



Township of Bernards

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Outgoing Mayoral Report 01/05/2021 – James Baldassare, Jr. A HISTORIC YEAR

To say that this has been an unprecedented year would be a huge understatement. It was, for the first time in recent living memory, that we as a town dealt with the consequences of a worldwide pandemic. Despite the challenges, we continued to successfully function as a community albeit with many concessions and sacrifices.

When 2020 began, we had no idea of the fear, anxiety and uncertainty that we would face both as a nation and as a community due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 public health crisis challenged us, both as individuals and as a community, and we have risen to meet that continuing challenge. What we demonstrated as a community is that people cared about and for each other. I note with pride that various religious and community organizations provided their members with numerous volunteering opportunities. Tragic as it is, the pandemic nevertheless showed us what being good neighbors is all about. It showed us that we are a community of caring people. Volunteers pitched in, got people fed, supported each other, got engaged and are still helping each other to get through a difficult time which continues. Simply stated, there was an extraordinary level of volunteering coupled with the outstanding efforts of our Bernards Township employees and our many essential workers. In particular, I want to thank our Health Department for providing so much timely information to all of our residents during this unprecedented period. Our Health Officer Lucy Forgione and her entire wonderful staff have continued to work days, nights, weekends and then some in a relentless effort to keep all of our residents, as well as the other 5 municipalities they handle, with as much up to date information as possible.

I cannot stress enough how proud of and grateful I am to all of the many individuals on the frontline of the continuing fight against this pandemic. This includes so many people, whether they be in the medical profession or others providing essential services including, but not limited to, our outstanding police, first-responders and all of the incredible Bernards Township staff and employees who care for us, protect us and serve us in such a selfless manner. We all owe them an enormous debt of gratitude.

As your Mayor, my first priority was always to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all of our residents. Accordingly, in order to ensure that all that needed to be done could be done, along with our Emergency Management Coordinator, Lt. Chris Hurst, we declared a state of emergency. As your Mayor, it was also my role to help provide all of our residents with the necessary

information and reassurance that all that could be done to deal with the pandemic was in fact being done. In addition to providing critical information and facilitating the flow of information to the public, I saw an important part of my role as providing hope, encouragement and optimism. I endeavored to do this through my visibility and accessibility which included my many personal communications via daily emails to all residents as well as personal communications to individuals. It is in my nature to be positive and optimistic and I continue to be optimistic that we will all emerge from this pandemic even stronger than before.

I believe we should remain optimistic for many reasons including the quality and resilience of our residents. However, history also informs and guides us. From 1918 to 1919, 670,000 Americans and 50 million people worldwide died from a global pandemic known as the "Spanish Flu" which also destroyed the world economy. Yet, this tragedy coming on the heels of World War I, was followed by an unprecedented boom known as the Roaring Twenties. From 1921 to 1929, the US economy grew by forty-two percent. This period was also marked by incredible technological advances.

I see parallels between what happened after the Spanish Flu and what is in progress today with many changes in technology which will reshape our lives in what I believe to be positive ways. This should give us all hope that a better and brighter future awaits us all and that like in the past, we as Americans, will do our part and lead the way.

I am very proud to say that Bernards Township was well-prepared from a financial and preparedness standpoint to weather the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In many respects, the pandemic made serving our residents even more challenging, however; we met that challenge and because of our financial strength no employees were furloughed or laid off and we were able to continue to provide the necessary services to our residents without interruption. We were fortunate to be well-prepared and well-staffed to meet this challenge including the use of the new RAVE network for communication. As noted, Bernards Township's financial strength allowed us to avoid laying off municipal staff, keeping our police, first-responders and other personnel available to continue to serve our residents.

Early on, the Township Committee and I recognized that small businesses in particular were especially vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic. Accordingly, during this period of the pandemic, we relaxed certain rules for doing business while maintaining appropriate safeguards. In addition, as part of the "Mayor's for Main Street" initiative, we recognized the importance of the small business economy and, to this day, continue to advocate on behalf of the business community. Having an efficient and quick process for the granting of building and other permits as well as the responsiveness of our planning and zoning boards also helped mitigate the challenges of doing business during the pandemic.

In the midst of these challenges, we nevertheless continued to engage in the important business of managing the town and addressing significant matters. We created a Diversity and Inclusion Committee for residents of various backgrounds to come together and discuss some of the issues that are important to the many diverse residents that make up our town in an effort to better understand our citizenry. We created a Utility Task Force to better identify problems and concerns and also provide potential solutions on the recurring needs and challenges of our community with regard to JCP&L, PSE&G, Verizon, Comcast/Optimum and New Jersey American

Water Company. In support of federal, state and local elections, we engaged in an unprecedented voter education effort through our Municipal Clerk to provide frequent updates and information on the vote-by-mail election process pursuant to Governor Murphy's Executive Orders.

We also worked to keep the Pleasant Valley pool open during the summer in a manner that was safe. And we did all this while keeping the 2020 increase to the municipal tax levy under 2%.

2020 proved to be a year of many challenges. We not only dealt with the Covid-19 pandemic but, like many other governmental institutions and corporations, also suffered an attack on our website. No data was lost, or sensitive information compromised, and we quickly rebuilt our website. We took advantage of the opportunity to put in place a new and improved system that is better and stronger than before with increased transparency allowing all of our residents to see how their tax dollars are being spent on municipal, county and school expenditures and understand the relative allocations.

I would like to conclude by telling all of you how very thankful and grateful I am to have been given the opportunity to be your Mayor during this historic and extraordinarily challenging time. Although the job was demanding, it was my great honor and pleasure to be of service to this community. We are so very fortunate to call Bernards Township home, a community well-known for a strong and welcoming character with an outstanding quality of life, excellent schools, and public safety. I have no doubt that our future remains bright and that better days are still ahead of us.

Thank you and God bless you all.

James Baldassare, Jr.