



Township of Bernards

1 Collyer Lane, Basking Ridge, NJ 07920
Phone: 908-204-3001; Fax: 908-204-3015; Website: www.bernards.org

Outgoing Mayor Asay's Reorganization Meeting Speech 01/02/2025

Happy New Year! Good evening! Thank you all for coming. I'd like to also thank Assemblywomen Nancy Munoz and Michele Matsikoudis and County Commissioner Melonie Marano for joining us in Bernards Township tonight.

I'm excited to share my 2024 Mayoral Report with you.

As I reflect on last year, it brings me great joy of the things we collectively accomplished through the work of our outstanding employees, professionals, and volunteers in our community.

Our town priorities in 2024 included these seven priorities: Public Safety, State-Mandated Affordable Housing Obligations, Economic Development – specifically related to the NJ Film production & Supporting Local Small Businesses, JCP&L reliability concerns, transparency via the Understanding Bernards speaker series, Recognition of segments of our community via Fabric of Bernards events, and overall community engagement.

How did we do?

- 1. Public safety** - Our Bernards Township Police Department demonstrated continued excellent police work last year.
 - In March 2024, Bernards Township was ranked at the second safest town in New Jersey per Safewise.
 - The prioritized Township Committee investments for public safety enabled two additional police officers to be hired, the installation of Automatic License Plate readers throughout the township as well as the resources needed to support their excellent work.
 - Despite the uptick in car thefts associated with home burglaries seen throughout the state and affecting our community, our Police Department worked diligently every day and around the clock to protect our community. Notable arrests were made throughout the year with acknowledgements by others including the Somerset County Prosecutor.
 - Not only did officers conduct their patrols or investigate their cases, but they also spent a significant amount of time educating our residents and addressing their concerns via the many safety presentations, including the 2.5 hour Understanding Bernards video, creating tools that our now housed on the police department webpage, and community engagement this year at all major programs and hosting numerous "Coffee with a Cop" events.
 - I also valued the collaboration with the other Somerset Hill towns via the Somerset Hills Safety Committee and look forward to our continued work together.



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- Looking forward, I believe public safety should stay a high priority. We look forward to learning in late Q1 if Bernards Township is granted the \$1.6 million grant supporting public safety that Congressman Kean submitted as part of his Community Project Funding Member submission for FY2025.
- 2. State-mandated affordable housing obligations** – As I shared via the Bernards Buzz and Township Committee meetings, this year we:
- We hired one of the best expert planners with extensive Mount Laurel expertise before the state law was finalized in March.
 - We conducted a thorough review of historical actions, reviewed the new law, and began scenario planning.
 - In the spirit of transparency, we hosted the Understanding Bernards presentation in June: Understanding Affordable Housing Efforts: Past, Present and Future to educate residents about this new law and process. This video has 338 views and is most watched of the program series.
 - We conducted many scenario planning exercises and have multiple options for consideration to address our Department of Community Affairs (DCA) assigned number of 218 units, thanks to the work of the Affordable Housing subcommittee which included myself and Gary Baumann at TC representatives.
 - As I led the process last year, I sought to mitigate the negative impact of this State Mandate via the following strategy: While Bernards Township will comply with the State law, our objective should be to build the fewest “new” units to limit the negative impact this new law could have. State law requires specific types of housing we must include, but we should ensure that we will build what our community actually needs, specifically housing for senior citizens and adults with special needs. I am hopeful the broader Township Committee shares this view.
 - Looking forward at the January 28th meeting, the Township Committee must adopt a binding resolution for our AH obligation. I sincerely hope that my fellow Township Committee members meet soon with our Mt Laurel expert planner because they have a lot to learn and absorb roughly three weeks before decisions that will affect our community for decades are made.
- 3. Economic Development – specifically related to the NJ Film production & Supporting Local Small Businesses**
- In April I attended a NJ Film Ready Conference. This led our township to adopt an ordinance in June that supports film production in our community.
 - I personally spent two days with a photographer to shoot 29 locations for the location database. I attended a Film networking event in Newark. I hosted 5 different scouts for multiple movies.
 - I announced in October that we landed our first major film production. This one day shoot resulted in a direct economic benefit to Bernards Township businesses and organizations totaling nearly \$52,000 via location fees including those paid to Liberty Corner Fire Company and Ridge Baseball Club, and purchases at local businesses for food, supplies and accommodations.
 - While this is a great start, I look forward to what the future can hold for our community to host location shooting.



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I was particularly active in supporting small businesses this year. Working closely with the BRBA, we hosted state and county experts to educate on topics such as grants and a certification workshop. I personally went door-to-door to our local businesses to educate them about available state grants. I look forward to learning if they are selected in the near future.

The focus on economic development is critical for our future. We need to proactively identify businesses to bring into our community. As we've recently shared, we've lost a significant amount of commercial property tax revenue over the past years such that residents are bearing the brunt of this burden, carrying approximately an additional \$1000 of residential property taxes. We need to correct this balance and get more commercial ratables to decrease our residential tax burden. We need unique and diverse revenue sources, and I am committed to bringing these options to our community for consideration, as I attempted via an overlay ordinance introduction in December.

4. JCP&L reliability concerns

- In June, Bernards Township had issues with electrical reliability. Many actions were taken with the culmination of the November 12th JCP&L presentation at the Township Committee meeting.
- In July, we solicited resident and business owner feedback via press release, Collecting feedback from over 200 residents, we mapped the responses to see a convergence and potential areas of specific need for investigation. I personally read and responded to each email on this topic so residents knew they were heard.
- I provided this qualitative feedback and an executive summary to JCP&L, had conversations with residents with expertise in the area to help guide questions and future actions with JC&PL, including leadership at the BPU.
- We identified residents who are dependent upon oxygen and linked them to the critical customer list as well as residents who are on wells and linked them to the JCP&L well list.
- JCP&L was a collaborative partner throughout this entire process. Their reliability engineers completed investigations into the Bernards Township infrastructure. When completed, Township employees received the presentation in September with the public presentation scheduled for the November 12th Township Committee meeting.
- JCP&L has continued to address the findings from the investigation to improve certain infrastructure and executed tree trimming to address the most common cause of reliability concern.

5. Transparency via the Understanding Bernards speaker series Understanding Bernards, an educational program about the role and scope of local government, completed five events in 2024. Notable performances included Affordable Housing, the most popular with 338 views, and the longest, BTPD, at nearly 2 and ½ hours, all posted on the Understanding Bernards webpage.

6. Recognition of segments of our community via Fabric of Bernards events.

The Fabric of Bernards program in 2024 consisted of 11 events that are posted on the Fabric of Bernards webpage. I personally enjoyed every event as well as my engagement in BCAA events, the BRIC events, and ISBR events this year.



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7. Overall community engagement and accomplishments.

It was a very active year. Two events that were particularly meaningful to me included the Captain Ford Shaw Way Dedication, led by his family and supported by our Parks & Rec and DPW leadership, and the recent Oak Tree Table Dedication.

Additional events I will fondly remember and look forward to seeing continue include:

- World Kindness Day – November 13
- PEC Run with Me 5K and family walk to raise money for our special needs community,
- The Sensory Friendly Mayors Fall Festival to benefit our special needs families.
- A Community Food Drive collaboration with the BRBA to benefit our local food pantry, God's Coop Food Pantry.
- Events to support our local small businesses and the BRBA
- Collaborating with the BOE regarding Youth & Technology and the BOE program, Restoring Focus.

Additional accomplishments that occurred this year included:

- Thanks to Jen Gander's leadership, the Mayors Wellness Campaign – as we were awarded 2023 Town Up and Coming. I look forward to seeing how Jen's and the team's hard work in 2024 is evaluated for the 2024 award. I also want to publicly thank Jen Gander for her willingness to launch the Bernards Township Ski & Board Club for our middle school youth. Thanks to the leadership of Elizabeth Seitz, Desiree Noland and over 20 volunteers, we have our first trip this Sunday.
- Everyone remembers when the Township received the designation "Fourth hottest real estate market in the US" in the Fall.

As Mayor I also prioritized communication to and with residents. This resulted in many phone conversations, in-person meetings, and fifteen Mayoral communications of the Bernards BLUrbs - Bernards Local Updates (videos) & Bernards Buzz: Mayor's Reviews. Additionally, I purposefully acknowledged resident accomplishments & heritage months at TC meetings to celebrate and bring positivity to our community, resulting in 33 resolutions (posted on Fabric of Bernards webpage)

These accomplishments were possible because of the wonderful township employees and professionals who are the true heroes working diligently for each and every one of us, every day. Led by Pat Monaco, our Township Administrator, his staff consisting of Christine Kieffer, our Municipal Clerk, as well as our Township Department heads: Jon Burger, Jen Gander, Dawn Marling, Sean McCarthy, Emily Pfeiffenberger, Tom Timko, and Ryan Wallace as well as those reporting up to them. Multiple professionals are important to our work so I'd like to call out specifically our Township Attorney entering his 28th year of service to Bernards Township, John Belardo. I also want to thank the MANY volunteers



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who serve our community, including those on Town Board and Commissions, special appointments, and of course, our volunteer Liberty Corner Fire Company and Basking Ridge Fire Company No. 1 and EMS.

I won't let the year be marred by the unexpected and unfortunate concerns that arose in December such as the drones, the American water issue, and the unnecessary confusion and hostile response generated for an overlay ordinance introduction.

It is with great sadness that I share: I cannot support Township Committee leadership who have displayed actions both in public and in private that are contrary to the oaths we have taken and contrary to the Handbook for Elected Officials, Appointed Officials & Volunteers that guide our actions. Such recent actions have resulted in resident deception and adversely affect the confidence of the public in the integrity of Bernards Township. Anyone who votes for leadership tonight via a "yes" or abstention vote, actually supports and condones this deplorable behavior. The creation of a hostile working environment for and intimidation of our township employees, professionals and volunteer boards and commissions is unacceptable. I welcome everyone to watch the Township Committee meetings for December 10 and 23rd and the Planning board meeting on December 17th for reference to my statement.

I am only one of five votes as part of this township committee. My one vote will be cast only after thorough research and public input with the guiding principle to solely do what is best for Bernards Township. I will continue to serve our community as long as my safety and the safety of my family is not impacted. Harassing language and vile attacks on me personally are never acceptable, and threats will be held accountable.

While I transition from Mayor to Township Committeewoman, I want to assure the community that I'm still here for you. I will continue to listen and interact with residents, aided by my new Facebook profile found at www.facebook.com/jenniferasay07920. I will continue to serve all residents as a devoted public servant. I have no other agenda. I will continue to try to create and introduce new and innovative ideas to solve our community needs, including the needs of our special needs population, such as the film and community campus concept. Residents need to be aware and demand accountability from the Township Committee to address the diverse needs of our community.

Thank you to all residents of Bernards Township. It was an honor and a privilege to serve our community as Mayor.

Jennifer Asay

Bernards Township 2024 Mayor