

2017 ORGANIZATION MEETING STATEMENT
by
FREEHOLDER DIRECTOR JOSEPH H. VICARI

Let me wish everyone a happy and healthy New Year and welcome to the 2017 Organization Meeting of the Ocean County Board of Chosen Freeholders.

First, I would like to thank my fellow Freeholders for naming me director for 2017. I would also like to thank Jack Kelly for his outstanding leadership as director of the board in 2016. Jack runs a tight meeting and I'm going to do my best to follow his example in the coming months.

And congratulations to both Freeholder Kelly and Freeholder Ginny Haines on their election victories and their new terms on the board. As many of you know, Freeholder Haines is only the second woman to sit on this board. It is refreshing and very positive to have a woman's viewpoint as we address the issues important to our residents

Let me also thank our senior Freeholder, John Bartlett, for his continued and inspired leadership, especially in regards to our county budget and our AAA bond rating, which I will address in a few moments. And finally, to my friend, traveler and deputy Freeholder Director Gerry Little, I look forward to working with you on behalf of the county's 68,000 veterans. Gerry is a great friend to our veterans and works hard to ensure that they receive all of the benefits they have earned and so rightly deserve.

I would like to recognize Sheriff Mike Mastronardy, who was sworn in today and is also beginning his new term. The Sheriff's leadership in protecting our residents during last year's terrorist attack on the Seaside Boardwalk proves once again that we are fortunate to have a lawman with the Sheriff's experience as the county's top cop.

Also with us are our County Clerk Scott Colabella and Surrogate Jeff Moran. You will not find a harder working county clerk or surrogate in the entire state of New Jersey. It's a pleasure to work with such innovative and dedicated Constitutional Officers.

As we look ahead to 2017, I can once again promise our residents that there will be no surprises when we announce the county budget in a few months. Under the financial direction of Freeholder John Bartlett this board will again present a budget that combines affordability with outstanding core services. We will also continue to maintain our AAA Bond rating – the highest bond rating available to government. Look to Trenton and you won't find a AAA bond rating. Look to Washington and you certainly won't find a AAA bond rating. This board take's its financial responsibilities very seriously and we can ensure you that we will not mortgage our children's future or our grandchildren's future.

Of course, when we talk about services we must talk about our seniors. Ocean County is home to the highest percentage of senior citizens in the state and this board will continue to see that our older adults are well cared for. From meals on wheels to the latest health screenings, our Office of Senior Services will continue to be a beacon of support for both seniors and their caregivers.

Protecting our seniors and our younger families will also remain a priority in 2017. Joining us here today is our Ocean County Prosecutor Joe Coronato, who is leading the effort to combat substance abuse in our county. We will continue to fight this disease, this addiction that claims the lives of both the young and the old.

Another priority of this board in 2017 is transportation. We will continue to lobby state leaders for the widening of Route 9, not just in one town but throughout its entire length from Lakewood to Little Egg Harbor. We will also pursue former Freeholder George Buckwald's great vision of additional passenger rail service linking our county with Northern New Jersey and New York City. We will look to both our state and federal legislators for help in funding these important improvements.

Improved public transportation not only impacts our residents, but the millions who visit the county for our beautiful beaches, bays, pinelands and many, many other attractions. Thru the efforts of our Department of Business Development and Tourism, tourism injects more than \$4.6 billion into the local economy. Tourism is vitally important to our Mom & Pop businesses that are the backbone of our local economy. We will also continue our work in protecting the Joint Base from any attempt to lessen this installation's vital role in the defense of our nation.

As elected officials we work hard to do what's best for the people of Ocean County. But there is another group I want to mention, people who give freely of their time to help others. Our many dedicated volunteers who serve their communities in first aid squads, fire departments and in other roles, deserve our thanks. Often, they are the first on the scene when our families and loved ones are in distress. On behalf of the entire board, I say thank you for your service.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn't recognize a group of people, without whom, we could not do our jobs. I want to personally thank our county employees, who continue to work through difficult times bringing the best possible services to our residents. We truly are a family here in county government and it is a pleasure to work with these outstanding individuals day in and day out.

Again, I wish everyone a happy and safe New Year and I look forward to working with, and for all of you in 2017.