

# nj

January 2024

# municipalities

Official Publication of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities

## Team Players, Working Together

“The greatest strength of local government in New Jersey is that it is effectively a bunch of team players working together toward a common goal for our great State.”

**William  
Chegwidden**  
President, NJLM  
Mayor, Wharton



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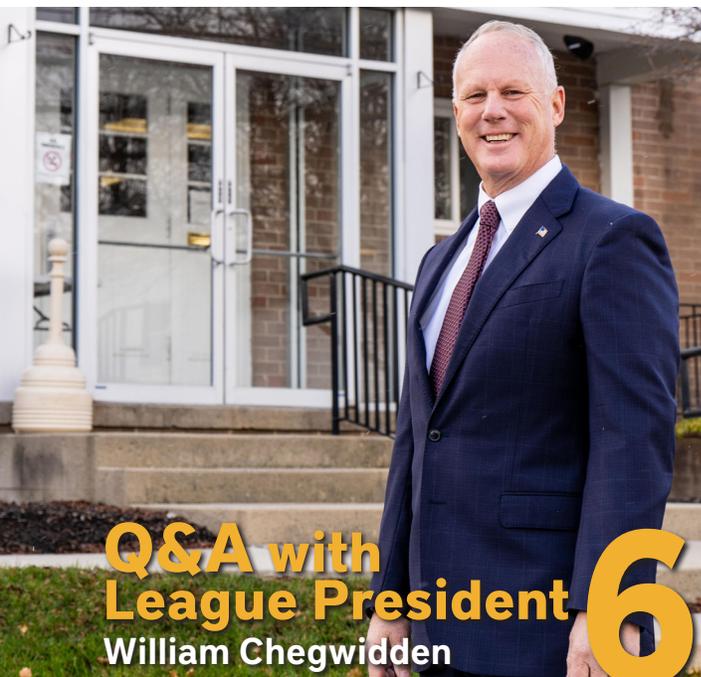
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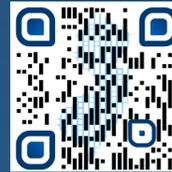
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We look forward  
to working with  
you this year and  
hope to hear from  
you on a regular  
basis about your  
success stories  
and pain points.”

## Looking into 2024: Higher Hopes for a Stronger Pipeline

As we celebrate the New Year, your resolutions for local government may very well focus on the people within municipal buildings along with those who you represent.

While we've seen it on the horizon for at least a decade, the reality of the silver tsunami is coming home to roost in local governments around the nation. Here in New Jersey, State and local governments are working with educational institutes and nonprofits to create a stronger pipeline of potential current and future government employees.

In our Leadership issue, we're putting the spotlight on our new League President, Mayor William Chegwiddden from Wharton Borough. He noted in the cover story this month, "We need to create a professional pipeline to fulfill the unique needs of local government. In the upcoming year, we will be working with our partners to create such a pipeline."

Acting Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs and Director of the Division of Local Government Services Jacquelyn A. Suárez notes in her feature (see page 22) that shared services can be a solid path to helping communities fill their service gaps by cooperating with other towns. She added that a creative approach to recruitment and

retention for local fire and EMS departments is being encouraged. We thank her for leading eight sessions at the recent League Conference and look forward to working with her and her team in the new year.

This year we're starting a new series to teach individuals about the practical side of managing municipalities with Municipal Management Workshops beginning this month.

Run in partnership with the League and NJ Community Solutions, it begins with the General Management Series 1, a three-hour practical education session on Financial and Personnel Management running in the morning, and Series 2, Public Works and Public Safety Management in the afternoon on January 23 in Rutherford and January 24 in Mount Laurel.

We look forward to working with you this year and hope to hear from you on a regular basis about your success stories and pain points.

And we always welcome your articles, news, and opinion columns—we want to share your voice with local governments around the great Garden State!

Please send your story ideas to [mcerra@njlm.org](mailto:mcerra@njlm.org) and [aspiezio@njlm.org](mailto:aspiezio@njlm.org). 🇯🇵

*Michael Cerra*

**Note:** If you haven't signed up for our Newly Elected and Reelected seminars in North and South Jersey, now's a good time to plan a knowledge-building day and teambuilding day. Visit [www.njlm.org/Seminars](http://www.njlm.org/Seminars) for more information.

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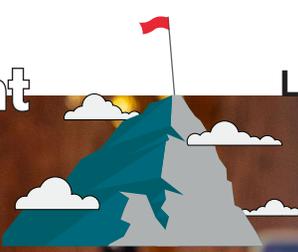
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# Team Players, Working Together

“The greatest strength of local government in New Jersey is that it is effectively a bunch of team players working together toward a common goal for our great State.”



**W**harton Mayor William Chegwidien was elected League President at the Annual League Business Meeting held on November 16 at the end of the 108th League Conference in Atlantic City. Recently, he shared his insights and expectations for the League in his presidential year and beyond.

## Q What led you to get involved in local government?

Before getting involved in local government, it came to my attention that some aspects of our local government could be done more efficiently. It was only natural that I got involved in the process as I was always participating in local community affairs after my high school graduation, whether through sports, clubs, or volunteer organizations.

## Q What are the greatest strengths of local government in New Jersey?

The greatest strength of local government in New Jersey is that it is effectively a bunch of team players working together toward a common goal for our great State. Each member of the team provides a stable foundation for each member of their respective local community.

Unlike the State Legislature, our residents can directly communicate and voice their opinions in our local government structure, thus giving the residents ownership of local community affairs.

## Q What do citizens expect from their municipal officials, and how has that changed over the years?

Most residents are very understanding of what local officials can do, and know we have limitations set by the State to our local jurisdiction. They know we provide them with their everyday day needs to help them navigate through the paperwork and bureaucracy that may be trying. The Borough of Wharton's team has always prided ourselves on customer service. Our residents know that they can reach out to any official and have their voices heard.

In the digital age, towns need an online presence so residents can have real-time information at their fingertips. The days of someone having to come into town hall to request data are gone. Town websites should be user-friendly, easy to navigate, and informative. Residents should be able to navigate each department to find and filter through information they need to assist in their endeavors.

## Q What are your goals as League President?

The League President's goals are ones that never really change. It is the President's and Executive Board's job to help towns voice their concerns on legislation that directly affects the everyday functions in their municipalities. The League's mission statement states that it is a voluntary association created to help communities do a better job of self-government through pooling information resources and brainpower. The League is made up of 564 laboratories, each town experimenting and trying new innovations and concepts to improve the quality of life for their residents. The League is the focal point to showcase the achievements and difficulties that may arise during these occasions.

This year's objective is one that we are too familiar with...finding an alternate means to collect school taxes. This is always the biggest part of any property tax bill; in some towns as high as 70% to 80% of their property tax bill. Priority 1, as it has been for a long time, the one that never goes away, is the full restoration of Energy Tax Receipts funding to municipalities. The League has done a tremendous job lobbying the Legislature to return Energy Tax Receipts funds that rightfully belong to municipalities. In Fiscal Year 2023, we were able to secure \$75 million. And this year, we successfully negotiated doubling the funds to \$150 million in Fiscal Year 2024.

However, significant property tax reform, including the rising cost of government services, needs to be addressed at the state level. At some point, the math simply does not work. Sustainable reforms that reflect that reality are needed for local governments to thrive. We will continue to advocate for full restoration of Energy Tax Receipts funding.

Next, affordable housing is in need of reform, especially as we near the 4th round of obligation. Without a reconstituted and restructured COAH, towns are left fighting in the courts against greater density, loss of open space, and creation of housing that is ill-suited to the

## Q&A with NJLM President

town's infrastructure and services provided. We need to fix this so municipalities have appropriate planning and development.

In addition to these evergreen priorities, we will also be addressing a few new issues.

One matter is finding additional financing opportunities to help municipalities fund the removal of lead paint and lead pipes beyond the Infrastructure Bank. We need state and federal grant opportunities.

Also, municipal government is not immune to inflation. Recognizing this, the Division of Local Government Services extended a one-year temporary cap extension for the cost of garbage and trash removal and disposal, recycling, gasoline, diesel fuel, and workers' compensation insurance. These costs should be permanently moved to the Property Tax Cap Levy exemptions.

During the conference, we had a great session with DCA Acting Commissioner Suárez on the challenges of hiring and retaining municipal government positions, especially licensed professionals.



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We need to create a professional pipeline to fulfill the unique needs of local government. In the upcoming year, we will be working with our partners to create such a pipeline.

**Q** What advice would you give to someone just elected to local office for the first time?

We all have a learning curve; it is important to familiarize yourself with the operations and procurers that are so critical to the functions of the town. You don't want to be known as a "No" person without offering a solution to the problem. There are many different avenues you can explore, such as: listening to a senior

member of the town board, looking at past year's council minutes, planning board minutes, or attending another town's council meeting, etc. The key is to realize many members have institutional knowledge and experiences that you can build on, so listen, listen, listen. Lastly, don't take on too many fires at once. Pick out the one or two issues that you feel you are knowledgeable in and follow through, otherwise you will find yourself scattered with no real solutions and dealing with a frustrated public.

**Q** How would you describe your leadership style?

It would be defined as coaching style. Everyone has a role to play and the only way we advance is if the team moves forward. There are many times you need to listen to your players, because they may have a better solution to a problem that might not be so clear to us.

**Q** What motivates you as a leader?

Many things are motivating, but nothing is more gratifying than solving difficulties that individuals may find overwhelming. It is heartwarming to navigate someone who feels they can't find their way through the system. There is only one thing you take with you when you leave this world, and it's your name.

**Q** What challenges do you see on the horizon for municipalities?

Many communities are vulnerable. They rely on County and State resources that took some time putting in place an efficient and effective system. Bureaucracy in its varied state

of complexity can add more questions rather than solutions. The challenges are to identify your most vulnerable population and address the needs of that part of the community. Once you have a plan in place, then team up with the County/State to pool resources needed to work your way up the at-risk ladder so everyone is included.

Communications are paramount in employing the plan, but not every resident has the means to use or communicate through social media. It should be incumbent upon the municipality to make every effort to get the message out. Municipalities should look to see what best practices were used to fine-tune their efforts.



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## Q How can local governments better build resilience in their operations?

Each municipality should have a plan and look out five to 10 years. A short-term and long-term plan. Many towns have already moved in this direction.

Municipalities have integrated many programs and made them accessible to their residents. Each town sets its own culture in dealing with public disasters. The health of your infrastructure is the lynchpin and everything hinges off that. Knowing the strength of your community helps your resilience in bouncing back after a disaster. Our

resilience is embedded in departments and programs we have implemented, such as fire, police, schools, hospitals, recreation, At-Risk populations, Municipal Alliance, churches, and many others. These organizations overlap each other in some way giving our towns some redundancy and promoting a strong community system.

### Acceptance Remarks

I want to thank Jason [Mayor Jason Karr, Morris Plains] for swearing me in, thank you, Jason. He's from "the community of caring," Morris Plains. And also he's become a good friend over the years to me; we had the same mentor, Frank Druetzler. I don't know if you remember Frank Druetzler from Morris Plains, 32 years as mayor, he was very good. And I want to thank Ray also, for your presidency.

I come from a small town, about 6,500 to 7,000 residents. I'm a former social studies teacher, I taught AP government, criminology, and US history. I want to thank my wife. She sometimes takes my jokes, so I want to thank you, Shelly. And my daughter Casey and my son-in-law Ryan are also here.

Also, a lot of people from the town are here: my Police Chief, DPW director, my Administrator, our Councilwoman also, my Clerk is here. So, we have a number of people who stayed on a Thursday. You know what it looks like, people trying to get out of here on a Thursday, they run you over. It's like teachers at 2:30 getting out of the building, right?

I do want to thank Ray for an extraordinary job that he did this past year, and his leadership over everything that we that we've done. We've helped pass legislation on the priorities that he put in place. I know we talked a little bit about the energy tax, under his leadership it went from \$75 million to \$150 million. So thank you.

You all know that we still face the rise in costs, we do. We know that we still need that Energy Tax Receipts coming back to municipalities. I said to someone, where are those poles located? They're located in this valley.

Who collects property tax?

We do.

Interesting. Isn't it? That they would take something like that away from us? That we started with. So we're going to try to get that funding put back in order.

Affordable housing. We know fourth-round obligation is a hot topic. It's been around a long time; I don't know about you guys, but why can't they come up with some kind of a solution? We're going to certainly push that this year also, and of course, fight for a better approach. In addition, there is, of course, COAH. How long have you guys heard about COAH? Right. It's been a long time coming, hopefully that gets settled within the next year.

Another thing that we would like to put forward, a lot



of us are having problems trying to fill our positions in our town halls. I don't know about you, but it's very difficult to try to get somebody to come in. This organization is great, this event here with all the different classes [helps].

Like I said, I was a school teacher for some time, and I have many former students that work for me. One of the great stories is I have a clerk, she was a former student and says, hey listen Cheg, do you have any ideas? I'm thinking about becoming a legal secretary. Why would you do that? I said, why don't you become a clerk? She said I don't know what a clerk does. I said, I know you, I know you'll figure out what a clerk does.

So we made her temporary clerk and upped her salary as she got the different certificates. And she's been with us for over 15, maybe 17 years, now.

It's constantly difficult, as you know, to try to bring in qualified people.

That's one of the things that we're going to do, [develop a] pipeline for professionals to try to bring them in. Commissioner Suárez, she's unbelievable. She's pushing us and the League is going to get behind you. We're going to go to vo-tech schools. We're going to go to county colleges. Pull them out—hey would you like to come out of high school and have a \$50,000 a year job and know that you can move up in the ranks once you get your certificates? We're going to put boots on the direct ground and we're going to going to try to put that in place. That's one of the additions.

Of course, lead pipes, we want to make sure that's taken care of. That's one of the low-hanging fruits out there.

These are just some of the priorities. I'm not going to continue to go on. But I want to thank everybody. I've been in the bullpen for a while, as you know. My arm is warmed up, and I'm ready to throw the ball now. Thank you very much. 🇺🇸

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