

Mayor's Message

Jan/Feb 2023

We said goodbye to 2022 and welcomed in 2023 and what I am most amazed at is how incredibly long it now takes me to scroll back to my “year of birth” when entering information on computer forms. Its as if my computer is mocking me. This backwards scroll also serves to remind me how, at once, things change while they stay the same. The Borough of Oceanport is actually a great example of that. The Oceanport Historical Committee recently published its long-awaited celebration of Oceanport’s first 100 years – aptly titled “Oceanport, A Great Place To Live” -- and this meticulously researched, beautifully written and visually arresting retrospective of all things Oceanport documents how dramatically Oceanport’s infrastructure has changed while, at the same time, its small town sense of community and commitment to volunteerism have remained the same.

Within the book’s 336 pages, the Oceanport Historical Committee – specifically, Frank Baricelli, John Bonforte, Tom Cavanaugh, Robin Kelly, Rosanne Letson, Paula Lombardo, Mike MacStudy, Barbara Sheppard, Ric Siciliano, and Toni Sverapa – has memorialized the amazing metamorphosis Oceanport has undergone over the past century and, given the continuing redevelopment of Fort Monmouth, will continue to experience in its second century. “Oceanport, A Great Place To Live” is a labor of love towards which each Historical Committee member volunteered hours upon hours of their free time.

No member, however, dedicated more time, effort and love towards its publication than Oceanport’s Historian, Frank Baricelli. Quite simply, without Frank Baricelli’s single-minded devotion to this project and his encyclopedic knowledge of Oceanport’s history, this project would not have been as successful. Anybody who has come into contact with Frank, knows that he served as Oceanport’s historian long, long before he was appointed as our official Historian in 2018. Frank passed away on November 27, 2022 shortly after “Oceanport, A Great Place To Live” was completed and sent to the printer. Sadly, he did not get to see the finished product and the people of Oceanport have been forever deprived of the opportunity to speak with Frank about the borough’s history. Frank was a walking, talking irreplaceable font of information about Oceanport whose comprehensive knowledge rendered the phrase “Google it” unnecessary when it came to our town. In fact, if you Google questions about Oceanport, the response comes back as “What are you asking us for? Ask Frank Baricelli.” Google now has some work to do.

I like to think that when somebody dies, a little piece of them remains behind in all the people they have come in contact with during their lives. Well, in this case, a great big piece of Frank Baricelli remains for us and generations to come in “Oceanport, A Great Place To Live.” The Oceanport Historical Committee is selling softcover versions of this book for \$30.00 and hardcover versions for \$75.00. Please contact Toni Sverapa at 732-539-1620 (after 9:00 am, please) or the Borough Clerk at 732-222-8221 to get your copy. Every coffee table in Oceanport should have a copy of this book prominently displayed on it. And if you don’t have a coffee table, Buddy Brocklebank will make one for you at cost.

About fifty years from now, Oceanport’s next written historical retrospective will certainly begin with the commercial and residential redevelopment of Fort Monmouth. In 2021, the Fort Athletic Club opened its doors and by the third quarter of 2022 had become the premiere multisport fitness facility in the Two Rivers area and certainly the only one with its name emblazoned on a historic water tower. The

Park Loft, located in what was originally a Dance Hall built by the Army in 1941, opened its doors in 2022 to great acclaim. If you visit this site, I promise that you will be stunned by how meticulously and beautifully this old building has been reimagined. The developer has re-used all the old wood to create a space that is, at once, historically significant and stunningly modern, a place where the Tommy Dorsey Band AND Brian Kirk and the Jirks could play on the same night at the same event. Birdsmouth Brewery opened in 2022 at the site of the old Commissary and an ice cream factory --- yes, you read that right, an ice cream factory --- began construction next door to the brewery in October. And, in October of 2022, it was announced that a new sports bar and restaurant --- Baseline Social – will be opening in the last remaining spot in the Commissary building in 2023. But Baseline Social will be much more than a sports themed place to eat: its plans include a large LED viewing wall, a 38-seat platform lounge, five virtual golf bays and an outdoor fire pit lounge.

But the big news in commercial development at Fort Monmouth is that FMERA approved a contract of sale with Netflix for the conveyance of close to 290 acres of property for about 47 million dollars. This is the biggest and best news for the Borough of Oceanport since Buddy Brocklebank was born. When the transaction closes, Netflix will own just about everything on the main post in Eatontown from the Main Gate on Route 35 to the bowling alley. In Oceanport, Netflix will end up with about 140 acres, including the McAfee Center and its campus, the FMERA office (the old library), the marching grounds, Cowan Park and the 400 Area (the land across the street from the main post on Oceanport Avenue). The net effect of the sale of these lands to Netflix is that there are no remaining parcels to be sold in the Oceanport section of the Fort.

A little over a decade ago, Oceanport's most important economic and social driver, Fort Monmouth, closed. When the Fort shut down, thousands of jobs disappeared, families moved away and an empty barren Fort Monmouth served as a constant reminder of what we had lost. From a redevelopment standpoint, what FMERA has done with the Oceanport section of Fort Monmouth is nothing short of remarkable. Netflix's arrival allows for an incredibly advantageous and creative re-use of this property and will serve to restore a great deal of vitality and social energy to Oceanport, Eatontown and Monmouth County at large. We are thrilled to be part of the proposed redevelopment and we look forward to participating with Netflix and FMERA in the continued economic and social revitalization of Fort Monmouth.

2022 also saw Oceanport's Gatta Park receive a long needed upgrade and three multi-sport turf fields opened on November 5th to great fanfare. Oceanport's recreation soccer program christened the new surface with a full slate of games that started at 9:30 am and ended just before sundown. By the time spring arrives, it is expected that the turf fields will be in use on an almost non-stop basis by the Borough's recreation teams, travel teams, school teams, and various third party sports organizations. The Gatta Park fields cost about 3.2 million dollars to build and the annual debt service on the bond that was used to finance the improvements will be about \$220,000.00.

If we were only to rent out the fields for 40 weekends a year, 8 hours a day, we would generate about \$240,000.000 in revenue, thereby covering the debt service. The fields at Gatta Park will be utilized and rented seven days a week, however, and we are projecting that the revenue generated will far exceed our annual debt service. In addition to the Gatta Park turf fields, renovations to Community Center Park

were completed and five pickleball courts were installed at Blackberry Bay Park where the roller hockey rink used to be. For those of you who have not gotten out to see the newly improved parks, we have drone videos of the park improvements on the Borough website's home page.

I am limited in the amount of space I can dedicate to analyzing and explaining this development in this newsletter. If you'd like to see a complete summary of both the property development in the Oceanport section of Fort Monmouth and the improvements to Gatta Park, Community Center and Blackberry Bay Park, please visit the Borough's website and look under "News and Announcements" on the home page.

The Borough held its annual Christmas Tree lighting on December 4th, and the Port Au Peck fire house was packed to the rafters with kids, adults and one very, very busy Santa Claus. This annual gathering is emblematic of everything that is good about being in a small town like Oceanport and it was great to see the event so crowded and the kids so enthusiastic. Earlier that day, the Port Au Peck Firehouse hosted the 4th annual KIDSGIVE gift wrapping and gift giving event. Over 150 gifts were wrapped and over 200 personalized Christmas cards and ornaments were made by children in our community as part of "Operation Sleighbells." At the end of the event, the volunteers (all children) formed a human chain and loaded every single gift, card and ornament into a truck for delivery to Family and Children Services of Monmouth County and Beacon of Life. While the kids were loading the presents, handing them from one to another as the gifts made their way from the fire house to the delivery truck, I was reminded of the Whos in The Grinch Who Stole Christmas. It was a very powerful and uplifting moment and I would highly recommend everyone to get involved with the event next year.

The following Friday, a bunch of Morris Avenue neighbors go together and had their own neighborhood tree lighting at Ron and Lynne Sickler's house. Ron and Lynne, two of the nicest people in the world, had smiles on their faces from ear to ear the entire evening. I was privileged to attend this event and I think it is something that every neighborhood should look to do in the future. Kudos to Carly Dietrick, Tom Tvrdik and the entire Morris, Vreeland Shippen and River neighborhood for putting this all together

Our Municipal Council's reorganization meeting was held on January 1, 2023. We welcomed in a newly elected council member, Keith Salnick, and said goodbye to former Council President Meghan Walker. Meg served Oceanport for three years on the municipal council, chaired the Health and Human Services Committee and served as a member of both the Park & Recreation and Public Safety committees. Meg was also the council's liaison to both the Public Library and the Oceanport Board of Education. Meg's commitment to the Borough of Oceanport was second to none and, although she will be serving on the Environmental Commission and volunteering in other areas, she will be missed greatly on the council.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to thank our volunteer firefighters, volunteer first aid squad members, volunteer coaches, volunteers in general, our teachers and school staff members, our crossing guards, our DPW workers, police, construction department, municipal court and our administrative staff at Borough Hall and EVERYBODY here in our town for making Oceanport what it is today and always has been: A Great Place to Live.