

**State of the Borough Address**  
**Mayor Jason F. Cilento**  
**Reorganization Day Meeting**  
**January 1, 2024**

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, members of the Dunellen Borough Council, and Borough staff. I'll begin my fifth State of the Borough Address by wishing you and yours a happy and healthy New Year! I am honored to be here today to begin my second term as mayor of Dunellen. We've accomplished a great deal together over the last four years, and I look forward to the jobs ahead of us still. We are privileged to serve this great borough, with the amazing people who call it home and the business owners who invest in our community putting their trust in all of us up here today – a fact we must always keep top of mind.

I look forward to working with the members of the Borough Council to accomplish even greater tasks ahead: Teresa Albertson, Joseph Paltjon, Trina Rios and Daniel Cole Sigmon, as well as Harold VanDermark and Crisol-Iris Lantz, who I thank and congratulate today on their swearing-in. And thank you, Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis, for joining us today to swear-in our council members and I. Thank you to Senator Jon Bramnick and Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz for joining us today too. I would also like to extend my thanks and well wishes to Jessica Dunne for her years of service on the Borough Council, and I look forward to working with her in her volunteer position. Congratulations to Teresa Albertson for being appointed Council President. We know you will serve this community with devotion and sincerity. Additionally, thank you to Council Member Trina Rios for her two years of service as Council President.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize Dr. William M. Robins, who recently retired from the Borough after serving twenty years as Municipal Clerk and Registrar, and eventually Borough Administrator, having already served the Borough as Library Director for thirteen years prior. Bill has played an integral part in moving Dunellen forward, working tirelessly to ensure our local government provided the best services possible for our constituents. His calm demeanor will be missed at Borough Hall, but we know he's looking forward to endless rounds of golf in the months to come. Thank you, Bill, for your commitment to the Borough of Dunellen. Now, as one chapter closes, another opens – so I would like to congratulate Lauren Staats for being appointed Municipal Clerk and Registrar, and Alexander Miller for being appointed Borough Administrator today. Both are dedicated public servants who we all know will work hard to serve the residents and business owners of Dunellen in their new roles. And finally, one last farewell goes to John Bruder, Esq., who served as a prosecutor for Dunellen for four years, and eventually as our Borough Attorney for twenty-two years. John has recently been approved to become a Superior Court Judge. Although we are losing a brilliant legal mind, the State of New Jersey will be gaining a Judge who is the epitome of honor and integrity, and who will enforce the law fairly and justly. Thank you, John, for your guidance and friendship. You will be missed - and with that note, I'd like to welcome our new Borough Attorney William Robertson, Esq. to the dais and wish him well in his new role with us. He's already been informed that we have a lot of work ahead of us and is prepared to be busy. Welcome, William.

It is my honor to stand before you as your mayor this afternoon to inform you the state of the Borough of Dunellen is strong. Living and doing business in New Jersey's Miracle Mile is a real blessing. We faced an unfathomable number of foreordained adversities over the past four years, including a global pandemic, Hurricane Ida, the rebuilding of our Firehouse, and destructive flooding – yet our community continued to show up to support one another with generosity, strength, and optimism for the future. We can only be successful when everyone pitches in, and in Dunellen, **they do**. As Mayor, I am encouraged and inspired every day by our collective volunteerism and unwavering dedication to continue making Dunellen a wonderful place to call home.

To that end, we accomplished a lot in 2023, including the continuation of historic improvements to our infrastructure, acceptance of sizable grant funds, and the continued revitalization of our downtown.

First of note, our commitment to providing cost-effective ways to improve our roads has been paying off, with nearly eight of our sixteen miles of municipal-owned roadways being newly paved since 2020. In 2023 alone, this included the completion of nearly one mile of road pavement projects through the Middlesex County's mill and pave program, enabling us to pave Columbia Street, Jadach Drive, Kennedy Court, Oak Parkway, Pearl Place and Penfield Place, as well as the ability to install new ADA-compliant crosswalks and replace severely damaged curbs.

Every road paved has received enhanced striping and signage to ensure traffic and pedestrian safety and enforce speed limits, especially near our schools, parks, and downtown businesses. This year in particular, these enhancements can be seen on Prospect Avenue. We also collaborated with the school district to build a sidewalk from Pulaski Street near Center Street to Faber School to assist pedestrian access in the area. Protecting the people living in and visiting our one square-mile is of the utmost importance. I would like to 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 \$4,435,460 in grants from State and Federal agencies for various road, park, environmental, and transit village projects that have already been or will be implemented over the next two years. For 2023, this includes a \$529,000 Transit Village Grant for decorative lighting along Route 28 between Madison Avenue and the Middlesex Borough border, and \$496,620 for Second Street Improvements Phase II between Madison Avenue and North Washington Avenue from the New Jersey Department of Transportation's Municipal Aid funds. We also received a \$436,800 Safe Streets for All grant from the U.S. Department of Transportation to assess and plan for pedestrian accessibility throughout the Borough of Dunellen. Additionally, Dunellen was awarded \$170,000 from the Local Transportation Projects Fund by the State of New Jersey to install rectangular, rapid flashing beacons at the intersections of South Washington Avenue and Orange Street, and New Market Road and Grove Street. Lastly, we received a \$39,600 federal grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior in coordination with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection and the Lower Raritan Watershed Partnership for a trash trap installation in the Green Brook to help capture debris and garbage from going upstream of Dunellen. We were honored to be the first in the State of New Jersey to benefit from this pilot

program. Through these newly awarded grants, we intend to improve the experiences of both residents and visitors with re-envisioned streetscapes, improved roads and pedestrian accessibility, and the protection of our local environment. We will continue to make strides towards improvements in the Borough of Dunellen by applying for grant opportunities that assist in offsetting the costs of these capital improvement projects.

The economic development and revitalization of downtown Dunellen continues with its renaissance of new investments and small businesses. Over the last four years, we've been able to close nearly \$68 million in residential, mixed-use, and façade improvements in downtown Dunellen, with several still to come along Route 28: in 2023, we welcomed ten new businesses, including a coffee shop, an event hall, several eateries, and a gifts and apparel shop; the Dunellen Downtown Management Organization continues to plan events and beautification projects for North Avenue throughout the year; the nearly fully occupied Dunellen Station development project has welcomed hundreds of new residents to its townhomes and apartments, and its retail space now houses Blue Foundry Bank and Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation.

These improvements will spur additional investments and increase commercial values of Dunellen's downtown properties, which is essential given 89 percent of our tax base is reliant on residential property values. The goal of revitalizing our downtown is first and foremost to help stabilize taxes for residential property owners. 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 helps the Borough to offset the tax burden on residents.

In addition to our redevelopment efforts, we conducted and/or adopted four planning initiatives to help guide the Borough's decision-making over the next decade on matters related to development, downtown improvement districts, and a Main Street program, as well as working to build out a municipal-wide strategic communications plan. Dunellen's Master Plan – the blueprint for Dunellen's future development and land use – was amended and adopted this year after its re-examination, focusing on downtown redevelopment and zoning, flooding and stormwater management, sustainability, and circulation and accessibility. Secondly, the Borough of Dunellen was the first in the State of New Jersey to adopt a Climate Resiliency Plan, which mainly focuses on ways to mitigate flooding and stormwater runoff through promoting green initiatives in design standards and assessing where and how to redevelop in areas prone to flooding. We also worked throughout the year with Sustainable Jersey on a pilot program to help create an Equity Profile and Municipal Communication Strategic Plan. The fruit of this labor will be assessed and hopefully implemented later this year. Finally, we worked with a graduate study class led by Dr. David Listokin at Rutgers Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy on the benefits of a downtown improvement district and a Main Street program in Dunellen. These initiatives will guide the Borough in sound decision-making as we continue to grow.

Based upon the recommendations from the Master Plan Re-Examination and Climate Resiliency Plan, we continued to work with our municipal planners to amend our Redevelopment Plan. These amendments include: clarifying intended uses throughout the redevelopment area; permitting new uses such as artist live/work studios, larger commercial stores,

grocers/supermarkets, entertainment venues, institutional uses, and film production studios; the creation of twelve-foot buffers between existing residential areas and new developments, no longer allowing buildings to go right up to backyard property lines; the creation of workforce housing; and the promotion of green design standards. All of these decisions were based on feedback from residents and business owners through various surveys and public events – a prime example of engaged constituencies impacting policy.

The Borough of Dunellen also adopted a number of quality-of-life ordinances designed to improve the aesthetics and peacefulness of our neighborhoods while supporting economic development. Some highlights include:

- A Vacant and Abandoned Properties and Storefronts Ordinance to establish minimum standards of accountability on owners or other responsible parties of vacant and abandoned structures and storefronts to protect the health, safety, and general welfare of the residents of the Borough;
- An amended Dunellen Alcoholic Beverages Ordinance to allow for restaurants in Dunellen to operate their liquor licenses on Saturdays and Sundays to encourage earlier operations such as brunches at these establishments;
- A New Chapter 152 for the Borough Code Entitled “Film Industry,” setting up a process that motion picture studios must follow in order to film in Dunellen;
- An amended Dunellen Noise Ordinance, making it more enforceable by the Police Department, and now Dunellen Code Enforcement, by removing antiquated language. This ordinance was written with the assistance of Chief Daniel Smith, Legal Counsel, Council Member Hal VanDermark, and the administration. Therefore, it went through extensive review by those responsible for enforcing it.

The Borough negotiated fair contracts with both our labor unions, representing our Department of Public Works employees and Police Officers, in which we worked towards mutual agreements in the increase of pay. Dunellen’s union and non-union employees are now paid at rates similar to surrounding and comparable municipalities. This will help in attracting and retaining a workforce. In return, the Borough was able to negotiate with the labor unions, as well as establish policy for non-union Borough employees, that moving forward, employees will have to assist in paying into their healthcare upon retirement. This is intended to help the Borough be fiscally responsible to its taxpayers by having employees contribute to these benefits in retirement while also continuing to provide quality services to them *and* pay fair wages to employees.

As part of our ongoing effort to promote transparency in government 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, as well as hosting monthly Walks & Talks with the Mayor. Residents can also sign-up for our E-Notify to receive alerts about important Borough incidents, such as emergencies and road closures. Additionally, we updated our Council Chambers this year to include improved microphones and new camera systems to better record and publicly view meetings in the chambers. 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. We also congratulate and thank Dunellen's Downtown Management Organization for continually improving its monthly e-newsletter, *Next Stop! Dunellen*, and Dunellen's quarterly newspaper, *The Dunellen Report*, which entered its thirteenth year of publication.

Notably, Dunellen was a final sixteenth contender in the national 2023 Strongest Town Contest! The contest (sponsored by Strong Towns) celebrates communities facing and addressing challenges such as housing, transportation, and economic uncertainty with resilience. I believe it to be a great honor for our square-mile Borough to be in competition with other towns across the United States in this way.

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

The Dunellen Parks and Recreation Department had another successful and memorable year in 2023, hosting several events and serving nearly 814 youth participants in activities such as basketball, tennis, track, soccer, baseball, softball, flag football, and summer camp. Fifty-three parent and guardian coaches volunteered their time to meet this 6 percent increase in participation. In its third year, the Hometown Heroes Banner program continues to grow downtown – thank you to Alex Miller and Kelly Seader for advocating for this program. We are also excited to welcome Kelly into the Parks and Recreation Department this year as a full-time Recreation Program Coordinator! She will undoubtedly do a fantastic job and I, for one, look forward to hearing her ideas to enhance our recreation programs. We continued to honor longtime Dunellen traditions such as the Memorial Day Parade & Ceremony, our Veterans Day Ceremony, the Christmas Tree Lighting, and Santa around Town. We recognize and appreciate the hard work of Alex Miller and Julie Grof, as well as our Parks and Recreation staff, the Recreation commission, and all the coaches and volunteers who helped support the department and its programs this year;

The Dunellen Police Department had an active year with 175 arrests, 3,500 summons issued, 2,400 motor vehicle stops, and the hiring of two new officers, Jeffrey Jones and Gary Smith. Detective Jonathon DeAngelo received a Meritorious Service Award by the 200 Club of Middlesex County for his part in apprehending a convicted Megan's Law sex offender. The Dunellen PBA 146 had another successful Toy Drive this year, collecting multiple trailer loads of toys for those in need during the Christmas season. Our Borough is safe because of our Officers, and we thank them for the risks they take each day to protect our community;

The Dunellen Fire Department continues to serve our Borough with honor and bravery. 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 due to the fire in 2021. We are all looking forward to when they can fully operate out of the soon-to-be George W. Hodulik Firehouse, which we anticipate will happen later this year;

We thank the Dunellen Rescue Squad for being there in times of great and urgent need for our residents and look forward to their new building at 635 Bound Brook Road. We happily announce that the Dunellen Office of Emergency Management received an Emergency

Management Grant this year in the total of \$10,000. Under the leadership of OEM Coordinator Homer Mosley, Jr. and Deputy OEM and CERTs Coordinator William Carlson, Dunellen's CERTs Team continues to remain active and has completed approximately 300 hours of training;

Dunellen Public Works, under the leadership of Alex Miller and Richard Herkert, hired one full-time employee, Gregory Stocker, to further improve upon the tremendous job they've been doing maintaining Borough properties, catch basins, and much more;

The Dunellen Downtown Management Organization hosted its annual HarvestFest in Washington Memorial Park, sponsored Dunellen Restaurant Week and Spring Into Wellness, hosted events such as Shop Small Business Saturday, decorated the downtown for the change of seasons and holidays, and hosted several grand openings for new businesses. The Dunellen Arts and Culture Commission hosted their annual Art Summer Camp, presented summer concerts and plays in the park, decorated the storefronts for the holidays, and will soon complete a public mural project that will be placed under the Madison Avenue train trestle. Both organizations really helped to brighten the spirit of our Miracle Mile 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. The Dunellen Diversity & Inclusion Committee worked to celebrate Dunellen's great diverse community, while the Dunellen Public Library – a cultural centerpiece of our community – continued to provide youth and adult programming, technological needs, and educational materials to nearly 12,000 visitors to the library in 2023. 2024 marks the 50th Anniversary of the Arnold Schwartz Memorial Library, and we anticipate a great year full of celebrations! The Friends of the Dunellen Public Library also coordinated their successful outdoor market in Washington Memorial Park this year, with funds from vendor fees benefitting 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 and other zoning related matters. Thanks to the volunteers who make up the Planning Board and thank you to Cherron Rountree and Lauren Staats for administratively keeping everything moving forward;

The Mayor's Cannabis Task Force sought additional feedback from the community and conducted extensive research regarding the commercialization of cannabis in Dunellen before deciding to recommend to the Mayor and Council that we remain opted-out at this time. We will continue studying the outcome of multiple lawsuits occurring between municipalities and applicants to further assist Dunellen in making its final decision on this matter;

The Dunellen Parking Authority saw a strong return of commuters to the train station parking lot and expect this trend to continue in 2024. To increase the ease and convenience of purchasing a daily parking pass, the Parking Authority has begun offering the option of using a mobile app for payments. This app, mPay2Park, can be downloaded on your mobile phone and readily used for convenience;

And our Municipal Clerks handled dozens of pet licenses, marriage licenses, and much more, while the Construction Office issued approximately 1,100 permits this year, 350 certificates of occupancies, and completed 1,800 inspections between all sub-code officials.

Dunellen also saw some of our local establishments, employees, volunteers and residents recognized state and nationwide! In our business community, Rome Pizza was awarded one of the best New York-style pizzas in the nation and No. 2 in New Jersey; Warrior Martial Arts was named one of the Top Five Martial Arts Schools in Central Jersey; Maggie Murray's Pub was recognized as the best Irish pub in Middlesex County; and the Dunellen Hotel & Rathskeller was named one of New Jersey's coziest restaurants by NJ.com. Dunellen resident Jake Mosca hiked the Appalachian Trail in memory of his grandfather Jim Mosca and helped to raise funds for Alzheimer's research; Alex Miller was awarded Public Servant of the Year from the Middlesex County Regional Chamber of Commerce; Recreation Commission Chair Jim Brennan was given the notable honor of being a Lifetime Service honoree from the New Jersey State Governor's Volunteerism Awards; Kelly Seader was awarded Coach of the Year for the Gold Division High School Boys Tennis from the Greater Middlesex Conference (GMC); Kerry Johnson was awarded Coach of the Year for the Gold Division High School Girls Soccer from GMC; and the late Laura Ruskuski was honored in memoriam for the Fay S. Mathewson Award from the NJRPA. Our Miracle Mile is filled with amazing people who achieve great things, with the individuals noted above proving that even in small towns, big things do happen!

Through collaboration, professionalism, and volunteerism, our employees and our community made great progress for the Borough in 2023 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 2024 and beyond:

The construction of the Dunellen Station project, as well as other recent investments into the revitalization of our downtown, has led to increased interest in Dunellen from builders and business-owners. We anticipate the construction of several residential and mixed-use projects this year. It is important to recognize the significance these projects will have in attracting new residents and businesses to Dunellen that will foster an economic boom for our downtown;

Our vision and duty is to make Dunellen a better place to live, work, play, and do business in. This year, we will make strides in assessing the benefits and implementation of a Downtown Improvement District. This will assist in marketing, attracting and retaining business in Dunellen, and will provide for greater funding opportunities for beautification projects downtown. To further revitalization in Dunellen, we will continue to work with New Jersey Legislative District 21 representatives Senator Jon Bramnick, Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz, and Assemblywoman Michele Matsikoudis to ensure that NJTRANSIT does not forget about the dire need to modernize the Dunellen Train Station;

We will continue to explore ways to save money and streamline municipal services through innovative shared services agreements with nearby municipalities and local agencies. Major infrastructure improvement goals in 2024 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;
- Working with Piscataway Township on the milling and pavement of Center Street;
- Using New Jersey Department of Transportation Municipal Aide Funds to improve Kline Place;
- Continuing to seek grant opportunities for beautification and infrastructure improvements;
- Advancing the South Avenue Culvert rebuild under the NJ Transit tracks to alleviate flooding;
- Strongly encourage other internet and cable providers to build-out infrastructure in Dunellen to help create competition in this market;
- Working on an ordinance to regulate truck traffic throughout the Borough;
- And developing a student ambassadors program with the High School so our youth can be involved in our committees, commissions, and volunteer programs to gain a better understanding of their local government, as well as host a Volunteer Picnic Day in Dunellen to celebrate and honor our countless volunteers;

We plan to look at ways to enhance public safety with the Dunellen Police Department through the organizational structure of the department and the assessment of the appropriate number of police staffing, with the hopes of adding a traffic control officer and community engagement officer. We also will continue implementing pedestrian and traffic safety measures such as enhanced striping, traffic light signals, and rapid flashing beacon lights at key intersections in Dunellen, as well as a Complete and Green Street Policy alongside our Safe Streets for All assessment. Additionally, we will also be looking at the overall organizational chart and behaviors of the Borough to see where we can find efficiencies in our local government so that we can continue to enhance services to our constituents.

Lastly, this governing body will continue to work closely with 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. We plan to work with our Financial Advisors, NW Financial Group LLC, to build out a revenue analysis from the redevelopment projects and work on a debt service payment plan to help alleviate this burden on the taxpayer. As we have so much to accomplish together moving forward, we will continually be reviewing and updating ordinances as needed.

I would 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 individuals:

- William Robins, our former Municipal Clerk and Borough Administrator;
- Alex Miller, our Superintendent of Parks, Recreation and Public Works & now Borough Administrator;
- Lauren Staats, our new Municipal Clerk and Registrar;
- Debra Weaver, our Human Resources Manager;
- Julie Grof, all Recreation Staff and the Recreation Commission;

- Richard Herkert and all of our Department of Public Works employees;
- Cherron Rountree, our administrative consultant;
- John Bruder, our former 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 and Ken Baudendistel, 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 our Police Officers;
- Chief Jonathan Scott of the Dunellen Fire Department and newly sworn-in Fire Chief William Scott, 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 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, the Mayor's Traffic & Pedestrian Safety Task Force, 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. In 2023, we had 125 volunteers participate in recreation programs and/or Borough commissions, committees and boards, and I hope we continue to build on that number. Dunellen's success is truly measured by those 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 whom without, I would not be able to be here today; my thanks and love to my mother and father, sister and brother, their families, my in-laws, and a special thank you to my Pop-Pop, from whom without, I would never have begun my journey into local politics. I am humbled and proud to serve the community that helped to raise me and my family, with 2024 sure to be an extra exciting year, given Lindsay and I are welcoming our firstborn, a baby girl, this February.

As Mayor of Dunellen, I promise to work with all members of Council to ensure responsible and transparent government is delivered to our constituents, with all residents feeling they are fairly represented and welcomed in our Miracle Mile. May we continue to devote our minds and hearts to public service above all else, so that Dunellen continues to be a place where our neighbors, friends, and families seek to create the greatness that uniquely defines our community. Thank you for your time today, and Happy New Year!