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Blizzard Provides 'What If' Time For Thinking on Fiscal Matters

Many people were relieved that it snowed Sunday. This year's winter has been so mild that it was eerie. Now we know that Mother Nature is back to normal. Fortunately, the blizzard occurred on Sunday so that residents could dig out and get to work on Monday without too much disruption.

Given the storm's magnitude, Westfield streets were well-plowed. The guys from the Department of Public Works did a good job. Often, DPW crews bear the brunt of criticism. Westfield's streets are extensive and nearly impossible to clear in a day or two. Scotch Plains and Fanwood crews consistently receive high marks from the public. Perhaps their assignments are easier.

New York City claims this storm was a 60-year record, with 26 inches received. Our suburbs received perhaps 20 inches. The school children were happy Monday with the day off.

When one is sequestered by a storm, there is time to ponder. As example, if you were Governor Jon Corzine, charged to deal with the fiscal mess at the state, what actions would you take?

Would you raise taxes on all fronts, lay off employees, reduce programs, stop borrowing, freeze investments on arenas, stop giveaways on developments, or all of the above? What would you direct other sub-governments to do, meaning counties, municipalities, boards of education and utilities?

Is the problem too big to ignore? Will the governor take sweeping action? Could he declare a "State of Fiscal Emergency" and order all sub-governments and boards of education to freeze budgets and tax levies until the books are brought back into order?

How could county government, towns, school boards and sewer authorities respond? It's dizzying to think of them all at once. Perhaps looking at just one area might enable coherency.

Union County is in the midst of budget meetings where it seeks \$413 million - a 5.9 percent rise from last year. How could the county deal with a fiscal emergency if imposed by the governor? About half of the county budget is for salaries and other direct costs of salaries such as benefits. At the hoped for budget of \$413 million, the county indicates it will lay off employees to save \$6 million.

Where will this come from? Could \$6 million be saved without laying off employees? A "What If" analysis using the spreadsheet of county salaries provides clues. We've run a few calculations using the county salary spreadsheet.

One condition we set was "No Layoffs." A second condition was "No salary cut for those earning \$50,000 or less per year." Then we established a formula to give a pay cut only to those earning in excess of \$50,000 - a sliding scale algorithm. The more one makes over \$50Gs, the more cut in pay. We estimated "other direct costs" of salaries to be 30 percent. Then, we set the total savings requirement to be \$6 million.

The "What If" analysis to save \$6 million without layoffs yielded the following results: Of the 2,959 county employees, 1,320 (44.6 percent) earn more than \$50Gs per year. 55.4 percent would be unaffected by the analysis. Those earning \$75,000 per year would receive a 2 percent pay cut. Those earning \$100,000 per year would receive a 6 percent pay cut. The top, in the \$150,000 range and above, would receive a pay cut of 12 percent.

The current average county salary is \$51,064 per year. With the above "What If," the average would become \$49,482 per year. The median stays the

same at \$46,785 per year. If the hypothetical governor's "State of Fiscal Emergency" demanded more, then as far as salaries are concerned at the county, one would be forced to examine "honorarium" salaries, individuals collecting salaries from more than one government entity, etc. Where there are question marks as to what such an individual may be doing to deserve a salary, it may be necessary to request a time sheet to see if that person is actually there, doing something, or on another job instead.

The other half of the county budget would require analysis too if the governor declared the emergency. What monies are being spent on initiatives such as the zoo in Scotch Plains, bringing the Jets to Berkeley Heights, expanding the Magnet School, etc. - well...

Monday night, there were two dramatic demonstrations by citizens in the county - one in Scotch Plains and one in Berkeley Heights.

In Scotch Plains, 300 or more citizens showed up to hear a county presentation at the zoning board meeting, overloading the municipal building and forcing the fire department to close the meeting. Citizens are enraged over the planned development of the Ponderosa Farm on Cooper Road by the county.

The county purchased the 23-acre property with \$10 million of "Open Space" taxpayer money. Citizens were first relieved, thinking the land was to be preserved. Now, county development plans for an amusement park type of petting zoo have surfaced where the land is to be leased to a private company for \$50,000 per year. The citizens are planning to rent buses to attend and protest at the freeholder meeting in Elizabeth tonight (Thursday). They've hired a lawyer to examine the contracts and challenge the legality of the matter.

In neighboring Berkeley Heights Monday night, Mayor David Cohen had a police car painted Jet green, green and white fireworks were set off and kids were told how great it would be to have the Jets practice camp built in Berkeley Heights on the Connell property by Runnells Hospital. Even to Giants fans, this sounds like fun.

However, to battle-weary Westfielders regarding "areas in need of development," the ugly word, PILOT, is an immediate "red flag" in the financial discussion of the county's Berkeley Heights initiative for the Jets practice complex development. For two years, Westfielders examined the PILOT scheme proposed downtown and demanded a vote. The knowledgeable citizens crushed the proposal at the voting booth.

PILOT stands for "Payment in Lieu of Taxes." After all is said and done, this is a maneuver to remove the property from the tax rolls so that school taxes are avoided. Then, the money is funneled to the development project that would otherwise be less viable. Later on, homeowners find their property taxes rising because of a shortfall in school tax collections.

No matter how many green balloons, green police cars or green fireworks there are, the financials must be examined. Who's getting paid is what must be uncovered.

Perhaps the governor should declare a "State of Fiscal Emergency" to force a hard look at everything going on.

There wasn't enough time during the blizzard to get into schools, towns and utilities.

SP-F BOE President Nelson Notes Respect For All Interests Concerned

Editor's Note: The letter was sent to Mr. and Mrs. Hiatt in response to their letter to the SP-F Board of Education and published in the newspaper last week.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Hiatt, Thank you for taking the time to write to the board with your concerns regarding our current contract negotiations with the SPFEA. We are pleased to hear that you value the education your children received in our district and that you realize the need to support the school budget. However, I must respond to some of your other statements, which imply that the board is the cause of the current stalemate and that the board will not "prioritize esteem for the teachers."

I do not understand why asking our staff members to help us control the spiraling cost of health benefits and having a professional dialogue about how together we can tackle this problem is looked upon as not respecting or caring for our teachers. In fact, the board is trying to maintain staff positions, as increasing benefits costs and budget caps will soon force us to cut staff. This board has always shown respect and concern for our staff. But when the money's not there, you can't spend it.

You ask how we will "savor the offloading of healthcare costs onto the shoulders of your grandchildren's teachers who make an average of \$52,000 per year." The salary you quote is actually the median, not average salary as quoted in the NJ State School Report Card. Half of our teachers make above and half make below that figure. Under the current contract, our teachers earn salaries that range from \$43,460 to \$99,192. Our median is low compared to the rest of the state because we have hired so many new teach-

ers in the past few years as our more experienced teachers have retired. We do have many teachers who earn at the top of the salary guide, over \$90,000 a year. In fact, the mid-point in the guide in SP-F is very close to the average household salary for SP-F, according to the most recent census data. Our salary settlements have always been in line with the rest of Union County and will continue to be so. By the time our grandchildren are in school, the median salary will be well above \$52,000.

You question if tax savings will be erased by selling your house for \$20,000 less than it might have commanded in a well-regarded district. The numbers of families flooding into these two towns to enter this school district and the incredible selling prices local residents are receiving prove that this is a well-regarded district and that local property values are at an all-time high. But local taxpayers cannot bear much more, and the board is well aware of that.

The board tries very hard to "do what is necessary to set aside enmity and hardened stances." We value the good working relationship that we have with the SPFEA when we are not negotiating. Our negotiations have been cordial and respectful; we just do not agree on certain points. We hope that in the negotiations for our next contract, we can try a different approach, but to try something new, there must be a willing spirit from both sides.

In the meantime, the board fully intends to "settle equitably" with a contract that is fair to the staff, the children and the community.

Thank you for your interest.
Linda Nelson
President, Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education

Resident Writes Cooper Road Petting Zoo in Scotch Plains is Poor Deal

Editor's Note: This letter was addressed to Union County Freeholder Chairman Alexander Mirabella and copied to *The Westfield Leader* and *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*.

Chairman Mirabella, I, and many others, applaud your long history of supporting the preservation of open space in Union County. However, the board's decision to locate a petting zoo on Cooper Road in Scotch Plains is a mistake. Besides the traffic congestion, garbage and noise the zoo will generate in Scotch Plains, this zoo is not about educating children as Green Meadows would have you believe. It is purely about profit. In our research, one of Green Meadows' petting zoos in Wisconsin generates over 1,000 visitors each day! Even if the Scotch Plains zoo visitors are half of that number, consider the environmental and quality of life impact on the community. In addition, just estimating that 500 visitors spend \$15 (the admissions alone will be \$9 initially), for six months of operations,

the park will generate about \$1.3 million! The cost of labor and animals is quite low and, best of all from Green Meadows' viewpoint, they are only paying Union County \$50,000 for the use of land that cost taxpayers \$10 million. That is a very good deal for Green Meadows and a very poor one for Scotch Plains and Union County.

With the Esposito Farm, you supported a community park with preserved wetlands and walking paths. Why was that option not considered for the Ponderosa Farms property? There are so many other options available for the Ponderosa Farm property that would enhance the community and have a lower quality of life impact, we implore you and your fellow freeholders to reconsider your decision. Do not let Green Meadows line their pockets at the expense of residents of Union County. Stop the petting zoo now and preserve your admirable and far-sighted legacy of preserving open spaces in Union County.

Phillip Melville
Scotch Plains

Westfield Rotary Club Reminds Readers of Their Scholarships

I write in follow-up to Michael Pollack's article, "Are Students Aware of Available Scholarships?" that appeared in *The Westfield Leader*, Thursday, February 9.

In his survey of local scholarships, Mr. Pollack neglects to mention Westfield's largest continuous scholarship program, the Rotary Club of Westfield Scholarship Program, established in 1954 as the direct successor to the club's loan program started in 1922 under the leadership of Charles Philhower, who was then Superintendent of Schools and President of the Rotary Club. To date, the club has made 1,425 scholarship awards for a total of \$1.8 million to local students who demonstrate academic excellence, service to the community and financial need.

The scholarships are funded from proceeds of Rotary's town tradition, the Annual Pancake Day, and by the non-profit Westfield Rotary Club Foundation College Scholarship Fund comprised of contributions and bequests to the club by generous members and local citizens.

Rotary also administers four Wallace Scholarships in collaboration with the Westfield Foundation as well as the Gerdes Memorial Scholarship.

Students who are Westfield residents enrolled in the school district or matriculating at other accredited area high schools that are interested in applying for a Rotary scholarship may contact the Westfield High School Guidance Office for further information. This year, Pancake Day will be held March 11 from 8 a.m. to noon at Westfield High School.

The February 9 edition of the paper calls for advertising space reservations in the upcoming 34th Annual Edition of *This is Westfield* which, according to the ad, will feature the region's business, education, civic, government and cultural organizations. Last year's edition of *This is Westfield* neglected to mention that Westfield is one of 32,198 towns in 168 nations world-wide whose good fortune it is to have a Rotary club.

Nancy Jackson, President, Rotary Club of Westfield

WF School Budget Education Session Described as Extremely Informative

On January 30, I had the opportunity to attend the educational session scheduled by Dr. Foley and our Board of Education. I have to say the presentation was extremely well done and quite informative. I felt the session cleared up various misconceptions and misinformation that many people have regarding our school budget.

What were most shocking to hear were the expenditures the district spends on Special Education, approximately 21 percent of a \$71 million budget. What is even more worrisome is the lack of state aid we receive to help pay for Special Education.

Moreover, it was also interesting to learn that our municipal tax dollars do not pay for the pensions of our teachers, it is paid for by the State of New Jersey. How the state will shore up the present pension deficit is another huge problem unto itself.

Tell Freeholders Your Concern About Open Space Development

When Union County taxpayers approved the Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund in 2000, and agreed to a surtax to support it, I doubt that many of those voting in favor envisioned "open space" to include a 250-car parking lot, 24 busloads of children visiting this space per day, chemical toilets and souvenir and food concessions. Yet, this is precisely what the county plans for 23 acres of land it recently purchased in Scotch Plains.

I also wonder if many voters realized that the county would place some of this "protected" space into the hands of a private, for-profit company that will generate income for its owners through the use of land acquired by the county with taxpayer dollars. And if county taxpayers want to enjoy the property, we have to pay an admission fee.

The county's plan to lease the former Ponderosa farm property in Scotch Plains, acquired under the Open Space trust fund, to Green Meadows Children's Farm in my opinion violates the spirit and intent of the Open Space Fund. The plan calls for the operation of a "children's educational farm" that will function primarily

as a field trip destination for surrounding schools, but will also be open to the general public.

While there is nothing wrong with offering children the opportunity to see farm animals and engage in the other planned attractions, a facility of this type does not belong in the middle of a residential neighborhood - the zoo is surrounded on all sides by private residences.

Local residents will without doubt have to deal with a significant increase in noise and traffic. What's more, should this plan be allowed to proceed, property values in the surrounding area will without a doubt be hurt. Did anyone voting for the trust fund envision that as a consequence of "open space"?

Naturally, it's the residents living closest to this specific project that object. But should this project proceed, every county resident should be forewarned - the next "open space" might be in your backyard and it could be more theme park than pastoral preserve. Concerned? Tell the county freeholders.

Terry Shea
Scotch Plains

ABCDICTIONOPQRSTUVEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

Diction Deception

Below are four arcane words, each with four definitions - only one is correct. The others are made up. Are you sharp enough to discern this deception of diction?

If you can guess one correctly - good guess. If you get two - well-read individual. If you get three - word expert. If you get all four - You must have a lot of free time!

All words and correct definitions come from the board game **Diction Deception**.

Answers to last week's sarcasm words.
1. Tetric - Perverse; harsh
2. Haje - The Egyptian cobra
3. Scatophagous - Subsisting on dung
4. Quean - A bold, immoral woman; a slut

QUAICH

1. A pimple
 2. A shallow cup or drinking vessel
 3. Covered with filth
 4. Precipitous; extremely steep
- LAMINIFEROUS**
1. Consisting of layers
 2. Extremely remorseful; tearful
 3. Consisting of large amounts of iron
 4. Very pale or faded

ZOOPRAXISCOPE

1. The average life span of animals in captivity
2. An early kind of moving-picture projector
3. The study of the diversity of indigenous species in a given region
4. The measurement of population growth of herding animals

OPHIOLATRY

1. The art of making brass-wind musical instruments
2. The art of making wine
3. The worship of snakes
4. Basket making

Letters to the Editor

Reader Supports Column Critical of 'American Idol'

I am writing to praise Jessica Riegel's column (The Student View: Why Condone "Idol's" Promotion of Ridicule?) in last week's paper. Ms. Riegel very eloquently expressed my uneasy feelings about the show. I think that because there are so few programs suitable for children and adolescents, "American Idol" seems benign to many parents, but it is not.

How can we expect our children to grow up to be polite, caring, considerate adults if we allow them to watch this type of behavior and laugh at it? I am glad to see that at least one teen sees through the glossy, "harmless" veneer to the nastiness underneath.

Deirdre Gelimne
Westfield

Group Comments on Cartoon Controversy

The furor in the Muslim world over cartoons first published in a Danish paper continues.

Many Muslims reacted angrily, deeming the cartoon offensive to their religious beliefs.

Was it wise to publish the cartoons? No. Why gratuitously denigrate the beliefs of a religious group?

Still, citizens of democratic societies know that our freedoms at times produce results we may find objectionable. But we respond through peaceful protest and public debate.

The reaction of some in the Muslim world, though, has been very different: violence, intimidation and property destruction. That's unacceptable.

And the story reeks of a certain hypocrisy. Some of the protesting countries are intolerant nations themselves. Let Saudi Arabia and others stop peddling anti-Semitic and anti-Christian views before getting on their high horse.

How will this story end? Hard to tell. But if violence succeeds in chilling the debate, what a tragic day it would be for all who cherish the values of a free society!

Allyson Gall
American Jewish Committee
Millburn

Bernard Heeney Creative Writing Contest

You are invited to enter the newspaper's creative writing contest. Detailed rules and prizes are posted on goleader.com. It is open to anyone and there is no entry fee. Entries (700 to 1200 words) must be received by March 1. Those who have already submitted will receive an editor's review shortly and will have the opportunity to submit an update.

Winning entries will be published this spring in the 34th annual edition of *This is Westfield*. In the spirit of creative writing, entries may be of past, present or future; history, commentary, sports, art, humor, science fiction, essay, mystery, instructive, illustrative or novelette. In some fashion, there must be a tie to Westfield or the surrounding community. Judging criteria will include format (spelling and grammar), creativity (ideas, impact and approach), tightness (clarity, structure) and depth. Have fun.

Deadlines

- General News - Friday 4pm
- Weekend Sports - Monday 12pm
- Classifieds - Tuesday 12pm
- Ad Reservation - Friday 4pm
- Ad Submittal - Monday 12pm

