

Westfield Board of Ed. Approves \$78.3-Mil. Operating School Budget

By STEVEN REILLY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Town property taxes are set to rise \$234 on the average home under the proposed board-of-education operating budget of \$78.3 million. The total spending is \$82.7 million, which includes a debt service of \$2.4 million. The \$71.1-million tax levy is slated for a vote in April's school-board elections and represents a \$3.1 million

(4.2 percent) increase in spending over last year.

The board of education approved the budget for 2007-2008 on Tuesday, reflecting a tax levy growth of 3.4 percent (13 cents on \$100 of valuation on the average assessed home in Westfield of \$181,500). A tax point equals \$180,000 in budget spending Westfield.

After the unanimous vote passed without comment from the board,

President Anne Riegel said, "We are all a little tapped out after months of discussing this."

At a community meeting on March 22 at Westfield High School, Superintendent of Schools William Foley asked residents to approve the budget in April to send a message to the district's next superintendent. Mr. Foley is set to retire at the end of this school year.

"This is a time to pass the budget," Mr. Foley said. "The worst message to give perspective candidates is to vote down a budget."

Mr. Foley said the budget increase is the lowest in six years. He said the major increases come from salaries, benefits and special-education services, which combine for 97 percent of the entire budget.

State aid contributes 6 percent to the budget; 3 percent comes from other sources.

Ginny Leiz, BOE vice president, said the board considered the recently passed bond issue and the additional cost to taxpayers when putting together this year's budget.

"The district has taken some innovative steps to help keep expenses low," she said. "Enrolling some employees into managed care healthcare has saved 9 percent in costs alone."

Mr. Foley said the district has been rigorous in renegotiating carrier fees for insurance policies in order to cut costs.

"Westfield is a good-sized community, which allows some change," Mr. Foley said. "The board of education has a good relationship with our teachers' association. That helps to manage expenses."

He said the district saved \$530,000 in renegotiating health care contracts and kept the overall cost increase in 2007 employee benefits to 9.2 percent, down from 10.4 percent last

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10



Wayne Baker for The Westfield Leader

LIGHT-HEARTED MOMENT...Westfield Mayor Andy Skibitsky addresses those in attendance at Monday's Gateway Chamber of Commerce Mayors Gala event in Elizabeth. Also pictured, from left to right, are: Westfield Police Captain David Wayman, Judy Spera, Fire Chief Dan Kelly, Police Chief John Parizeau and Town Clerk Claire Gray.

MS School Tax Levy to Rise \$418,302 Over Last Year

By GINA LEVINE-LEVY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE — The Mountainside Board of Education on Tuesday night adopted its 2007-2008 school budget of \$14,565,752. The budget for the current year is \$13,966,844 — a difference of \$598,908, or 4.3 percent, officials said.

With the expenditures offset by the use of dissolution funds amounting to 8.2 percent (approximately \$1,194,000) of the proposed budget, the school tax portion of Mountainside residents' property-tax levy for this year is projected to increase by 3.75 percent over last year. The proposed school tax levy for 2007-2008 is \$11,694,735 compared to the 2006-2007 school tax levy of \$11,276,433 — an increase of \$418,302.

According to school officials, the school tax portion of Mountainside property taxes will increase by \$141 annually for the average homeowner. The average borough home is assessed at \$160,700.

School business administrator Roderic McLaughlin said the increase is driven by a \$793,508 increase in tuition for Mountainside residents who attend Governor Livingston High School (GLHS) in Berkeley Heights. The tuition increase is about 5 percent.

The proposed budget breaks down into the general fund (operating budget) of \$14,387,862, special revenue fund of \$177,890 and debt service of \$388,135.

"Appropriations in multiple funds due to transfers" subtracted \$388,135, bringing the total base budget to \$14,565,752, officials said.

The majority of the budget, 83.6 percent, is funded by the local tax levy, officials said.

Dissolution money received when the regional district disbanded will

fund 8.2 percent of the revenue side of the budget. State-aid funds equal 4.7 percent of the budget. The remainder is funded by miscellaneous revenue and fund balance.

Forty-five percent of the operating budget (\$6.3 million) covers employee salaries. Twenty-four percent,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Guerrero Field Project Draws Pro, Con Comments From Garwood Residents at Borough Council Meeting

By KATHY MARQUES
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD — At Tuesday night's borough council meeting, Councilman Keith Sluka spoke about a proposed project at the James V. Guerrero Memorial Field.

"We want to make our park aesthetically pleasing while also providing our residents and children with a park they can relax and play in. We would like to add a soccer/hockey/baseball field, a new basketball court, synthetic turf, a playground, walking trail, bocce ball court and quiet sitting area. This gives our residents something they can be proud of," he said.

Mayor Dennis McCarthy in 2005 appointed a committee to review and recommend recreational improvements. The estimated cost is \$1.4 million, with more than \$880,000 coming from grants, leaving a difference of more than \$515,000 that would need to be raised.

"This breaks down to \$25.20 a year for 15 years on a house assessed at \$100,000. That's less than what I pay to fill up my car," Mr. Sluka said.

The committee will work on setting up a schedule for utilizing the courts for games and recreation. "I'd rather have people fighting over the use of the courts than not at all," Mr. Sluka said. "If they don't fight over it, than what did we make it for?"

Resident Anne Leonard opposed the project, saying, "I'm all for kids and youth. But we dragged our heels on building a senior center. We have nothing for the seniors, nowhere for

them to socialize. You all have parents. A lot of you make big figures.

"And your wives are working too. I have only one check coming in. My Social Security check is probably

get? What about all the other increases we will have to pay for, like education?"

Even though the committee "fought over what should be made, this was



Kathy Marques for The Westfield Leader

FIELD OF DREAMS...Garwood residents expressed their opinions at Tuesday's borough council meeting on proposed improvements to James V. Guerrero Memorial Field. The proposed plan is shown above.

what you make in a week. That \$25 for a park may not sound like a lot, but \$25 here and \$25 there, that's a lot. Taxes just keep going up."

Resident Bruce Paterson agreed, saying, "It's a great infomercial with a bocce ball court. But everyone wanted a community center. We didn't ask for a bocce court. Why couldn't you have done this within your bud-

get? What about all the other increases we will have to pay for, like education?"

Other residents spoke in favor of the project. A Garwood teacher said,

Garwood Easter Egg Hunt Set for Saturday

GARWOOD — Garwood will hold its annual Easter Egg Hunt in Westfield will be held on Saturday, March 31, at noon at the Little League field.

Egg Hunt at Williams Nursery Set for April 7

WESTFIELD — Williams Nursery at 524 Springfield Avenue in Westfield will host its 11 annual Easter Egg Hunt for children aged 10 and younger on Saturday, April 7, at 2 p.m.

There will be more than 4,000 eggs filled with candy, toys and 50 special prize eggs, which can be traded for bigger prizes. Participants can take pictures with the Easter Bunny.

There is no charge for the event. Williams asks participants to arrive early, as the hunt starts promptly at 2 p.m. For further information, call (908) 232-4076.

a tax levy of 6.1 percent.

The proposed 2007 budget amounts to an increase of approximately \$119 a year (\$9.91 a month) for the average assessed home in Westfield, which, for 2007, is \$181,500.

More than \$20 million (56 percent) will come from local property taxes. Estimating a county tax increase of \$138 per household and a school tax increase of \$300, the average Westfield home should expect a \$557 (5.1 percent) hike in taxes, "if all the numbers hold true," Town Administrator Jim Gildea said.

Chairman of the Finance Policy Committee Peter Echausse said the budget represents a "fiscally prudent plan," noting that for the fourth year

in a row, no sale-of-asset money was used to balance the budget. In addition, he said, after this year, the town will pay off all of its unfunded debt.

To reduce headcount, the town will reduce three full-time staff positions to two part-time positions and eliminate an additional part-time job.

Third Ward Councilman David Haas, a member of the committee, voted against approval of the introduction, as did Fourth Ward Councilman Tom Bigosinski.

In other business, the council introduced and approved the Special Improvement District's (Downtown Westfield Corporation) budget by a unanimous vote. The budget, which Mr. Echausse said is paid through an assessment and not taxation, is \$390,970 — staying flat from last year.

During public comment, Fire Department Lieutenant James Ryan, Jr., a firefighter for nine years, approached the council with a "concern over staffing levels."

Lt. Ryan said during "the last three significant fires in town, there were only six guys on duty at that time."

He said at a fire in December, four firefighters were injured, with two members out for more than two months.

In addition, he said that when there are six people, "we have the option of sitting on the lawn and watching the building burn or violating the safety rules." He said firefighters were cited for insufficient staffing levels during a second fire fought in December.

"With this budget being proposed now, I beseech you to see that there are sufficient funds to ensure that there is adequate manpower at all times," he said.

Lt. Ryan paused for a moment before continuing, "It's painful to see my fellow firefighters get injured. We'll try to kill ourselves to do the best we can to preserve the safety of Westfield...I don't think it's too much to ask for to keep it at seven (minimum)."

Mr. Gildea responded, "Minimum manning is a management prerogative. This council will discuss with management and professional staff what the right thing to do is. I advise Lt. Ryan and other FMBA members

"The walking path is a healthy idea. To just place a community center and that's it, is being selfish. You want to have as many residents as possible using the park."

Longtime resident and community-center committee member Angelo Alimonti said he was disappointed that seniors didn't get a facility but said, "This is the best we came up with. I pay taxes and want something to show for it. It is time to give back to the youth of our town."

The more than 30 residents who turned out at Tuesday's meeting gave Mr. Alimonti a round of applause.

After a one-hour discussion, Mayor McCarthy thanked residents for their input and said the council will take into account their considerations.

In other business, Clark Township municipal engineer Richard O'Connor, representing Grotto Engineering, proposed to the council they incorporate a "user fee" billing system for paying the Rahway Valley Sewerage Authority (RVSA) sewer bill.

"In 2000, the [RVSA] had increased the capacity in its treatment facility significantly. The initial cost of the project was \$70 million. Currently, it's \$252 million and is expected to reach up to \$300 million.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

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Wayne Baker for The Westfield Leader

MANY OPPORTUNITIES...Garwood's Patricia Quattrocchi speaks during last Thursday's forum presented by the Women's Political Caucus of Union County. The event focused on the opportunities for women to serve on the Union County political committees for both major political parties. See story on page 2.

PAGE INDEX			
Regional	2-3	Classifieds	18
Editorial	4-5	Obituary	20
Community ...	6-8	Real Estate	11-19
Education	9	A&E	21-22
Sports	11-15		

WF Schools Announce Schedule Change

WESTFIELD — The Westfield School District, in a reversal of traditional unused-snow-day procedures, has announced that it will turn the single unused snow day from this year's winter season into an additional school day, to be tacked on to the end of the school year.

The additional day has been deemed "No Winter Weather Helps Students Think Better" Day, and students will spend the day working on intensive, ambitious academic projects...

April Fools!

Westfield Public Schools will be closed Monday, April 2, through Monday, April 9, for spring break. Originally, spring break was to end on April 6, but the district ended the winter months using two out of the three snow days allotted in the 2006-2007 school calendar.

On January 10, the board of education had approved the April 9 date as the first "give back" date if the district had unused snow days.



ORGANIZATION FUN...Westfield Democrats meet at Janice and Frank Fusaro's home on March 25. Pictured, left to right, are: Mrs. Fusaro, Ken Rotter (Westfield Democratic Committee chairman), Lisa Quackenbush (WDC vice chairwoman), Congressman Frank Pallone (D-6), Westfield Councilman Dave Haas, Westfield Councilman Tom Bigosinski, Viera Bigosinski and Mr. Fusaro.