

2021 Montgomery Township Committee Reorganization Remarks

MAYOR DEVRA KEENAN

Yesterday was a day of violence, chaos, and insurrection in the Nation's Capital, not to be taken lightly or glossed over. We will be addressing this later in the meeting with a resolution Deputy Mayor Schuldiner will be putting forth. But for now, we turn attention to things of a more celebratory nature.

I want to begin my remarks tonight by congratulating Committeewoman Shelly L. Bell for her historic swearing-in today. She is a groundbreaker as the first African American to serve on this Township Committee. Thank you for stepping up to lead this community as part of your long-term commitment to public service. We are very thankful to have your perspective and expertise on the Township's governing body.

I next want to thank my colleagues on this committee for your confidence in voting for me to serve as mayor in 2021. Our form of government in Montgomery Township is based on the idea that we must collaborate and build consensus. Not a single one of us can accomplish anything on our own. We must be able and willing to work with others in order accomplish our goals. We must form relationships, find common ground, and sometimes agree to disagree. It all starts with showing up and committing to doing what it takes to serve the community that has elected each of us. It will be my goal as mayor to continue to work collaboratively with those who are willing to do the same.

We are fortunate to have an experienced and very capable professional staff, led by Administrator Donato Nieman. I thank you all for your continuing work and service, particularly during this difficult period in our history.

I also want to thank my husband Sergey and son Maxim, for their unwavering support and patience as I take on this new responsibility; Thanks to my parents who have always

encouraged me from the get-go to be me, and to do what I thought was right; to my father-in-law, Yuri who is the embodiment of kindness and gratitude. Thank you for being you.

I am delighted that my immediate predecessor as mayor, Dr. Sadaf Jaffer, will continue to serve this community as a member of our new Inclusion and Equity Committee, with Committeeperson Bell as the Township Committee liaison.

I also want to thank the many elected officials for attending our reorganization meeting tonight. State Assemblyman Roy Freiman for administering my oath tonight as Mayor and I am delighted to see:

- Assemblyman Andrew Zwicker
- County Commissioner Melanie Marano
- County Surrogate Bernice "Tina" Jalloh
- County Clerk Steven Peter
- Former Montgomery Mayor Don Matthews
- Former Montgomery Deputy Mayor Brad Fay

Thank you all for your steady support of Montgomery Township, particularly during the difficult last year we all have experienced.

I believe the year 2021 will be one of the most consequential for our township. In the short term, we will continue to work as hard as we can to keep our residents safe during the continuing pandemic. We are fortunate to have a very strong, nationally accredited Health Department under the leadership of Stephanie Carey, whose leadership and team this past year has saved lives. We will do everything we can to support you all during this next phase, as we roll-out the vaccines.

We also must continue to look out for others and take care of those Montgomery residents who are facing severe economic hardship. I am heartened by the outpouring of generous gifts to our food pantry from residents and civic groups of all kinds. We owe thanks to Deputy Mayor Marvin Schuldiner for his efforts to coordinate with the MontyCares initiative that works to support community members in need.

At the same time, we address these immediate, pressing challenges, we must also dedicate ourselves in 2021 to preparing for the very different world that will emerge in the aftermath of the pandemic.

If this difficult last year has taught us anything, it is the importance of community —especially our connections to neighbors, green spaces, and available resources during hard times. This pandemic has caused many people to discover, or rediscover, the outdoors, nature, local agriculture, trails and sidewalks, and the value of local businesses. Many of us have also gained a new appreciation for our schools and teachers.

These happen to be the same reasons many of us chose to live in Montgomery. That's why I am even more certain than before that we need to double-down on our commitment to protecting our environment and connecting our community. It shapes my thinking about the infrastructure we should be building, and the problems we need to address.

In the coming year, I will be prioritizing environmental protection, open space, and trails for walking and bicycling. I am particularly dedicated to initiatives to reduce flooding and protect our clean water, promote green energy, and enhance our deer management strategy. I want to work on pedestrian and bicycle connections between our new municipal center, our schools, commercial areas, and neighborhoods.

We must help our businesses recover, support our farms, and rethink the mix of retail, office buildings, and home offices. The economy of 2029 will not look the economy of the past and we should be planning for that future now. For many of us, working from home, full or part

time will be the new normal, and that will change our needs and expectations for the community where we live and work. It also means we need to make sure we have the necessary digital infrastructure required for success now and in the future economy.

Our new municipal center, including the library, will be one important answer. It will be a destination that brings our community together—not just a place you go to pay your property tax or get a dog license. It will be a place where we can connect. Not only do I want residents to connect with each other at the municipal center and library, but also to plug-in to a world of digital information and solar powered electricity, and to access a growing network of pedestrian and bicycle pathways. We have an opportunity to make this new municipal center a true community hub, a center of connectivity. I plan to appoint a steering committee to make sure the municipal center is on the right track to achieve these significant goals.

One of the most visible problems I want to address in our community is the abandoned buildings near the 206/518 intersection. They are eyesores, safety hazards, and a lost opportunity given their central location. The days of sitting on our hands while buildings crumble around us, waiting for the owners to do the right thing and take care of their properties are over. The days of casting aside our own rules to acquiesce to developers are over.

Tonight, we are appointing dozens of residents to municipal boards and commissions. I am grateful that despite all the strain of these difficult times that so many of our neighbors are willing to step forward, to help make Montgomery an even better place to live and work. I look forward to our work this year, better connected, and working together. Thank you.