Township of Bernards

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

Mayor Duarte McCarthy's Reorganization Meeting Speech
01/06/2026

Thank you, Amalia, it was an honor to have you swear me in. You're a great sister, and an inspiring leader on the Mendham Township Committee. They are very fortunate to have you. Mike, thank you for being you, supporting me and being a great listener, you put up with a lot. You've always been my biggest fan, and I am yours.

Alissa and Tarran, thank you for making the trip down from Boston and for your love and support in this new adventure. Mom, you are the best, I am so happy you are here with us tonight. You inspired me through your volunteering to get involved and make a difference, and to the extended Duarte and McCarthy family here, thank you! Family is everything; we show up for each other, and having you all here is wonderful.

I want to acknowledge Shanel Robinson, Somerset County Commissioner Director, and Sara Sooy, Somerset County Commissioner, for joining us, along with Peter Corso, Chief of Staff to Assemblyman elect Andrew McCurdy.

Also joining us tonight is outgoing Mayor Janice Fields, who chose not to seek reelection, and her husband Barry. We had a chance to honor Janice and our colleague David Tancredi, during the December 9th Township Committee meeting, recognizing their years of volunteering in our community, and service as an elected and appointed official. Janice, you had significant and positive impact on Bernards Township. Thank you for providing me with a broad set of responsibilities, and for your mentorship, advice, and friendship. I wish you and Barry all the best in your future endeavors.

And a big thank you to all the friends and families here tonight, including some of Alissa's high school friends. It's great to see all of you. I greatly appreciate your taking time to be here; it's very humbling.

For those of you who don't know me, Mike and I moved to Basking Ridge in 1996. Mike grew up here, his family moved to Basking Ridge in 1969; so, for him, moving here was coming home. Our daughter Alissa went to Oak Street, William Annin, and graduated from Ridge High School. We have roots in Bernards Township, and a strong interest in the vitality of our community. I'll share a secret with all of you; no one is more surprised than I am to be sitting here as your new Mayor.

As our local journalist Jake Perry wrote in the Bernardsville News. The last time Democrats held a majority on the Township Committee was in 1938, when the governing body still consisted of three members led by a "committee chairman." The committee switched from having a committee chairman to a mayor in July 1952, and then annually chose a mayor from one if its own for a one-year mayoral term.

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Tonight is the first time the Township Committee has selected a Democrat. I'm humbled to be the first, although my mom likes to remind me that I'm not the first Mayor in the family. That was my grandfather, Manuel de Jesus Bono Garcia.

What does that mean having a Democrat as a mayor? Well, a friend recently said to me, "You know, we're not a red town, or a blue town, we are a purple town." I liked the idea that we are a blend, because at the national level, the political narrative has become very divisive, and political identity has made some family and friends into enemies. Here we are locals.

At the end of the day, it's not whether you are a republican, or democrat, or independent, what matters is that we are one Town. Regardless of political affiliation, residents want to be heard, have their concerns addressed, and to be treated with dignity and respect. I believe our Township Committee is in a good place to do that.

We have a strong set of elected leaders. Committeewoman Jennifer Asay and Committeeman Andrew McNally, have experience having served as mayors and deputy mayors, and we the have the talent and enthusiasm and fresh perspectives of our newly elected colleagues Brett Hodges and John Tompkins.

I've also shared that my philosophy is that you don't throw out the baby with the bathwater. Our Township is in solid financial standing.

The Township has maintained a "Pay As You Go" capital budgeting policy and has not issued debt for any capital project in nearly 35 years, with our last borrowing being in 1991. This coming year, we will again look at our operations to be as efficient as we can be, while we also examine our capital, so that we are responsible stewards of our taxpayer spending, focusing on our community priorities.

It's been my experience that our town is well run through the contributions of talented and committed staff, including Ryan Wallace, our head of Public Works, Tom Timko, head of Engineering, Jennifer Gander, head of Parks and Recreation, Sean McCarthy, our CFO, and Emily Pfeiffenberger, head of HR. All those individuals, report to Pat Monaco, our Chief Administrative Officer, who has been with the township for 38 years.

Our Municipal Clerk, Christy Kieffer, and her team are vital to the administration of our local government and work tirelessly on a broad array of responsibilities.

Tonight, we will also reappoint a set of professionals, including our township attorney, John Belardo, who has served Bernards for 27 years.

We have exceptional individuals who serve our community in the Police Department, under the leadership of Chief Tim King and Deputy Chief Mike Sweeney. The brave volunteers in our Liberty Corner Fire Co, under the leadership of Chief Ron DePasquale, the Basking Ridge Fire Company, under Chief Doug Mazzalle, and the Company's EMS squad, under Captain Sarah Bonnefoi.

These first responders put their lives on the line in service to our community, and I wish for their continued safety in the year ahead. Our community is also fortunate to have vital, innovative services provided through the Bernards Township library, with Director Rachel Burt, and the Board of Health, under Health Officer, Dawn Marling.

Collectively, we have a strong team ready to focus on priorities, both those we are aware of, and those that will emerge in the year ahead. Three that are top of mind for me include our Public Safety, the future of our community and understanding and addressing the needs of our residents.

In 2025, for the second year in a row, Bernards Township has been ranked through a SafeWise Study, as the second safest city in New Jersey, and 21st in the nation. Our Police Department also worked hard to go through the reaccreditation process administered by the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police.

Our Police Department has been accredited for quite some time now, yet the department goes through this process every three years to promote the best possible standards. While we have a strong department, we are a town of 28,000 people.

This past October, we had residents share their concerns about public safety on Allen Road in the wake of Township resident Bhuvani Mani being struck by a car, and then succumbing to her injuries. Allen Road is among the most enforced for traffic safety in the Township.

Nonetheless, Committeeman Andrew McNally and I serve on the police subcommittee, and are in communication with residents, county and staff alike regarding this priority. The county and township are proceeding with several engineering studies and will anticipate outcomes within the next few months to inform and guide next steps.

In addition, we are exploring opportunities, such as partnering with RideWise Inc., to provide education in our community. Donna Allison, who leads RideWise for Somerset County, shared that they are an independent non-profit organization dedicated to promoting and advocating for transportation choices, that are efficient, safe, and sustainable, and offering education and programming that focuses on pedestrian safety, public transit, biking and ridesharing. RideWise is grant funded, and the services they provide are free to municipalities.

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Public Safety is an important cornerstone of being a livable community. Looking back 50 years ago, Mike remembers when there was only one light, and it was a blinking light, in Bernards Township. Imagine Bernards Township fifty years from now, what will it be like?

This past year, the Township Committee approved ordinances to fulfill our state-mandated affordable housing obligations. We expect an order of conditional compliance from Judge Menen that approves our affordable housing obligations for the next ten years through July 2035 and protects us from builder's remedy lawsuits.

As we fulfill our obligations, we can consider the vision of what we want our community to be.

During our Affordable Housing public comment, we heard from residents concerned about construction and development happening in proximity to their neighborhoods, along with the potential impact on our schools and traffic.

We also heard from the families of adult children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, on the dire need for housing. This past July, Bernards Township partnered with Our House Foundation, and committed $200,000 for the renovations from the town's Affordable Housing Fund, to open the sixth "Our House" location in Bernards Township.

While we celebrate the opening of the sixth home, there is more to do. What development would we want to see now, and in the future? What do we want to preserve?

As we meet our fourth round of Affordable Housing obligations, I plan to encourage discussions to consider these and other questions on our hoped-for future. Part of that is fostering Economic Development.

Committeewoman Jen Asay and John Tompkins, himself a small business owner, will partner on a subcommittee to support our local enterprises, and seek new opportunities for the township. The third priority I see is understanding and addressing the diverse needs of our residents.

Our Township provides a broad array of programs and services to residents of all ages, through among other areas, our Park and Recreation department, and our Board of Health.

As an example, this past year, in response to residents, the Pool Commission created two new pass categories. One for Resident Adults 18 years and above with a Disability, and a "reduced rate Caregiver pass."

This summer, Bernards Township also became home to an Innovative Adaptive Golf Camp. The NJ Golf Foundation offered two clinics at the Inspiration Golf Range in Lyons for individuals with adaptive needs. These actions address the needs of members of our community.

Building upon that, I'm pleased to share that the Somerset County YMCA, in partnership with Bernards Township, has been awarded a $70,000 grant through the New Jersey Department of Human Services Age-Friendly Grants Program. Bernards Township will support the Somerset Hills YMCA in its efforts to assess, plan, and implement age-friendly initiatives that will enhance the quality of life for older adults in our community. Those are a few ideas on our top priorities.

We also have cause to celebrate! 2026 will bring the FIFA World Cup to the US, and our local area, and marks the 250th Anniversary of our Nation!

Bernards Township played a rich, vibrant role in our Nation's History. Our Township Anniversary Committee was launched last January, with David Becker, President of Ross Farm, serving as Chair, and a committed group of resident volunteers and representatives from our schools and local organizations. We are keen on highlighting events in Bernards Township that occurred on and around the 250th Anniversary, along with significant events that happened later. One of those was the 680-mile march in 1781, where 10,000 French and Continental soldiers, under the leadership of General Washington and French General Rochambeau, stopped to camp at English Farm in Liberty Corner on their way to Yorktown, VA, the site of the last major land battle of the Revolutionary War.

This past September, Bernards Township, in partnership with the Basking Ridge Business Alliance, celebrated our Township's 265th Anniversary; yes, we are older than the country, with a special event at the Farmstead Arts Center. The program, "Colonial Farms: The Original Work from Home" paid tribute to the contributions of local businesses past and present, and in conjunction with the theme, we recognized our oldest continuously operating business, English Farm, founded in 1740. A set of five panels called "Bernards Township Business, "Then and Now" were created for the event. The panels are traveling around town and today were placed at Ridge High School.

In the meantime, we ask you to save December 10th - 15th, for a special set of programs, and a reenactment, of the capture of General Charles Lee. The capture happened on December 13, 1776, at the Widow White Tavern in Basking Ridge, that was across from St. James church. The programs will explore the capture's impact on the Revolutionary War, and the connection to several prominent citizens of Basking Ridge at the time.

In light of our Nation's 250th Anniversary, Mike and I have been watching Ken Burn's Documentary, "American Revolution." I'll admit sometimes we fall asleep watching it, it's pretty dense.

One aha moment I had was how the fight for "Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all" was an unintended consequence of the revolution.

The Leaders of the Continental Congress were men of wealth and prestige. Their original plan was to have their grievances with Great Britian resolved without necessarily seeking independence. However, the need to recruit "regular folks", including the poor, women, and those enslaved, changed the narrative to the idea that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities. The result? The American Revolution

created our great nation, in which the ideals of liberty, equality, civil rights, and responsible citizenship, are the basis of law and the foundation of a free society.

These are principles I value and will embrace during my tenure as Mayor in service to you.

In closing, our 2026 Township Committee is pleased this evening to appoint residents to the various boards and committees. All of you have said “yes” to giving your time, expertise, and talent to Bernards Township, and for that we are very grateful.

I’ll close with a quote from the late Maya Angelou who said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

I hope that in the coming year, you feel positive about our community, and that you experience that we, the Township Committee, are working together collaboratively, and in good faith, to provide you with the best possible outcomes.

Thank you, Municipal Clerk Christy Kieffer, and your team, for planning this evening’s reorganization meeting.

Following our meeting, you are all invited to join us for refreshments at the Liberty Corner Fire House!

With that, a Happy New Year to all.

Ana Duarte McCarthy
Bernards Township Mayor