



Happy Passover

THE WESTFIELD LEADER

Ad Populos, Non Aditus, Pervenimus

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County Budget Under Review; Jail, Overtime, Golf Discussed

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader
ELIZABETH - The Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders' Fiscal Policy Committee continued hearings last week on a proposed \$436.8 million spending plan that is up \$22.4 million over 2007. The county tax levy is set to jump \$15.4 million to \$255.3 million. The meetings also focused on reduced overtime at the county jail and increasing the revenue stream at the county's three public golf courses.

trator of the Union County jail, last Wednesday forecasted a savings of \$3.5 million in overtime savings this year and \$4.8 million next year as a result of a re-organization of jail management. The proposed budget includes \$7 million for correction officers' overtime, a hike of \$200,000 over last year, according to an executive budget presented by County Manager George Devanney in February. Correction officers' salaries are \$21.4 million, up almost \$1.1 million over 2007.

million public safety department budget, an increase of \$2.5 million over last year. The proposed budget for correctional services is \$40.7 million, an increase of \$1.6 million over 2007.

During budget talks before the freeholders' Fiscal Policy Committee, Public Safety Director Richard Childs said the county had witnessed "escalating" overtime costs the past two years. He said under Mr. Riordan, overtime has "decreased every month for the first quarter" of 2008. The jail director said savings would be greater next year, once 51 new corrections officers are hired and have completed their mandatory training.

According to a budget proposal obtained by The Westfield Leader, the new officers are being added "in order to improve efficiency and to reduce overtime costs." Another six current officers were promoted to sergeants.

Mr. Riordan said a corrections officer's starting yearly salary of \$38,500 jumped to \$74,000 when overtime was added based on a \$54-per-hour fee.

Officials said in their written presentation that a personnel management system would be obtained to provide "more accurate tracking and recording of employee time balances, which will lead to better fiscal oversight."

Freeholder Al Mirabella, Fiscal Policy Committee chairman, said he was happy with the plans to reduce overtime costs at the jail.

"This is a 180-degree difference from the conversation we had at this same time last year [under the previous administration]," Mr. Mirabella said.

During the discussion about golf courses on Saturday, Director of Parks and Community Renewal Al Faella said the courses had a deficit of \$435,000 last year. This year's golf operations proposed budget is \$2,034,124, a reduction of \$10,000 from last year.

Among the long-term options under consideration is the issuance of identification cards to non-Union County residents, which would reduce the fee charged to out-of-county residents by \$10. He said golf advocates have said that offering a discount would produce an additional 5,000 rounds of golf a year or \$200,000 in added revenue. Last year, the county courses had 31,000 rounds of golf played, and rounds are down 8 percent over the last eight years. Mr. Faella said changing tee-times to nine, instead of 10 minutes apart, would generate another time slot every two and a half hours, allowing for an extra group producing \$1,800 per day in added revenue.

Officials also are considering a management contract to have a private company handle the day-day-to

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WF Resident Says County Govt. Should Be Dissolved

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - During the public portion of the April 15 town council meeting, a citizen proposed the elimination of Union County government, and the council heard a We Care (Westfielders Concerned About Responsible Development) presentation that addressed vacant buildings in town.

Westfield taxpayers, on average, will face property taxes of \$12,263. Approximately 61 percent of that figure is sent to the board of education. The county gets roughly 21 percent, and Westfield keeps 17.5 percent.

Lance Cook, a Summit Avenue resident, called it "unacceptable" that the county collects more money than the municipality. He applauded the Westfield council for its "willingness to try to cut the budget...something you don't hear of in the county."

Mr. Cook encouraged Westfield citizens to "get more involved" in county politics. A self-proclaimed "former Democrat," Mr. Cook, now unaffiliated, said the all-Democratic freeholder board is "completely out of touch" with average citizens.

He said he wished Republicans and Independents were on the freeholder board, so "they can duke it out."

Mr. Cook has started to attend county meetings in Elizabeth, which regularly take place four Thursdays a month, and suggested that town offi-



David Samsky for The Westfield Leader

DEMOCRACY TAKES ROOT...Eighty downtown Westfield business and property owners meet Tuesday night, pledging thousands of dollars to fight town government over taxes and parking fines increases.

Business Action Group Forms, Opposes Parking Fine Increases

By TED RITTER
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - A standing-room-only crowd of about 80 downtown business owners and landlords - many of whom are also local residents - rallied, Tuesday night, against a proposed increase in municipal parking fines.

The event - held at Jersey Mike's Subs, operated by Norman and Carol Greco, who organized the rally - resulted in the formation of the Westfield Action Group.

Reached on Wednesday morning, Mr. Greco said the "passionate" response from attendees led to raising between \$25,000 and \$30,000 - \$10,000 from one individual alone.

Mr. Greco said the "inability and ineffectiveness" of the Downtown Westfield Corporation (DWC) and the Westfield Area Chamber of Commerce (WACC) has led to the situation.

"They (DWC, WACC) don't help us," Mr. Greco said. "We have no advocate. We need to be represented."

He also laid blame on the town council.

"The council says the downtown is not a concern of theirs. Well, let me tell you - we exist, and we're suffering," Mr. Greco added. "The town doesn't do a thing for us. They just

want money from us."

Members of the Westfield Action Group hope to involve additional colleagues and residents from across town in self-funded initiatives, including exploring a poster campaign, newspaper ads and joint appearances at town meetings - all aimed at opposing the town council's proposal to raise overtime parking fees from the current \$20 to \$32, with a provision allowing for future increases up to \$50.

"This fight - and that's what it is - is for all of us," said Mr. Greco. He said the town is "overzealous in its ticketing," which could turn Westfield into a "ghost town."

"I want to be in business here; [the town is] discouraging people from coming down here," said Mr. Greco. "What do you want to come to this town for if you get a ticket for \$50?"

Local business people at Tuesday night's rally were eager to speak their minds, as well.

Theresa Martinho of the Westfield Hair Co. suggested exploring a class-action lawsuit to block the town from increasing parking fines "so drastically."

"They're ruining my business, and I'm not going to lay down for it," she said.

"If we want to implement change quickly, we need to show up in numbers [at town hall]," said downtown property owner Michael Blancato. "We have to work as partners together to win this battle," he said, adding that the mayor and council "live in an ivory tower right now."

"If this crowd ever showed up at city hall, they would have a heart attack," agreed former business owner Tim Harrington.

Andrew Arkin of Adler's Jewlers said, "We'll be done" if parking fines go up as much as proposed.

"People do not come back to my store after getting a ticket, and that's at \$20 [per fine]...imagine if it was \$50," he said.

Joe Spector, who owns the Leader Store, said current parking fine enforcement policies often result in a "negative first experience" for people coming downtown to shop.

"We're shooting ourselves in the foot...we are second to New

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MS Council Votes to Hike Parking Fees at Lots

By EBONY MCQUEEN
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE - The borough's governing body, on April 15, introduced an ordinance to increase parking permit fees by 25 percent at the municipal complex and the Mountainside library parking lot.

The fee for quarterly permits will be raised from \$90 to \$120 per quarter while the fee for monthly permits will increase from \$40 to \$60 per month. Non-residents pay the monthly fee.

Both fees will increase by 5 percent on January 1 of each year, officials said.

In other council business, the mayor and council have agreed to change the council work session meeting to the first Tuesday of the month, as opposed to their current second Tuesday monthly meeting.

"The week goes by too quickly," Mayor Robert Vigilanti said.

According to the mayor, the borough's staff needs more time in between their regular work session and the public meeting to take care of any matters that may require more than a week's work. The work session meeting also conflicts with the borough's board of education meeting.

If legal action is necessary, the new meeting schedule will begin in June.

The borough will purchase two saving bonds in the amounts of \$300 and \$200 to present to the valdictio-

rian and salutatorian of the 2008 Deerfield School graduating class.

The borough council presented Mountainside Police Officer Scot Worswick with a "token of their appreciation."

"Congratulations on 25 years of serving the borough residents," Councilman Keith Turner said. "The residents of Mountainside could always count on you."

In observance of Arbor Day, Department of Public Works (DPW) and Deerfield School will plant a tree at the school on Friday, April 25. It is required for a municipality to observe Arbor Day in order for them to be designated as a Tree City, officials said.

Tax Collector's Office Open Late Tuesday

WESTFIELD - The office of the Westfield tax collector will be open on Thursday, May 1, from 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. for the payment of property taxes.

The last day to pay without a penalty is Monday, May 5. Interest will be charged beginning on Tuesday, May 6, and will revert back to the original due date of May 1.

Taxpayers wanting to receive quarterly e-alert tax department notifications should register on the town's website, www.westfieldnj.gov.

For more information, call tax collector Susan Noon at (908) 789-4051



David B. Corbin for The Westfield Leader and The Times

BREAKING A MEET RECORD IN THE HIGH JUMP...Westfield High School senior Adam Bergo, pictured, and teammate Jordan Johnson broke the meet record in the high jump with a combined height of 12'6" at the Blue Devil Classic track meet last Saturday. Bergo has cleared 7'0" in winter track. See page 13.

Martone Resigns from DWC, Verdic Named Interim Chair

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - David Martone stepped down last week as chairman of the Downtown Westfield Corporation (DWC) after he discovered that the new location of his business on South Avenue was outside the boundaries of the town's special improvement district, making him ineligible for board membership. Mr. Martone had just been reappointed to another three-year term as a board member in January by the town council.

The DWC is the management entity for the downtown Special Improvement District. DWC Vice-Chairman Dominick Verdic, a resident of Scotch Plains, will serve as interim chairman until the DWC board of directors reorganizes. Holding a property owner slot on the board, he owns the building at 105 Elm Street, which houses the DWC offices.

Mr. Martone's business, the Classic Thyme Cooking School, moved from East Broad Street to South Avenue, West. He had served the board since 2000 and as its chairman for three years. He found out that he was no longer eligible to serve after not receiving his SID tax bill at which time he called the town.

"We didn't know we moved out of the district. [There] was an error on the printed [SID] map [which is on the wall in the DWC office]," he acknowledged. He said Classic Thyme is the only business in the small area of South Avenue that was mistakenly included on the SID map. He said the DWC would work with the town to correct the map.

Mr. Martone had to step down from the SID board because he held a mer-

chant seat on the board requiring the individual's business to be within SID district. There are seats for property owners, merchants and a resident on the board.

"I felt good [of his time serving on the board]. I didn't feel I was leaving at a bad time," Mr. Martone said of his resignation.

Mr. Martone listed approval of plans for the first phase of the downtown streetscape project along the south side business district as the biggest accomplishment of the DWC during his tenure.

"Seeing that get approved was a tremendous feeling of accomplishment," Mr. Martone said.

"I am confident the board will continue on and do wonderful things," Mr. Martone said. He said he has asked Mr. Verdic to serve as acting chairman until the board reorganizes at its next meeting, Monday, May 19. The board's meetings are held in the basement of 105 Elm Street.

Town Administrator Jim Gildea and Mayor Andy Skibitsky said Mr. Martone would likely be replaced by Mr. Verdic. Mayor Skibitsky and the town council will be charged with filling the vacancy left by Mr. Martone's resignation.

Mr. Gildea said the town would look to the list it maintains for people who have applied to town boards in the past for applicants. Mr. Martone would have to be replaced by a merchant.

Mayor Skibitsky said while he assumes Mr. Verdic will be the new chairman, that decision will be made the full DWC board.

"David's commitment to downtown

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Garwood Borough Council Proposes Sewerage Rate Cap

By RAYNOR DENITZIO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD - The Garwood borough council introduced an ordinance on Tuesday that would increase the sewerage rate cap for businesses in the borough from 20,000 gallons of water to 50,000 gallons. Under the proposed ordinance, businesses using more than 50,000 gallons of water would be charged separately.

"Those industries and businesses that have a water usage between 20,000 and 50,000 [gallons] will no longer receive a separate bill from the borough," said Kathleen Villaggio, borough council president.

Ms. Villaggio said the borough lowered the industrial rate cap from 100,000 gallons to 20,000 gallons last year. According to the councilwoman, the proposed adjustment to the rate cap would result in about \$2,000 less in revenue for the bor-

ough. The borough increased the industrial user charge in February to coincide with increases from the Rahway Valley Sewerage Authority.

The ordinance will now move to a public hearing on Tuesday, May 13.

During the workshop session of the meeting, the council also discussed various road projects that are being planned in the borough. These projects include the paving of the section of Second Avenue in front of the Lincoln/Franklin School and the paving and drainage projects on Myrtle and Willow Avenues.

The council asked borough engineer Donald Guarriello to provide new estimates for the cost of the projects so the borough can determine how much funding from grants is available for the projects and how much funding the borough will have to provide. Ms. Villaggio said any

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