

## Ciesla Sworn In to Newly Renamed Board of County Commissioners

By Art Charlton / Director Warren County Public Information Department  
(BELVIDERE, NJ, January 2, 2021) – Warren County government's annual reorganization meeting was "one of many firsts," noted county Commissioner James R. Kern III.

Kern, who was named board Director for the year by his colleagues, pointed out that it was the first "virtual" reorganization meeting, livestreamed for the public as pandemic restrictions meant the audience was limited to just a handful of invitees.

"Second, this is the first meeting of the Board of Commissioners as the term freeholder comes to an end," Kern noted. A state law signed last year did away with the colonial-era term, which Warren County's governing body had used since its first Board of Chosen Freeholders was seated in 1825.

And it also was "the first county re-org meeting without Richard Gardner listed on the agenda in some official capacity in probably two decades," Kern added. Gardner stepped down after six terms as a Warren County freeholder, the longest tenure in over a century and tied for the second longest in the county's history.

Lopatcong resident Lori Ciesla, a former township committeewoman who more recently served on the county's Transparency and Technology Task Force, was sworn in to a three-year term on the Board of County Commissioners after winning election in November.

The meeting commenced with Warren County Clerk Holly Mackey reading Ciesla's certification of election, followed by Warren County Republican Chairman Douglas Steinhardt, a former Lopatcong Mayor who recently ended his tenure as state Republican chairman and is running for governor, administering the oath of office to Ciesla.

Once Ciesla was seated, the board named Kern as director and Commissioner Jason J. Sarnoski as deputy director for 2021.

Warren County Surrogate Kevin O'Neill, who was re-elected in November, was also sworn in to his third five-year term. Superior Court Assignment Judge Thomas C. Miller administered the oaths of office to Kern and to O'Neill.

In their remarks, all three commissioners praised Gardner for his service, with Kern telling Gardner "your leadership, presence and institutional knowledge will be sorely missed."

The COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted the change in procedures to make the reorganization available to the public in a livestream on Vimeo.com instead of the usual session to start the year with speeches before a crowd of well-wishers, was at the forefront for all three commissioners.

Ciesla began her remarks with words of remembrance for those lost in the past year due to COVID-19, and thanks those who are on the front lines battling the pandemic.

Ciesla, Sarnoski and Kern all noted the changes in technology brought on by the pandemic that are helping to keep the public informed about county business, while also noting the struggles Warren County has faced with a lack of state funding to



Lopatcong Township resident Lori Ciesla takes the oath of office as a Warren County Commissioner from former Lopatcong Mayor Douglas Steinhardt while her son Nick and husband Jim hold the Bible.

fight the pandemic, and with state directives that have hurt businesses here.

The "one-size-fits-all" shutdown and restrictions have been "a death sentence to small businesses," Kern noted.

"Our businesses have suffered enough. Our children are not getting the education they deserved and that we pay for," Sarnoski said, adding he will continue to fight the state's "overreach."

Ciesla vowed to work with her fellow commissioners on the county's economic recovery, seeking grants and recovery funding from the state and federal governments. "Warren County will not be left out or left behind," Ciesla asserted. "Our voice will be heard loud and clear by those who need to hear it."

Ciesla also said she will continue to support the "pay as you go" philosophy to which past Warren County freeholder boards have adhered, and will look to promote shared services and other cost-saving opportunities.

"There is an end in sight for this pandemic," Kern said. "We will not return to a "new" normal but to normal. The immediate future will be tough but I know this board is ready to work and I can promise you and the residents of Warren County that we will fight everyday on their behalf to keep this a special place to live."

The meeting concluded with greetings and remarks from Miller, Gardner, Mackey, O'Neill, Steinhardt, county Prosecutor James Pfeiffer, and Sheriff James McDonald.

The board set a schedule to hold regular meetings on the second and fourth Wednesday of each month, with the first budget work session to be held this Wednesday. Budget sessions will be open to the public through conference call, while the regular meetings will also be on a video livestream, with access information published prior to each meeting on the county's official website, [www.co.warren.nj.us](http://www.co.warren.nj.us), and social media platforms.



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