

State of the Borough Address
Mayor Jason F. Cilento
Reorganization Day Meeting
January 1, 2023

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Dunellen Borough Council, and Borough staff. I will begin my fourth State of the Borough Address by wishing you and yours a happy and healthy New Year! We are privileged to serve this great borough and the amazing people who call it home. They put their trust in all of us up here today; may we never lose focus on that.

I look forward to working with the members of the Borough Council to accomplish even greater tasks ahead: Teresa Albertson, Jessica Dunne, and Joseph Paltjon, as well as Trina Rios, Daniel Cole Sigmon and Harold VanDermark, who I thank and congratulate today on their swearing-in. And thank you, Deputy Minority Leader Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz, for joining us today to swear-in our council members and for being a part of this annual re-organization. Additionally, congratulations to Trina Rios for being re-appointed Council President. We know you will continue to serve this community with devotion and integrity.

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. Living and doing business in New Jersey's Miracle Mile is truly a blessing. While facing unprecedented adversities over the past three years such as a pandemic, Hurricane Ida, and the loss of our Firehouse, our community still showed up to support one another with generosity, strength, and optimism for the future. We are a community of volunteers and can only be successful if everyone pitches in, and in Dunellen, **they do**. The people of Dunellen are who give proof to the phrase "The Miracle Mile!" And, as Mayor, I am encouraged and inspired every day by our collective volunteerism and unwavering dedication to making Dunellen a wonderful place to call home.

To that end, this administration accomplished a lot in 2022, including historic improvements to our infrastructure and parks and the continued revitalization of our downtown. First of note, our commitment to finding more cost-effective ways to improve our roads has been paying off, with nearly six out of our sixteen miles of municipal-owned roadways newly paved. This includes:

- The completion of Lincoln Avenue this year through funding from the New Jersey Department of Transportation's Municipal Aide grants from fiscal year 2020 and 2021,

totaling \$1,029,550. These funds covered the entirety of improvements to the roadway, its curbs and sidewalks, and sewer and storm water, including the addition of dozens of new native trees, push-button rapid rectangular beacon lights, ADA crosswalk improvements, and more;

- Our continued partnership with Middlesex County's mill and pave program allowed us to pave Schwartz Place and sections of First Street and Dunellen Avenue, as well as including newly installed ADA crosswalks;
- The amended Ordinance 2021-23, Restorations to Streets and Sidewalks under Chapter 256-9, implemented in September of 2021, brought New Jersey American Water and PSE&G to the table for discussions regarding assisting the Borough pave several sections of roads after investing in 3.4 miles of new utilities along Fourth Street, Lincoln Avenue, Madison Avenue, North Avenue Extension, Pulaski Street, Third Street, Mountainview Terrance, and North Washington Avenue;
- And finally, 2022 saw a continued partnership with the New Jersey Department of Transportation to restrict the ability of large trucks to turn at the intersections along Route 28.

Every road paved has received enhanced striping and signage with the sole purpose of enhancing traffic and pedestrian safety and enforcing speed limits, especially near our schools and downtown businesses. Protecting the people living in and visiting our square-mile Borough is of the utmost importance, and I thank the Mayor's Traffic and Pedestrian Safety Task Force for their continued assistance and input on this matter.

Since being sworn-in as Mayor in 2020, the Borough of Dunellen has been awarded a total of \$2,161,540 in grants from the New Jersey Department of Transportation for various road and transit village projects that have already been or will be implemented over the next two years. For 2022, this includes the awarding of \$226,000 Transit Village Grant for Wayfinding signage along North Avenue and \$619,460 for Second Street Improvements between the Middlesex Borough border to Madison Avenue. Through these newly awarded grants, we intend to improve the experiences of both residents and visitors with re-envisioned streetscapes, pedestrian-friendly walkways, improved and bike-friendly roadways, and clear, welcoming signage that better communicates where parking and municipal services can be found.

The revitalization of Dunellen's downtown continues with its renaissance of new investments and businesses opening up. Over the course of the last two years, we have been able to attract close to \$38 million in additional investments in residential, mixed-use and façade improvements in downtown Dunellen. Six businesses, including a cake and coffee shop, an Italian restaurant, a lobster dog food truck, and more, opened in 2022 alone. The Dunellen Downtown Management Organization continues to bring events and beautification projects to North Avenue throughout the year. The Dunellen Station development project has welcomed dozens of new residents to its townhomes and apartments, and its retail space is expected to be completed this year, with Blue Foundry Bank and Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation already signed as commercial tenants. Plenty more residential and mixed-use development projects and façade improvements are still to come. That is precisely why I presented to the Borough Council this year an ordinance for a Short-Term Tax Incentive program to help smaller property owners within the Redevelopment Area make investments through a five-year tax incentive, relieving certain property owners of taxes owed on the new and improved valuations. I am grateful to the Borough Council for unanimously supporting this incentive program, as I believe it will continue to spur additional investments downtown. So long as we continue to promote and adopt a commerce-friendly mentality that attracts and retains new business, investors, and builders, Dunellen's downtown will continue to thrive and increase revenue that will help the Borough offset the tax burden on our residents.

In addition to our redevelopment efforts, this administration conducted three interconnected planning initiatives to help guide the Borough's decision-making over the next decade – the first of which was the Master Plan Re-examination. Dunellen's current Master Plan – in other words, the blueprint for Dunellen's future development and land use – was adopted in 2012. Updates include broader policy goals in support of our collective visions and concerns, such as one of New Jersey's first Climate Resiliency Assessments, and an eventual plan. Furthermore, Dunellen was awarded two technical assistance grants – one by the Active Transportation Study by New Jersey Transit's Transit-Friendly Planning Program, the other by the Complete and Green Streets for All policy by the North Jersey Transportation Planning Authority – to recommend improvements for pedestrians and all modes of transportation in Dunellen with greener and more sustainable infrastructure practices. These planning initiatives – which provided several opportunities for public input through residential surveys and municipal

outreach – will be presented for consideration early this year. We thank the Master Plan Re-Examination Steering Committee and the Mayor’s Traffic and Pedestrian Safety Task Force for their dedication to each initiative.

Furthermore, throughout the year, we continued to work with our municipal planners to find ways to make improved amendments to our Redevelopment Plan and recognize the importance of being more environmentally conscious and creating a more sustainable Dunellen. We amended the Redevelopment Plan to include EV charging station requirements, pervious pavements, rain gardens, and native plant requirements.

The Borough of Dunellen also adopted a number of quality-of-life ordinances designed to improve not only the aesthetics of our downtown and neighborhoods, enhance economic development, but also the well-being of our property and business owners. These include:

- A completely revamped Sign Ordinance setting comprehensible rules for signs on businesses and buildings in downtown;
- Amendments to our Redevelopment Plan establishing an Industrial zone and a transition zone at Dunellen’s borders without requiring developments to be mixed-use, which we anticipate will strengthen our already established central business district;
- An ordinance permitting and encouraging wineries and breweries to develop downtown;
- A bond ordinance to pay for stream and brook cleaning to improve water flow and alleviate local flooding;
- A flood damage control ordinance that regulates water run-off in new developments
- A bond ordinance for park improvements such as painting and the addition of new lights to the Washington Park Gazebo;
- And, most notably, the ability and encouragement for studios and production companies to film in Dunellen, including this year, David Duchovny’s new project “Bucky Dent.”

As part of our ongoing effort to promote government transparency and enhance communication with residents, business owners, and visitors, the Borough regularly posts timely updates and virtually broadcasts Council Meetings, Mayoral Town Halls, and monthly “Messages from the Mayor” on our website. This year, to increase face-to-face interactions, I added Walks and Talks with the Mayor in Columbia Park as part of a Mayor’s Wellness Campaign. Lastly, we introduced E-Notify to actively alert community members of important Borough incidents, such as emergencies and road closures, while Dunellen’s Downtown

Management Organization continued to improve its monthly e-newsletter, *Next Stop! Dunellen*, and Dunellen's quarterly newspaper, *The Dunellen Report*, entered its twelfth year of print publication. It is our responsibility as a governing body to make constituents acutely aware of happenings within local government, and we will continue to fulfill this mission.

I would like to spend some time now recognizing in detail the fantastic jobs our departments, Boards, committees, and commissions have been doing to enhance the lives of our residents:

The Dunellen Parks and Recreation Department had another successful and memorable year in 2022, hosting 33 events and serving nearly 600 youth participants in activities such as basketball, tennis, track, soccer, baseball, softball, flag football, and summer camp; in its second year, the Hometown Heroes Banner program grew from 52 banners to 90 on flagpoles downtown; and, while continuing to honor public traditions such as the 74th annual Halloween Parade and the Memorial Parade & Ceremony, the Department also found time to stripe the newly paved basketball courts at Morecraft and Gavornik Parks, install the new benches at both parks, and install new playground equipment at Morecraft Park made possible through a community benefit donation by the developers of 528 North Avenue, Community Development Block Grants, and capital improvement expenditures. We recognize and appreciate the hard work of Recreation Director Alex Miller and Program Manager Julie Grof, as well as Parks and Recreation staff, the Recreation commission, and all the coaches and volunteers who help support the department and its programs;

The Dunellen Police Department had an active year with 170 arrests – including 52 DWIs – and 4,200 summonses. Our Borough is safe because of our Officers, and we thank them for the risks they take each day to protect us. Dunellen PBA 146 recognized several Officers this year for lifesaving efforts and exceptional performance of duties: Lieutenant Christopher Beenders, Sergeant Christopher Lovell, Detective Nicholas Goldman, Patrolman Marcin Nierodzik, Patrolman Keith Irons, and Patrolman Joe Dudley, whose service was also recognized this year at the State PBA's annual Valor Awards;

The Dunellen Fire Department continues to serve our community with honor and bravery. On October 12, 2021, members of this department and our community lost a pillar and a piece of Dunellen history when the Firehouse unfortunately burned. These men and women have shown nothing but grit, patience, and dedication to their jobs as the Firehouse, its engines, and its

equipment are restored or replaced. We are actively and immediately seeking a top-notch contractor to complete the rebuild of what will now become known as the George W. Hodulik Firehouse. I cannot think of anyone more worthy to have that building named after them;

We continue to thank the Dunellen Rescue Squad for being there in times of great and urgent need for our residents, and happily announce that the Dunellen Office of Emergency Management received an Emergency Management Grant of \$10,000 this year. Under the leadership of OEM Coordinator Homer Mosley, Jr. and Deputy OEM and CERTs Coordinator William Carlsen, Dunellen also celebrated the first anniversary of its CERTs Team, which currently maintains 13 members;

Dunellen Public Works promoted Richard Herkert to Foreman and hired two full-time and one part-time employee – Bryan Cashin, Bryant Warren, and Audrey Devine –, to further improve upon the tremendous job they’ve been doing maintaining the Borough;

The Dunellen Downtown Management Organization hosted its annual HarvestFest in Washington Memorial Park, sponsored Dunellen Restaurant Week and Spring Into Wellness, decorated the downtown for the change of seasons and holidays, and hosted several grand openings for new businesses and anniversary celebrations for long-standing businesses such as the Dunellen Cinema & Café, Miles Upholstery, Blacher Canvass, and Rome Pizza, while the Dunellen Arts and Culture Commission hosted their annual Art Summer Camp, presented summer concerts and plays in the park, began working with my office on a mural project with Rutgers Mason Gross School of the Arts, and decorated downtown storefronts for the holidays. Both organizations really helped to brighten the spirit of our downtown this year!

The Dunellen Municipal Alliance also held several events, informing our community of the Alliance’s mission to protect our youth from the effects of drug and alcohol abuse. They received \$5,000 from the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services to further assist these efforts;

The Dunellen Diversity & Inclusion Committee spent their first full year hosting educational workshops and events in celebration of Dunellen’s multicultural excellence, while the Dunellen Public Library – a cultural centerpiece of this community – continued to provide youth and adult programming, technological needs, and educational materials. The Friends of the Dunellen Public Library coordinated their successful outdoor market, this year in Washington Memorial Park, with funds from vendor fees for the benefit of the Library;

The Dunellen Planning Board held many important and successful meetings this year as it continues to be the municipal agency that oversees site plans for redevelopment projects in all zoning areas, as well as hiring Cherron Rountree as the Planning Board Secretary and Laruen Staats as the Recording Secretary, both of whom have been doing a great job at providing efficiency for the Planning Board;

The Mayor's Cannabis Task Force took on the responsibility of seeking additional feedback from the community regarding the commercialization of cannabis in Dunellen, and will provide a fair and competent report to the Borough Council later this year;

Finally, the Borough added three full-time employees to provide more effective and accessible government services to the residents and businesses of Dunellen: Claribel Acevedo, technical assistant to the Construction Officer, the Planning Board, and Redevelopment; Julie Grof, program manager in our Recreation Department and assistant to the Department of Public Works; and Gail Woerner, tax office clerk. These individuals have been doing a fantastic job, allowing offices that historically have been closed most days to the public to now be open and accessible to the public.

Through collaboration, professionalism, and volunteerism, our employees and our community made great progress for the Borough in 2022 while remaining true to our small-town values. Now, I would like to share just a few of the tasks on the agenda for Dunellen in 2023:

The construction of Dunellen Station, as well as other recent investments into the revitalization of our downtown, has led to increased interest in Dunellen from developers. We anticipate the construction of several residential and mixed-use projects this year, as well as a historically high volume of applications for more. It is important to recognize the significance these projects will have in attracting new residents and businesses to Dunellen that will allow for even more improvements to government services and foster an economic boom for our downtown;

Working with our Municipal Planners, we will be implementing several recommendations from the 2022 Master Plan Re-Examination and the interconnected planning initiatives to successfully guide the direction of Dunellen over the next ten years. It is and has always been this administration's vision and duty to make Dunellen a better place to live, work, bike, and walk, create, and do business in. This year, I will begin working with the Dunellen Downtown Management Organization to promote the benefits of a Business Improvement District in

downtown Dunellen. Please be on the lookout for more information on this topic, including a future Mayoral Town Hall;

In the spring of 2022, with the help of New Jersey Legislative District 21 representatives Senator Jon Bramnick, Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz, and Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis, my office pushed improvements to the Dunellen Train Station forward, with NJTransit's Capital Division promising to initiate design and engineering phasing. In October, with additional support from Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman, we applied the Dunellen Train Station for a Federal Transit Administration grant to realize the designing and engineering phase as a first step to modernize and make our station ADA compliant. I recognize the grant application was not successful this year, and that's not the kind of news I would want to share with you – but - that does not mean we sit back, do nothing, and accept this minor setback. It just means we get back up and get back to the drawing board with our state and federal stakeholders this year, and continue to fight for an improved train station. It's what this borough deserves.

We continue to explore ways to save money and streamline municipal services through innovative shared services agreements with nearby municipalities and agencies. Major infrastructure improvement goals in 2023 will include:

- Working with New Jersey American Water and PSE&G on more utility improvements and paving roads;
- Working with Middlesex County on the milling and paving of more streets in Dunellen;
- Working with Middlesex County on the replacement of the Pulaski Street Culvert;
- Using New Jersey Department of Transportation Municipal Aide Funds to improve Kline Place;
- Working with National Water Main Cleaning Company to assist with culvert clean-outs to help with water flow in our streams and brooks;
- And advancing the Culvert rebuild under the NJ Transit tracks to alleviate flooding.

This governing body will continue to work closely with one another and department heads to develop a long-term capital improvement plan that will strategically allow for downtown, park, and other capital improvements throughout the next several years. As we have so much to accomplish together moving forward, we will continually be reviewing and updating ordinances as needed.

I'd like to end my address to you today by thanking the Borough's administration and staff, and our various boards, commissions, and committees. Though there are many I'd like to recognize by name, here are a few notables:

- William Robins, our Municipal Clerk and Borough Administrator;
- Debra Weaver, our Human Resources Manager;
- Lauren Staats, our Administrative Assistant and Deputy Clerk;
- Alex Miller, Julie Grof, all Recreation Staff and the Recreation Commission; Richard Herkert and all of our Department of Public Work employees;
- John Bruder, our Borough attorney;
- Scott Olsen, our Chief Financial Officer;
- Tax Collector Dawn Hutchison, Tax Office Clerk Gail Woerner, and Tax Assessor Dawn Guttschall;
- Judge Katherine Howes, Municipal Court Administrator Terry Crisafulli, and Violations Clerk Denise Donato;
- George Deene, Code Enforcement;
- Mike Rossi, Claribel Acevedo, John McManus, Scott Brescher, Travis Lamberson, and Michael Mullin in our Construction Office;
- Police Chief Daniel Smith, Lieutenant Chris Beenders, Administrative Assistant Debbie Ritchie, and all of our Police Officers;
- Chief Jonathan Scott of the Dunellen Fire Department, Chief Jeff Best of the Dunellen Rescue Squad, and all of their membership;
- OEM Coordinator Homer J. Mosley, Deputy OEM Coordinator William Carlson and their entire CERTs Team and OEM Staff;

Thank you to all of our government services employees and volunteer agencies, including the Parking Authority, the Planning Board, Dunellen Downtown Management Organization, Mayor's Traffic & Pedestrian Safety Task Force, Mayor's Mural Steering Committee, the Master Plan Re-Examination Steering Committee, Dunellen Diversity & Inclusion Committee, Dunellen Arts and Culture Commission, the Maurer House Committee, Shade Tree Commission, the Dunellen Public Library Board, the Mayor's Cannabis Task Force, and the Dunellen Senior Club. Dunellen's success is truly measured by the countless volunteers who serve our community.

Finally, I would like to recognize and thank my family for their unwavering support. I extend my love and gratitude to my wife, Lindsay, for all her love and support, and for whom without that love and support, I would not be able to be up here today, as well as my mother & father, my brother & sister, and their families. And a special thanks to my Pop-Pop for whom without his guidance I would have never began my journey into local politics.

I am continually honored and humbled to serve the community that helped raise me and my family. As Mayor of Dunellen, I promise to work with all members of Council to ensure responsible government is delivered to our constituents and that all residents feel they are fairly represented. May we continue to devote our minds and hearts to public service above all else, so that Dunellen continues to be a place where neighbors, friends, and families seek to create the greatness that uniquely defines our community. Thank you for your time today; I look forward to working with you all. Happy New Year!