

## **Mayor Michael State of the City 2024:**

Thank you to everyone joining us in-person, as well as those watching from home. I hope everyone had a joyful holiday season, and I wish all of you and your families all the best in 2024 and beyond. 2023 was a year full of ups and downs like any other. We have our fair share of dissent and debate just like any other community, but I am proud to say that through it all, we can see the good intentions and genuine care for our city that our residents carry with them in their words and actions.

I want to thank our entire administration and all our dedicated city employees for their ongoing service to the Englewood Community, along with all our elected and appointed officials, board and committee members, our religious leaders, non-profits, business owners, community organizations, and all the other people who work so hard year-round to make Englewood the very special place that it is for our families.

We mark 18 months of service from our City Manager Robert Hoffmann, and additionally last year created the role of Deputy City Manager, which has been capably filled by John Birkner. Working in concert with the City Council and myself, along with our department heads and municipal employees, I believe we have seen an uptick in efficiency and responsiveness, with sound fiscal management and professionalism. Improvements in traffic and pedestrian safety have been important priorities, and further improvements to infrastructure as well as operations have yielded positive results in flood mitigation and other areas. We will need to continue to build upon their creative problem solving and forward-thinking attitudes in coming years to deal with rising costs, infrastructure needs, and other unavoidable challenges.

Chief among them is to continue and expand our efforts to clear the Overpeck Creek and other water ways-- to reduce and prevent flooding. We must also expand our work with our surrounding municipalities on regional drainage issues and solutions. CSX must also be brought to task in cleaning its culverts, swales, and drainage lines along their track right of way. CSX's lack of drainage maintenance is directly responsible for damage to residential and commercial properties in Englewood over the past decades.

Our Public Safety Professionals and Public Works Team continue to serve with distinction as well, and my thanks go out to Police Chief Tom Greely, Deputy Chief Matt

De La Rosa, Fire Chief Jeff Kaplan, and Edroy Jenkins Director of Public Works--and all the women and men who keep our families and homes safe and kempt. We saw numerous instances where they stepped up with valor when called upon this past year, and we are fortunate to have them. I have always been committed to filling our public safety ranks and organizational leadership charts, not just with numbers, but with talented as well as diverse individuals, and I thank our Chiefs, City Manager, and Council for their support in these critical areas.

As the longest sitting Mayor in our City's history, I thank my local colleagues for installing me into the New Jersey Hall of Fame and my international ones for including me in Global Summits and Conferences. In recent times I have represented the City of Englewood to provide insight into issues concerning the startling rise of Antisemitism; the importance of Immigration reform; and safety protocols leaders the world over employ to stand against all forms of "Hate".

Unfortunately, it is inevitable that we will lose cherished members of our community with each passing year, and this year was no different. I hope you will all join me in continuing to celebrate the lives and memories of dear friends such as Sam Trusty, Curtis Caviness, Gerald Akridge, John Kelly, and all the others who have departed from us. This past year we memorialized our late Mayor Sandy Greenberg and can best honor all their legacies and friendship by keeping them in our minds and living our lives in a manner that would make them proud. Our prayers remain with the loved ones of all those who have passed.

As we remember those we have lost, it cannot be overlooked that we are still without answers and without closure regarding the death of Bernard Placide. I reiterate this here, and will again convey inquiries, as I have repeatedly in the past, to the Office of the Attorney General, which by state law has jurisdiction over this case. We fully recognize that it is necessary to conduct due diligence to ensure that we reach the correct outcome rather than just a quick outcome. But far too much time has passed with our community left in limbo and unable to heal from this traumatic event.

I am however encouraged that Englewood is now participating in the ARRIVE Together Program, which is an initiative of the Attorney General pairing mental health professionals with law enforcement in responding to situations where mental health

concerns may factor in. The model intends to provide more tailored responses that may de-escalate these encounters and reduce the number of *use of force* incidents and injuries. We hope never to need this kind of intervention but should find comfort in the knowledge that it is there, and that we are making efforts to pursue proactive change within our justice system. Our prayers remain with all those impacted, but action to accompany them is a welcome addition.

As we also remember Dr. Ronel Cook, who we tragically lost last year, we look to the silver lining that is Dr. Marnie Hazleton, our new Superintendent of Englewood Public Schools. Dr. Hazleton has proven to be an uplifting presence and highly qualified leader within our schools and paints a bright picture for our students in the years ahead. She has been a pleasure to work with, and for those who have not yet had that pleasure, I encourage you to reach out with any questions or ideas regarding our schools. We should work with the School District on joint projects and establish internships and career paths for jobs in local government.

Despite the difficult environment, we are blessed to see robust investments being made this past year in our Central Business District—Vacancies being filled store after store, ribbons being cut and seeing scores of entrepreneurs; restaurants; and professionals starting new locations and businesses. Our business community is resilient, but they will continue to need our personal patronage and support, so as you make plans for shopping or dining, please remember that Englewood has some of the finest options around and patronizing them helps our entire city by providing jobs, creating revenues, and keeping us all connected.

I would also like to see us take advantage of emerging industries and new revenue streams, first and foremost among those revisiting a practical plan for cannabis in Englewood. Several years ago, I vetoed an ordinance banning all forms of cannabis production, packaging, and retail sales because I felt our city government had not considered the options at hand and we could be passing up major opportunities for much needed municipal funds, especially after our Planning Board found this new industry could be consistent with our Master Plan. I want to remind everyone of two crucial facts. One - I am not advocating for retail or other cannabis establishments in our downtown or residential areas. Two - regardless of our local actions in Englewood, recreational adult use cannabis is legal in New Jersey, and will

be available by delivery as well as in nearby locations, as close as Teaneck. I am asking our City Council to move forward responsibly and proactively with this effort.

Efficiency and coordination are critical in 2024. I urge the Council to adopt capital budget Ordinances early in the year so that the city can get good pricing on road paving and purchase equipment that has long lead times for delivery. Let us invest in our Parks and Playgrounds. Like Flat Rock, they should become known as part of the Crown Jewels of our City. We should be able to monitor the work of utility companies so that we can receive much needed infrastructure upgrades for electric, natural gas and water without having to dig up roads three times due to their lack of coordination.

I had the privilege of being invited to and then visited each of Englewood's public, private, and parochial schools. We had much to celebrate in Englewood athletics this year, with several teams posting stellar seasons. The Dwight Morrow High School Girls Soccer team took home their THIRD straight Big North American Title, while the Dwight Morrow football team was crowned the 2023 Super Football Conference Ivy Division Champion, and Junior Football B Team won the B-County Junior Scholastic Football League conference championship as well. The Dwight Englewood High School Boys Tennis team won the Bergen County Spring Tournament, while the Dwight Englewood boys basketball team made it to the championship game of the North Jersey Interscholastic Conference tournament. The Englewood Raiders baseball team also won the U.S. Amateur Baseball League (USABL) Northeast Division-16U 2023 Fall Championship. We are very proud of all our students in all our Englewood Schools, and these added athletic accomplishments show the success we are fostering on and off the field. I commend and congratulate our student athletes, as well as all the coaches and family members who support them and help them reach these goals.

This past year we had a significant increase in the number of Municipal Ordinances put forward and adopted. To keep residents informed and connected, I have for the past four years conducted weekly virtual community forums, which we call "Coffee with the Mayor", stemming from back in the day when I used to hold these sessions in person downtown. It's an opportunity for me to convey a condensed version of the various official updates I receive, as well as for residents to air concerns and ask questions on a variety of topics. I invite everyone to join us every Friday at 11am, by

visiting the Englewood Public Library Facebook page, or viewing on my own Facebook page.

We face other challenges ahead, most notably revising our city's Master Plan, which must be completed by the end 2024. Through this process-- we will investigate the many ways to make the city more business friendly while making sure that the Codes which protect the safety of all are fair and enforced.

Court mandated Affordable Housing plans and other general development discussions dominated large portions of the past year, and with good reason. I remain committed, as I believe does this council, to ensuring that we do everything possible to maintain the unique character of our city, balanced with meeting certain mandates that are outside of our control. We have managed to avoid a very real threat of losing local zoning control to developers in this process, and implementing a thorough and structured Master Plan this year will help cement our vision for Englewood's future.

I'm not permitted to go into specifics of the ongoing lawsuit challenging the Affordable Housing mandate, but certain gaps in process and logic, and the public relations campaign behind it, do raise questions as to the driving force. What I do know is that we are taking a comprehensive approach to this Master Plan, recognizing the different needs and character of each neighborhood, as well as a holistic approach in how each exists as an important part of our city.

The increasing number of Group Homes, Clean and Sober locations and other specialty homes must be regulated. The city now has 29 such locations. Englewood is ready, willing, and able to accept with open arms our fair share. But It must be balanced with the needs of the residents in the surrounding neighborhoods.

Obviously, we must consider the aesthetics, density, and affordability of our residential housing, as well as other factors such as infrastructure, flooding, and environmental impact, but other nuances also exist such as specially zoned business corridors and even potential future improvements such as mass transit that require careful and genuine vision and planning to produce the best short and long-term outcomes for our residents. Essentially, we must explore how to move forward with

smart development and leverage the modernization of our aging infrastructure along the way.

I will state here and now that in creating this Master Plan, we must provide thorough opportunity for public input before a plan is constructed, as well as after one is presented, with ample time before it is to be voted on for meaningful discussion and potential changes. Englewood will continue to grow and to evolve, and we all have a right to have a say in that. I am publicly asking the council to adhere to that premise in considering timelines, professionals, and process, although I do believe you all share my sentiments in this regard already.

This coming year will find us celebrating Englewood's 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. We have more in common that bonds us than differences that separate us. We know we have a lot more work to do on this and other issues in 2024 – not the least of which is a Community Center - but I also know we have the talent, and passion - on this dais, in this chamber, and throughout our city - to continue moving things in the right direction together to do what is best for every Englewood resident.

Special thank you to all who attend our public meetings and virtual Sessions. We must remember to maintain civility and respect in this hallowed Chamber.

I remain humbled and immensely privileged to serve as Mayor of Englewood. I'm so grateful to the residents of Englewood for placing your trust in me. I thank God for allowing me to raise my four children in Englewood and am now privileged to see my grandchildren similarly growing up here. Public service is such an important part of my family life, and I treasure every day that I can show my children, and now my grandchildren, the value of community and the fulfillment that can come only from helping others.

I look forward to our continued friendship and shared endeavors in 2024 and beyond. Thank you, and God bless you all.

***Michael Wildes, Mayor. City of Englewood, New Jersey. January 2, 2024.***