

FIRST SELECTWOMAN
Brenda L. Kupchick



State of the Town

February 28, 2022

Members of the RTM and fellow Fairfielders:

I am honored to stand before you this evening as your First Selectwoman to deliver my third State of the Town address.

Upon reflection when preparing to write this address, it occurred to me that I actually provide a "State of the Town" twice a month to residents through my newsletter. I provide updates on new initiatives, town budget updates, recognize various departments, and share positive community news. At the end of the year, I also send out a year in review highlighting and commending the many accomplishments of the men and women who work for the Town in service to our community. Instead of reiterating the accomplishments and work that we have been doing this past year in Town Hall, I want the focus tonight to be on Fairfield's future.

We are coming out of the second year of a global pandemic and I am proud of how we have worked together as a community. Vaccinations and treatments are now widely available, and the movement to mask choice in our schools began today. While COVID will not disappear for a while, it is a relief we can now treat it like the flu or any other virus. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and thank once again the dedication and hard work of our Emergency Management Team, our Health Department and nurses for guiding our Town through this difficult and tumultuous time.

Fairfield is lucky to have Department Heads who are leaders in their fields, who willingly adapt to new obstacles, and often set an example for other Towns. It is an honor to work with these fine people in service to our residents and businesses. With seven new Department Heads hired last year, and a new Police Chief sworn in at the end of 2020, there has been a great deal of change.

Change is difficult and often the first reaction is resistance, but change is necessary for progress. I came into Town Hall after the largest public corruption scandal in our Town's history was uncovered, and my goal from the start was to first and foremost restore public trust, hire new talent, reorganize government, implement new protocols, and clean up the physical mess that was left at the fill pile and at many sites throughout our Town. We have made significant progress in those efforts despite the time-consuming and regulatory bureaucracy.

We have cleaned up a large majority of the contaminated sites around Town, we are making progress on the fill pile itself, and this year, we will tackle the big question of FEMA violations and remediation at Penfield Pavilion. Unfortunately, millions of tax dollars will be needed to clean up this mess; however, I continue my pledge to handle

this situation the right way – fully complying with the law and the regulatory agencies that were ignored in the past.

Government transparency and public accessibility to participate are important cornerstones for good government. I receive overwhelmingly positive feedback from residents that my newsletters have kept them more informed than they ever have been before. In my efforts to streamline government, I have held several joint meetings of all three boards on major issues impacting the Town, and will I continue to do so in the future. Transparency and accessibility through online meetings made necessary by the pandemic are one of the few positives that will continue. We have at the minimum, call-in lines so members of the public can at least listen from the comfort of their home to any public meeting as it is actually happening. Through funds made possible through the federal American Rescue Plan Act, our meeting rooms will feature technology to support hybrid participation by board members, presenters and members of the public alike. Never in the history of Fairfield has government been more open and accessible.

In my proposed FY23 budget, which was approved by the Board of Selectmen earlier today, we continue our reorganization of town government. Modernizing town government and services, identifying inefficiencies, and restructuring departments to increase accountability and productivity will continue to be my priorities for the future.

We have eliminated positions that are no longer relevant and have created new positions that bolster the departments so that they can better meet the needs of our changing community. I continue to receive a large amount of feedback from our residents by phone, email, or while out in town. I have taken all of that input and proposed a budget that is responsive to the needs of residents, businesses and does so with a less than 1% increase in the mill rate.

My proposed budget continues to maintain strong investment in Fairfield Public Schools, fully funds our long-term liabilities, and will maintain our long-standing AAA bond rating.

I want to thank the members of the Board of Finance that served on the Senior and Disabled Tax Relief Committee and both the BOF and RTM for approving one of the most expansive senior and disabled tax relief programs in the State. Included in this budget, the tax relief program helps to give back to those residents in need and those who helped build a solid foundation for Fairfield's next generation.

I am proud of the work my administration has done with the fortitude to make sorely needed and long overdue structural changes. My budget proposal also addresses the diverse needs of our community while being mindful of the Town's responsibility to its

taxpayers. I sincerely hope the Board of Finance and Representative Town Meeting will support my continued efforts to move our town forward.

Fairfield's budget process is a long one, which goes until Thursday, May 5 when the Board of Finance sets the final mill rate. I will continue to provide updates on the budget process and welcome residents' feedback.

Despite the challenges the pandemic brought our economy over the last two years, I believe that Fairfield has a bright future ahead.

It is truly exciting to see the revitalized Community Theatre downtown, a project that shows how partnerships between private business and not for profits can be successful. The Town is so grateful to Sacred Heart University and Kleban Properties for restoring this treasured landmark into a beautiful and inviting destination that enhances our thriving downtown.

Sacred Heart University's \$70 million investment in a premier hockey and skating arena will be a new destination in and of itself, and will provide valuable ice time to our youth, which is sorely needed in Town.

Fairfield University has also made significant investments in upgrading its on-campus facilities with construction underway to replace the former Alumni Hall with a new 3500-seat convocation hall and arena, projected to open in November of this year. The University's bookstore just celebrated its 10-year anniversary downtown; and opened at a time when so many bookstores were closing. The University is also beginning construction on new townhouses to meet its student population needs. Both universities provide an extraordinary economic benefit to our town and local businesses.

This year we continue our investment in infrastructure projects, and thanks to funding through the federal American Rescue Plan Act, we will finally begin to address and mitigate the flooding related to Rooster River. The flooding has caused extreme hardship to many families that live in this flood prone area. Currently, we are in the permitting process of this long overdue project and hope to begin construction on Phase One this spring.

Also included in the ARPA funds is significant investment in paving and sidewalk repair, which is very helpful after engaging in a professional firm that provided the Town with an independent paving analysis. All 285 miles of Town roads were examined and scientifically rated by this firm. I am happy to report that we now finally have a proposed road-paving plan that maps out a clear pathway to achieving

immediate road improvements as well as assist with a blueprint for investments necessary to maintain our roads in the future.

Improving pedestrian safety is a top priority and we have already begun our work addressing critical areas of need. ARPA funds are going toward the Southport Connectivity project on the Post Road and the Four Corners project in Stratfield will be finalized providing a pedestrian-friendly and beautiful streetscape in the commercial center in the Stratfield area of town. The grant-funded Post Road Circle Safety Study that will fix that heavily traveled intersection is also almost complete. Pedestrian improvements in the nearby Grasmere neighborhood are expected to begin construction later this year.

We also are using ARPA funds toward infrastructure improvements for our aging playgrounds throughout town. Several are already complete, and more are scheduled to be finished this year. The formation of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan is currently underway. This study will provide the framework necessary to plan and invest in in the future of Fairfield's recreational activities. I don't think it would be a surprise to anyone when I say residents would like to see a dog park and have also made it clear they would like more pickle ball courts.

ARPA funds provided through a grant to the Fairfield Theatre Company will help them to assemble an outdoor stage intended to host more free community concerts. Our Economic Development Department, in partnership with Parks & Recreation and my office, are working to come up with some new exciting events for residents, and enhance existing programs. After the last two years, I think we can all agree for the need to come together as a community for some fun, while supporting our local economy.

This year I am also assembling a bipartisan working group with representation from all town boards and the education administration, to examine capital needs in our town and schools to put together a comprehensive five-year plan that residents and Town boards can have a better understanding where Fairfield is going to be investing in the future. While the Town has a long list of infrastructure needs, our sewer system needs significant funding, specifically the East Trunk Sewer replacement project is projected to be upwards of \$10 million, a project necessary to support development at the Metro Center and the eastern half of our town. At the same time, our Senior Center is aging, Old Town Hall is in need of major repairs and our recently completed Life Safety Report shows significant deficiencies on the Town Hall campus that need to be addressed. The school district also has many capital projects they would like to fund.

Our town has many competing needs and I am looking to institute a bonding cap while we work through putting together the five-year plan to prioritize those needs, in order to protect our Town's fiscal health.

It is with great pride I announce the Fairfield County Regional Dispatch Center, also known as the ECC, is opening on Sacred Heart University's campus, as part of another innovative partnership. This first regional ECC in the state consolidates Fairfield and Westport's emergency communication center. Residents from both communities will see increased service levels such as a reduction in call processing times when every minute counts, and improved management of both internal and field resources. Once fully operational and successful, we hope to welcome more towns into this regional center which will help reduce operating costs in the future.

After a 20-year stalled development at Fairfield Metro Train Station, I am very energized for the pending sale of the site to a new developer. Plans have been approved to move this long-awaited project forward with a mixed-use transit-oriented development that includes residential units, a sorely needed hotel, and commercial office and retail space. I am excited by the conversations I had with the new developer about connecting the metro corridor to our downtown. The developer has indicated his intent to start construction of the first building later this year. The Town is working with the State to update the tri-party agreement and have it finalized as soon as possible. Fairfield has been waiting a long time for this site to be developed and I look forward to seeing shovels in the ground.

We are in ongoing discussions with the owners of the former Exide Battery site and support their efforts to redevelop that important area on the Post Road. While the economy under COVID has made it difficult, we are seeing signs our economy is breaking through the haze of the last two years.

While our commercial tax base has grown, we must continue to work to enhance smart growth in targeted areas, which will help lessen the burden on our residential taxpayers. Fairfield continues to have strong demographics that make Fairfield attractive for new business investment to take hold as the overall business climate improves. I am excited to see the Plan of Conservation and Development (POCD), which is underway along with a zoning regulation review, which are both critical to future development in Town. An updated POCD is important to the Town's business investment and attraction efforts. Our new Conservation Director is also working to revise our inland/wetland maps and change the fee structure to make it more fair for our residents.

The Affordable Housing Committee began work this past year on updating the Town's Affordable Housing Plan in advance of the June 2022 State statutory deadline. Since the last Plan was adopted in 2014, the Town's affordable housing list grew by 150 new units and closed the gap to within 45 points of the 433 points needed to qualify for a temporary moratorium under Connecticut General Statute 8-30g. The Town on its own successfully acquired parcels for new affordable housing this year and my administration is working on new and creative ways to build our own affordable housing to help reach a moratorium as quickly as possible.

The Town's long-awaited online permitting has gone live in the Building Department. This system, which is long overdue, offers residents and businesses one point of entry to interact with all permitting departments. It allows users to upload documents and track permit status through an online portal and will cut out many of the challenges residents face when dealing with multiple departments. Right now, only our Building Department is live while we test the system, but soon Conservation, Plan & Zoning, Engineering, Health, Sewer and the Fire Marshal's office will follow.

I stated in my first State of the Town that I planned to impanel a Charter Revision Commission, which the Board of Selectmen established last year, to review our Town's governing document and consider changes to the way our Town government operates that may be very helpful for future generations. I look forward to the Commission's recommendations that will come before the Board of Selectmen this year.

I care deeply about our community and the feedback I have received from our elected officials, and appointed officials, but most importantly the feedback I receive from our residents, that has been helpful to me as I have had to make difficult decisions required to lead our Town these last few years.

I am just as committed as I was the day I raised my hand and swore an oath to serve our community, and am looking forward to a new year filled with hope and promise for Fairfield. God Bless you and God Bless the great Town of Fairfield.