. I'm proud that Nate was here earlier to help lead us in the Pledge of Allegiance, and know that now he's praying for a snow day tomorrow.

I. Achieving the promise of consolidation

A year ago we were here celebrating the historic consolidation of Princeton. We were full of pride about doing our part to end New Jersey's multiple municipal madness, and hope about achieving the promise of consolidation. Today I'd like to briefly highlight what we've achieved, and look ahead to some of the challenges and opportunities we face in 2014.

II. What we've achieved

Consolidation offered the chance to get a handle on the escalating property taxes that threatened to make our town unaffordable for many. By finding efficiencies and eliminating duplicative spending, we reduced our budget and were able to cut property taxes. And working with the Citizens Finance Advisory Committee, we have begun implementing budget best practices, including adopting a budget calendar. Our sound financial footing was recently recognized by ratings agency with the award of the highest bond rating.

But consolidation was not just about financial savings. It was also about creating a better and more effective government for our residents. I want to focus on a few areas where we've seen this play out.

Public safety services were the largest components of both the Princeton Borough and Township's budget, and the merger of the two departments through consolidation has already resulted in significant savings, and we anticipate additional savings once consolidation is fully implemented.

The force is smaller due to attrition, yet because of a more cost-effective command structure, we have been able to provide better services and reinstated services previously trimmed due to budget cuts. The Traffic Unit is focused on enforcement and safety, and the Safe Neighborhoods Unit is dedicated to proactive community policing.

The department standardized police technologies and upgraded the consolidated dispatch center to provide better 911 services, including reduced call transfer and centralized dispatch planning and management.

Completing a new agreement with the Princeton University Public Safety Department was an important piece of unfinished business and will ensure better cooperation between the two departments and more effective responses to public safety threats.

And the department is on track to receive accreditation. This recognition -- that we are among the top departments in terms of best practices for operations and procedures -- is all the more impressive (fewer than a quarter of NJ forces have it) given how quickly it's been achieved.

Let's be clear -- there's no doubt that the police department faced challenges earlier in the year, but it has responded under Captain Sutter's leadership and worked tirelessly to strengthen relations with the community. Starting with the community expectations survey, which identified issues of priority and concern, the department has been conducting neighborhood meetings, instituted bike patrols, increased foot patrols in the central business district, pursued more directed traffic enforcement, and has initiated several school-based security initiatives.

This fall, the police department adopted an order clarifying the role of local police with regard to federal immigration enforcement. The order was the result of a long and close collaboration with the Human Services Commission and LALDEF. It builds on new outreach by Spanish speaking officers in the community, and sends a strong message to the community that witnesses or victims should not be afraid to come forward and work with local law enforcement. Later this winter, the department will operationalize the order with innovative training for its officers.

An outside review from the Rodgers Group found that the former Boro and Township departments, with their very distinct cultures, are coming together successfully and morale has improved. As a result of that organizational review, the department now has the tools for more

effective management. And the fact the department has turned the corner has been noted by many in the community.

As I noted earlier, the police department has had an invaluable partner in the **Human Services** Department and Commission.

At the department, we have new leadership – Director Elisa Neira – who has reinvigorated the mission to provide services to our most vulnerable residents and create a more welcoming community. New initiatives have included Send Hunger Packing, a public-private partnership with the school district and Mercer Street Friends to provide weekend packages of food for elementary school children at risk of food insecurity.

And the Human Services Commission has worked diligently to address the needs of our immigrant community, working closely with the police department to build bridges to the growing community through a variety of outreach channels. In addition to the groundbreaking order more clearly defining the very separate roles of our police vis-à-vis federal immigration authorities, the Commission has also developed new intake guidelines to address wage theft and promoted tuition equality at the state level, and recently celebrated the enactment of this critical legislation.

We have also launched the first community needs assessment survey in a long time -- if ever -- to identify the needs of our most vulnerable residents.

I'm also pleased that the **Board of Health** has continued Princeton's leadership in protecting public health, enacting Mercer County's first ban on smoking on public property. The ban will promote a healthier environment, especially for children and seniors, populations most susceptible to secondhand smoke, and will help normalize smoke-free environments. And more recently, our health department, under the able leadership of our interim health officer, Bob Hary, has worked closely with PU, NJDOH and federal partners to address the meningitis outbreak on campus.

And finally, Princeton was at the forefront of protecting the civil rights of our residents as the first Mercer municipality to provide marriage licenses to gay couples. I'm proud that we worked swiftly to respond to the state court ruling and ensured that our residents – who had already been denied justice too long – were able to marry as soon as legally possible.

III. Looking ahead to 2014

I am pleased with all we have accomplished in our first year as a unified Princeton, but know there is still much more to do.

First, we must continue to strengthen our finances. That means continuing CFAC's work to implement best practices, including adhering to new internal budget schedules and devising a capital plan to manage our debt load and prioritize our infrastructure needs.

On the public safety front, I hope we will stay the course and lock in the gains we have made in a force that, despite being smaller, is more nimble in meeting our needs and more responsive to the entire community. We have important decisions before us on the leadership of the department and the size of the force, but can be proud that the force has turned a corner and is on a strong path to serve our community.

We couldn't have accomplished all this without the talented staff and dedicated volunteers who serve on our boards and commissions. While we have successfully managed significant staff departures this past year, we will likely face more staff changes in 2014, and will need to ensure we maintain the high quality staffing and services for which Princeton is known. Our gifted administrator, Bob Bruschi, has generously provided more than a year's notice of his retirement, and while I would rather he not leave us, selecting his replacement is an opportunity to ensure stable leadership and a smooth transition to the post-Bob era. Hopefully, Bob, we can accomplish a lot – and maybe have a little fun – in your last year.

In closing, I look forward to working with my colleagues, the terrific staff and many engaged residents to continue to achieve the promise of consolidation and keep Princeton the vibrant and diverse community we love.