

Corzine Tells of NJ Fiscal Crisis, Proposes Debt-Restructuring Plan

By DEBBIE MADISON
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

CRANFORD — New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine described the current debt situation as a “financial crisis” that has thrust the state into virtual bankruptcy. He said the state has a total of \$115 billion in liability, including \$32 billion in bonded debt and \$60 billion in unsupported healthcare obligations for government employees and retirees, including teachers, police, firefighters, judges and many others, which is growing at 10 percent per annum.

An overflow crowd of citizens and public officials filled the 600-seat Roy Smith Theatre at Union County College in Cranford January 30 to hear the Governor, while others listened in an overflow room. After the Governor’s

half-hour presentation, dozens of citizens stepped up to the microphones to ask questions, make statements, provide recommendations, criticize the Governor’s plan to remedy matters and criticize state government in Trenton.

Using an overhead presentation of pie charts and graphs (shown on pages six and seven of this edition and on the Internet at goleader.com), Governor Corzine described the problem and summarized his four-pronged fiscal plan for state government, which included: freezing current spending, limiting future spending to not exceed revenue, using future toll collections for present day use and limiting future unfunded borrowing by requiring voter authorization.

The most controversial element of the Governor’s financial-restructuring

and debt-reduction plan calls for the formation of a “Public Benefit Corporation (PBC),” which would sell \$40 billion in bonds to produce funds this year to pay a portion of the \$32 billion of current bonded state debt and finance new transportation projects. In exchange, the PBC would be given the tolls for the next 75 years from the state’s major highways. In the proposal, the tolls would be increased 800 percent over the next 12 years (with additional increases thereafter indexed to inflation). The tolls would apply to the Garden State Parkway, the New Jersey Turnpike, the Atlantic City Expressway and a segment of Route 440.

According to Governor Corzine, the liability for health care and pensions is further aggravated as half of the government work force is 50 or more years old, and will be entering the retirement system soon.

During the two-hour public response session, Union County residents approached the microphone to voice their grievances that they were being taxed into debt to pay for disparate and unfair pension and medical benefits for public employees. Speakers were assertive and, at times, contemptuous. Many of the citizens told the Governor that the state must cut spending and stop increasing taxes and tolls. A Cranford small-business owner claimed the proposed toll increases would devastate his food-delivery business. A Summit resident said he is having difficulty paying his mortgage now and that the Governor’s plan leaves him little choice.

A Fanwood resident called for privatizing the schools or consolidating and restructuring the 600 or so school districts in the state. The Governor said he would welcome discussion to help make this happen.

Citizens suggested renegotiating public-employee contracts to bring those benefits more in line with those of the private sector, where employees must contribute. One teacher voiced her objection that her contract was not being honored because she was being asked to pay a portion of her healthcare benefits.

The Governor said those contracts were negotiated by previous administrations, adding that he did not believe the solution lay in renegotiating on those promises. He said his administration was the first to require public employees to contribute to their benefits going into the future (1.5 percent of salary). A Summit resident countered that his private-sector job, for benefits and retirement, requires him to contribute 25 percent of his salary.

The Governor said the current bonded debt of \$32 billion would escalate to \$36 billion before the next gubernatorial election in 2009. This debt is “crowding out education, health care, property tax relief and senior services,” he said and “translates into \$10,200 owed by each and every household.” In total, the combination of bonded debt and un-

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Plea Deal Fails to Bring Closure for Victim’s Friend

By RAYNOR DENITZIO
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Stephen Bogart’s friend, Helen Rentoulis, said this week that she is not completely satisfied with the three-year sentence facing Janet Garcia, Richard Garcia and Lucia Heinz, all of whom pled guilty last week to defrauding Westfield resident Stephen Bogart out of his life savings.

“Unfortunately, I think they got off way too easy,” said Ms. Rentoulis. Ms. Rentoulis, owner of Vicki’s Diner, became friendly with Mr. Bogart when he began to stop by the diner twice a day for meals.

It was during one of these visits that Ms. Rentoulis first met Richard Garcia. Ms. Rentoulis said that she noticed something peculiar about the relationship between Mr. Bogart and Mr. Garcia, who claimed he was helping Mr. Bogart pay his bills.

“You just get a funny feeling sometimes with people, and I never shook it,” Ms. Rentoulis said.

Ms. Rentoulis’ concern grew when Mr. Bogart’s diner visits became less frequent. Ms. Rentoulis said when she called Mr. Bogart to check on him, he said that he was fine and was using groceries that Mr. Garcia had brought him.



WHEN PIGS FLY...Governor Jon Corzine stands next to a slide depicting an animated figure of a flying pig, emphasizing a quote from his January 8 State-of-the-State Address. In the speech, he said “pigs will fly over the Statehouse before there’s a realistic level of new taxes or spending cuts that can fix this mess.” He made the comment to support his proposals for remedying the state’s financial problems. See pages 6 and 7 for his slide presentation.

Westfield BOE Discusses Budget, Approves Teachers’ Pay Hike

By CHRISTINA M. HINKE
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — During its fourth budget meeting, Tuesday night, the Westfield Board of Education discussed its 2008-2009 proposed \$23,578,314 general education budget, presented by Anita O’Neal, interim assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

The general education budget for kindergarten through grade 12 represents an increase of 2.17 percent over last year. “This represents 31 percent of our overall budget,” Business Administrator Robert Berman said.

Though the total budget increased, no new staff is proposed. Further, the kindergarten is losing one staff member from last year due to the board’s decision to consolidate classes, officials said.

There is a general flat rate of staff over last year due to favorable class sizes, which had no overall significant change over last year. Salaries for 2008-2009 are \$23,578,314, which Mr. Berman said does not include such positions as principals or guidance counselors, nor does it include technology, music and art teachers. These positions are included in other budgets.

The board approved a two-year teachers’ contract with the Westfield Education Association (WEA) at the meeting Tuesday night. The contract, effective July 1, 2008 through June 30, 2010, provides for an annual increase of 3.9 percent. The previous three-year contract included salary increases of 4 percent, beginning June 30, 2005.

School officials said the new contract is below county and state averages, which are 4.29 percent and 4.6

percent, respectively.

The proposed budget breakdown is as follows: elementary, \$10,639,675; intermediate, \$5,430,454, and high school, \$8,370,868. All include the cost of salaries.

The line item, staff training and

Resident Mary Wisler asked the board to consider adding a 30-hour driver-training course for 10th and 11th graders.

“This is a number one life skill...our teenagers will use driver training daily,” said Ms. Wisler. She said the



GIANTS WIN...The area virtually shut down Sunday night, with house parties everywhere filled with fans watching the dramatic Giants’ victory over the Patriots in Super Bowl XLIII. Guests at the Corbin house celebrate after the Giants stormed back for the win.

supplies, in the high-school budget is up 400 percent, at \$2,250, over the previous year. Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dolan said the prior year only had a cost of \$450, which she said is low. She said a wellness-training session would be added, to teach about the stresses kids are under and how teachers can help.

Overall, board members said they feel crunched for time in getting out the budgets to the state. “This is a difficult time and the abbreviated schedule is making it so much worse,” Board President Ginny Leitz said.

The next budget meeting on Tuesday, February 12, at 8 p.m. will focus on applications to the state, due Friday, February 15.

number one cause of death for teenagers is driving at excessive speeds.

Ms. Dolan said there are two or three teachers certified to teach this course.

However, scheduling conflicts is the leading reason dissuading the offering of this course, according to board member Alice Hunnicutt.

Board member Anne Riegel said including this course on the curricula “was probably the most seriously explored than ever before.”

“I don’t think the discussion is over yet,” Ms. Hunnicutt said.

The BOE announced that nominating petitions for candidacy to the board are due by 4 p.m. on Monday, February 25. School board elections will be held Tuesday, April 15.

Heinbokel Presents Taskforce Study to Westfield Council

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Land-use Taskforce Chairman William Heinbokel walked the public through the taskforce’s final report, Tuesday night, which marks the compilation of a 12-month study of issues surrounding the redevelopment of residential homes within the community.

The taskforce, formed in 2006 by Mayor Andy Skibitsky, reviewed current land-use ordinances, evaluated emergent land-use issues and formulated recommendations for change. The mayor charged the group with evaluating how best to “allow revitalization while accommodating various interests and to protect private-property rights without sacrificing community

quality of life and valued community resources.”

Mr. Heinbokel said in order to better understand the essence of redevelopment in town, the group met with “stakeholders,” including members of the general public, architects, builders and the Historic Preservation Commission, among others.

After assessing the stakeholders’ “perceptions,” the taskforce concluded, “The cold, hard truth is that a house that was considered desirable and within the economic reach of middle-class families during the 50s and 60s would be considered unlivable by many of today’s homebuyers. The growing tendency for even first-time buyers to buy big is making the concept of the small

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SEEING RED...Dignitaries listen to Governor Jon Corzine detail his financial restructuring and debt reduction plan last Wednesday at Union County College in Cranford. Among those seated are Union County College President Thomas Brown (far left), State Senator Tom Kean, Jr. (fourth from left), Assemblyman Joseph Cryan (LD-20, Union), Assemblymen Eric Munoz (LD-21, Summit), Jon Bramnick (LD-21, Westfield) and Union County Freeholder Chairman Angel Estrada.

Little Gate House Finishes Hearing Expert Testimonies

By CHRISTINA M. HINKE
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Attorneys for both the opposition and for the applicant, Julie Marsella of 200 Canterbury Road, concluded their presentations of expert witnesses at Monday night’s planning-board meeting in the case of the “Little Gatehouse” property, developed in the 1920s by Arthur Rule. The property is located at the South Gate to Wychwood in Westfield.

Brian Molloy, an attorney for those residents opposed to the plan, presented Charles Silverstein, a traffic engineer. He testified to the “substandard safety conditions” of adding a driveway entrance on Wychwood Road.

Mr. Silverstein said that the earlier testimony of traffic engineer Elizabeth Dolan, hired by the applicant, did not address the standards written in the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) green book.

He said, according to AASHTO, a driveway is considered an intersection; therefore, it should apply to the intersection sight distance standards. He said 280 feet is the appropriate intersection sight distance, a measurement of length necessary for a car to make a sudden stop when another car exits the driveway.

Ms. Dolan applied stopping sight-distance standards, which has a shorter sight distance.

Ms. Dolan testified in her earlier statement that a 115-foot sight distance is needed for a car turning right off of East Broad Street onto Wychwood Road. This is based on her detection of average speeds round-

ing that corner of 15 mph.

Mr. Silverstein said he clocked speeds, at the same location, averaging 20 mph. He said when using his speed that a stopping sight distance would then increase from her calculated 115 to 160 feet, though he disagrees with using stopping distance as a form of measurement.

“It creates an unsafe situation,” he said, adding that it is not enough time for an oncoming car to react to a car exiting the driveway.

“I feel it is a dangerous location for a new driveway,” Mr. Silverstein said. “It is increasing the likelihood of a stopped car at that point.”

Mr. Silverstein also stated Ms. Dolan’s use of a 10-foot setback of the driveway to the point where it meets the road is not compliant with AASHTO standards, which is a minimum of 14.5 feet and a recommended 17 feet.

Ms. Dolan said in her experience, 10 feet is used in many applications but also recognized it is not an AASHTO standard. She said some towns use 10 feet.

Mr. Silverstein said Westfield does not have 10 feet in its ordinance.

With the addition of a driveway, Mr. Silverstein said an additional 10 to 11 traffic movements are created in a 24-hour period. He said all the movements are potentially unsafe in regards to poor sight distance.

Ms. Dolan said, “It does increase the potential for a conflict.”

Ms. Dolan and Mr. Silverstein also said removal of township-owned shrubs and trees along East Broad Street would help sight lines, along

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IN OPPOSITION...Charles Silverstein, left, traffic-safety engineer for those residents opposing a subdivision on Canterbury Road, speaks in opposition to the location of a new driveway in the building plans before the Westfield Planning Board on Monday night. The application calls for adding to the existing “Little Gatehouse” and construction of a new home on the property. Pictured on the dais, from left to right, are: board attorney Russell Feinstein, board chairman Vincent Wilt and board member Anthony Attanasio.

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