

Mullock looking ahead to major issues

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issues," he said.

Mullock believes the Beach Avenue seawall project is No. 1 on the list of tasks to address.

"If we don't have necessary protection from the sea, you're not going to have a town to have the other issues about," he said.

Increasing the wall's height above the base flood elevation requires elevating structures 11 feet.

According to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), "the planned work also accounts for a 500-year storm with waters that rise 13 feet over the BFE where the seawall would still have an extra two feet of freeboard if this type of storm occurs."

"FEMA has committed \$25 million to this huge project, and we're [working] to get the permits in place in the next month," the mayor said.

Mullock said that FEMA funding is expected to pay for most of the project.

Water from the sea is not the only issue that needs addressing as plans for a new desalination plant are in the works.

"We need to have clean water and of course that affects the other communities on the island, not just Cape May City," Mullock said.

City Council is seeking federal grants for the project. Under state guidelines, the current plant does not have enough water capacity to meet the area's needs, especially during the summer

months when the population increases exponentially.

"We've worked with congressional and Senate partners Jeff Van Drew and Sens. Cory Booker and Andy Kim on the Water Resources Development Act," Mullock said. "It was done in a non-partisan way, with a significant amount of money for the desal plant, so that will be huge."

Affordable housing

The lack of affordable housing in Cape May has continued to be a highly discussed topic.

"The affordable housing issue is really difficult," Mullock said. "Most importantly, our community is not one of the many shore towns that close down in the off-season. Cape May is much smaller in the wintertime, but it's always had a [busy] community, and it's important that we do everything we can to maintain that."

When he reflects on what makes Cape May stand apart, Mullock said the wonderful beaches, beautiful natural environment, small businesses, restaurants, hotels and cultural aspects all come to mind.

"Housing the workforce [of our economy] is going to be crucial over the next 10 or so years," he said. "Our lifeguards, police officers and firefighters are having more and more of a difficult time finding housing as more homes are sold. It's only going to become more of an issue."

As he enters his new four-year term, housing is another topic at

the forefront of Mullock's mind. It is a problem without a simple solution.

"We have a Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) account that is made up specifically to pay for low-income housing," he said. "If I handed you \$2 million to fix the affordable housing situation, you could probably buy two smaller houses in Cape May, but that's not fixing anything."

The city has a partnership with the Cape May Housing Authority that Mullock believes will be a great collaboration.

"Sixteen new family houses are planned at the existing Housing Authority site, and I think that will be huge," he said. "We still have more to do to look at what we can do for our workforce housing."

Other upcoming projects include Lafayette Street Park, which has progressed in steps and starts for year. It will include a dog park, playing fields and nature trails.

Looking back

Last year was busy for Mullock, with the city undertaking several projects of large magnitude.

"2024 was a good year," he said. "The library in the Franklin Street School was an amazing accomplishment of the entire community, and working with the county, the state and community groups."

After four years of work on the former Franklin Street School, the new Cape May County Library branch opened in June



MAYOR ZACK MULLOCK

2024. A ceremonial book brigade was held as the public passed books from the former library on Ocean Street to the newly restored building.

"The book passing was such a beautiful and historic opening," Mullock said. "The school was recently on the list of New Jersey's 10 most endangered historic properties. Just last month, we were given an award from Preservation New Jersey for the best preservation project, which was such a flip to take a property from endangered to a reward."

Another town project Mullock considers successful is the place-

ment of ADA-accessible beach mats that stretch more than a mile from the Cove beach to Convention Hall.

"That [project] was heartwarming, and it's not often as a mayor that you do a project that gets a 99% approval rating," he said. "I heard from so many people who couldn't take their parents on the beach, or had wheelchair-bound family members, and this was the first time they'd been on the beach in years — all were just beautiful stories."

Many roads were resurfaced, including Lafayette and Washington streets.

"More than just the road surface, we did a lot of lead pipe removals and replaced a lot of storm drains, which is so important during floods," he said. "We also installed new water and sewer lines."

Looking forward

City Council consists of Deputy Mayor Maureen McDade, Councilwoman Lorraine Baldwin and councilmen Shaine Meier and Steve Bodnar.

"I have a lot of trust and faith in every one of them; they're all there for the right reasons and they love Cape May," Mullock said. "With that basis, you know you're going to disagree on different issues now and then, but that's just like friends and family. You're going to have disagreements, but when we've had them, it's been extremely respectful, and people are willing to compromise."

Economy keeps growing

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Wieland said the survey asked whether the economy affected travel plans and found that it did. Another question asked whether visitors expected that would continue

in 2025 and found people felt about the same.

"It all comes down to discretionary spending," she said. "If the economy affects the core spending 365 days a year, you have to spend less."

She said the survey

found 60 percent said the economy affects their spending and 60 percent of that said they would cut spending.

Wieland said the spending data is generated using lodging, food and beverage, retail, recreation

and transportation expenditures.

"Cape May County outpaces every other county in food and beverage, retail and recreation," she said. "Across the board we are seeing increases."

She said that is amazing considering most of the businesses throughout the county are small.

"We are just mom and pops and have outpaced all 21 counties," Wieland said.

Occupancy tax

Wieland said the best barometer for identifying growth is the state occupancy tax, which she said was up month over month except for April due to Easter being late and October.

"I was a little surprised to see a 5.8 percent decline in October — that had me a little nervous," she said, noting the tax does not include visits by second homeowners, who are a large part of the fall market, but does include short-term rentals.

"We continue to grow occupancy tax because we create marketing to get people here," she said. "This is a great destination. We saw 11.6 million visitors in 2023. When you take into consideration there are 9.2 million residents in the state, and we had more than that, that's pretty impressive."

Wieland said the county generated \$21.987 million in occupancy tax last year, third in the state, but sees little in return.

Getting little back from taxes

Wieland said the occupancy tax was enacted in 2005 to support marketing for tourism, arts and history and that the region "never has received close to what we generated." In 2023, she said, the county generated \$22 million and got back just \$1.3 million, or 6 percent, in grants.

"There are counties that generate far less and receive much more," she said. "Where is the equity? Where is balance?"

Wieland said the tax is collected "on the backs of hoteliers and they need to know what the result is," noting they bear the expense of collecting the tax and sending it to Trenton "but are not getting anything back."

She said that in 2023, the tax generated \$189 million statewide but only \$50 million was returned for tourism marketing.

"We are getting the short end of the stick again," she said.

Marketing new year

Wieland said the Tourism Department already has started its marketing campaign through social media — "It has become a very important part of our campaign, allowing us to reach an extended audience" — print, broadcast media, streaming, "all kinds of new things that allow us to expand and target visitors."

"We continue social media throughout the year because it builds excitement and awareness and we can do sponsored content," Wieland said.

She said they continue to use traditional marketing methods as well because 47 percent of visitors are baby boomers and still like to hold reading materials.

"We need to provide a message in the form they want," she said.

They also will start attending travel shows in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Canada.

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