

FIRST SELECTWOMAN  
**Brenda L. Kupchick**



State of the Town

January 25, 2021

Members of the RTM, Distinguished Guests, and my Fellow Citizens:

I am honored to stand before you this evening as your First Selectwoman to deliver the State of our Town address. As called for by our Town Charter, we gather once a year for a report on the State of our Town and we reflect upon our accomplishments and the many challenges we face as we set a course for the future.

When I stood before you a year ago to deliver the State of the Town, never could I have imagined what 2020 would bring, and at that time, never did I anticipate the many obstacles that our town would face.

I and many others thought that our biggest challenge would be the investigation and remediation of the fill pile. Unfortunately, that was not the case. The next day after my budget passed the Board of Selectmen, I sent out my first newsletter with information about the pandemic, encouraging residents “if you don’t feel well, please stay home”. It was a concerning and uncertain time for me as a newly elected leader of a town, for my new administration, and for all our citizens. Just days later I signed a declaration of emergency and opened up the Emergency Operations Center.

Like all organizations, corporations, and governments the COVID pandemic was a critical development which took everyone by complete surprise. Throughout the early days of the pandemic, our Emergency Management Team, which includes myself, relevant department heads, members of my administration, and led by Chief Denis McCarthy, jumped into action and worked daily to plan our response. While other town governments shut down for months, I’m proud to say our Town Hall was only closed for three days which enabled my team to put together the necessary safety protocols needed to maintain services for our residents and businesses who were struggling with their own private challenges. I am proud of our team and thankful for the selfless leadership they displayed on behalf of our citizens.

Throughout this crisis, the well-being of our residents has been at the forefront of my mind. It served as my motivation and inspiration over these past 11 months. Let us not forget those who suffered from this virus and those in our community who lost their lives because of it.

It is during trying times like these that people of great character so often rise to the occasion to the benefit of us all, and this experience was no exception. I would like to take a moment to highlight the extraordinary dedication of our Health Director, Sands Cleary. Sands worked tirelessly with his department and the Emergency Management Team, under unprecedented circumstances, starting with the first Coronavirus Mitigation Team meeting on February 27. We first focused our efforts on community

education and answering the questions and concerns of our residents through videos and public service announcements.

Our Health Department established a robust contact tracing operation, which provided invaluable information and resources for our community. Today, 11 months into the pandemic, our Health Department continues to make thousands of contact tracing phone calls while also responding to thousands of calls to help keep our residents safe. They have worked around the clock since the pandemic started, and welcomed and accepted their responsibilities with grace and professionalism.

Most recently, Sands was responsible for setting up one of the very first town-operated vaccine clinics in our state, which provides a model operation for residents to be vaccinated efficiently and safely. I have received an overwhelming amount of positive feedback for the professionalism, efficiency and hard work of our Health Department. Please, join me in thanking Sands and the staff in our Health Department.

Chief Denis McCarthy and Sands Cleary were invaluable to me throughout this public health emergency. Working with them has shown me their leadership and steadfast commitment to our community. Chief McCarthy kept the Emergency Management Team on task and is always a few steps ahead of the next challenge. Chief McCarthy and members of our Fire Department provide leadership to the planning team, the public information office team, and the operations team to ensure our town was prepared, and continues to do everything we can to protect our residents and our town employees. I hope you will join me in recognizing Chief Denis McCarthy for all that he has done and continues to do for Fairfield.

Our Social Services Department and Senior Center also rose to the challenge by shifting their daily operations to helping on several different fronts including coordinating phone calls to residents who were isolated and needed assistance with our "Friendly Caller Program". They delivered more than 10,000 hot lunches to homebound seniors, and residents with disabilities, and delivered nearly 400 bags of groceries to families unable to get to the food pantry. Operation Hope, CERT and the Salvation Army put together food boxes and set up a drive-through food pantry so that residents could access the pantry safely. More Fairfield families utilized Operation Hope's food pantry than ever before due to the economic impact of the pandemic. I would also like to recognize the residents and community organizations who stepped up to volunteer their time to host food drives nearly every weekend in an effort to keep the food pantry well stocked. We should all take pride in how residents of Fairfield rallied to help each other during this crisis.

I am very proud to say we also quickly established Fairfield's COVID-19 Relief Fund, which raised money from generous residents to support 47 Fairfield households with mortgage and rental assistance, utilities, car payments and other living expenses. The fund is still accepting donations from those who want to contribute and applications are available for residents still in need of assistance. Thank you to all of those who helped make this possible.

During last year's State of the Town address, my focus was on economic development and attracting new businesses to Fairfield. The pandemic forced my administration to pivot from attracting new businesses to helping our local businesses survive. All hands were on deck to ensure that we did everything within the limits of our authority to streamline our normal government regulations to make it easier for our businesses and restaurants to survive under new state-mandated COVID protocols.

The Town quickly approved 50 outdoor dining locations under this program, including 27 sites that had not previously had outdoor dining, in an effort to assist our restaurant community. I waived permit and licensing fees for restaurants for expanded outdoor dining, and our building and zoning departments turned permits around in two days or less. Our Health Department also assisted our local businesses to ensure they were in compliance with CDC guidelines.

Our Office of Community & Economic Development responded to this challenge by launching a small business assistance program, through which mini-grants provided help with the cost of personal protective equipment, physical modifications and other operating costs associated with safety. Those grants assisted 67 businesses in town, which resulted in saving 124 jobs and creating 14 new ones.

Late last October, we also launched the new Buy Local campaign, an e-gift card program to support our local businesses, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce. Over \$40,000 in gift cards have been purchased since its launch. This is \$40,000 going directly to support our local businesses. I also want to say how encouraged I am to be cutting ribbons for new businesses opening during these economically challenging times. I hope all residents who are listening to this message tonight will make it a priority to shop at and support our local businesses as it is crucial to their success. Their success is our success.

In part due to these efforts, the impact of the pandemic was lessened on our local businesses and I want to report that for the first time our commercial tax base in Fairfield has grown from approximately 9% to slightly higher than 11%.

Looking to the future, I will once again prioritize working on key sites such as the former Exide Battery property and the Fairfield Metro Center Station, and other major commercial areas that are important for the growth of our community. While our commercial tax base has grown, we must continue to boost that growth, which will lessen the burden on our residential taxpayers.

This past year, I have met with the owners and developers of commercial sites across our town to share my vision and offered the town department's expertise and advice. While the pandemic will continue to have an impact on the commercial real estate market, Fairfield continues to have strong demographics that bode well for new business investment to take hold once the overall business climate improves. I am happy to report Fairfield has fared better than most neighboring towns, as evidenced by new businesses opening.

Having two prominent universities in our community has always given Fairfield a competitive advantage. They play a huge role in attracting talent to our town, which is instrumental for enticing new businesses and for business retention. Sacred Heart and Fairfield University are major employers in Town and have a significant economic impact. I will continue to collaborate closely with them.

Last year, the pandemic necessitated my administration to begin the process of fundamentally changing operations of town government. The first step of which was to negotiate and pass Fairfield's first zero percent tax increase. I knew this had to be a priority due to the financial impact on our community from the pandemic. However, I want to be very honest with our residents that passing a zero percent tax increase with all of the needs of our town was no easy task. It has presented real challenges for me crafting the next budget, which will go before the town boards starting in March and will be worked on over the next five months.

We have just begun this year's budget process and have already recognized the difficulty in providing basic services at a reasonable cost to taxpayers. I am pleased to note that the decisions we have made continue to ensure that the Town will retain its AAA bond rating, and my administration is committed to maintaining that rating. Our Finance Department, under the leadership of our new CFO Jared Schmitt, has, and will continue to, request all available relief funds. I am pleased to note that we have received in excess of \$550k in reimbursements and more is expected.

Upon taking office, my initial focus was to clean up corruption, environmental contamination, provide transparency to our residents, and new leadership and

management for town employees. I am taking these long-term and widespread challenges head on to restore trust and accountability in our town government.

My administration has worked diligently this past year with both state and federal environmental agencies, under the guidance of our environmental attorney and licensed environmental professionals, to comply with their regulations and ensure the Town is following all testing and remediation requirements to the letter of the law.

Our environmental contamination issues may have seemed to take a back burner during the pandemic, I want our residents to know that my administration has not let up our work and pressure on these agencies. Unfortunately, the pandemic has had an impact on these agencies ability to quickly review and sign-off on our remediation plans, and that continues to delay our ability to move forward. While this has been a black eye on our community, cleaning up the environmental contamination and the public corruption associated with it remains a top priority for me. I will include updates when I have them with our community.

While Fairfield feels like a small town, especially to me because I grew up here, Fairfield is not a small town anymore. We are actually a small city of over 61,000 people, with an operating budget over \$300 million. We have thousands of employees between the town and the schools, an active and engaged community and important issues that sprout up every day, which our community expects their government to be responsive on.

Because of the size of our town and the responsibilities, I hired talented individuals to assist me in delivering on my vision and goals to be transparent, informative and provide timely information for our community through my newsletter, and to ensure Town Departments are running at their highest levels. While my newsletter takes a great deal of time and planning each week, I believe transparent, regular and honest communication with residents is the most important job of an elected official. The response has been overwhelmingly positive and I am grateful to all those who submit suggestions for content or simply write back with a note of thanks. A look back through these newsletters provides a lot of insight into the work and accomplishments of my administration during this last year.

Before I came into office, the Board of Finance commissioned an outside audit of the Department of Public Works to identify where there were lapses in oversight and accountability. My administration was eager to receive these findings. In July, I established a cross departmental working group, headed by the Chief Administrative Officer, to meet weekly and go over the audit recommendations. Since then, we have

addressed 35 of the items and are still working to address the others, and to implement all necessary safeguards to prevent any future corruption or mismanagement. No policy can ever replace strong leadership and oversight from the top. I recently hired John Marsilio as our new DPW Director, who comes to this position with 35 years of experience in construction and public works from municipal government and the private sector. He has studied the audit and is incorporating the recommendations into the daily operations of the department.

In March of last year, I also hired James Haselkamp as Fairfield's new Human Resources Director. Jim came into this position with over 30 years of experience to help me in implementing personnel policies and procedures that have been neglected for many years. When I shared with Jim my vision to reorganize how our town government works, he recommended we offer a Voluntary Early Retirement Incentive Program (VERIP), which is widely used by municipalities.

I first discussed the plan with leadership of both parties of the Representative Town Meeting back in September of 2020. I explained my goal was to reorganize departments to create efficiencies and eliminate duplication and waste, make government smaller, more efficient and smarter through technological advancements and managerial improvements, and finally, change the overall culture within our government to improve the customer service experience for our residents.

I was excited to bring this proposal to the Representative Town Meeting and was pleased it passed last month. Seventeen employees ultimately elected into the voluntary retirement program, and since then we have been working to analyze operations, identify efficiencies of our town government that will be implemented and included in my proposed budget.

Over the last year, we have made investments in Town Hall to upgrade technology in our conference rooms, which proved to be very timely given the virtual meetings we have had to accommodate this year. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge IT Director, Dave Kelley, who has worked to ensure our town meetings could be held virtually and it has added a huge workload to his department.

Our buildings and infrastructure require investments that are reflected in the long-range capital plan we put together this year. I want to personally thank Selectman Tom Flynn for his work with my administration so we have one document that contains the short-term and long-term projects, and prioritizes them in a way so we can fund them in a fiscally responsible manner.

Last month, all three town bodies approved a \$5.1 million appropriation for the town to purchase a 12-acre site in Southport to provide our alternative high school with a more cost effective and long-term location. This is a good investment for the town and I was happy to work collaboratively with the Board of Education, the school administration and the town bodies on this acquisition. I look forward to having conversations with our community to receive feedback on ideas for additional uses for the remaining portion of this property.

I am also excited to announce that we are implementing an online permit software system to offer residents and businesses one point of entry to interact with all permitting departments. My intent is for this new technology to make it easier on those doing business with the Town, and create efficiencies in the workflow in those departments.

The Strategic Planning Committee was established in 2017 to provide recommendations on how to improve Fairfield for the better through incorporating public interest into local government initiatives. I was so pleased to recently meet with the executive committee to review their draft final recommendations which they will present before the Board of Selectman in the coming weeks. I hope residents will pay attention to this process and read the final report as I think many of their recommendations will be beneficial for our town. I want to thank the members of the Strategic Planning Committee for the years of volunteering their time on behalf of our town.

In conjunction with those recommendations, I will be starting the process of empaneling a charter revision commission to address the strategic plan as well as other proposals I have identified over the last year. One example is a proposal to change our Town Seal, which I believe should be updated, and can only be done through charter revision. In upcoming newsletters, I will provide more details on the timing and the process to establish the commission and will be seeking volunteers to serve in accordance with the rules set out by the Town Charter.

I have been diligently working with my administration on our reorganization efforts and assembling the budget I will be presenting it to the town bodies for consideration and approval. The budget I am working on will reflect the realities and impact of the pandemic, the economic challenges our citizens continue to face, and my goals for our community, based on resident's feedback. I believe the budget also has to take into consideration the rate of unemployment, wage stagnation and increased costs that are confronting our citizens and businesses.



The school administration's budget proposal that includes nearly a \$10 million increase poses a significant challenge for me and our community that values education, but whose citizens are facing financial difficulties. We must work together to balance both.

Certainly, when I chose to run for First Selectwoman, I did not expect it to be easy, but I also didn't expect to be faced with a global health crisis. However, I know the residents of Fairfield elected me to do this job, because they had faith in me to solve problems and make difficult decisions. I pledge to the residents of Fairfield that I will continue to keep my promise that I will do my best every single day. I will never allow politics to take precedence over policy. I will continue to reach across the aisle to work on important positive changes for our town and I will provide helpful information to keep residents updated and informed. My door is always open, and I will always be accessible to our residents, our business community and elected officials.

I want to sincerely thank our residents, for sharing your kindness through emails, calls and generous gestures over this past year. Your support and encouragement has been a real blessing to me through this difficult year. Despite the challenges, I am looking forward to a new year filled with hope and promise for Fairfield.

We're all in this together. God Bless the great Town of Fairfield.