

Y A A K O V W E N G E R

1820 Swarthmore Avenue • Unit 815 • Lakewood, N.J. 08701
PH: 732.901.1228

An Open Letter to the Greater Lakewood Community

June 4, 2024

Dear friend,

As many of you know, for the past few months I have been exploring the possibility putting my name on the ballot to run for a seat on the Lakewood Township Committee.

This idea was the result of my passion for our town and those who live here. My roots in Lakewood run deep. I was born and raised here, and have witnessed the growth of this town from an up close and personal perspective. I was raised in Yeshiva Apartments on Forest Ave. at a time when the entire yeshiva list of all from residents of Lakewood was one page long. The first kosher grocery store was located in the basement of our building. The only Cheder in town was in the Legion Building on BMG's campus and Bais Yaakov – today known as Bais Faiga – was in trailers at the corner of 8th and Forest. No one in the community had any problems getting into schools. At that time, the entire Jewish community lived in the immediate yeshiva area, and living in such a small, close-knit community had many benefits and was a beautiful way to grow up.

Over the ensuing years, I have, of course, seen many changes, as Lakewood grew at an unprecedented rate. No one at that time could have dreamt how much Lakewood would grow and expand. If this growth had been anticipated, it could have been planned in a smarter and more efficient way, which would have allowed us to avoid many problems and issues that have arisen in tandem with the growth. If, for example, a focus had been placed on building wider streets and more avenues to get from Point B to Point B, and there would be much less cul-de-sacs or streets vacations, and with square blocks instead of developments, much of the traffic problems we live with today could have been avoided.

With hindsight being 20-20, I believe that a crucial lesson we can learn from this is the importance of smart planning for the future. While we can't know how much more the greater Lakewood area will expand, it is clear that there will be a considerable amount of future growth. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that smart planning and coordination is utilized, so that current problems are not exacerbated and new problems are kept to minimum.

Over the course of the past decades, I have had the opportunity to develop many connections within government circles, local agencies and businesses, and with community residents in general. I have had the privilege of interacting with individuals and groups on all levels and have heard and seen again and again that there is a great need for more and better coordination between all parties of interest to properly adapt to the times and to provide for the current needs of the town, while simultaneously planning for the future.

Through my experience, I have seen the need to place strong emphasis on the welfare of the residents of Lakewood and providing the services they need to thrive, rather than on focusing on the whims and interests of those in positions of authority. Unfortunately, there often seems to be a focus on maintaining the status quo by keeping the same few individuals in positions of power and not infringing on their honor in any way, to the extent that it is almost forgotten that these individuals are only in power to serve the needs of the residents of Lakewood and to make sure that our town operates in a smart and safe manner.

As we have done numerous times over the years, The Shopper recently ran a series of articles in which we addressed some of the pressing issues in town and asked residents to give their feedback. We received many replies from residents and we took the time to go through each response in order to gauge the general feelings of the peo-

>>>

Y A A K O V W E N G E R

1820 Swarthmore Avenue • Unit 815 • Lakewood, N.J. 08701
PH: 732.901.1228

ple of Lakewood. A common theme amongst a large percentage of the respondents was the sentiment that people feel that no one is looking out for the “regular guy”. No one is representing the interests of the general public.

This sentiment is what drove me to consider running for Township Committee. I was not looking to “fight the system” or to be “anti-establishment” in any way; rather, my aim was to be the “pro-people” official, who would be available to assist community members with services and issues, and would be on hand to listen to their concerns and take their problems and ideas to heart, and to get the job done for them. As someone who has been advocating for the people of this town with government officials and agencies for a long period of time and has, b”H, been able to get a lot accomplished on the people’s behalf, I felt that I would be suited for such a role on a local government level.

The truth is that if our town would function in a way that better serves the people, there would be much less need for residents to reach out to askanim or community activists, or to use pull to get through to elected officials in order to get simple things done. If our town were set up in a way in which it ran smoothly, less issues would arise, and we would not need to overburden our askanim and officials for people to get the services they deserve or for traffic to flow more efficiently.

If simple fixes were made, people could have easier and better access to local officials, and problems could be addressed in a more open and free manner. Before the pandemic, Township Committee meetings were always convenient, constructive venues for residents to personally engage with their elected officials, as well as the hired professionals who attended many meetings, and to air their concerns about relevant topics. This created a forum for productive conversations and often led to positive improvements. Yes, the meetings did on occasion devolve into shouting matches but, overall, they served a positive purpose.

It is, therefore, very unfortunate that the Township Committee meetings are still not being held in-person. In our community, where unfiltered internet usage is strongly discouraged, a large percentage of Lakewood’s residents do not have access to online or Zoom meetings. As a result of the meetings being held solely online, they have lost the opportunity to personally interact with the committee members and are lacking a means of communicating their ideas and feelings to them. While the internet and Zoom may be considered a convenience in today’s general society, the lack of involvement in the meetings from our community has proven that this format is obviously not working for Lakewood.

Another cause of the lessening of personal connection between residents and those in positions of power is the fact that many of our hired professionals have moved out of Lakewood – either because they were offered a great deal on their home or because they couldn’t handle the citification of our town – but continue to serve in the same capacity as when they did live here. The only people who have a genuine interest and concern in everything that occurs in Lakewood are Lakewood residents, and that is who should be serving our community in most cases.

Many of our officials and professionals have been serving in the same positions for way too long and have become somewhat complacent. While I am not advocating for term limits, it is important to bring up the definite need for fresh faces in positions of authority. Residents of Lakewood who may not be well-connected but live here and are raising families here – and, therefore, are very familiar with what this town needs and how it could improve – should be given an opportunity to serve our town and provide all they have to offer.

One example of the need for elected officials to step up and personally take responsibility for the goings on in town is that of private school bussing. While school bussing is not directly the responsibility of the Township Committee, they have involved themselves by contributing millions of local tax dollars to the LSTA, both in forms of loans and grants, through various township entities. Now that the Township Committee is a stakeholder in the bussing operations, it would behoove them to make sure the taxpayers’ money is being used responsibly and properly. By asking around, one can easily see that way too many residents feel that their needs are not being taken

Y A A K O V W E N G E R

1820 Swarthmore Avenue • Unit 815 • Lakewood, N.J. 08701
PH: 732.901.1228

seriously by the bussing establishment, and one would hope that the Township Committee would work towards solving this problem.

With this as just one example of many, it is clear that there is a need for new faces in positions of authority, who are energized to focus on the needs of every resident of Lakewood as an individual, and to ensure that we properly plan for the future. This would include minimizing problems that we have seen caused in the past by ill-advised street vacations, building streets that are too narrow, etc. Additionally, traffic problems often come up when there simply is no coordination between agencies and departments during road constructions. Too many times, numerous streets are closed off in the same area due to more than one construction project taking place at the same time, which causes the entire area to turn into gridlock and chaos.

This type of confusion could be avoided if serious new faces were added to every department, with proper direction coming from the top to every department and agency in a coordinated manner. Furthermore, proper coordination of this kind with county, state and even federal institutions, as well as with vendors, such as JCP&L and others, would eliminate many of these type of issues.

I pledge to be at the forefront of this work, and to continue to facilitate connections between local residents and those in positions to help them. With a focus on the positive and on improving the lives of Lakewood families, I will do my best to work towards improving our local government and agencies so that they are on the side of every resident. At the same time, I would also encourage every resident to get involved as much as possible in order to ensure that your voice is heard. To illustrate the importance of community involvement, I clearly recall a BOE meeting quite a few years ago in which an employee who was leaving the district was granted an over-the-top monetary settlement. This agreement – at taxpayer expense - made no sense, but it went almost completely unchallenged. In a room of 150 chairs, I was the only one in attendance. The next week, the story was featured on the cover of The Shopper in order to bring it some attention.

I am citing this story as an example of the fact that an involved community simply will receive better service. The politicians are working for us. They are, so to speak, our employees. If the boss fails to pay attention, the employees may not do their job as well as they would for an active boss. Similarly, if our town's residents are involved and engaged, there is reason to believe that our town will operate better and more effectively.

Having said all this, I have decided against running for Lakewood Township Committee in this year's election. While I seriously considered this option, I concluded that I am not looking to be involved in a lashon hara spree. I am not interested in taking part in an acrimonious battle, and I definitely do not want to get dragged into months of incivility. While I am very passionate about our hometown and strongly desire to do all I can to rectify the problems and flaws that exist, running against candidates who have held their positions for many years would inevitably have led to an abundance of negativity and hostility, which is why I ultimately chose to stand down.

While I will not be running for Township Committee, I commit to use all my kochos and connections to work for the betterment of every Lakewood resident, and I will do all I can to bring in fresh, new faces to work on behalf of each and every family and individual.

Sincerely,



Yaakov Wenger