

SUPERVISOR JENNIFER DeSENA'S

2022 NORTH HEMPSTEAD

STATE OF THE

TOWN



MARCH 31, 2022

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Supervisor Jennifer DeSena

Town of North Hempstead

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for joining us for the annual North Hempstead State of the Town address. The State of the Town address has a long and storied history over the last 35 years, so I am **excited** to be here today with all of you, and I'm especially excited that we are gathering **IN-PERSON!**

First, I would like to thank the League of Women Voters for all their hard work and dedication to make sure that today's event went off without a hitch.

Planning an event like this and adapting to our "new normal" is no easy task, so thank you to President of the League **Regina Goutevenier**, Luncheon Chair **Amy Bass**, and her talented team: **Michele Lamberti, Francine**

Furtado, Judy Jacobson, and Marie Bellon. Let's have a round of applause for them and the amazing job they did today!

The League of Women Voters has long played a **significant** role in uniting our communities and advocating for the informed participation in our democracy of all citizens, regardless of **gender, sex, race, ability, or party.**

I feel very privileged to be here, and without the efforts of the League through history, I surely would not be here today.

A special thank you to the Harbor Links staff for all their hard work helping to coordinate today's event. Also, a special shout-out to Kim Corcoran-Galante and her talented staff for making today's event a reality.

Thank you also to all the Town of North Hempstead elected officials here today, including:

- **Receiver of Taxes Charles Berman**
- **Town Clerk, Ragini Srivastava**

- **Councilmember Robert Troiano, Jr.**
- **Councilmember Peter Zuckerman**
- **Councilmember Dennis Walsh**
- **Councilmember Veronica Lurvey**
- **Councilmember David Adhami**
- **Councilmember Mariann Dalimonte**

While I know some have rushed to paint a picture of us as a dysfunctional Town Board, I like to think we are just going through some **growing pains**. It may have been painful at points so far, but **we're in this together**, and we're all here to do the people's work! I am committed to making our Town Board successful through collaboration and bipartisan cooperation, and I look forward to continuing to work with all of you. **Together we can accomplish many great things.**

It's also important to recognize and highlight our collaboration with colleagues in other levels of government, as well as all our many local mayors, special district commissioners, school superintendents, school board members, and union leaders, all of whom contribute in different ways to help make the Town of North Hempstead such a **special place**.

Also, I would like to recognize all of our first responders and health care heroes, especially those who are in the room today. Let's give them a round of applause for their **dedication** during the past 2 years of this pandemic.

We are forever indebted to them.

I'd also like to acknowledge that March is **Women's History Month**. We owe so much to the intelligent and determined women who have come before us, and it's an honor to continue the tradition here in the Town of North Hempstead of **strong female leadership**.

Finally, a thank you to the entire workforce of the Town of North Hempstead, especially our department commissioners. Without the hard work of all our departmental staff, it would be **impossible** to implement the many great services, events, and programs here in our Town.

Today marks my **90th day in office** and I can truly say that time has flown by. Since my swearing-in, my team and I have spent an **extraordinary** amount of time conducting a thorough review of Town operations in each and every department.

Our Town government is faced with **many challenges**, and I am excited to be at the helm working to enact real change that I know will be in the best interest of our residents. My goals since day one have been to **streamline Town government wherever possible, increase accountability to our taxpayers, operate in a fiscally responsible manner, and lead our Town in an open, honest, and transparent way.**

Transparency is the key to a responsive government. There's an old expression that sunshine is the best disinfectant. Sunlight is needed so that taxpayers are never in the dark where they feel uninformed about what their government does for them. So, I'm excited to be announcing today some **new transparency initiatives** I will be instituting.

First, I believe residents should have greater access to watch our Town Board meetings. Town Board meetings are where the real business of government is conducted, and while our Department of Internet Technology does a fantastic job livestreaming and archiving our meetings, **more** can be done to expand access to a broader audience, especially our older residents who either may not have a computer and internet connection or may not be tech savvy enough to be able to tune into our Thursday night meetings.

North Hempstead TV is a fantastic resource that does a great job providing our residents with enriching programming. This was especially evident when we were forced to pivot to remote programming throughout the pandemic.

Our residents know that they can always find something interesting to watch on NHTV, such as classes about sustainable yard care, native plant gardening, yoga, or a tour of Manhasset Bay to name a few. But, residents have **never** been able to view their government in action.

Seeing government in action is one of the most basic features of government access TV. In fact, it's one of the main reasons why cable companies are required to carry it for free. Yet, in the more than 15 years that North Hempstead has operated a tv studio, it has **never** broadcast its board meetings.

Going forward, I am directing our crew over at North Hempstead TV, to begin broadcasting our monthly Town Board meetings every week, will be able to tune in and **see how their Town government works.**

Residents will now be able to see our Town Board hard at work on their TV as well (but I don't know that we'll be beating out Bridgerton or Succession anytime soon!)

Another transparency initiative I will be instituting is rotating "Town Hall" style meetings with the Supervisor, in each Council district to make it easier to hear resident's concerns. For too long many residents have felt **unheard and unseen**, so what better way to offer them the ability to comment directly to their elected officials on the state of the town than in a face-to-face meeting, filled with **open dialogue and fresh ideas.**

While our Town already takes public comment at each Town Board meeting, it's fair to say that some residents do not have the ability to come to a Town Board meeting to be heard. Meeting in each Council district will make Town government **MUCH** more accessible.

More details will be announced at a later date regarding dates, times, and locations. And of course, I invite the Councilmember in whose district the meeting will be to please join me that night and give our residents the opportunity to speak **directly** to us about how they feel regarding Town government.

As many of you know, although this is my first elective office, I have long been active in my local community through my work as Executive Director of the Manhasset Coalition Against Substance Abuse. During my time as Executive Director of CASA, I worked passionately to **educate and empower** parents to protect their families from the risks of alcohol and other drugs.

I worked to establish the Student Leadership Teams and Set Connect youth clubs at Manhasset High School to teach leadership and improve mental health, and I collaborated with the school's guidance department to teach warning signs of depression and suicidal ideation.

I have dedicated the last few years of my life to reducing the illegal, and underage use of alcohol, tobacco, prescription, and other drugs among our youth. While I am no longer in my official capacity at CASA, I still passionately believe that this should be a top priority of not just all elected officials but all families.

With that in mind, I am today announcing that I will be establishing the **Town of North Hempstead Substance Misuse Advisory Council**. Substance misuse is preventable, and just over the last year alone, we have lost over **100,000 people to drug overdoses and another 100,000 to alcohol misuse.**

Many lives can be saved through **prevention, treatment, and recovery**, and I believe not only is the Town able to do something to help the problem, but we also have a moral obligation to do so.

There will also be an expanded role by our **Disability and Veterans Advisory Committees** within my administration. In recent years, these committees have been allowed to languish and it is time for that to change. Stella Spanakos, a great friend, and co-founder of the Nicholas Center in Port Washington recently invited me to celebrate her Diversity in Business Award from Long Island Business News.

At the ceremony, we took these statements heard to heart: “diversity and inclusion should be viewed as leverage, not compliance.”

It’s incumbent upon us as elected officials to do all we can to protect our most vulnerable communities, and I plan to work extensively with the Disability and Veterans Advisory Committees, **listen** to their input on issues

important to those they represent, and work together to make our communities more **diverse, inclusive, and equitable**.

The Town's 311 Call Center is an outstanding resource for both our residents and our departments. A well-run department filled with personable and affable employees who go above and beyond to make sure our residents' questions are answered, our 311 Call Center is the envy of many other Towns on Long Island.

During times of emergency, our Call Center is open day and night so that residents who need to reach us can do so. In 2021, 311 answered **176,510** calls. While that's an astounding number in and of itself, I'm also proud to report that during the next week, we project that our 311 Call Center will answer **it's 2 and a half millionth call!**

I can't thank Commissioner of 311 Vinny Malizia and his fantastic call takers enough for helping us reach such an amazing milestone. We sincerely thank them for their helpful and courteous service to our residents.

The Town's Animal Shelter is another excellent resource here in North Hempstead, and 2021 was a great year for them as well. During 2021, 34 dogs were adopted, and 45 lost dogs were reunited with their owners. As a shelter dog mom myself, the Animal Shelter holds a special place in my heart, and I urge any of our residents who are looking to adopt to come down to the shelter on April 30th because it's **National Adopt a Shelter Pet Day**.

Our Town continues to support our senior community in a variety of ways. Slowly, as guidelines have changed and the world has adjusted to the "new normal," regular in-person programming has returned, most recently with last week's **Spring Fling at Clinton G Martin Park in New Hyde Park**. Many thanks to Commissioner of the Department of Services for the Aging Kim Corcoran-Galante for all she and her staff have done to weather the storm.

Project Independence currently has almost 16,000 registered members! Just last week, the first in-person Project Independence Advisory meeting in two years took place and it was my honor to be there and speak to the

passionate nurses and social workers who provide invaluable communication and assistance to our North Hempstead seniors so they can comfortably age in place and stay in their homes.

Phase 1 of the North Hempstead Beach Park Renovation project is currently underway, and it entails **critical infrastructure work** that will protect the esplanade and beachfront park from future flooding and erosion, while improving the quality of park experience through the creation of a living shoreline.

I am happy that after many years of public participation, planning, and design, the Town is finally making this investment for the future of the park, making sure that this will be a place where **families will be able to continue to make memories for generations to come.**

I want to thank Congressman Suozzi for recently securing **\$1 million** for the first phase of the renovation project. This is a significant portion of funding, and it's in addition to the previous **\$1 million** of funding already secured from New York State.

Additionally, I am excited to announce that Senator Chuck Schumer also secured funding for two more projects here in the Town, including **\$480,000** for the **New Cassel Community Building Renovation Project**, and **\$656,000** to help fund **Senior Transit Buses**. Many thanks to our elected representatives, as well as thanks to former Supervisor Judi Bosworth for her work on these projects.

Now, for a few more items of note. First, I am calling for an update to our **Town's Master Plan**. For those who may not be familiar with what a master plan is, a Master Plan identifies and addresses the diverse needs of our communities when it comes to decisions affecting **quality of life, sustainability, and delivery of services for our residents**.

Suburban planners recommend that a Town's Master Plan be updated **every 10 years** to account for the diversity and growth of our communities. To my knowledge, North Hempstead's Master Plan has not been updated since 1989.

A lot has changed in the last 33 years, so I believe it's high time for an updated document that more accurately reflects our times. I will be submitting a more detailed proposal at a later date to make this a reality.

Second, as my team and I continue to assess all aspects of Town governmental operations in preparation for the submission of my first Town budget, I'm announcing today that we will prioritize Town investments in critical infrastructure in 2022 and beyond.

One of a Town's primary responsibilities is to repair and maintain critical infrastructure, such as our **roads and our sewers**. But for too long, these have taken a back seat to other competing interests and have sometimes been **neglected** to the point of nearly falling into a state of disrepair.

Consider a neighboring municipality of comparable size such as Town of Oyster Bay- in 2021, **over \$20 million** was budgeted for road resurfacing. Compare that to the Town of North Hempstead, where only **\$4 million** was set aside in the 2021 adopted capital plan for road resurfacing. That is **woefully inadequate**, and it is clear that our priorities must shift.

In my first 90 days in office, I have heard from countless residents that they are **unhappy** with the state of our roads.

I'm proud to announce that road repair and reconstruction in the Town of North Hempstead will be made a greater priority going in budgets forward. While our Department of Highways resurfaces between 6 and 8 miles of residential road each year, I think that is **far too few** considering the Town has jurisdiction over 300 lane miles of Town roadways.

A plan must be put in place to address regular road maintenance and replacement. The roads selected each year for resurfacing are based on criteria established within the Engineering Division, so I believe the Town

should be **more transparent** about this repaving list and make it available for inspection by residents through an online portal. This is something I will be working on with our Department of Highways and Department of Internet Technology.

Last month, after finding out that all the members of our Town Board of Ethics were still serving on terms that had expired years ago, I moved to install a **new, independent** Board of Ethics. Under our Town Code, it is the responsibility of the Supervisor to appoint the 7-member Board of Ethics.

Having a truly independent Board of Ethics who are capable of exercising **meaningful oversight** is crucial to **prevent conflicts of interest and misdeeds**. And it is equally important that these members serve in guaranteed terms **independent and autonomous** of the outside influence of the Town Board and me.

After taking feedback from my fellow Board Members into account, I am happy to report that at tonight's Town Board meeting, 7 nominees will be considered. These nominees represent the **geographic diversity of our community, as well as gender, religion, and ethnic diversity**, which is paramount to the formation of any Town Commission or Appointed Board.

I also believe that all Town employees and elected officials should be subject to ethics training. Further educating our workforce on the ethical standards expected of them will be yet another step to establish an **'ethical firewall'** to protect our residents from potential conflicts of interest. I will be working with our Human Resources Department to further implement this proposal.

This past week, I announced the first in a series of reforms aimed at **transforming** the oft maligned Building Department. After a thorough review of the department's operations, my team and I have identified a provision buried deep within the Town's Code, that has **bogged down departmental operations, created needless and legally questionable**

interference, and shifted accountability away from our trained professionals in the Building Department.

This provision of Town code gives individual Town Board Members and the Town Supervisor a 5-day window to offer comments on, and even **overrule** the Building Commissioner's decision regarding expedited permit applications in their district. If the recommendations of the Councilmember are contrary to the recommendation of the trained professionals in the Building Department, according to Town Code, **the opinion of the Town Board member is final.**

This is an **unheard-of** level of power for individual Town Board members over the determination of an expedited permit application. Over the last five years alone, the Building Commissioner's decision to deny an application has been overridden on 56 occasions.

This provision is a slippery slope, as it essentially **could** make getting a permit not a matter of how valid your application is, but a matter of who you know, or even worse, how politically connected you are.

As elected officials, it's extremely important we avoid all impropriety, or even the appearance of impropriety. As it stands now, this arrangement under Chapter 2 Section 10 is legally improper and leaves the door wide open for **potential corruption, favoritism, and the development of a pay-to-play atmosphere** to ensure the approval of an expedited application. It must go.

If we are to begin to rehabilitate the Building department, we must first get our own house in order. It's taken many years to create these problems, and it will undoubtedly take some time to undo them as well.

No other Town on Long Island has a provision even remotely like this. I can confidently say this because during our research into this subject, when my team spoke to Building Department's from neighboring municipalities, they were met with shock and disbelief that this was actually **IN** the Town code in North Hempstead.

I'm proud to announce that at tonight's Town Board meeting, the Board will be considering a resolution I've introduced to set a date for a public hearing next month to amend this chapter of the Code and **strip this provision** from it.

My proposed local law will not only do away with this legally questionable power that has been granted to the Supervisor and Town Board members but will also **streamline the process** for an expedited permit by mandating that the Building Commissioner process the application within 7 days of receiving it, whereas previously there was **no set deadline**.

I look forward to speaking more about this tonight and I **urge** my colleagues on the Town Board to work together with me in a bipartisan manner to achieve this initial reform.

It's no secret that the Town's Building Department has been plagued in the past by issues and scandal. After carefully examining the Department and determining what works and what doesn't work, I can confidently say that the Department is in desperate need of a **culture change**.

I'm sure if we took a poll of all of you here today, **either you or someone you know** have had an issue with the Building Department in the past.

The Department has become synonymous with the slow pace of government in even the simplest matters. I'm sure even my fellow Town Board members would **agree** that there is room for improvement in the department.

It's not enough to pay **lip-service** to the problem, acknowledge its existence and hope it goes away while maintaining “**business as usual.**” No more band-aids or quick fixes – what is needed here is true **systemic change!**

While we are still faced with many challenges, I am certain that the best times for the Town of North Hempstead are **ahead of us.**

The Town of North Hempstead is a great place to live, work, and raise a family, and I am excited to implement these first new initiatives and move Town government forward in the best interest of our taxpayers. I am truly honored and humbled to have delivered this speech today, thank you once again for the privilege.

I look forward to continuing to work with Town residents and my colleagues on the Town Board to make government **more efficient and accountable to our taxpayers.**

May God bless you, your families, the Town of North Hempstead, and the United States of America.

Now, I think we have some time for questions from our residents...