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Scotch Plains - Fanwood



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CANDIDATE'S NIGHT...United States Senate candidate Diane Allen addressed the Fanwood Republican Club on Monday. Ms. Allen feels a female candidate will help Republicans win in November. The program also featured Congressman Michael Ferguson, who discussed issues impacting the Seventh District and the nation. Pictured are Fanwood Mayor Louis Jung and Ms. Allen.

Cheri Rogowsky for The Times

NEIGHBORS EXPECTED TO GIVE TESTIMONY

Fanwood Board Hears Application For Pleasant Avenue Subdivision

By SUZETTE F. STALKER
Specially Written for The Times

The Fanwood Planning Board heard opening testimony last week in a subdivision appeal for a Pleasant Avenue property that has roused concern among neighbors, who are expected to present their arguments when the hearing is continued.

Toby Two Realty, L.L.C. is the contract purchaser for 76/80 Pleasant Avenue, currently a single, 100-foot-wide lot located in an R-75 zone. The South Plainfield-based company hopes to subdivide the property into two, 50-foot-wide lots.

A single-family home already exists on the site, with another house earmarked for the new, second lot to be developed if the Planning Board grants the applicant minor subdivision approval.

Toby Two Realty is seeking seven bulk variances in connection with its appeal, dealing with minimum lot size, minimum lot width, minimum side yard setbacks and maximum improvement coverage.

During an initial two-hour hearing on February 27, the applicant's attorney, Peter J. Wolfson, of the Morristown firm of Dillon, Bitar and Luther, called several witnesses, who described for the board and a crowd of residents how the planned subdivision would enhance the Pleasant Avenue site.

Despite the large turnout, public testimony was held over until the hearing is continued at a date that had not yet been announced at press time. Board Chairman Gregory Cummings apologized last week to the audience for the postponement, but cited the lateness of the hour and the amount of public testimony expected to be heard.

Among the witnesses called by Mr. Wolfson last week was Craig Stires of Stires Associates in Somerville, Toby Two Realty's project engineer. He said the subdivision would result in one lot, where the current home is located, measuring 5,087 square feet, and the other lot measuring 5,074 square feet.

Additional testimony was provided by John Sisto of Westfield and Donald Sisto of Basking Ridge, principals with Toby Two Realty, which has built residential and commercial structures in Westfield and Scotch Plains for the past 15 years.

They presented a diagram and photographs of a two-story, four-bedroom Center Hall Colonial home that they are building on Scotch Plains Avenue in Westfield.

Donald Sisto said this is the type of dwelling they have proposed for the new lot on Pleasant Avenue, adding that "there is a demand" for such homes in the area.

Plans call for several alterations to be made to the portion of the property occupied by the existing house. These include razing a detached two-car garage and replacing it with a single garage, plus removal of a patio and driveway area to reduce the amount of impervious surface coverage.

While maintaining the project wouldn't negatively impact drainage of the area, Mr. Stires said the applicant nevertheless would be willing to install a drywell - a subterranean, grass-covered chamber, accessible by a manhole, where water is collected and then released into the ground - on each of the two lots.

The drywells, Mr. Sisto told *The Times of Scotch Plains-Fanwood*, would alleviate the problem of storm water from the properties flowing into nearby Forest Road Park.

Storm water management concerns had been cited by the Fanwood Environmental Commission in its report to the Planning Board regarding the application, since the area has experienced problems with flooding.

William H. Hamilton, a licensed professional planner with Keller and Kirkpatrick of Parsippany, testified on behalf of the applicant that the subdivision would bring the parcel of land more into conformity with other lots on the road.

He said the new home proposed for the second lot would "keep in character" with others on the street, in terms of size and appearance, as well as setbacks and the distance between residences there.

In response to a question from Council President Joel Whitaker, governing body Liaison to the Planning Board, as to why it would be more desirable to have two, 50-foot-wide lots than a single, 100-foot lot, Mr. Hamilton responded, "it's really the perception of the homes" as one

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Township Council Hears Status Of Commuter Bus Program

By FRED ROSSI
Specially Written for The Times

The new community shuttle bus program that will transport commuters in Scotch Plains and Fanwood to and from the Fanwood train station, should be up and running by spring.

Clayton Pierce, Fanwood Downtown Revitalization Coordinator, met with the Scotch Plains Township Council at its Tuesday night conference meeting to explain some of the particulars of the federally-funded program.

Mr. Pierce has been leading the planning and implementation efforts on behalf of the program.

Two shuttle buses, each seating 25 passengers, will run during the morning and evening rush hours on the north and south sides of the railroad tracks.

One bus will be devoted to a route serving the bulk of Fanwood and the southern section of Scotch Plains, while the other will serve the north side of both towns.

In general, the southern route will follow a path along Hetfield Avenue, West Broad Street, Martine Avenue,

Terrill, Lamberts Mill and Raritan Roads and South Avenue.

The northern route will be concentrated in the Mountain Avenue-Jerusalem Road area. Tentative pick-up schedules and locations have been set, although these may be revised as the program gets underway.

NJ Transit, which is administering the federal grant, will disburse grants to fund the operating costs of the program, including fuel, bus drivers, insurance and dispatchers. This year, the agency will allot \$30,000 per bus, or \$60,000 total, for the program.

In 2003, the grant will be \$20,000 per bus, and in 2004 it will total \$10,000 per bus. The federal government is also paying for the two buses, each of which costs \$90,000.

Mr. Pierce said he envisions utilizing bus drivers employed by the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education as shuttle bus drivers. He is presently coordinating with the Board of Education on this matter. In addition, he told the council that he wants the shuttle program to be profitable, through rider fees, which he initially estimated at \$2 per ride, and through advertising.

Scotch Plains Property Tax Rise Expected to Accelerate

By FRED ROSSI
Specially Written for The Times

With the dire straits of state government finances threatening future state aid to municipalities and schools, along with increased spending for public schools,

county government and improvement bonds, Scotch Plains property owners should expect a higher than normal property tax increase this year and in the future.

The municipal portion of property taxes is about 17 percent of

the total property tax. Municipal property taxes have increased modestly over the last decade. However, the rate of increase is likely to go up over the next few years.

Over the past 11 years, the average tax increase for local government purposes and the reserve for uncollected taxes on the average assessed home in Scotch Plains has been \$36 annually, according to Township Manager Thomas Atkins.

In a letter to the Township Council, in the midst of the local government's discussions on this year's budget appropriations and the property tax levy to finance those outlays, Mr. Atkins said that the \$36 average annual tax increase from 1991-2001 "will not be matched over the next several years, without question," for several reasons.

"State government finances are not in good shape. Therefore, the future of state aid is questionable and troublesome," Mr. Atkins said. "It appears obvious that there possibly will not be any increase in state aid."

In addition, Mr. Atkins said future tax increases will likely be higher than in the 1990s because of "the volatility of the health insurance market, the interest arbitration law for uniform personnel, the machinations that have taken place with our required pension payments, the demands of our citizens for more services without increasing taxes (and) the requests of our departments, boards, (and) commissions for greater sums of money than the taxpayers can afford to pay."

Mr. Atkins added that several service areas in the township government are requesting additional personnel, "which is always extremely costly."

The council is likely to introduce its 2002 budget at its Tuesday, March 26, meeting, with a public hearing to be held in late April or early May.

Mr. Atkins has already expressed some concern about local government finances, especially in light of the economy and a lower level of investment income resulting from the sharp drop in interest rates last year.

Fanwood Council To Seek Possible Ways To Reopen Skate Park

By KIMBERLY MERZ
Specially Written for The Times

During its agenda meeting on Tuesday, Fanwood's governing body discussed ways to reopen the LaGrande Park skate park, following the Recreation Commission's unanimous decision to keep it closed due to lack of ability to enforce rules for the facility.

According to Councilman Michael Brennan, the Recreation Commission voted 5-0 against reopening the skate park, which had debuted last year as an activity for youth in the borough.

Mr. Brennan said the Recreation Commission is not against the skate park, but thought that it had no way to enforce the skate park rules.

The council expressed disappointment and suggested that, with a new fence and supervision at the park, paid for by a usage fee, the Recreation Commission should reconsider its decision.

Council members said the skate park is good for Fanwood and that the borough just needs to figure out a way to manage it. The addition of a surveillance camera connected to police headquarters was also suggested.

Officials agreed that they would rather have the skaters at the park than somewhere else.

Under other business, the council confirmed that an ordinance supporting the redevelopment plan for a block of downtown land will come up for a second reading at the governing body's regular meeting next Tuesday, March 12.

The controversial plan addresses a

6.5-acre stretch of commercial land bordered by South, Martine and LaGrande Avenues and by Second Street. While officials believe it will spur long-delayed improvements to the area, merchants and property owners have expressed concern that the plan will negatively impact businesses along the block.

At another point during the meeting, members of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Garden Club requested permission from the council to have its annual "Mother's Day" plant sale in Fanwood, despite opposition from one merchant.

Garden Club President Shirley Farkas spoke to the council, in hopes of relocating the annual plant sale fundraiser to Fanwood from Scotch Plains.

Councilman Brennan said he spoke to the owners of two florist businesses in Fanwood in regards to the impact the sale might have on their establishments. One merchant did voice objection to Mr. Brennan regarding the sale being held in Fanwood, especially so close to Mother's Day, a major holiday for the floral industry.

Mrs. Farkas said her organization sells plants, not arrangements, and that the sale would last for one day only, Saturday, May 11, from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.

This small, non-profit, state-run organization has donated plants for various locations throughout the municipality, including two wine barrels in front of LaGrande Park, Mrs. Farkas said.

The Garden Club is looking to relocate the fundraiser, due to park-

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A TEAM...Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks meets with Assemblywoman Linda d. Stender at the Open House at her Scotch Plains office on February 28. Mrs. Stender represents the 22nd District, which includes Scotch Plains and Fanwood.

Cheri Rogowsky for The Times

See All The News On The Internet
www.goleader.com

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LaPolla Named Executive Dir. of Turnpike Authority

By FRED ROSSI

Specially Written for Westfield Leader and The Times

Union County Manager Michael Lapolla has been appointed by Gov. James McGreevey to be the new Executive Director of the New Jersey Turnpike Authority. Mr. Lapolla, who resides in Westfield and has served in his position since 1997, will begin his new duties on March 18.

It looks as if Deputy County



Michael LaPolla

Manager George Devanney will succeed Mr. Lapolla, although no formal announcement has yet been



ALL ASSEMBLED...Assemblywoman Linda d. Stender greets Albio Sires, Speaker of the New Jersey Assembly, left, and Assemblyman Gerry Green of District 22, which includes Scotch Plains and Fanwood, at her legislative office on Second Avenue in Scotch Plains last Thursday.

WF Planning Bd. Approves Development Variances, Public Objects To Antennae

By JAMES M. FOERST

Specially Written for The Times

Development of existing properties and construction of additional homes continues in Westfield with the recent approval of two applications heard before the Westfield Planning Board at the March meeting. The Planning Board approved an application to construct new cellular phone antennas on the roof of a residential building located near downtown. The Board also approved the construction of a new two-family home on the south side of town, which did not comply with the Westfield Land Use Ordinance.

The Planning Board met this past Monday to hear the application of Westfield Prime Properties, L.L.C., a local property development company, requesting approval to create two non-conforming lots from a single non-conforming lot, a practice known as "shoe-horning." The proposal called for rehabilitation of the existing two-family home located at 574 Cumberland Avenue and construction of a new two-family home on the newly created second lot. The proposed plan would require a total of fourteen variances from the land use ordinance including variances for inadequate street frontage and undersized lots.

This was the first application subject to the new, more restrictive, land use ordinance passed by the Town Council last November. According to previous statements made by the Planning Board, the goal of the new ordinance is to reduce and restrict residential over-development in Westfield.

The applicant presented testimony that the construction of two-family homes was the "predominant pattern of land use" in the neighborhood and that more than half of the existing lots were non-conforming. In response to questions from the board, the applicant reluctantly noted that if construction on the property were limited to a one-family home, then the application would comply with the requirements of the ordinance as to lot size and frontage.

Richard Elbert, a member of the Planning Board, said, "The idea is not to make additional non-conforming lots." This sentiment was echoed by Rafael Betancourt, Town Council Liaison to the Planning Board who stated, "This town is moving to dissuade this type of application; to stop over-development."

Kenneth Marsh, Town Engineer and Planning Board Member commented that based on the language of the land use law, the board could not reject the application. He noted that the testimony presented addressed each of the requirements for approval of variances and since "the proofs have been met under the land use law," he would support the application.

made by the Board of Chosen Freeholders, which will ultimately appoint a new manager. Mr. Devanney has served in his post since July 1997. The County Manager serves as chief executive and administrative officer responsible for the county's day-to-day operations and delivery of services to the 21 municipalities.

"I'm ready for a change," Mr. Lapolla told *The Westfield Leader* and *The Times of Scotch Plains-Fanwood* in explaining his decision to accept his new position, where one of his immediate concerns will be the popular, but financially-troubled EZ-Pass toll system. "I've been here almost five years, and I'm looking forward to the challenge."

For much of the past 20 years, Mr. Lapolla, 47, has been involved in Union County politics and administration. He served two terms on the Freeholder Board, from 1983 to 1989, and was Chairman in 1988. He then served briefly in the administration of former New Jersey Gov. Jim Florio before a stint as State Director for U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley. In 1991, he returned to Union County as First Assistant Prosecutor under County Prosecutor Andrew Ruotolo, and served until 1997. In June of that year, Mr. Lapolla was named County Manager.



DOWNTOWN IMPROVEMENTS...Streetscape work continues near the intersection of South and Martine Avenues in downtown Fanwood, as part of a comprehensive program to enhance the look of the business district and increase patronage of local businesses.

WF-BOE Gives Calendar Reading; Previews Budget With Tax Increase

By LAUREN S. PASS

Specially Written for The Times

On Tuesday, the Westfield Board of Education approved the public school calendar on first reading, with a start date of Wednesday, September 4, for the 2002-2003 year.

Final approval of the calendar will occur at the school board's Tuesday, April 2 meeting. The board rejected the previously proposed 2002-2003 calendar, which would have had the school year begin on Monday, September 9.

Several of the board members, as well as Superintendent of Schools Dr. William Foley, mentioned the many e-mails, letters and telephone calls they had received in protest of the September 9 opening.

The proposed delayed start of the school year was to accommodate construction at Westfield High School. Construction is scheduled for completion on Saturday, August 24.

Parents were on hand to speak out against the September 9 opening at Tuesday's meeting. Merry Wisler, President of the school district's Parent Teacher Council, spoke in favor of a September 4 opening, telling the board that two thirds of the children in town do not attend the high school.

"I'm distressed that construction companies are dictating the start date," added Susan Devaney. Dr. Foley stated that it was the architects who suggested leaving the extra time for construction delays. "The high school project is complex. The people you are paying a lot of money to are saying, 'leave a little elbow room,'" he noted.

The calendar that was presented on first reading on Tuesday night now calls for a September 4 start date, with June 20, 2003 as the last day of classes and June 23 as the date of graduation.

The calendar also includes the following vacations: December 23 to January 1, February 17 and 18, March 31 to April 4, April 17 and 18, as well as two built-in snow days.

Should construction at the high school fall behind schedule and the school cannot open on September 4, high school students will have to attend classes on February 18, De-

ember 23 and June 23. These dates are subject to revision depending on how many days the construction is delayed.

The new calendar will be available for reading for the next 30 days.

The board also previewed the 2002-2003 school budget, which includes an 8.6 percent tax increase. If approved, this would amount to a 24-cent increase per \$100 of assessed home value.

The increased spending anticipated by the school system must come from increased property taxes, as no increase in state aid will occur this year for Westfield. About 90 percent of the school spending is funded by taxes from property owners. Approximately 7.4 percent of the proposed budget is scheduled to come from state aid.

The proposed budget reflects an 8 percent increase in operating expenses and a 39 percent increase in debt service. The school board budget proposes to increase the operating spending by \$4.2 million. Construction at Westfield High School has caused the increase in the debt service.

"This year, we feel the full impact of the high school bond," Dr. Foley explained. "Even if we had no increase in the budget, it would cost you six cents."

Other proposed spending hikes include a \$1.46 million increase in personnel costs; a \$1.37 million increase in insurance costs, and a \$799,772 increase in special education tuition and services.

The budget also proposes additional spending for increased teacher training; a ninth grade humanities program; a pilot program for gifted and talented students in kindergarten through grade 8; computer replacements for the intermediate school special education and the Advanced Learning Program; improvement of athletic fields; updated sixth grade mathematics; a new elementary social studies program; Westfield High School foreign language curricula and new text books.

"(The) intent is to lay this out for the board members and the public (to view). Nothing is set in stone here," Board President Arlene Gardner said. "We may hear from the public that every item is important. We're actually in a lot better shape than most school districts because we don't get a lot of money from the state."

Although the budget maximum mandated by the state is not yet known, a possible second increase

in spending of \$783,601 has been proposed by the school board to include elementary world language, elementary guidance, eighth grade sports, new staff and wireless computers at both intermediate schools.

Board member William Wallace pointed out that although there may be two questions on the ballot, it is still one budget.

"I understand that this is a difficult tax year. Some communities will choose to make substantial cuts. We need some dialogue; we need to hear from people," Dr. Foley stated.

The proposed budget is open for public discussion until Tuesday, March 26, and there will be a work session meeting on Tuesday March 12, for the board to further discuss and make changes.

See it all on the Web!
www.goleader.com



DISTINGUISHED SERVICE...Specialist Tony Boscia, the son of Joe and Sue Boscia of Westfield, was recently named "Soldier of the Month" for January for the 2nd Battalion, 34th Armored, 1st Infantry Division at Fort Riley, Kansas, where his parents were also stationed. He serves as a gunner on an M-1 Abrams tank in that unit. The soldier graduated from Holy Trinity School in Westfield, St. Joseph's High School in Metuchen and the University of Scranton. He previously served for eight months with the peace-keeping force in Bosnia.

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