

**State of the Borough Address**  
**Mayor Jason F. Cilento**  
**Reorganization Day Meeting**  
**January 1, 2026**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Dunellen Borough Council, and Borough staff. It is a privilege to stand before you today to deliver the 2026 State of the Borough Address, the seventh in my time as Mayor of our Miracle Mile. First, I want to wish each of you and your families a happy and healthy New Year.

Dunellen's strength comes from the dedication of its residents, the commitment of our local business owners, the generosity of our volunteers, many of whom were sworn in this afternoon, and the countless others who make this Borough such a special place.

As we begin 2026, the Dunellen Borough Council and I sincerely thank you for the trust you place in us to lead and serve our community.

At this time, I am pleased to recognize the members of the Dunellen Borough Council: Teresa Albertson, Daniel Cole Sigmon, Crisol-Iris Lantz, Trina Rios, Elizabeth VanDermark, and William Scott. I want to extend my congratulations to Councilwoman Rios and Councilman Sigmon on their swearing-in today, following their reelection this past November. I also congratulate Crisol-Iris Lantz on her appointment as Dunellen Borough Council President for 2026. It is a privilege to continue working alongside each of you in service to our community, and I am excited for what this year will hold.

I want to take a moment now to honor the memory of Councilman Harold "Hal" VanDermark, who passed away in October. Hal was a Navy veteran, devoted community leader, long-time resident, and friend to us all. He served Dunellen with unwavering dedication and passion, which spanned decades, from his time coaching youth sports to supporting the arts and serving on the Council since 2021. We are grateful to his wife, Liz, who has

since been sworn in to continue Hal's important work and legacy. His passion for service and love for our community remain an enduring inspiration to us all.

Looking back on 2025, it is inspiring to see our Borough continue to thrive year after year. Over the past year, we have enhanced the services available to residents, expanded events and programs that bring neighbors together, and preserved the beloved community traditions that make Dunellen special. Thanks to the dedication of our first responders, along with the hard work of our administrative staff and volunteers, these efforts have helped make our Borough an even more welcoming and vibrant place to live, work, and gather. From improvements in public services to initiatives that strengthen connections across our community, our shared work has made a meaningful difference in the daily lives of everyone who calls Dunellen home.

We remain focused on building an even stronger and brighter future, while celebrating our successes and acknowledging the advancements we continue to make. As we move forward, we ensure that we respect Dunellen's rich history and traditions while engaging in its future. Now, I am proud to highlight the accomplishments of the past year, beginning with emergency preparedness and public safety.

In 2025, the Dunellen Office of Emergency Management and Community Emergency Response Team made important progress to keep our Borough prepared. They updated emergency plans, developed school reunification procedures, and conducted active shooter drills with local and county partners. The move to a new Emergency Operations Center was completed, and CERT membership and training grew significantly, including new search and rescue protocols. Their dedication was evident in over 400 hours of training and support during community events and emergencies like the July windstorm and flooding.

Our Police Department maintained high public safety standards, completing over 200 arrests, including 90 DWI arrests, conducting 2,915 motor vehicle

stops, and filing 849 police reports. Patrolman Keith Irons was promoted to Sergeant, and Patrolmen Andrew Mortensen and Erik Ortiz were hired in March, while Patrolman O'Neill celebrated his retirement after years of dedicated service to Dunellen. In recognition of their dedication, Sgt. Irons, Ptlm. Lowder, and Ptlm. Smith received honors from MADD for DWI enforcement, and Sgt. Robbins was recognized as a Drug Recognition Expert Instructor.

The Fire Department celebrated the completion of the George W. Hodulik Firehouse reconstruction with its Certificate of Occupancy. Volunteer membership grew by 14 members, with several completing advanced Fire 1 and Fire 2 training. Firefighters responded to over 480 calls in 2025, including a historic high of 134 calls during July's severe weather events, demonstrating extraordinary commitment even while managing damage to their own homes.

The Dunellen Rescue Squad served Dunellen and neighboring towns, responding to over 400 calls. About 20 volunteers, including four new EMTs, contributed over 12,000 man-hours and 2,000 training hours. The Squad secured a Verizon grant, raised funds for operations, and provided medical coverage at community events such as the high school graduation, street fair, Haunted Trail, and 5K race.

Building on the hard work of our emergency responders, our Department of Public Works also worked tirelessly behind the scenes to keep Dunellen safe and welcoming year-round.

DPW continued to maintain Borough property, snow plowing, and winter road treatment. They inspected and cleaned 304 catch basins, swept over 300 miles of streets, and installed planters in Washington Memorial Park and around the Welcome signs on Bound Brook Road and North Washington Avenue.

During major emergencies, our DPW played a critical role in recovery efforts. Following the July 3rd storm, they removed 650 tons, or if anyone is

curious, that's 1.3 million pounds, of downed tree brush to help restore power, and just two weeks later, after the July 14th flood, they cleared an additional 80 tons of debris.

To continue Borough-wide maintenance, we saw significant improvements throughout Dunellen through two key road projects.

Second Street Phase One, funded primarily by a \$619,000 NJDOT Municipal Aid grant, included new curbs, sidewalks and ADA-compliant sidewalk ramps, milling, paving, and enhanced striping from Madison Avenue to the Dunellen/Middlesex border. The Jackson Avenue Mill & Pave project also featured ADA-compliant sidewalk ramps, new curbing, milling, paving, and updated striping. Together, these projects covered approximately half a mile of roadway.

Looking ahead, NJ American Water projects completed this year will be milled and paved in 2026, bringing the total streets paved since 2020 to 13.33 miles, or roughly 75% of the Borough's roadways.

While we continue investing in our community's infrastructure, our Administration has been equally focused on managing costs and ensuring sustainable operations for the Borough.

Over the past four years, health insurance costs in the State Health Benefits Program rose more than 80%, with increases of another 50% projected through 2028. To address this, our Administration worked with our insurance broker to transition Borough employees to the Horizon HIF plan as of January 1st. This change maintains employee coverage while limiting the Borough's increase to 14%, which is significantly lower than the 36.5% increase we would have faced had we stayed in the State Health Benefits Program, demonstrating our commitment to fiscal responsibility and protecting taxpayer dollars.

Community safety remains a priority. In 2025, we installed Rectangular Rapid Flashing Beacons at key intersections along North Avenue to

improve pedestrian safety and support a more walkable downtown Dunellen. These improvements were funded through redevelopment community benefits without direct costs to the taxpayers. This demonstrates the benefits of holding developers accountable as true community stakeholders, ensuring their investments bring meaningful improvements to Dunellen beyond just the development of their projects.

Another major priority of our Administration has been and continues to be the modernization of the Dunellen Train Station. Since 2020, we have actively advocated with NJ TRANSIT and government partners for immediate repairs and long-term upgrades to make the station safer, more reliable, and fully accessible.

In September 2025, Borough officials and I met with NJ TRANSIT leadership and state legislators to establish clear goals: short-term cleaning and repairs; mid-term safety improvements, such as new railings and platform enhancements; and long-term plans for elevators and a new ADA-compliant platform.

NJ TRANSIT's commitment to advancing a concept plan for a new station is vital, as securing it will unlock essential state and federal funding. In November, U.S. Senator Andy Kim toured the station and heard firsthand about commuter challenges, reinforcing the need for continued federal support.

We remain committed to working with NJ TRANSIT and partners to ensure the station meets the needs of our residents and supports downtown vitality.

Along with Administration's efforts to enhance essential services for our residents, the Tax Department continues to make advancements to serve the community.

In 2025, the Dunellen Tax Department welcomed Borough resident Starlet Sherrod as Assistant to the Tax Collector/Administrative Support, whose

dedication has helped the office run smoothly and also support the Clerk's Office.

The Department also expanded awareness of the PAS-1 Property Tax Relief program for seniors and disabled residents, making reimbursements more accessible. A new QR code enables residents to pay taxes, PILOTs, and sewer bills remotely, with plans to add credit, debit, and mobile payment options soon.

Meanwhile, the Dunellen Clerk's Office continued to provide essential services to our residents and businesses. The office processed 68 marriages, more than in the previous two years combined, issued dog and cat licenses, handled 500 OPRA requests, and facilitated licensing for new businesses opening in our Borough.

The Dunellen Municipal Court saw the promotion of Denise Donato to Municipal Court Administrator and welcomed Erica Trojanowski as Deputy Court Administrator, ensuring the smooth operation of the court and continued service to our community.

Moving on to growth and revitalization, the Department of Community Development, which oversees the Construction Department, Code Enforcement, Planning Board, and the Dunellen Downtown Management Organization, continued supporting downtown growth and revitalization and collaborated with local business owners to facilitate façade improvements to enhance the aesthetic appeal of our downtown.

Throughout 2025, the Borough continued to grow with six new businesses opening and about 275 construction permits issued. Rental inspections rose sharply to 250 from 93 in 2024. The Construction Department also completed 32 time-of-sale inspections and reviewed 98 zoning applications. Construction investment nearly tripled, increasing from \$4 million to nearly \$11 million, showing strong confidence in Dunellen as a place to live, invest, and work.

The Dunellen Downtown Management Organization welcomed Total Wireless, Deli Cream, Tasty Nutrition, and The Wick Studio, celebrated the new ownership of Uncle Louie G's as well as the new location of In The Cut, and closed out the year by honoring the Dunellen Hotel & Rathskeller's 100th anniversary.

The DDMO continued beautification efforts with planters and decorative baskets, and promoted community engagement through events like Spring into Wellness, the Car Show on Route 28, and Harvestfest. Although Harvestfest was rained out, many vendors joined the Founders Day celebration with about 60 participants.

They also coordinated the Harvestfest Art Contest with local schools, showcased student artwork throughout the year, sponsored Small Business Saturday, and added holiday trees to brighten downtown during the season.

Along with the downtown initiatives of the DDMO, the Dunellen Parking Authority set out to improve safety, accessibility, and convenience by installing a new parking machine in Lot A and working with the Borough to adopt Ordinance 2025-01 to strengthen parking regulations.

Patrols near Faber School and the daycare enhanced child and pedestrian safety, while new signage clarified parking rules, and a third part-time Parking Enforcement Officer was hired. The DPA also updated policies, standardized procedures, and refreshed their section of the Borough's website with current parking information.

The Borough continued expanding its communications by formally transitioning the role of Communications Coordinator to Public Information Officer to keep residents informed and engaged. This year, we implemented the TextMyGov emergency notification system and are finalizing a redesigned Borough website set to launch early in 2026. Transparency remains a priority with livestreamed Council meetings,

Mayoral Town Halls, monthly Walks & Talks, and monthly Messages from the Mayor online.

Critical alerts like emergencies and road closures are shared promptly across multiple platforms, including the Borough's social media, E-Notify, and TextMyGov, while our website, Dunellen-NJ.gov, remains the central hub, supported by email blasts, the Next Stop Dunellen newsletter, and The Dunellen Report, which is now in its 15th year and mailed quarterly to every household.

The Dunellen Shade Tree Commission had a productive 2025, celebrating Arbor Day with first graders at Faber School by planting a Princeton American Elm. Throughout the year, they planted trees across the Borough, maintained the Adopt-A-Station program, pruned town trees, and decorated for the holidays. The Commission continued community education through posters, guides, and school programs, completed tree inventories, and maintained Dunellen's Tree City USA designation for the 22nd year. In memory of John Finney, a dedicated member who passed this year, a memorial tree was planted in Columbia Park.

The arts thrived in 2025 with the Dunellen Arts, Inclusion, & Culture Commission celebrating the Madison Avenue mural, hosting five Music in the Park concerts, and presenting three performances of High School Musical through Plays in the Park, all well attended by the community.

DAICC promoted inclusion and cultural awareness by recognizing Juneteenth and Black History Month, sponsoring art and essay contests for Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and running a Summer Art Camp where teens contributed to the future Prospect Avenue mural.

They also engaged residents in Founders Day activities, including a public mural painting, and organized the annual Holiday Window Decorating program to support local merchants.

That same sense of community engagement carried over into programs that encouraged participation, wellness, and connection for residents of all ages.

2025 was another outstanding year for the Dunellen Recreation Department, with record participation across all ages reflecting our community's enthusiasm. The department expanded 11 youth programs, including new summer camps for Softball and Soccer, along with three adult programs, two senior events, and nine community-wide gatherings that brought neighbors together.

Youth participation reached new highs in soccer, tennis, and summer camp, supported by 77 volunteer coaches. Seasonal events drew larger crowds, and seniors enjoyed continued programming like holiday parties, picnics, pizza parties, movie days, and many Middlesex County activities.

The Hometown Heroes Banner Program grew to honor 130 local heroes, adding 18 new banners in 2025.

With 737 total registrations, including 600 youth, the Recreation Department continues to foster connection and inclusion. In 2025, the Recreation Program Coordinator role transitioned to the Parks and Recreation Director to further enhance the department. We look forward to building on this momentum in 2026, starting with Youth Basketball in January.

As we recognize the hard work of our Borough departments, we also look ahead to exciting improvements coming to Dunellen.

The Borough has secured nearly one million dollars in grant funding for 2026, bringing total grants since 2020 to over eight million dollars. These funds will support infrastructure upgrades and beautification efforts, with most covered by non-Dunellen tax dollars, helping to ease the tax burden on our residents.

Notable grants include \$448,271 through the NJDOT Municipal Aid grant for Second Street Phase 3 and \$525,000 through the NJDOT Set-Aside Grant for North Avenue Streetscape Improvements Phase 2.

Second Street Phase 3 spans Second Street from North Washington Avenue to Jefferson Avenue and includes the removal and replacement of severely damaged curbs and sidewalks, the removal and replacement of trees, stormwater system restoration, and the milling and paving of the road, along with enhanced striping.

North Avenue Streetscape Improvements Phase 2 spans North Avenue / Bound Brook Road from Madison Avenue to Jackson Avenue and includes the installation of trees with expanded planters, benches, bike racks, and public garbage cans.

Though these projects will take time to complete and may not start in 2026, they mark important progress toward a stronger and more vibrant Dunellen. Meanwhile, beautification efforts funded through redevelopment community benefits, such as enhanced benches and additional planters, will begin in 2026, allowing residents to see incremental improvements throughout the year.

We are also looking forward to the North Avenue / Bound Brook Road Streetscape improvements, which will bring new LED decorative lighting from Madison Avenue to the Middlesex/Dunellen border, enhancing both safety and the aesthetic appeal of our downtown corridor.

In addition to infrastructure investments, Dunellen is proud to advance its cultural landscape through significant arts funding secured in 2025. Nearly \$883,000 from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority's Activation, Revitalization, and Transformation Program will support two exciting initiatives downtown.

The Monmouth Museum will establish a satellite location at 266 North Avenue, offering exhibitions and educational programs that bring arts and STEAM learning opportunities to residents of all ages.

Meanwhile, the historic Dunellen Theatre will become home to a new residency by the Actors Studio of New Jersey, which will bring high-quality theatrical productions and related programming to our community.

These grants strengthen our downtown, expand access to the arts, and help make Dunellen a vibrant destination for culture, learning, and creativity.

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Looking ahead to 2026, several important projects are underway to continue improving our community. These include Second Street Phase 2, which will address severely damaged curbs and sidewalks, upgrade parts of the stormwater system, replace trees, mill and pave the street, and add enhanced striping and speed radar signs.

We will also move forward with the South Washington Safe Street project, replacing sidewalks from the railroad bridge to the Dunellen border near Walnut Street, improving pedestrian safety and accessibility. Additionally, we will be conducting an assessment through the Safe Streets For All Grant that we received from the federal government, which will create a plan to improve the safety of pedestrian access throughout Dunellen and open the door to more opportunities for state and federal funding.

To support our local business community, the Dunellen Borough Council, our Community Development Director, the Dunellen Downtown Management Organization, and I will explore partnering with an economic development consultant to create a strategic plan focused on marketing, attracting, and retaining businesses while strengthening support for existing ones.

We will continue to advance redevelopment efforts in the downtown area, building on over \$175 million in investments to date. At the same time, we will assess and prioritize improvements needed in our parks and other community spaces. Additionally, we will collaborate with the Parking Authority to conduct a comprehensive parking assessment aimed at improving parking conditions throughout the Borough for both residents and downtown visitors.

Another goal for 2026 is to collaborate with planners to review our existing Redevelopment Plan, focusing on identifying suitable areas beyond the downtown core for missing middle housing. This effort would seek to promote more affordable for-sale housing options, which is essential for helping residents build equity and create generational wealth for their families while addressing our communities' and regional housing needs beyond just the rental markets.

Finally, as the United States of America celebrates its historic 250th anniversary this year, I've asked Business Administrator Alex Miller to spearhead a 250 Committee to celebrate our great nation together as a community.

I would like to close my address today by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Borough's council members, our administration and staff, along with our various boards, commissions, and committees. While there are many deserving of recognition, I want to highlight a few individuals by name:

- Alex Miller, our Borough Administrator, and the Superintendent of Parks and Recreation & Public Works;
- Lauren Staats, our Municipal Clerk and Registrar;
- Briana DeCandia, our Administrative Assistant and Deputy Registrar;
- Debra Weaver, our Accounts Payable and Human Resources Manager;
- Kelly Seader, all Recreation Staff, and the Recreation Commission;
- Richard Herkert and all of our Department of Public Works employees;

- Cherron Rountree, our Special Projects Advisor;
- William Robertson, our Borough attorney;
- Scott Olsen, our Chief Financial Officer;
- William George, our Public Information Officer;
- Tyler Mayer, our Administrative Assistant
- Tax Collector Dawn Hutchison, Assistant to the Tax Collector Starlet Sherrod, and Tax Assessor Dawn Guttschall;
- Aggie DelMauro, our Escrow Account Manager
- Judge Katherine Howes, Municipal Court Administrator Denise Donato, Deputy Court Administrator Erica Trojanowski; and Violations Clerk Dawn Mayer-Doll;
- Derryck White, our Director of Community Development;
- George Deene and Ken Baudendistel, Code Enforcement;
- Scott Brescher, Claribel Acevedo, John McManus, Mike Rossi, Phil Langon, and Michael Mullin in our Construction Office;
- Police Chief Daniel Smith, Captain Chris Beenders, Lieutenant John Doherty, Administrative Assistant Debbie Ritchie, and all our Police Officers;
- Chief William Scott of the Dunellen Fire Department and all of their membership;
- Chief Jeff Best of the Dunellen Rescue Squad, and all of their membership;
- OEM Coordinator Homer J. Mosley, Deputy OEM Coordinators William Carlson & Joseph Cummins, and their entire CERTs Team and OEM Staff.

I extend my sincere thanks to all of our government employees and volunteers for all their hard work and tireless efforts in making our Miracle Mile all it can be. I also thank the Dunellen Public School District, Board of Education, administrative staff, and teachers for their ongoing collaboration and guidance of the next generation.

I also want to express my deepest gratitude to my family and friends for their support. To my wife, Lindsay, and our daughter Kennedy, your love and encouragement inspire me each and every day. I am equally thankful

to my parents, siblings, and their families, my in-laws, and to former Mayor Robert Seader, whose friendship and guidance have been invaluable. A special thank you to my late Pop Pop, whose example inspired my journey into public service. It is a true honor to serve the community that has raised my family and me.

Looking ahead to 2026, I am committed to working hand in hand with the Borough Council and municipal staff to continue pushing Dunellen forward. Together, we will strive for a transparent and responsible government where every resident feels valued and welcome. Let us remain dedicated to public service and community collaboration so that Dunellen continues to be a place where neighbors, friends, and families come together to build on the great foundation of our Miracle Mile.

Thank you for your time today. I wish everyone a happy and successful New Year. May God bless you all.