

Reorganization Day Speech
Mayor Jason F. Cilento
January 1, 2021

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Dunellen Borough Council, and Borough staff. I first wish to extend to you and yours a happy and healthy New Year!

Thankfully, we all have the good fortune of continuing to be connected with the great Borough of Dunellen, and I look forward to continuing to work with the following members of the Borough Council into 2021: Jessica Dunne, who is now serving her second term; April Burke; Stacy Narvesen; Daniel Cole Sigmon; and Trina Rios. I also welcome our newest Councilperson, Tremayne Reid, who serves as Dunellen's first African-American representative elected to the Borough Council. Additionally, congratulations to the newly appointed Council President, Jessica Dunne; I know you will serve the position with honor.

Finally, I would like to recognize the outstanding contributions of former Council President Kenneth Bayer, who devotedly served our Borough as a Council Member for 12 years. In particular, he was vital to the redevelopment of Dunellen's downtown, working to see through the development of the Art Color complex and other projects throughout Dunellen. He is a man of honor, and we should all strive to emulate his style of public service. Our Borough is better because of him. Thank you, Ken.

It is my honor to stand before you as your Mayor this afternoon to inform you that the state of the Borough of Dunellen is strong. Despite these unprecedented and difficult times, there still appears to be a breath of fresh air in our lively community today. Having served one year in office thus far, it gives me great pleasure to speak with you now about our accomplishments in 2020, while expressing our continued vision for the future of Dunellen.

This past year, simply put, was incredibly challenging. However, we faced it together head on. Dunellen is blessed to have top-notch emergency services, and we should remember that while each member of the team faced the high risk of COVID-19 everyday, they continued to go well beyond and above what was expected of them. That is precisely why they were collectively honored this year as Citizen of the Year. We are all truly indebted to them and we thank them for their service.

We did not foresee the coming of COVID-19 and its devastating impact on our lives, but through prompt and concerted action, I believe we were able to decrease the damage to both human life and businesses in our town. This governing body worked assertively to develop policies that protected residents and Borough staff, while making sure to safely deliver government services in this new pandemic-fraught world. Public meetings were held virtually to continue to make government accessible to residents, and communication was increased through social media to maintain a high level of information flow to our citizens. This governing body also developed a business re-opening strategy to make doing business in Dunellen during COVID-19 easier and less bureaucratic. I am

beyond proud of our community who, during a global pandemic, came together and proved what the Miracle Mile is all about - volunteering and lending a helping hand to neighbors in need.

As we close the chapter on 2020, we recognize the challenges we faced, but also wish to celebrate our accomplishments. In my reorganization speech last year, I noted several tasks laid before us: road and sewer improvements, investigating further areas of shared services, improving communications, and the continued revitalization of our downtown. It was imperative that we set out on this agenda to secure the well-being of Dunellen. To some, this list appeared to be quite ambitious for a new administration, but to those elected as representatives of the people of Dunellen, we knew tough, reasonable decisions had to be made and fair, new policies had to be implemented in order to bring the Borough into the 21st century and make our government more approachable.

For example, we first considered how we could efficiently and economically improve our roads and sewer infrastructure. We developed a program with PARSA, the Plainfield Area Regional Sewerage Authority, which addressed the immediate need to locate and assess sewer lines for repair prior to paving roads. We also applied for a \$20,000 Community Development Block Grant to pay for this. This year alone we faced 3 emergency sewer line breaks, some on more recently paved roads. Our hope is that this plan will prevent double work from occurring and, in the long run, will help to protect the Borough's finances.

Speaking of road improvements, Grove Street between New Market Road and Prospect Avenue was recently repaved and the long-awaited improvements to South Madison Avenue are under way. These road improvement projects are being funded through NJDOT Municipal Aid funds. South Madison Avenue was designed to be a Complete Street Model roadway, an initiative we plan to implement on all road improvements funded by NJDOT funds moving forward. Additionally, the Borough was awarded a grant in the amount of \$504,550 from NJDOT's Municipal Aid for fiscal year 2021 for improvements to Lincoln Avenue. These funds are in addition to the Borough's NJDOT Municipal Aid of \$525,000 for fiscal year 2020. We are hopeful these grants will cover the majority, if not all, of the expenses for the Lincoln Avenue Roadway Improvements.

In the area of shared services, we achieved partnership with Middlesex County on two fronts. One was a shared services agreement for their tax map pilot program free of charge to the Borough. This program will allow for efficiencies in our Construction and Tax Assessor's Offices and will produce cost savings for the Borough, as we will not have to depend on the work of outside engineering professionals to develop future tax maps as we continue to redevelop downtown. The second area of shared services with Middlesex County is our new mill and pave program. This program will allow the Borough to pave more streets over a shorter time period at a lesser cost. Several roads surrounding the John P. Faber Elementary School are in the pipeline for this year. As you can see, 2021 presents itself to be the year in which we make long-awaited and responsible capital investments in our infrastructure. Finally, the Borough

of Dunellen and the Dunellen School District reached an accord on a shared services agreement that will provide a more efficient and cost-saving mechanism in which to oversee, maintain, and repair buildings and recreation facilities that are jointly used by both agencies. This agreement will delineate the responsibilities and fiscal accountability for buildings, grounds and facilities in Columbia Park, McCoy Park, Morecraft Park, and the John P. Faber School playing field, while enhancing the relationship between the Borough and the District.

As part of our endeavor to improve transparency and communication with residents and business owners, the Borough improved our website with regular and timely updates and published the Borough of Dunellen's official Facebook page. Furthermore, Dunellen's Downtown Management Organization has continued to enhance its monthly e-newsletters, *Next Stop! Dunellen*, as we continue to use traditional forms of print such as *About Our Town's Community News* and Dunellen's quarterly newspaper, *The Dunellen Report*, which is now entering its tenth year of publication. We have also been able to virtually broadcast the Borough Council Meetings and plan to enhance this technology this year. Because of these services, I have been able to provide the public with monthly "Messages from the Mayor," updating residents on what is happening at Borough Hall and what capital projects, events, and redevelopment projects both myself and the Borough Council are working on.

We promised last year that we would present our budgets through more visual forms such as PowerPoint and infographics, to better explain our goals to the public. We did just that, with our chief financial officer formally

presenting the budget to the public through PowerPoint and including infographics both in print sent home in our tax bills, as well as making them digitally accessible on our website. It has been my philosophy as a public servant to never allow for constituents to feel as if they are unaware of the happenings of their local government. I know the Borough Council shares this same view. We will continue to fulfill this mission.

As Dunellen continues the revitalization of our downtown, we will promote and adopt a commerce-friendly mentality to attract and retain new businesses. The transformation of the old Art Color complex into the Dunellen Stations project will gather steam this year as permits are pulled and construction is set to commence in 2021.

In 2020, we began the community vision plan process by conducting a survey on downtown Dunellen, assisted by DMR Architects, our Municipal Planner. The purpose of this survey was to better understand our community's preferences as we continue to redevelop Dunellen's downtown. More than 435 responded, providing excellent data in which to analyze. I look forward to working with DMR Architects to presenting this information this year to the public so we may begin the stages of amending our redevelopment plan and zoning ordinance to reflect the community's vision and placing the Borough in a greater position to advocate for the smart development of our downtown.

We all know the Dunellen train station is a big part of that vision and vital to the success of our downtown. We all see the aging structure as we travel up and down Washington Avenue, or North Avenue, but I would like

to recognize our improved relationship with New Jersey Transit as we made small improvements to the station and its platform this past year, including enhanced lighting, new signage, better maintenance of the grounds, and freshly painted stairways and waiting rooms. Through advocacy and persistence, I am happy to report that Dunellen Station is one of 30 rail stations named for inclusion in a NJ Transit strategic plan called Regional Rail Station Modernization and Access Program that if funded will enhance safety, customer experience, and most importantly, provide accessibility for all customers. Ensuring Dunellen Station remains on this list for New Jersey Transit will remain a top priority of mine as Mayor.

These are just a few of the examples of the significant service and cost efficiency strides both myself and the council made in 2020.

Now, I would like to highlight the accomplishments of our departments, Boards, committees, and commissions.

The Parks and Recreation Department assisted with the complete makeover of Columbia Park, including a new turf football and soccer field, a new rubberized running track, new concrete tennis courts, a new playground, and a new gazebo. Though COVID-19 restricted many sports and recreational activities, the Recreation Department was able to adjust and safely modify its summer camp, soccer and tennis programs. Santa Around Town was still a lively affair, even though our Easter Bunny, Memorial Day, and Holiday Tree Lighting Ceremonies were mostly virtual. Additionally, an activity we are particularly proud of is the “Food Shopping for Seniors,” with 41 shopping trips. Similarly, their pop-up Food

Drives with Pastor Roy Carryl and the Living Hope Church helped 222 households feed 719 people.

As previously mentioned, the Dunellen Rescue Squad performed with extraordinary valor in these most difficult times. Because of hospital volume, ever changing logistics, and the increased need to clean each vehicle between patients, their average call took nearly three times longer to accomplish. Still, they responded to 435 calls in 2020, a 25 percent increase over the prior year. They also trained four members to be CPR instructors and sent five members to EMT classes.

The Dunellen Tax Collector's Office instituted a new online bill paying system called WIPP, so that property owners can pay their real estate taxes and sewer utility fees on our Borough website. This should save everyone considerable time.

At the Office of Emergency Management, Coordinator Homer Mosley recruited a very dedicated and hardworking set of deputies, several of whom have completed the basic OEM course to become certified. All members continue regular disaster training and interact well with other emergency agencies. They stepped up in coordinating the distribution of COVID-related PPE, and together, we were able to submit thousands of dollars of expenditures for CARES Act reimbursement.

Though COVID-19 seriously impacted Dunellen Parking Authority revenues, they continued their vital role of ensuring that available parking

on streets was distributed equitably. Special attention was paid in 2020 to areas such as yellow-curb and handicap parking violations, as well as the overseeing of 2-hour residential prohibitions.

The Dunellen Municipal Alliance held several events, informing our community of the Alliance's mission to protect our youth from the effects of drug and alcohol abuse. They also held a socially distant leadership program for Dunellen high school students, including a virtual Great American Smokeout program on vaping for DHS freshmen.

The Dunellen Downtown Management Organization hosted its annual HarvestFest in Washington Memorial Park, decorated the downtown for spring with flower baskets, and for the holidays with Christmas trees, while the Dunellen Arts and Culture Commission hosted their annual Art Summer Camp and decorated downtown storefronts with painted winter scenes. Both organizations really helped to bring to life our downtown this year, and I am excited to see what they will do in 2021!

The Dunellen Public Library continued to provide services to residents during COVID-19 by providing contact free services such as checking out materials, printing and faxing services. Programs were held outdoors in a socially distanced capacity, and many services such as the Children's Department's story times were taken online via zoom or social media. They received grants from The Arnold Schwartz Foundation to continue to develop the new book collection and purchase chrome book laptop devices to expand technical services. Funds were also awarded by Middlesex County Commissioners through a grant provided by the Middlesex County

Cultural and Arts Trust Fund. The library also benefitted from generous donations made by residents and supporters who donated books through the Dunellen Library's Representation and Cultural Diversity Wish List which included books that represent and celebrate the wonderfully diverse population of Dunellen. In addition, the Friends of The Dunellen Public Library coordinated an outdoor market, with the funds from vendor fees benefiting the Library.

Lastly, the Dunellen Planning Board held important and successful meetings online while developing an improved application and tracking process.

As you can see, we were able to make great progress for the Borough in 2020, even during a pandemic. Now, I would like to share with you a vision for Dunellen that I believe will support our revitalization efforts and stay true to our small-town values. These are just some of our priorities for Dunellen in 2021 and beyond:

Dunellen will continue to focus on the revitalization of our downtown. As earlier noted, structures should soon be going up at Dunellen Stations and at 528 North Avenue. Dunellen is becoming a place for builders to invest and other projects are in the works for individual mixed retail-residential buildings on North Avenue. I am looking forward to bringing these projects to the Borough Council this year and working with the Planning Board as they progress through the application process. Additionally, as previously stated, we will be working with DMR Architects to amend our

redevelopment plan and zoning ordinance to reflect the community vision plan survey results.

The Borough will also be hiring a full-service Information Technology consultant to completely revamp our computer and internet capabilities. Our IT infrastructure is aging out and we have to make the decision to move the Borough into the 21st century. For example, we are working to install cameras in the Council Chambers for upgraded and sophisticated streaming of Council and other public meetings.

We are still constantly exploring ways to save money and streamline municipal services through innovative shared services agreements with other municipalities and agencies. This includes seeking ways to find cost-savings in our healthcare expenses this year.

Some major infrastructure improvement projects in 2021 will include: working with Middlesex County on the rebuilding of the South Madison Avenue culvert; the milling and paving of several streets on the South side of town; proposing the rebuilding of the Fire House curb at the embankment; advancing the Culvert rebuild under the NJ Transit tracks to alleviate flooding and move us closer to applying to FEMA to redraw the flood maps; planning Morecraft Park improvements from redeveloper contributions we received in 2020; and working with Parks and Recreation for Gavornick Park enhancements to the basketball court and slide on the playground set.

I expect to work closely with the Council and department heads to develop a long-term capital improvement plan so the Borough may better plan for needed improvements. As revenues become realized from the Dunellen Stations projects, it is our hope to use them to assist in alleviating tax burdens and begin beautification projects around town. I will also work with the Maurer House Restoration Committee to fully realize the concept plan to make the home a public space for recreational and borough use, as well as space for the Dunellen Historical Society.

I would like to take the time to thank the borough's administration and staff, and our various boards, commissions, and committees.

Though there are many I would like to recognize by name, here are just a few:

William Robins, our Municipal Clerk and Borough Administrator, for his help this year while we all made transitions; Debra Weaver, our Human Resources manager, does a magnificent job overseeing payroll and accounts payable; Lauren Staats, our Administrative Assistant and Deputy Clerk, who does it all, from overseeing vital statistics to animal licensing; our borough attorney, John Bruder, always provides us with sound legal advice and counsel; Scott Olsen, our chief financial officer, works wonderfully with our team in the tax office, including Gail Woerner, tax office clerk; we thank Judge Katherine Howes, the municipal court administrator Terry Crisafulli, and her deputy, Lauren Colletti; Ron Safar, our department of public works supervisor, oversees a very hard working department that keeps things moving around town; we thank Scott

Luthman and Rich Gianchiglia in our construction office; and we appreciate Alex Miller, Julie Grof and the Recreation Commission for expanding our youth programs and overseeing our parks.

We thank all of our volunteer agencies, including the Parking Authority, the Planning Board, Dunellen Downtown Management Organization, Dunellen Arts and Culture Commission, the Maurer House Committee, Shade Tree Commission, the Dunellen Public Library Board, the Mayor's Traffic and Pedestrian Safety Task Force, and the Dunellen Senior Club. Dunellen's success is truly measured by the countless volunteers who serve our community.

We are fortunate to have what I feel is the best emergency services in all of Central New Jersey. Thank you to Chief Daniel Smith and his police department for serving and protecting our Borough, as well as Debbie Ritchie, the Police Department's administrative assistant, and Lieutenant Chris Beenders. I look forward to working with all of you to continue keeping our community safe. To our new Chief Mark Crawford of the Dunellen Fire Dept and newly appointed Chief Robert Bracaloni of the Dunellen Rescue Squad, I thank you both for your service and your members' service. And, to former Chief Jeremy Lowder of the Fire Department and Chief Jeff Best of the Rescue Squad, thank you for all your years of service and friendship to our Borough. We all recognize the great risk each of our emergency services members takes when going out on a call. I know I can speak for myself and the Borough Council when I say you have our support. Please keep safe out there.

Finally, I would like to recognize and thank my family for their unwavering support:

I extend my gratitude and love to my fiancée, Lindsay Braverman, who I will get to call my wife, or I her husband, after September 2021. I am only able to serve my hometown as Mayor because of her support, understanding, and push to make me a better person each and every day;

To my mother, father, brother and sister and their families, and to my extended family, thank you for your continued encouragement. I would not be who I am today without your support.

With all this being said, I am honored to have the opportunity to serve the community that helped raise me and my family. As Mayor, I promise to work with all members of Council to make sure successful government is delivered to our constituents and to ensure all residents feel they are being represented through my office and this governing body. I believed from the onset that as a governing body and as a community, regardless of political affiliation, we would build bridges and continue to connect with one another in the exchanging of ideas and the building of great things together. I am proud to say that it is my belief we have accomplished such a task during turbulent and unprecedented times in our borough's and nation's history. May we continue to make Dunellen the prime example of what bipartisanship can accomplish when we set aside partisan politics and devote ourselves to the true meaning of public service – serving the people. Dunellen is a place where neighbors, friends, and families come

together to create greatness and ventures that uniquely define us as a community. We care about making this Borough a great place to live, work, create and raise a family, and that is what makes our square mile the “miracle mile!”

Thank you for your time today. I look forward to working with all of you.
Happy New Year!