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TIMES

OUR 49TH YEAR - ISSUE NO. 17-2008

USPS 485200 Periodical - Postage Paid at Scotch Plains, N.J.

Thursday, April 24, 2008

Published Every Thursday Since 1959 www.timesnj.com

(908) 232-4407 press@goleader.com

SIXTY CENTS

Marks Says Merger Overtures Have to Come From Fanwood

By FRED T. ROSSI

Specialty Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — Mayor Martin Marks said this week he would “not stand in the way” of discussions between Scotch Plains and Fanwood on a possible merger of the two towns, but said an overture in that regard would have to come from Fanwood officials.

At the township council’s regular meeting on Tuesday, the mayor responded to various comments from Treeview Circle resident Jason Engelhardt, who spoke about the parking fees at the Fanwood train station

and also asked about an outright consolidation of the two towns. Mr. Engelhardt is in favor of a merger.

Mr. Engelhardt asked whether presently there is an equitable sharing of costs given that all the schools in the joint district are located in Scotch Plains and most ball fields used by youth leagues in both towns are similarly situated in Scotch Plains.

Mr. Engelhardt requested an analysis of what consolidation would mean to residents and how such a move would affect local property taxes. He also called for a ballot referendum on the question of merging, and also said

he favored ending all shared services agreements with Fanwood if the two towns do not merge.

The mayor said shared services arrangements will continue because they save township residents money. Ending the agreements as Mr. Engelhardt favored, as a way to prod Fanwood into seriously discussing consolidation, would, the mayor said, be akin to “cutting off your nose to spite your face.”

Councilwoman Paulette Coronato, a member of the shared services committee, said the various shared services agreements between the two towns and the board of education are “saving money in the long run.”

Mayor Marks said consolidation “is a long, drawn-out process” that would ultimately require a majority of favorable votes from residents in both towns.

He told Mr. Engelhardt he does favor spending “one nickel” of township taxpayer dollars to perform any type of in-depth analysis of a merger “if Fanwood is not ready to buy into it.” The mayor said he wouldn’t resist a study of the type favored by Mr. Engelhardt, but said, “It takes two to tango,” meaning that Fanwood has to show “some willingness to go hand-in-hand down the road.”

The mayor said he would be interested to see the Fanwood governing body’s reaction to Mr. Engelhardt’s proposals, noting that officials there have not expressed interest in a major consolidation.

In other business, at Tuesday’s meeting, Deputy Mayor Nancy Malool said last week’s meeting with business and property owners to discuss the establishment of a Special Improvement District showed there “are still a lot of issues that need to be further discussed.” She said a second meeting is tentatively set for Wednesday, April 30, at 7 p.m. at the municipal building on Park Avenue. A confirmation of the date will be posted on the township’s website, scotchplainsnj.com, in the next few days.

Councilman Jeffrey Strauss said the new, lit ball fields at the Union County Vocational-Technical School would be ready for night games within the next week.

He also said bids for the lighted southside artificial turf soccer field will open on Tuesday, May 6. It is hoped that the new field will be ready for play in the fall.

The council also gave final approval to an ordinance increasing construction code fees, which have not been raised in seven years, according to Councilman Kevin Glover.

The council also approved a resolution confirming its position that the enactment of an ordinance banning cell towers would have no real posi-

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Courtesy of Steve Falco

THE ENVIRONMENT...Nathan Abdy, Katie Zawodniak and Ross Mulcahy of the Park Middle School Environmental Club examine a tree in Carriage House Park as part of a tree identification workshop run by the Fanwood Shade Tree Commission. By observing the smooth gray bark and small red flowers, the students determined the tree is a red maple.

County Budget Reviewed; Jail, OT and Golf Discussed

By PAUL J. PEYTON

Specialty Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

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.

Brian Riordan, the new administrator 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. Correctional officers’ salaries are \$21.4 million, up almost \$1.1 million over 2007.

The jail is part of an overall \$50.7 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 Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*, 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

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Courtesy of Dana Dunlavy

LADIES NIGHT...The Hickory Tree Chorus entertains College Club of Fanwood/Scotch Plains members on Monday.



TAKING THE REINS...Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr accepts the gavel as the new president of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors (NJCM) from Malcolm Fraser, former president and mayor of Cape May Point Borough, at the annual spring NJCM meeting in Atlantic City.

Facing Budget Woes, FW Council Calls for 18 Percent Salary Cuts

By JOHN MAGUIRE

Specialty Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD — The borough council held a special budget meeting Monday to address a \$500,000 shortfall in the coming year’s budget, currently projected at \$8.5 million. The council unanimously called for an 18 percent cut in municipal salaries to come from administration, police and public works departments.

Fanwood, like many communities, is facing a large increase in property taxes, a reduction in state aid, increased costs and reduced revenues. State aid will be \$186,669 this coming year, down 17 percent from last year.

Mayor Colleen Mahr set the tone by saying, “We have to make decisions now” and that “draconian measures” were in order. She implored the council to address the issues and not wait to see if Fanwood would receive additional funding from the state. The mayor received support from the council, with many members expressing the need to plan “for the worst-case scenario.”

“It’s time to make decisions,” agreed Councilwoman Donna Dolce. Anticipating the response from affected departments, she stated that “No” is not an answer.”

Councilwoman Joan Wheeler agreed. “I would not give them the

option to cut from their total budget — this 18 percent needs to be from labor costs,” she said.

Fanwood has applied for extraordinary aid, which the state disburses through a separate program, but word on whether Fanwood will receive it will not come until June. The council agreed that was too long to wait to make cuts.

There was a debate on whether to ask for cuts strictly from personnel.

Questioning whether asking the department heads to make the decisions was appropriate, Councilman David Valian said, “We have to see what their proposal is.” Whatever the department heads come up with, “we have a lot of work ahead of us,” he added. He asked the council to give the police chief and the other affected managers enough time to think through their proposals.

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Conference of Mayors Elect Mahr President of NJCM

ATLANTIC CITY — At its annual spring meeting in Atlantic City, the New Jersey Conference of Mayors (NJCM) has elected Fanwood Borough Mayor Colleen Mahr as NJCM President for 2008-2009.

Mayor Mahr has been an active member of the NJCM since she first took office as mayor in 2003. She has served as one of Union County’s representatives to the board of directors of the NJCM and served as treasurer and vice president.

Mayor Mahr was the youngest person elected as mayor of Fanwood and the fourth woman to hold that office in more than 100 years.

In 2007, Mayor Mahr was selected as one of Union County’s Women of Distinction and was re-elected in an uncontested election.

In her remarks at the convention, Mayor Mahr said that Governor Jon Corzine’s proposed state spending plan calls for significant reductions in municipal aid and reiterated that mayors will remain vocal in their collective opposition to these reductions. She cautioned the governor that reductions need to be applied in a “fair and equitable manner” and tied to efficiencies as an incentive. She said reductions should not be based upon an arbitrary population number.

Mayor Mahr stated that under her leadership, the mayors will fight for balance, equity and demand fairness on those issues that directly affect the mayors of New Jersey. She said the NJCM will raise the voices of mayors to help address issues and present solutions designed to improve the quality of life for all citizens.

She outlined several goals for the upcoming year. They include “raising the bar” for all mayors on what it means to be a member of the organization. She pledged to engage the membership in ways that have never happened before. She will establish a mayors governing institute to create a forum for ideas and have open discussion of issues and solutions.

The institute will serve as a central resource for information and referrals on issues that are faced by mayors every day. She said it will serve as a central repository that will assist mayors to govern their communities more effectively and efficiently.

Mayor Mahr, her husband George and their three sons: Liam, 4, Daniel, 3, and Colin, 1, reside in Fanwood.

The New Jersey Conference of Mayors was founded in 1963 to represent the interests of the mayors. For more information, see njcm.org.



WIRED AND READY...Scotch Plains local access TV-34 Manager William McMeekan organizes equipment in the basement of the township municipal building in preparation for expanding programming for the public.

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