

STATEMENT OF COUNCILWOMAN HEATHER HOWARD
PRINCETON COUNCIL REORGANIZATION MEETING
JANUARY 5, 2015

I'm pleased to be here to mark another year of the consolidated Princeton and to look ahead to 2015. I want to start by thanking my colleagues for their hard work – it's a pleasure serving with you. In particular, I want to congratulate Jo Butler and Bernie Miller on their reelection to the Council, and thank Mayor Lempert for her continued leadership.

Two years ago we were here celebrating the historic consolidation of Princeton. We have rightly been proud of what we've accomplished, but also recognize how much more we have to do. I'd like to briefly highlight some of our successes in the past year, and look ahead to some of the challenges and opportunities we face in 2015.

Consolidation provided us with important tools to address the growing property tax burden, and I'm pleased that we were able to hold the line on municipal taxes last year, even in the face of rising school and county taxes. And we adopted important budget best practices, as recommended by the Citizens Finance Advisory Committee, that will impose discipline on our budget and capital planning processes. Adhering to and building on these new procedures should be a priority going forward.

But consolidation was never just about financial savings – it was also about creating a better and more effective government. I want to highlight on a few areas.

Public safety is a significant portion of our budget and a critical service for our residents, but also a reflection of who we are as a town. The Police Department continued to excel this year under the exceptional leadership of Chief Nick Sutter. Naming him Chief was a highlight of 2014, for it solidified the leadership and allowed the force to continue to gel, resulting in a stronger, more effective and more compassionate department. Those gains were recognized when, after a rigorous external review, the department achieved accreditation. While that would be an accomplishment for any force, it was a remarkable achievement and honor for Princeton, given the short time frame and the leadership challenges the department had faced.

The Police Department has made intensive efforts to strengthen relations with the community, to ensure all residents have their rights respected and feel that their voices will be heard. Building bridges with all members of our community will not only make our law enforcement efforts more effective and our town safer, but also forge a more just and humane community. The Department built on the Chief's immigration order with innovative training,

continues to work with Human Services to address wage theft and build bridges with the immigrant community, and the Safe Neighborhoods Unit is a model of community policing. These efforts garnered state and national recognition and I hope will continue to bear fruit.

It's important to note that the department continues to do more with less – we hired two terrific new officers to compensate for retirements, and still reached the Transition Task Force's target for a smaller force size well ahead of schedule. And the department continues to innovate and promote transparency, establishing a "ride along" program, expanding and modernizing the monthly police report, and instituting smart reforms to our dispatch to reduce overtime.

A key partner in the Police Department's efforts to strengthen community relations has been the Human Services Commission and our fabulous Human Services Director, Elisa Neira. She completed a community needs assessment, which will help us provide more efficient services to our most vulnerable residents, is working with various stakeholders to implement our wage theft reforms and expand the Send Hunger Packing (SHUP) program, and always responds compassionately to residents' needs.

And Elisa's had a key partner in our wonderful new Health Officer, Jeff Grosser. Together, they jumped into action when our WIC Clinic was threatened, preserving a vital service for at-risk moms and kids in town. Jeff has been on the job less than a year, but he's already done a masterful job helping to handle the meningitis outbreak on Princeton University's campus and dealing with the state's first Ebola quarantine. With his expertise and enthusiasm, we have already begun laying a foundation for a healthier Princeton.

I'm also pleased that we are finally getting a handle on our legal fees, an area of our budget that had seemed immune to significant savings from consolidation. Councilwoman Butler deserves much credit for adoption of the new monthly retainer arrangement, a more cost-effective contract for outside legal services, and I look forward to continuing to work with her to find ways to constrain these costs. In addition, through rigorous oversight and smart management of thorny issues, we hope to prevent litigation where possible.

We wouldn't be here today celebrating our successes without the dedicated staff and committed volunteers who serve on our boards and commissions. While we have successfully managed significant staff departures this past year, we will likely continue to face staff changes, and we must be vigilant about maintaining high quality staffing and services in Princeton. We recently welcomed our new administrator, Marc Dashield, and Marc's smooth transition bodes well for 2015.

2015 promises to be another exciting year for Princeton. I look forward to working with my colleagues, the tremendous staff and many engaged residents to continue to achieve the promise of consolidation and to keep Princeton the vibrant and diverse community we love.