The Town Council and I wish you all a Happy New Year! We wish you good health, happiness, prosperity and above all, a return to normalcy in the year to come. May 2021 be the year we bounce back in strength, resiliency and the spirit of community. I really look forward to a time when we can hold all of our community events and enjoy getting together at street fairs, music concerts and so much more.

With news about the vaccine, I take comfort in the feeling that the worst of the pandemic may be behind us and a sense of normalcy is around the corner. Please stay tuned to the latest news including vaccination information by visiting our website at www.secaucusnj.gov/virus. We will also be making Swiftreach announcements via email and phone. If you did not already sign up to receive automatic Swiftreach announcements, please visit our website home page, go to the “I want to” tab and click on “register for Swiftreach” link. If you do not have access to the internet, you can call our offices at 201-330-2000 for help.

2020 was a challenging year but that did not stop us from completing important projects and infrastructure improvements throughout Town. Through State initiatives, NJDOT and County grants and other funds, we have made significant roadway improvements to Meadowlands Parkway, Mill Ridge Road, Humboldt Street, the section of Paterson Plank Road over the Route 3 bridge, Sixth Street, etc. We were also able to upgrade the playground, parking lot and exercise trail at Schmidts Woods, upgrade the Duck Pond and added a new children’s park at Mill Creek Point. We have added more police officers and upgraded equipment for our fire department. In 2021, we will continue to focus improving our infrastructure, expanding open recreational spaces and ensuring the safety and security of our residents. Stay tuned for information on construction on a new Senior Center building, improvements on Secaucus Road, Meadow Lane, Front Street and more.

Be well and stay safe. Happy 2021!

Mayor’s Corner

Secaucus Artist Lamatina wins ICON 2020 Competition

Secaucus’s very own Maleesa Lamatina is a proud winner of the ICON 2020, a competition that honors New Jersey’s best musical theater voices. The competition begins with 90 artists and six elimination rounds. Artists sing one selection and are judged on vocal strength, presentation, vocal quality and the “IT FACTOR” (which is how they pull it all together). Maleesa entered the competition all seven years it has been in existence. She has made it to the semi-finals 6 years and into the finals twice, including this year—an impressive accomplishment indeed! Maleesa wins a $10,000 grand prize and the lead role in the winner’s dream production.

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Gyaltsen Choden: 100-Year Journey from Tibet to Secaucus

As we ring in the new year, leaving behind the unusual tumult of 2020, Gyaltsen Choden celebrates a very fulfilling milestone—he can boast of a century worth of experience at the interesting intersection of countries, cultures and history. A Secaucus resident for several years now, Gyalt sen Choden was born on January 1, 1921 in Tibet. In 1940, he met 5-year-old Tenzin Gyatso, the Tibetan spiritual leader and 14th Dalai Lama. In 1948, Gyalt sen was appointed to the office of the Private Treasury, an entity separate from the National Treasury of Tibet. There was increasing nervousness that Tibetans in general, and the Dalai Lama in particular, would face threats from the Chinese authorities. The newly established private treasury would allow the physical security of the Dalai Lama if the need arose.

For 12 years, Gyalt sen Choden served in his official capacity, and played a vital role at a turning point in Tibetan history. On March 10, 1959, the Dalai Lama was invited to a cultural celebration at the National Treasury of Tibet. There was increasing nervousness that Tibetans in general, and the Dalai Lama in particular, would face threats from the Chinese authorities. The newly established private treasury would allow the physical security of the Dalai Lama if the need arose.

In India, Gyalt sen helped with the process of registering more than 80,000 Tibetan refugees and with getting them asylum status. He later helped launch Rangwang Parkhang Tibetan Freedom Press, was active in keeping the now-scattered Tibetan community informed, and also helped edit the Dalai Lama’s autobiography My Land and My People. He was appointed Home Secretary of the Tibetan Government in exile and assisted in resettling tens of thousands of Tibetans in southern India. He oversaw the rebuilding of Ganden, Drepong and Sera monasteries where relocated Tibetans continue their culture, language and traditions as a continuous, collective community.

He moved to the U.S. in 2000 and now lives in Secaucus with wife Tsundae Sangmo, his son Tsewang Namgyal and family. Looking back, he reflects on his time with the refugees as the most productive and purposeful part of his life. He gives credit to the practice of compassionate caring for the happiness he exudes even as he grapples with losing his eyesight. At 100, he continues to spread the message of love, compassion and unconditional understanding. We wish Gyalt sen Choden many years of good health and happiness.
Police Department Unveils Hybrid Vehicles

On December 11, 2020, the Secaucus Police Department unveiled two (2) new “hybrid” Ford Escape Police Vehicles. These “hybrid” Ford Escapes will primarily be used on extra-duty traffic details in construction zones, where the vehicle normally sits idle for extended periods of time. Since the vehicles are “hybrid,” power for the vehicle will be drawn from an electrically charged battery, during a vast majority of the idling time. Therefore, the emissions from gasoline fumes released into the environment will be greatly reduced.

During one experiment by the Secaucus Police Department’s Vehicle Mechanic, Scott Petruzzello, the “hybrid” Ford Escape sat idle for five (5) hours running on the electrically charged battery, and only engaged the engine for thirty-three (33) minutes.

“Hybrid” police vehicles will also come at a cost savings to the taxpayer, which is a primary concern of Mayor Michael Gonnelli’s administration. The cost savings will stem from a reduction in the amount of gasoline needed for the vehicles and wear and tear on the vehicle, since the vehicle partially runs off of battery power. These two (2) “hybrid” Ford Escapes were purchased for $26,879.41 each, with fees paid to the Town of Secaucus when a police vehicle is stationed at a construction zone.

“With the purchase of these Hybrid police vehicles, everyone wins,” Chief Dennis Miller said. “Police Officers will have a new vehicle to use, the taxpayer will be saving money and the Secaucus Police Department will be doing its part in helping the environment.” Also, three (3) “hybrid” Ford Interceptor Utility Vehicles have already been ordered this year, which will be used for regular patrol duties. These patrol vehicles will be put into service during the Spring of 2021 and through attrition, we will be transitioning our entire fleet to “hybrids,” Miller said.

Mayor Gonnelli stated, “What a great addition these two vehicles are to our fleet. One of the main goals of my Administration is to be mindful of the environment whenever making purchases and these vehicles certainly do just that. I am so pleased we were able to add to our growing electric/hybrid vehicle fleet.”

“These new vehicles are an important part of Secaucus’ commitment to our ‘green’ municipal fleet and produce fewer emissions. In doing so, we will have healthier air as well as long-term energy and cost savings,” Town of Secaucus Environmental Coordinator Jennifer Schneider said.

Elms Residents Get Serious About Pumpkin Decorating

We missed bringing this to you earlier, but we could not let these pictures just sit in our archives. Residents at the Elms of 5th Street participated in a pumpkin-decorating competition in October. They had a lot of fun while putting in some serious effort! We cannot bring pictures of all the creations but here are the two top spot winners. First place winner Mary Iacobucci (pictured) and her granddaughter, Eden Mojena, came up with a candy-corn puffer fish. Very creative! Congratulations to the winners and all participants.

Fire Chief Carl Leppin

Every two years the all-volunteer Secaucus Fire Department selects a new Fire Chief. This year Fire Chief Carl Leppin III hands over the reins to incoming Fire Chief Joseph Schoendorf who will lead the department until 2023.

Chief Carl Leppin joined the Fire Department as a Junior Firefighter with Engine 4, Ladder 1 in 1996 and later transferred to Engine 3. Though Carl joined as a volunteer at the request of other members, he couldn’t be happier about his decision. After the first few responses to fire calls, he felt “there is no sense of accomplishment better than this.” This fuels his duty as a firefighter and led him to be chosen Captain and Lieutenant three times each. Carl is also the Town’s Construction Official, a job he says is intertwined with his role as Fire Chief. Knowledge of construction codes also informs his ability to navigate fire safety systems in buildings.

When Carl took over as Fire Chief in 2018, he had a set of goals he wanted to achieve for the Fire Department. His list included equipment and facility upgrades, robust recruitment, enhanced training, modernizing standard operating guidelines and focus on the newly formed Marine Division, now part of the NY-NJ Regional Fireboat Taskforce. With the support of Mayor Michael Gonnelli and the Town Council, he supervised the procurement of grants for a state-of-the-art rescue boat, new motor for Marine 2, new gas meters, and the COVID-19 PPE grant. Carl is especially proud of the new rescue boat and improvements to the Marine Division which he says, “more than paid off the investment, having been used for many marine rescues including fires and stranded boats.” In the last two years, the Fire Department also procured a new generator for Engine 1, approved fire alarm systems for Tower 2 and Rescue 1, purchased and upgraded extraction tools for Ladder 1 and Rescue 1, and completed upgrades to Rescue 1 buildings. In addition, the Mayor and Town Council approved the purchase of 12-14 sets of gear a year (gear expire every 10 years and must be replaced; old gear is donated to countries that do not have gear). Work is also in progress to replace the engine at Engine 2. The standard operating guidelines were updated to current standards.

“All these upgrades and equipment are useless if we don’t have firefighters to use them,” reflected Carl. Extra efforts made by ex-Chief Raymond Cieciuch and Donald Cieciuch over the last two years added 46 more to the team – 12 Junior Firefighters, 17 Auxiliary Firefighters, 1 Probationary Firefighter and 16 Firefighters. New sessions for marine, extraction, high-rise and intercompany training ensured that all fire personnel are adequately prepared for any emergency. Carl always reminds firefighters to “never stop learning, and never to be afraid to ask questions.” As he passes the baton to new Fire Chief, he shares this piece of advice—“Be proactive and think ahead so decisions are made not just for today but for the future as well.” Thank you Chief Leppin for a well-served two years.

Chief Leppin thanked all members “for entrusting me with this position and allowing to serve as Fire Chief. I thank incoming Chief Joe Schoendorf and Battalion Chief Fred Schneider for their tremendous support. I wish them as well as incoming Battalion Chief Larry Marciano the very best,” he added.

We will bring pictures from the January 5th swearing-in ceremony in the February Newsletter.
The Giving Spirit and Helping Hands Spread Holiday Cheer

It is said, where there are hardships, there are also helping hands. That certainly the case in Secaucus. In 2020, the number of families need more than doubled. However, generous donations, countless helping hands and the immeasurable impact of the giving spirit made the holidays a bit more cheerful. Santa Claus was especially happy to have the help Mayor Michael Gonnelli, the Town Council, the Department of Social Services, the DPW and a team of elves from Town Hall who helped spread holiday cheer throughout Town. Secaucus also received generous donations from several businesses in the area which were prepped, packed and delivered to families, civic organizations, daycares, schools, shelters, food banks and more. Facebook was flooded with posts from residents who were pleasantly surprised by holiday gift bags delivered to their doorsteps. The Town even held a free hand-sanitizer drive-by event thanks to generous donation from two businesses.

Santa Claus started with a drive through town and appeared at the virtual tree-lighting ceremony on December 5th, then making appearances at Zoom classrooms, firehouse-led drive-throughs and more. Santa even showed up at the Mayor's Office to hand out gifts to employees. At the same time, thanks to the annual toy and food drive donations, many families shared some extra smiles, albeit behind masks. All these make Secaucus a community that truly cares. Thank you to all who donated, organized, prepared and delivered happiness in the form of holiday deliveries!

Hospital Donates Holiday Gifts

On Monday, December 21st, Hudson Regional Hospital President and CEO, Dr. Nizar Kifaieh donated 300 $25-gift cards to Mayor Michael Gonnelli, as Town Councilwoman Orietta Tringali, Councilman Bill McKeever, Santa Claus and families who received holiday gifts looked on. Donated gift cards will be distributed to Secaucus families in need. Throughout the year, the Hospital has not only been a reliable partner in the area’s fight against COVID-19, but has also been a strong community partner. The Mayor and Town Council thank the Hospital for their yearlong efforts, from art shows that encourage students, to various donations to help the community. We wish the hospital continued success.

Knights of Columbus Coat Drive

Mary Immaculate Council 12769 along with Msgr. Peter B. O’Connor Assembly 1543 recently ran their annual coat drive for the homeless. They were able to distribute over 25 bags of coats for adults and children who are homeless. The coats were greatly appreciated by the various shelters that received the coats. With the combined effort of both the Council and Assembly, they were able to sort the various coats and bag them. A shout out goes to those Knights including Paul Pinkman, Master of the New Jersey 1st Regiment, Sal Manente Sr. Assembly Commander, Rich Steffens and Neal McGarrity, Past Grand Knights who helped sort and deliver the coats. The Mary Immaculate Council would also like to thank Mayor Mike Gonnelli and the Town for their assistance in obtaining some of the coats, which collected at Burlington Stores and delivered by the Town to the Knights.

Secaucus Honey

Fresh, local

The Perfect Gift for Any Season

1/2 LB. JAR = $10
1 LB. JAR = $20
PROPOLIS = $10

CONTACT THE ENVIRONMENTAL DEPARTMENT AT ENVIRONMENTAL@SECAUCUS.NET OR 201-86-GREEN (47336)

Christmas Tree Pick-up

The Secaucus DPW makes it easy for you to properly discard Christmas trees. Just remove all lights and decorations and place trees curbside after 5pm any day from January 2 to 31st. There is no need to call to schedule a pickup. DPW trucks make trips around the Town's streets and will pick up trees discarded at curbside. Simple and easy!