



# Township of Bernards

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## **Outgoing Mayor Field's Reorganization Meeting Speech 01/04/2022**

Good evening. I hope everyone had a wonderful New Year's. First, I'd like to congratulate and welcome Jennifer Asay and welcome back Andrew as an elected TC member. It's going to be wonderful having you both on TC. I want to thank my fellow committee members and our township employees and volunteers for all your hard work and support over the past year. Most important though, I want to say thank you to the residents of Bernards for your support over the past year. You are the reason we are here. You have asked us to represent you, your interests, and our community and to make the best decisions possible for you. 2021 has seen many challenges - some expected and some not, but everyone stepped up to face those challenges to deliver the best outcome.

When I assumed the duties of Mayor from Mayor Baldassare, I knew that my job would not be easy. We were still amid a pandemic and the way forward was still unclear. We were all still seeking answers and solutions. In times of crisis, leaders have an obligation to be as transparent as possible to those who have been elected to serve. I have done my best to be visible, approachable, and engaged with you. Tonight, I want to conclude my term as Mayor as openly as I began and discuss our accomplishments of the past year.

After a year of quarantine and isolation, it was important to me that we find ways to come together as a community to share ideas about a diverse range of subjects. With that in mind, I launched the Meet the Mayor's Series. This series of conversations covered a variety of topics and personalities. Just to mention a few:

- Our Chinese, Indian, and Italian organizations and residents, whose cultures and perspectives are a strong and vibrant part of our community, shared their experiences, cultures, and hopes for the future.
- Our Police Department and Fire Official spoke with our residents about safety; It was an opportunity for our residents to gain input and insight from those we trust with our lives.
- Then, the Basking Ridge Business Alliance shared their efforts in growing and promoting local businesses as well as discussing ways the township can help in their efforts to strengthen the Basking Ridge community.
- Finally, we had the privilege to meet with NJ State Supreme Court Justice and Bernards resident Justice Helen Hoens who embodies what it is to be a true public servant.

Despite the ongoing presence of Covid, which continues to challenge us, I am happy to report that Bernards continues to grow. This year saw businesses and residents increasing throughout our town:

- Our planning board had 6 Land Development applications processed,
- 4 Land Development ordinances reviewed,
- and 3 Master Plan Elements reviewed.
- Our Zoning Board of Adjustment processed 30 land development applications and our zoning officer reviewed 450 construction permits, 120 zoning permits, and conducted 81 zoning permit inspections.
- Regarding construction code, 2021 is the second most active on record for permits and inspections. We have also worked to make many of these services available online to include permit applications, inspections scheduling, property sales certificates and permit histories.

While our town grows and improves, our infrastructure continues to meet the needs of our community and our quality of life continues to be the example for others to follow:

- We paved 24 streets (19 from 2020, 5 in 2021, and 14 jobs remain)
- We micro surfaced 9 streets
- Paved Spring Valley Boulevard from King George to English Place, Sections I & II
- Awarded a contract for a new Township aerial
- Awarded Madisonville Traffic Study
- Completed the survey for the 2022 DOT grant project – Reconstruction of Keats Road, Thackeray Drive and Highland Avenue
- Awarded Newell Drive Reconstruction – currently under construction
- The Town Hall elevator project is progressing with a design already in place
- Lyons Road path was paved from Knollcroft Road to just east of Byron Drive
- And lastly, Schmidt Park Pedestrian Bridge was awarded

We continue to look for ways to share services and we did that this year with Bernardsville Borough with our Fire Prevention Bureau. They have continued to work hard to protect lives and property here, and now in Bernardsville as well.

- They conducted 387 Periodic Inspections and 457 Other Inspections in Bernardsville,
- and 650 Periodic Inspections and 715 Other Inspections in Bernards Township along with conducting 32 fire investigations.

One of the gems of Bernards is our Parks and Recreation Department. As I stated before, it was important to me to bring our community together and Parks and Rec certainly made that happen with this year's Mayor's Fall Festival. There were close to 1,000 residents in attendance enjoying music, dancing, pumpkin roll contest, hayrides, costume swap, arts and crafts, and so much more.

Another major accomplishment which wasn't easy for Parks and Rec was negotiating a new 10-year agreement with the Veterans Administration for the operation of the Golf Complex, which includes the Coakley-Russo Memorial Golf Course and the adjacent driving range facility. We also negotiated a sub-agreement with the NJ Golf Foundation for the daily operation of the driving range, to officially open in the spring of 2022.

If that was not enough, they facilitated a program that was near and dear to my heart - the CARES Act grant funded Senior Food Security & Wellness Program, where through one of our local businesses we delivered 3,490 meals over 5 months to 152 low income, township senior residents. I take immense pride in this program because during Covid our seniors feel uncertainty and fear with venturing outside. Delivery those meals gave them the security and comfort of knowing our community cares and we are here to provide support.

Our golf course had a successful 2021 season, with the return of the Mayor's Cup Tournament and the newly launched online tee time reservation system.

Our pool also had a successful 2021 season, returning to full operation of all facilities with new shade structures and soft surfacing around the children's pools, the return of swim lessons, and swim team programs.

- We saw the return of summer camps and workshops and our winter Rec Basketball League.
- We resurfaced the tennis courts at Pleasant Valley Park & Oak Street and opened Pickleball Courts at Pleasant Valley Park.
- We also saw the return of many of our special events.
  - Our Summer Concerts,
  - Movies & Plays in the Park,
  - National Night Out,

- Field of Honor honoring our Veterans,
- and the Hometown Hero Banner program expansion to Pleasant Valley Park.

And then there's our very esteemed Police Department:

- They successfully navigated another year of Covid while maintaining a full staff and keeping the overtime budget under 50%.
- The department continues to regularly train in many areas, and one in particular is training in ABLE/ICAT which is a curriculum in de-escalation to prepare for the new Attorney General's Use of Force Guidelines.
- Lastly, Body Worn Cameras (BWC) were introduced at the end of 2021 and are currently being used on the road.

We thank our Police Department for serving and protecting our community, and especially during Covid. Words are not enough to express our deepest gratitude for their dedication, professionalism, and service in keeping our community safe.

Also, there have been some other noteworthy matters that have occurred this year:

- We developed an ordinance amendment relaxing restrictions on permitted retail and childcare uses at the Highland Village Center in The Hills.
- We held several events for the community such as our September 11th Commemoration Ceremony, Yoga in the Park with the Mayor, and the Mayor's Art Award.
- The Township Committee partnered with the Basking Ridge Business Alliance to organize a Thanksgiving food drive and collected over 700 pounds of food to benefit the Food Bank Network of Somerset County.
- When dropping off the donations to the Food Bank, we were asked if we could run a non-food item drive in December. The food bank was in desperate need of personal care items and again, Bernards stepped up and met the challenge of helping others. The collection was an overwhelming success due to our community's generosity.
- We also held our Volunteer Appreciation Dinner. This event was especially important to us as it is our volunteers who keep our township going. They are the driving force behind the success of Bernards and have been crucial to our ability to recover from the setbacks and hardships of Covid. Without them, neither I nor my fellow committee members would be able to speak with such pride of the success of Bernards. Being able to honor them was a privilege for all of us.

This year for the first time we partnered with the Basking Ridge Business Alliance for the Annual Tree Lighting Ceremony. In the past, they had sponsored the event on their own. Their support of both the township and our business community, especially in the past year, has strengthened the bond between us. I am incredibly happy that we were able to partner in an event that brings us together as a community and gives us all hope for a brighter year to come.

Finally, to the matters that are of greatest importance to our community and our residents - Covid and our budget. Despite the ongoing presence of Covid and its variants, our response has been and continues to be rapid and robust. The Bernards Township Health Department provides weekly testing and vaccine clinics, in addition to providing valuable information and guidance to our residents. We work closely with our local healthcare providers and experts at the state and national level to do all that we can to ensure the health and safety of our residents.

Fiscally, this was a challenging budget year. However, despite losing \$1.4 million in revenue during 2020, the Township will be able to deliver a responsible budget and tax levy for 2021. We will be maintaining all Township Services and will provide a fully funded \$5.9M capital budget to continue to maintain the

Township's infrastructure. Again for 2021, Bernards Township will remain debt free and with an eye toward future budgets, we have also been able to meet the requirements of the Township's long standing Fund Balance Policy. Here are a few of the budget highlights:

Total Proposed Budget:	\$41,906,425
Includes Total Capital Budget:	\$ 5,860,675
Municipal Tax Levy:	\$21,121,995 – An Increase of 1.96% over 2020
Municipal Tax Rate:	\$ 0.312 per \$100 of Assessed Value

Bernards has received the first half of the Township's \$2.6M allocation of American Rescue Plan Funding. These funds will be used to help fund critical infrastructure projects in the 2022 budget.

I want to thank each of our department heads for making the necessary cuts to ensure that we were able to present you with a budget we could all be proud of.

2021 has been a year of challenges on numerous fronts. We end the year in a good place and with the ability to move forward into 2022. Again, I am profoundly grateful to all our departments and the township committee for their efforts.

When I ran for township committee, my motto was Community First. This has been and continues to be the guiding principle that embodies every decision I have made as a committee member and as Mayor. I can stand before you tonight and say that I have given you my best, and it is my hope that it has been enough. I wish incoming Mayor Baldassare tremendous success and as I return to my position on the committee, I will continue to do all that is asked of me in service to the people of Bernards.

The three greatest things that have happened to me in my life are my husband, my sons, and the opportunity to serve my friends, my neighbors, and all the people of Bernards. I wish you all the best in 2022 and in the years to come. Thank you for the honor of being your mayor.

God Bless All of You and God Bless America.

*Janice M. Fields*