

## Town of Ponce Inlet

### Mayor's State of the Town Address

January 23, 2020

With the start of a fresh New Year, many of us take time to reflect on the prior year. The Town does this as well and we provide this information to you each January through this annual State of the Town Address.

On March 27, 2019, the series of lawsuits between the Town and Pacetta, LLC came to an end. After more than a decade and unfortunately millions of dollars spent, both parties ultimately agreed to simply walk away. Pacetta agreed to drop all pending litigation at the local, state, and federal levels and the Town agreed to not pursue reimbursement of legal fees for all the cases for which entitlement was or could have been established. It was a quiet ending to a lawsuit that had been anything but that for a very long time. While the monetary loss to both parties was extraordinary over that decade, there is a certain ebb and flow to money that we all experience in the market and otherwise; so we know that money manages to recover itself over time via various means. What I find as the more troublesome and lasting harm in this lawsuit is the division that occurred between some residents who had otherwise been friends, apart from a difference of opinion on this matter. That divisiveness became so strong that we saw some residents move from the area, and for others we saw friendships end. If you experienced that on either side of this issue, I do hope that 2020 will offer an opportunity to mend that situation. It is most definitely time to move forward jointly as a stronger community.

Unrelated to the Pacetta matter, but to address some confusion based upon recent reporting – the Town recently had a first reading on changes to its comprehensive plan and land use and development code regarding its coastal high hazard area (CHHA) policies. As required by the State of Florida, the Town's comprehensive plan must incorporate and contain policies related to the CHHA. The CHHA is a line drawn by a computer model created and periodically redrawn by the National Weather Service, that indicates the area subject to storm surge flooding during a Category 1 hurricane. In 2017, the National Weather Service redrew the CHHA line and the Town included the newly drawn line in its 2017 Comprehensive Plan. The National Weather Service's extension of the CHHA line may have had the unintended effect of inadvertently reducing available development opportunities on many parcels within the Town. Accordingly, the recent comprehensive plan and land use development code revisions are intended to simply restore the development opportunities available to parcels before the CHHA line was expanded by the National Weather Service. The amendment does not change the uses of these properties or give them more rights than they had before. Second reading and potential adoption of this ordinance will be scheduled in 2020 following review by the Volusia Growth Management Commission and the State.

Now turning our attention toward our operations, we'll start with the financial health of our Town. The Town received an excellent audit for the prior fiscal year. We have a general fund reserve of approximately 2.4 million dollars, which equates to approximately 4.5 months of our current operating expenses. The Town has a long-established goal to keep the general fund reserve at a level

between 3 and 9 months of operating expenses, and we remain within this range. The Town's composite millage rate at 19.5363 mills remains the 5<sup>th</sup> lowest out of the 24 separate taxing districts in Volusia County, nearly a half-mill lower than our neighboring unincorporated area Wilbur-by-the-Sea and over one mill lower than our nearest incorporated neighbor; the Town's specific millage rate is 5.9 mills of this total amount. We strive to meet our stated mission to provide you with excellence in service delivery while ensuring you obtain the greatest value for your tax dollar. With that in mind, I'll describe some of the specifics of what we have done this year.

I'm very pleased to announce that our Planning & Development department staff have made advancements in the Town's community rating with the National Flood Insurance Program – assuring our property owners a 25% discount on flood insurance. The Town is currently at a level 5; an accomplishment shared by very few municipalities in Florida. Currently, 259 cities and counties in the State of Florida are participating in the Community Rating System (CRS) and only two communities have a better rating than Ponce Inlet. We are aiming for a rating level 4 in the coming years to avail an even greater discount on flood insurance and to improve our overall flood resiliency. This is achieved by prioritizing the creation and enforcement of regulations that enhance the Town's ability to manage flooding and by having the extensive documentation available as required. This is an ongoing and time-consuming effort by our staff, but it yields a quantifiable benefit for all of us living on this barrier island community.

In 2019, our administrative staff were able to closeout their 2017 Hurricane Irma funding reimbursement request, having obtained approximately \$87,000 from FEMA and the State reimbursement for expenses associated with that storm. We were fortunate to not have any expenses worth claiming for any storms since that time so there are no more outstanding requests for reimbursement. We are appreciative of our staff's hard work and their tenacity to obtain this type of reimbursement, well after completion of the clean-up work for which we all see.

The economy and local housing market continued to prosper in 2019, as demonstrated by the number of permits issued this year. Over the course of the year 1,048 permits were issued, including 13 permits for new single-family homes. This represents more than an 8% increase in permits issued compared to 2018. In response to these permit requests, we conducted 1,551 inspections with an 89% pass rate. Our staff works to assist contractors in understanding the requirements of the Florida Building Code with the primary goal to ensure the health, safety, and well-being of our residents. In addition, the Town has implemented over-the-counter building permitting for mechanical permits, sewer connection permits, simple electric permits, and simple plumbing permits. We intend to expand our over-the-counter permit process as our front desk staff become appropriately trained in this technical area. We are also working toward online permitting as an option for those who prefer but it is not our intent to eliminate the ability for face-to-face interactions with our staff, as some other agencies have done. We want our staff to be ready to assist you, not to direct you to a computer.

Our Town Council has been one of action. With the Town's Water System Improvement Plan having been completed in one fell swoop in 2016-2017, we have turned our focus more intently toward our

**Mayor's State of the Town Address**

**January 23, 2020**

**Page 2 of 5**

long-existing Sewer Master Plan. Knowing that the State has placed great focus on the elimination of septic tanks in vulnerable areas like barrier islands, we were hopeful of obtaining a grant for a large project in our area to include the design work needed – so we applied for one in 2018. We learned the State via St Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) prefers smaller scale projects and in order to be competitive we would need for design work to be completed first. This brings about a significant obstacle for the Town as we do not own the sewer system, so we do not have a capital fund from which to draw funds. In an effort to overcome this, staff worked with the City of Port Orange and obtained their agreement to fund a \$200,000 design and engineering study in order to submit a competitive application for construction grant funding to SJRWMD for gravity sewer on Ponce de Leon Circle. The Town has held neighborhood meetings with the residents on this street and obtained the agreement of more than fifty percent of those living on the street that they want sewer if we can get it to them as proposed. We have also submitted a legislative funding request via Senator Wright and Representative Leek. Our staff has followed Council’s direction and worked diligently on this for Ponce de Leon Circle and I know they will continue this effort, as there are many more homes shown in the Town’s Sewer Master Plan for consideration of septic-to-sewer conversion.

We closed 2019 with the retirement of our Chief of Police, Frank Fabrizio. Chief Fabrizio had served as our police chief for seven and a half years. He retired as a Captain from the Orange County Sheriff’s Department to come to work for Ponce Inlet. Chief Fabrizio accomplished many good things for our Town during his tenure here and I’d like to share some of these with you in my appreciation for his efforts. Chief Fabrizio initiated self-defense training classes, which he participated in personally teaching. He also initiated *Coffee with the Chief* where anyone could schedule a time to have coffee and talk with him and periodically, he scheduled open “coffee meetings” at our Community Center. While jokingly referred to as *Frank’s Flags*, handy pedestrian crossing flags were installed at Chief Fabrizio’s encouragement and have been appreciated for years by our residents to increase pedestrian visibility for safer crosswalk use; others in Volusia County have since contacted us for information and then implemented this program in some areas within their own communities. Chief Fabrizio implemented a program entitled AC4P, Actively Caring For People as a way to recognize local good Samaritans with a wristband and a write-up of how they have helped make a positive difference in someone’s life within their community. He also implemented the Carfit Program in which some of our police officers became certified in assisting drivers determine the correct seat and mirror adjustments for their vehicles for safer operation. When the weather was nice, Chief Fabrizio could be found performing bicycle patrol community policing efforts with his officers. At the request of our Town Manager, Chief Fabrizio found an efficient means to implement the police body camera program ahead of the curve and having these body cameras in place has been very beneficial for the Town in both criminal cases and when we receive complaints. Having an appreciation for advancements in technology for law enforcement purposes, Chief Fabrizio sought and obtained approval for the purchase of license plate readers (LPRs) which are placed at the town’s northern border on both South Atlantic Avenue and South Peninsula Drive. Our LPRs have resulted in 559 citations and 144 arrests in the 18 months that they have been in place; clearly generating a lot of police activity with notifications directly to the on-duty officers when things like a stolen vehicle

**Mayor’s State of the Town Address**

**January 23, 2020**

**Page 3 of 5**

or a vehicle in which the owner has an open warrant or some other unresolved law enforcement matter. With the retirement of Chief Fabrizio, our Town Manager will undertake the task of hiring a new police chief in 2020. I have every confidence that she will find another Chief of Police who will bring the level of knowledge and experience that we have come to expect for the protection of our community.

I always like to share that the Town of Ponce Inlet was one of two cities to initiate a pilot program for municipal patient transport in 2012. We are proud to have demonstrated a successful partnership with Volusia County in this critical care component. While our Fire Department was within the first two that provided this service, we are now one of five municipalities in Volusia County that offer this service to their residents. We have been doing this for over seven years, successfully transporting approximately 1,540 patients in that timeframe. One of the requirements of municipalities wishing to participate in Volusia County's patient transport partnership is to respond to certain types of patient transport calls outside of their own jurisdictions, when they are the closest unit available to do so. In 2019, the Town's fire department transported 315 patients total; of those, 192 from Ponce Inlet and 123 in response to a closest-unit-response call. Being authorized to provide patient transport from our barrier island community ensures the patient arrives at the hospital in the shortest time possible and provides an added benefit in continuity of care.

The Town initiated an effort to upgrade our only active park in 2015 when we began to receive requests from citizens for uses that the park was not originally designed for. The process began with a citizen survey, which resulted in the Town preparing a conceptual plan and applying for a Volusia ECHO grant. Volusia ECHO provides grant funds to finance acquisition, restoration, construction or improvement of facilities to be used for environmental, cultural, historical and outdoor recreational purposes. The Town received the approval of the ECHO Grant in 2018 of almost \$400,000 towards this capital improvement project in Timothy Pollard Memorial Park, located at 4680 South Peninsula Drive. The remaining funding was allocated from the Town's land acquisition fund, which was created to be used for the purchase of and improvements to lands for public use at a total estimated project cost of approximately \$830,000. A complete renovation and improvement project of this park is now drawing to a close with amenities to include: the previous tennis court which will be resurfaced in April when the temperatures are more consistent (so that cracking will not be an issue), a replacement basketball court; four pickleball courts; a racquetball court; two new playground areas: one for ages 2-5 and one for ages 5-12; a public walking trail; a pavilion; a restroom facility; lighting throughout the park; and 7 additional parking spaces. We are excited to be able to offer this fun recreational park for our citizens of all ages to use beginning in 2020 and we hope that you will enjoy it for many years to come.

As we prepared to launch the Pollard Park Project, we also submitted an ECHO Grant application in the amount of \$175,000 towards an intended \$350,000 capital improvement project in the Kay and Ayres Davies Lighthouse Park, located at 4931 South Peninsula Drive. The grant was written for improvements to specific aspects of the park including a renovation and upgrade of the playground,

the addition of bench swings in various locations for adults to enjoy, expansion of the public walking trail along the perimeter of the park to eight feet, and lighting in the playground area and along the walking trail. The playground design and bench swings have been selected and we are hopeful of having this portion completed before Easter. The sidewalk and lighting designs are still being finalized but this project is still expected to be completed in 2020.

As a small town with big goals in meeting your recreational desires, the Town has continued to work with the River-to-Sea Transportation Planning Organization to obtain federal/state grant monies as the primary funding source for a sidewalk expansion project for eight-foot-wide sidewalks along South Peninsula Drive. So far, this funding has resulted in the completion of a bicycle-pedestrian master plan and was followed by the completion of a feasibility study. In 2019, we applied for grant funding for the design, engineering, and construction of this sidewalk improvement project and have been placed on the TPO priority funding list, from which allocations are made based upon available federal/state funding each year. Our project was submitted under the 10% local match requirement so, while we are aware that considerations have been discussed regarding increasing this requirement, we are of the understanding that our project will be considered under the funding requirements that were in place when it was submitted and prioritized by the TPO. Timing can be everything, so we are hopeful that it lines up for us and that an affordable improvement to eight-foot-wide sidewalks along South Peninsula Drive, wherever feasible, will be coming to you over the next few years.

Ponce Inlet is a very special, pristine town and recognized as a Tree City, a Bird Sanctuary, and a now as a Monarch Butterfly City. Ponce Inlet offers many opportunities for interesting and fun things to do. With the invaluable assistance of community volunteers, the Town was pleased to cosponsor 17 events during 2019. The Ponce Inlet Historical Museum, located at 143 Beach Street, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places, welcomed 1,402 visitors in 2019. In addition to events in which the Town cosponsored, the Town via our Cultural Services Department hosted 17 special programs related to history and 18 special programs related to parks and recreation in 2019. There were also many events held by the Marine Science Center, the Ponce Inlet Lighthouse Association and by your various Town clubs at the Community Center.

As we review 2019, we know that we are not the only ones who have been hard at work for our Town. Our citizenry continues to volunteer at an amazing rate! We have about 65 volunteers whose work is directly related to Town government purposes, and there are many other volunteers who give of their time to other various community clubs. In total, there are at least 22 different boards, clubs, or other organizations for a census population of just over 3,000. These volunteers make our Town the special place we all enjoy. On behalf of the Council, I want to give our heartfelt thanks to all our volunteers.

With that, I wish you all a very happy, healthy, and prosperous New Year!

Respectfully yours,

Gary L. Smith, Mayor