

Mayor's Address - 2026

Happy New Year, and welcome to Middletown Township's Annual Reorganization Meeting.

Before I say anything else this morning, I want to begin where I always should—at home.

Because the position of Mayor is never done alone, I want to express my heartfelt thanks to my family because they are the foundation that makes everything I do possible.

To my wife, Alannah—thank you for your love, your patience, and your steadiness. You carry more than your share so I can serve, and I am forever grateful for that.

And to Reagan, Grant, and Kennedy—one day you'll fully understand why you spent your childhood running around Town Hall, singing, drawing and leaving handprints on the doors all across this building and why your dad believes so deeply that this work matters. You remind me, every day, what we're working for: a community where children can grow up safe, proud, and surrounded by opportunity.

Thank you for giving me the strength to do this job with the dedication it demands.

To my colleagues on the Township Committee, I am honored to serve alongside you. Together, we carry a solemn responsibility: to protect what generations built here, preserve the values that make Middletown great, and make decisions worthy of the trust our residents place in us. The

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accomplishments we recognize today are the result of your dedication, your judgment, and your commitment to working together.

And to my friend, Deputy Mayor Rick Hibell—thank you for your service and partnership. You have consistently stepped up for Middletown with steady leadership and a deep sense of duty. I am grateful for your support, and I look forward to continuing our work together for the residents we serve.

This morning, we gather for a tradition that is easy to describe as routine—but it is anything but routine.

Because what happens in rooms like this is what keeps the American experiment alive.

Long before Washington makes headlines, long before Trenton takes votes, people gather in their hometowns and do the hard, honorable work of self-government. Where neighbors sit together. Where public servants take an oath. Where a community decides—peacefully, deliberately—how to move forward.

That is not ordinary.

That is America.

And this year, of all years, that truth should land a little deeper—because 2026 is not simply another year on the calendar.

In 2026, America turns 250.

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Two hundred fifty years since a bold idea took root: that people could govern themselves; that rights are not granted by the powerful but endowed by their creator; that freedom is worth protecting; and that the best way to build a future is to place it in the hands of citizens who still believe in responsibility, service, and decency.

Now, there will always be voices—sometimes loud—who try to convince us to think smaller about our country, to be embarrassed by our history, or to forget what we've overcome.

But Middletown will not follow them there.

Because Middletown is what the American experiment looks like when it's working—people who still believe in its exceptionalism.

A place where smart planning and fiscal discipline still matter. A place where progress doesn't require surrendering our character. A place where we preserve what's worth preserving, improve what needs improving, and leave this township stronger than we found it.

So this morning, I want to speak about what we will do next through that America-250 lens—because local government is where the American idea becomes real. It's where values become decisions. It's where patriotism becomes service. And it's where love of country becomes love of neighbor.

And with that spirit in mind, let me begin with one of the clearest examples of stewardship we delivered together.

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OPEN SPACE

When residents voted to protect open space, you didn't just authorize funding—you entrusted us with a responsibility. You asked us to be stewards. To think beyond the next meeting, beyond the next budget cycle, beyond the next headline—and to protect something that cannot be replaced once it is gone.

And in 2025, Middletown delivered—in historic fashion.

This past year, Middletown acquired more than 100 acres of open space — more than at any point in our Township's history. Think about what that means: in a time when so many communities are losing their identity to overdevelopment, Middletown made a decision to protect its character—and to protect it permanently.

With the support from the Monmouth County Commissioners, we preserved the former Mater Dei campus, now safeguarded forever as **Mater Dei Park**—not as a temporary solution, but as a lasting gift to the next generation.

We protected the historic **Tretter Property in Chapel Hill**, securing environmentally sensitive land that strengthens our resilience and preserves the natural systems that make Middletown beautiful.

And we preserved the former **Lincroft Presbyterian Church property**, setting it aside for future community use.

Together, these acquisitions represent a once-in-a-generation investment in our environment, in our neighborhoods, and in our quality of life.

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And I want to be clear about something: preserving open space is not about stopping progress. It is about shaping progress—responsibly, intentionally, and with wisdom. It is about ensuring that when our children and grandchildren stand where we stand today, they inherit more than roads and buildings. They inherit trails and trees. Fields and beauty. They inherit a Middletown that still feels like Middletown.

Because the truth is simple: you can always build later. But you cannot always preserve later.

PARKS AND RECREATION

Protecting land is how you preserve Middletown's character. Investing in our parks is how you strengthen Middletown's daily life—because parks are where childhood happens, where neighbors become friends, and where the rhythms of community are built.

In 2025, we advanced meaningful improvements across our park system, and in 2026, we are going even further—because a great town doesn't just maintain what it has. It improves it.

This year, you will see **Bodman Baseball Fields** receive major upgrades. Practical, high-impact field improvements that make every diamond better, safer, and more playable for the kids and families who use them.

You will see major momentum on our courts as well. In 2026, we will see major upgrades **at our tennis courts throughout town**, creating spaces that reflect how families and neighbors actually live, play, and stay healthy today.

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At **McMahon Park**, you will see upgrades that bring multiple generations together—**pickleball, tennis, and basketball improvements**—because the best parks aren't designed for one age group. They're designed so everyone has a place.

You will also see continued progress at the **Dorsett Playground**, reinforcing a simple principle: children deserve safe, modern, welcoming places to be kids.

And at **Poricy Park**, we will advance the Library Walk—a project that reflects who we are. The Story Walk is an outdoor, self-paced reading experience set up along a path outside the library where you can enjoy some fresh air while you have fun reading. These aren't just upgrades. They are investments in health, in connection, in family time, and in community pride.

Because in a world that moves too fast, a great park is more than green space.

It is where moments become memories.

AMERICA 250

In 2026, America turns 250—and that milestone should encourage us to pause and reflect on our shared history and values. Because we didn't inherit a finished nation. We inherited a responsibility.

We inherited a sacred duty: to strengthen it, to serve it, and to pass it on better than we found it.

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Two hundred fifty years ago, an idea took root that changed the world: that ordinary people could govern themselves, that freedom belongs to everyone, and that the future can be built through faith, work, and common purpose. That idea has survived every battle—and it's our turn to carry it forward.

So in Middletown, we will do more than commemorate America 250—we will bring it to life. We will expand programs and events for families, students, civic groups, veterans, and first responders, and we will open the **Middletown Township Historical Society Museum**, which is located in the historic train station, to preserve and share our story.

And I am proud to announce: **Middletown will be the home of Monmouth County's America 250 parade and celebration—“Red, White & You.”** We will help set the tone for the county—bringing neighbors together and celebrating the country we love.

But the most important work of this anniversary year won't happen at a ceremony. It will happen in the next generation—when our children learn that liberty is protected, citizenship is practiced, and love of country is lived through service, responsibility, and community.

America has never been defined by its critics. America has been defined by its citizens—builders, volunteers, and patriots who showed up and moved this nation forward.

That is what we celebrate at 250. And that is what we recommit to in 2026.

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SENIOR CENTER UPGRADES

A great community is measured by how it treats people at every stage of life.

And in Middletown, we do not forget the residents who helped build the township we benefit from today.

That is why we awarded contracts for **\$1.3 million** in improvements to the Middletown Senior Center—new HVAC, energy-efficient lighting, upgraded restrooms, a new roof, new windows, and ADA accessibility enhancements.

These upgrades are not just improvements to a building.

They are a statement of respect.

Veterans Village

Few responsibilities are more sacred than our obligation to those who served our country.

In every era, Americans have stepped forward—many from towns just like Middletown—to defend a way of life that is not guaranteed, and never was. They carried the burden so the rest of us could carry on.

This past year, Middletown made meaningful progress at Veterans Village, where affordable housing for veterans has become a reality—not just a promise. And that matters, because gratitude is not a feeling. Gratitude is an action.

And while I cannot share details tonight, I can tell you this: our work is not finished. We are actively exploring the next phase of veterans housing in partnership with nationally respected organizations, including Tunnel to

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Towers, to ensure that those who sacrificed for our freedoms have a place to call home—right here in Middletown.

Because in this community, we do not just speak about honoring veterans—we do it.

MIDDLETOWN ON SCREEN

Middletown continues to gain national attention—not just for how we live, but for where stories are told.

Over the past year, Middletown served as a filming location for major productions including *Happy Gilmore 2* and *The Last Mrs. Parrish*, reinforcing our reputation as a welcoming, film-friendly community and supporting local economic activity and visibility.

WORLD TRADE CENTER MEMORIAL GARDENS

This year marks 25 years since September 11, 2001—a solemn milestone that changed our nation, and our town, forever.

And here in Middletown, we carry that memory with more than words. We continue to remember it so we never forget.

That is why we have invested \$1.4 million into the World Trade Center Memorial Gardens—not to remake what is sacred, but to strengthen it, preserve it, and ensure it remains worthy of those we lost.

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This work includes a renewed pathway, so families, seniors, students, and visitors can walk the grounds with ease and reverence. It includes new lighting, so the memorial stands with quiet dignity not only in daylight, but in the evenings as well—because remembrance does not keep office hours. And it includes new trees and thoughtful landscaping—living symbols of resilience—so that even as seasons change, the meaning of this place does not.

But the most important feature of the Gardens cannot be poured in concrete or installed with wiring.

It is the promise we renew every time we step inside them: that we will never forget.

Because memory is not only about the past.

Memory is how we stay worthy of the sacrifices that were made.

PUBLIC SAFETY

Public safety remains one of Middletown's highest priorities—because nothing else works if families don't feel safe in their homes and neighborhoods.

Our volunteer first responders embody the very best of Middletown. They answer calls without hesitation. They give time that cannot be replaced. They show up in the moments when neighbors are frightened, families are hurting, and seconds matter.

And I want everyone to understand the scale of what that service looks like.

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In 2025 alone, Middletown's volunteer fire, first aid, and OEM teams responded to **4,192 calls for service**—including **1,781 volunteer fire calls**, **2,403 volunteer first aid calls**, and **8 volunteer OEM calls**—an average of **11.45 volunteer calls every single day**.

And behind every call is time—real time—pulled from dinners, weekends, jobs, and sleep. Our volunteers logged **31,330 incident-response hours** in 2025, and **81,681 total volunteer hours** across all activities.

So in Middletown, gratitude can't just be something we say—it has to be something we do. That's why we implemented the **Middletown Emergency Volunteer Incentive Program**, rewarding our volunteers with **nearly \$40,000 in property tax relief**—a tangible way to recognize those who protect and serve this community, and a clear statement of our values: when you show up for Middletown, Middletown shows up for you.

And alongside our volunteers, we are proud of the men and women of the **Middletown Police Department**. Under the leadership of **Chief Craig Weber**, our officers serve with professionalism, vigilance, and a deep respect for the community they protect. Day in and day out, they are the steady presence behind the scenes—preventing crime, responding in moments of crisis, and working proactively with residents, schools, and our emergency services partners to keep Middletown safe.

THANK YOU

Everything I have shared this morning is only possible because of an exceptional team that turns ideas into results. Our administration is filled

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with dedicated professionals whose hard work, expertise, and quiet commitment I have the privilege to witness every day.

I want to recognize our Township Administrator, Tony Mercantante; our Township Attorney, Brian Nelson; our Assistant Administrator and Township Clerk, Heidi Pieluc; our Chief Financial Officer, Colleen Lapp; our Public Works Director, Ted Maloney; our Recreation Director, Janet Dellett—and so many others who go above and beyond to serve this community. Their steady leadership and tireless work help Middletown run well, respond quickly, and keep moving forward.

I also want to extend a special thank-you to two people I depend on every day: Laura Mattes and Shannon Miller. Your guidance, support, and dedication are invaluable, and I am deeply grateful.

And to our communications team, Tara Berson, Raven Rentas and Gianna Piroso—thank you for setting a standard of excellence. Through your work, residents stay informed, engaged, and connected, and you show what good government looks like when it respects people enough to communicate clearly and consistently. Your work is an essential part of Middletown's success.

I want to thank my mom and dad—thank you for the values you instilled in me: faith, hard work, respect, and love of country. To my brothers and my sister, and to my sister-in-law—thank you for your support, your counsel, and for always keeping me grounded.

And I want to make a special mention this morning of my brother, **Corporal Luke Perry**. Luke is back home after a year of service overseas

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with the **United States Marine Corps**, including time in **Japan, Malaysia, and Australia**. Luke—welcome home. We are so proud of you, and our family is grateful for your service.

CLOSING

As we begin 2026, Middletown is strong because its foundation is strong.

We are preserving our history while preparing for the future.

We are investing responsibly while protecting taxpayers.

We are honoring service with action—not just words.

And we are proving, year after year, that thoughtful leadership matters.

But I want to leave you with something bigger than a list of accomplishments.

The strength of Middletown has never been found in any one project, any one program, or any one person.

It has been found in the character of our people.

In the volunteer who shows up. In the neighbor who checks on a neighbor.

In the parent raising children with values that endure. In the senior who still serves. In the veteran who raised their right hand.

In the first responder who runs toward danger.

That is Middletown.

And because that is Middletown, I believe the best is still ahead.

Not because it will be easy.

But because we will face it together.

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With discipline.

With gratitude.

With courage.

And with a love for our hometown—and for our country—that does not waver when the world gets loud.

Thank you for the honor of serving you.

God bless you, God bless Middletown, and God bless the United States of America.