

FIRST SELECTWOMAN  
**Brenda L. Kupchick**



State of the Town

January 27, 2020

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

Every year, as called for by our Town Charter, we gather to receive a report on the State of our Town. We reflect upon our accomplishments and our challenges, as we seek to set a course for the future.

As I deliver my first state of the town address, I am reminded of the people who held this office before me – both Republican and Democrat. I am reminded of two people in particular: John Sullivan and Jacky Durrell.

John and Jacky were in different political parties and led our Town for a combined total of 34 years. Two people who helped guide and successfully lead our Town for one third of a century – and there is clear reason. John Sullivan and Jacky Durrell were not guided by their politics, but rather by their love of Fairfield and their commitment to work every day for the residents of our community.

One thing I have learned at every level of my public service these last 20 years is that the people of Fairfield will always choose what is right over what is political.

In the spirit of putting Fairfield first, I must lead by example. In the first few months of my administration, I have appointed both Republicans and Democrats to serve in key positions of trust and accountability. I wish to introduce them formally to the people of Fairfield tonight.

I have named Jackie Bertolone as my Chief of Staff. Jackie brings a wealth of knowledge from her time at the state level, in the private sector, and in nonprofit management, and will be a real asset to me and the residents of Fairfield. I have named Tom Bremer as my new Chief Administrative Officer, who formerly served as Chief of Staff for First Selectman Flatto after many years in the private sector. I have retained Jennifer Carpenter, who served in both the Flatto and Tetreau administrations, as Deputy Chief of Staff.

I feel it is important to set a tone of collaboration and communication right from the start. I met with the Democrat and Republican leaders from the RTM to hear their priorities and establish a positive working relationship. In the coming months, I will continue to reach out to members of our town bodies so that we can all work together to do what is in the best interest of our community.

I would also like to note that serving on the Board of Selectmen has allowed me the opportunity to get to know Nancy Lefkowitz a lot better. Nancy clearly shares my passion

for Fairfield and my philosophy of putting policy over politics. Nancy, I know that you, Tom Flynn and I are going to do great things together over the next four years.

Since raising my hand to take the oath of office on November 25th, I have repeatedly called for a new sense of bipartisanship and decorum in our town. A look in the eye and a shake of a hand must replace communication through social media that can be mean-spirited and unproductive.

We are all Fairfielders and to me, that means, putting the best interests of our community first. We can disagree, and I am sure we will, but we can still engage in respectful dialogue and work together in the best interest of our town.

I am the First Selectwoman for every Fairfielder regardless of party affiliation.

Tonight, I will speak as I always do, honestly, plainly, and directly to the people of Fairfield. I am going to talk a little about what we have done to effect positive change since taking office just eight weeks ago, and lay out my vision for the things I hope we can accomplish together.

Government is supposed to serve the people, and our community will not have faith in our ability to stabilize taxes, grow our economy, invest in our schools and protect our quality of life, if they do not have faith in our ability to lead this Town in an honest, transparent and ethical manner.

In recent months, the reputation of our community has suffered as a result of the unfortunate events stemming from the fill pile. Please know that I am diligently working every day on this issue and will not stop until it is resolved.

Since taking office, the town has received two Notices of Violation (NOV), one from the DEEP and one from the Environmental Protection Agency regarding the fill pile. I have been working with the town's environmental attorney and the town attorney. I have four licensed environmental professionals (LEP) who visited the fill pile that I will choose from this week to submit remediation plans that meet DEEP and now EPA standards.

As soon as I have more information regarding the plans and the response from the environmental agencies, I will host a town hall meeting with those agencies and the Department of Public Health to update our community and answer your questions.

Regarding the ongoing criminal investigation, there are updates I cannot share, and I know that must be frustrating to our residents, but I am working with law enforcement to root out

corruption and fraud wherever it may exist within our town government. I know that you have many questions. More information will be released to the public this week through law enforcement.

In my administration, when an employee sees something, I have told them to say something, and I will not tolerate criminal behavior or public corruption in Fairfield's town government. And to that end, I have established an open door policy with town employees that has been welcomed and utilized.

I have communicated to all town employees that anyone with important or relevant information regarding the ongoing investigation to contact our Town Attorney so that he may properly report it to law enforcement. Our town attorney is also receiving and responding to information through the whistleblower hotline.

I am committed to working with law enforcement to bring to justice those who have compromised the health, safety and welfare of our residents, and town employees. While this overall process is taking longer than I would like, my top priority is to make sure that this issue is handled appropriately and with strict adherence to the law.

We must never again allow this to happen in our Town.

This year, I will be asking the RTM to empanel a Charter Revision Commission and begin the process of strengthening our Code of Ethics. We need tighter internal controls in many areas of our government and we need even greater accountability for those that violate the public trust.

While handling the fill pile will remain a top priority, I also want to implement my vision for Fairfield's future that was developed while listening and learning from the people of our community.

This vision includes focusing on economic development, modernizing town government and services, improving technology to make it easier for residents and businesses alike to navigate our town departments, while also investing in the infrastructure of our long neglected town buildings and roads.

My administration will be placing a renewed focus on Fairfield's Office of Economic Development. This is the face of our community when prospective businesses come to Fairfield they should experience a high level of service from a properly funded and staffed department.

Fairfield has a highly skilled workforce and two outstanding universities that continually invest in our town and breathe life into our community. Our two universities play a key role in the vibrancy of our economy and that is why it is critical that we work together.

We have a nationally ranked school system, beautiful beaches, three great libraries that offer programs for all ages, a vibrant downtown with the Fairfield Theater Company, and a soon revitalized community theater, thanks to Sacred Heart and the Kleban Family. Fairfield features a vast variety of restaurants and shops and a diverse economy, all nestled in a community that has three train stations, and easy access to both 95 and the Merritt parkway.

To grow our Grand List, the Fairfield Metro Center needs the type of mixed-use that encourages young people and working professionals to choose Fairfield while also giving options to residents who helped build our community and are looking to downsize in town.

We must focus on redevelopment opportunities along Black Rock Turnpike and Post Road that diversify the type of businesses that come here while also easing and improving traffic congestion on these two corridors.

While we grow our economy, we must also work to make government smaller and smarter. Our town has not taken full advantage of technological advancements to make government more efficient and consumer friendly.

Over the next four years, through attrition and responsible planning, my administration is committed to reducing the size of government through the elimination of waste, inefficiency and duplication.

To do this, I will be asking the Board of Education to work with me in identifying ways we can share services in the areas of Information Technology, Purchasing, Finance and Public Facilities.

At the local level, we know all too well the division between those concerned about taxes with those that want more funding for our schools. I believe these two concepts are not mutually exclusive. If our Town and our Board of Education can work together to find savings in these non-education related areas, we will reduce the burden to the taxpayer so we can make meaningful investments in the classroom that prepare our children to compete in a global economy.

The majority of my time over the last few weeks has been spent getting my arms around the town budget while meeting with department heads to go over each of their budgets. Early next week, I will conclude those meetings and will begin crafting my first budget proposal as your First Selectwoman.

One of the most glaring observations from these meetings is the consistent lack of investment in our town's buildings, most notably Old Town Hall, Independence Hall and the Bigelow Senior Center, that are in desperate need of overdue repairs. Some issues are more pressing than others, for example, the 41-year-old boiler in Independence Hall needs to be replaced and I just signed off on an emergency order to replace a 40-year-old boiler at the animal shelter that went down last week and is beyond repair.

Some buildings need an assessment and careful planning such as the foundation of Old Town Hall, which requires new support. That is why I have asked Selectman Tom Flynn to spearhead a working group of Town department heads to create a long-term Capital Plan for the town. Tom's rich financial experience will be of great benefit to our community.

This long range plan will allow town bodies and residents alike to have a better understanding about the investments we need to make in the short and long-term. I intend to have this plan completed for the next budget year so that we can have a document in place for town bodies regarding the necessary improvements to maintain and invest in our town's infrastructure and operations.

My administration is in the process of delivering on our promise to improve customer service in town government and create a user-friendly experience for residents and businesses through modernization efforts and technological improvements.

The town's IT department has been working with department heads to develop a robust system which will allow residents, contractors and businesses the ability to apply for permits online and make it easier to do business with the town.

Recently, the health department launched an online web page to look up septic systems and well information. We are immediately developing these and other changes to help bring the town into the 21st century.

These are just the highlights of the many areas in our town government that need attention and reorganization.

The next four years will bring good days and yes, tough days. I know that together we can tackle the challenges ahead and move Fairfield toward a brighter future.

I am so incredibly grateful to the people of Fairfield for entrusting me with the responsibility to lead our town for the next four years.

I am relying on those of you in this room who raised your hands and took the oath of office as elected officials, to help me do what the people of Fairfield elected me to do and lead our town in a new and positive direction.

I have a deep humility for the responsibility conferred by the trust of the people of Fairfield. I pledge to the residents of Fairfield that I will continue to wake up every morning ready to go to work for you and continue to earn the trust that you have placed in me as your First Selectwoman.

Despite the challenges ahead, I am very excited about Fairfield's future. I am so incredibly proud to be working on behalf of our amazing community.

God Bless you and thank you for the opportunity to serve.