



ESTABLISHED 1659

## CITY OF NORWICH

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Peter A. Nystrom  
Mayor of Norwich

100 Broadway  
Norwich, CT 06360

First let me welcome you all to a New Year! With 2020 behind us I hope there is optimism throughout our community as we move forward. The year in review has unquestionably been one of the most daunting challenges that everyone has faced. COVID-19 has rewritten societal norms. As a people we thrive on getting together, seeing friends, spending time with family. Here in the council chambers the participation of our public has been removed due to Covid. The executive orders established by Governor Lamont, while clearly offered with the best intentions to keep the public safe, have limited public access. The same impact of denying public access to our small businesses and restaurants has placed a significant burden on them.

I'm happy to say that that has not gone unnoticed nor has that been ignored as our city reached out to help create outdoor dining facilities, even shutting down the road that passes along City Hall itself. Our local lending institutions as well as the Norwich Community Development Corporation, were extremely supportive in helping businesses receive funds from the federal government. Thankfully, additional dollars have been made available at this time and total almost \$1 million to help small businesses, families and others get through these cold winter months. Specifically, \$419,000 in Covid HUD funds and \$550,000 additional CARES Funds are going to be available. I want to particularly thank Norwich Public Utilities and their staff for all that they are doing for this community. Like the city side of government, they too are playing a vital role in helping people. Going forward we are putting together an operations team that will oversee the distribution of these funds. I invite any additional small businesses in our community and families in need to seek assistance as this program unfolds. I have asked NCDC and Cathy Crees from the Norwich Community Development Block Grant program to expedite this effort. Authorization for this effort was in fact supported by resolution of the entire City Council and I extend my thanks to them as well.

Clearly our work as a city government is only just beginning. The process of distributing these available dollars from the federal government will allow us to also protect the many small businesses that have invested in our community over the last several years, particularly the minority owned businesses that you can see in Foundry 66 and other areas in downtown and across the city. We must continue to acknowledge that controlling the growth in government spending locally is important. Our council will be voting on its second budget this current year that will impact investors' decisions, including the decision to purchase a home in our community. Acknowledging that what we invest in and how it can stimulate or stop grand list growth is vitally important.

Soon after Covid hit, I implemented weekly calls every Friday morning with our State Senator Cathy Osten, state representatives, city department heads, Angela Adams of the Greater Norwich Area Chamber of Commerce, Jillian Corbin of the Saint Vincent DePaul Soup Kitchen, Pro-Tempore Mark Bettencourt, the General Manager for NPU Chris LaRose, and our City Manager John Salomone. The Uncas Health District led by Pat McCormick has been an integral part of these discussions, providing Covid updates and strategies in order to put best practices in place for the people of Norwich. I have been particularly impressed with

our Superintendent of Schools Kristen Stringfellow, the staff of Norwich Public Schools and our Board of Education as they have had to respond daily to continued impacts of Covid while keeping our kids safe and providing them an education. Dr. Brian Kelly of NFA, Linda Allen of Norwich's school readiness programs, and Ellen Retelle of the Integrated Day Charter School were also a valuable part of these discussions.

It would be a mistake not to acknowledge hardships that businesses have endured here in Norwich. At the moment, the issue remains as to whether minor-league baseball will continue in our city.

Losing the copper producing plant Freeport McMahon and the shutdown of ALS services has impacted revenues to our own Norwich Public Utilities. I'm proud to say that this was not ignored and that we reached out, marshalled state services to help place the affected workers in new employment and I can tell you today that many of them accepted new employment. As a member of the Eastern Workforce Investment Board CEO Council, I am grateful that we assisted in this effort as well as those in the manufacturing community here in Eastern Connecticut.

Our city also responded appropriately to the concerns of many of our citizens during a prayer vigil and peaceful rallies. We gathered together, giving voice for our people who needed to share their concerns regarding police accountability. With almost immediate response, local community leaders and community police officers took action to gather every week and continue their dialogue. This has led to community activities such sprucing up playgrounds and skate parks, monthly gatherings referred to as Coffee with a Cop hosted by Foundry 66, and in the warmer times a community picnic was held in Mohegan Park and a family picnic was hosted at The Daniel Jenkins Park on Mechanic Street. These community building events are fostering better awareness and understanding of the role of police officers to build stronger relations. I want to thank Sergeant Rankin, all the officers who contribute, and the local citizens who participate in this community effort. Police Chief Patrick Daley is fully supportive of these efforts and attends when possible. Anyone in the general public is always welcome. These efforts have sparked progressive ideas to move toward the goal of improving social equality and equity for people of all color and walks of life. Building relationships takes the collective collaborative effort of everyone.

Additionally, our city is taking advantage of every opportunity to foster food security throughout our community. I want to give thanks to Jillian Corbin, Director of St. Vincent DePaul Soup Kitchen and Lee-Ann Gomes, Director of Human Services for their tireless efforts.

Planning Director Deanna Rhodes and Alderwoman Stacy Gould organized Bags for Hunger. This program raised \$4,400 to purchase gift cards for food at local supermarkets. Together they have been rock stars filling the gaps for families in need. I know for a fact that they have inspired others to step up as well. As a city we have hosted food distribution sites during the past year and may have the opportunity to bring other food pantries to this community as the need continues.

In an effort to grow the grand list, I will be asking our City Council to consider and review the possibility of a new code compliance grant program. The current downtown bond program ends April of this year. This program was made possible by the voters of the City of Norwich and the Norwich City Council in 2010 as they supported the referendum allowing for its creation. As I've seen firsthand the need for development in other parts of our community, I would request that the two components be for code compliance assistance and rental rebate assistance. The current downtown Bond program has generated seven dollars in private investment for every dollar in public investment for code compliance. The Program generated \$13 in private investments for every dollar invested in assistance for rental rebates. This time however I will suggest that we focus on a program that helps development throughout the city following the neighborhoods identified in Norwich's adopted Plan of Conservation and Development. The Ponemah Mills project continues to grow as they are working on an additional 77 units of housing. Further dialogue with the Council and the developer is required.

For myself I have been incredibly inspired by the generosity and resiliency that so many people and small businesses have demonstrated over the past year. Even while many have struggled they continue with their philanthropy and support for our nonprofit organizations.

And now with a light at the end of a very long and dark tunnel we must all keep our local businesses in mind and help them recover so that they can either rehire employees who have been let go or move forward to make the investments that were delayed during the pandemic.

In closing I ask everyone to be vigilant. The dispersal of a vaccine is giving us hope, but we cannot let our guard down. Continue to wear a mask for yourself and your family members. Practice social distancing and take nothing for granted. Norwich will get through this, but not without your determination and diligence. I wish you and your families a healthy and happy 2021.

Mayor Peter Albert Nystrom  
City of Norwich  
860-608-2165