

## Corzine Tells of NJ Fiscal Crisis; Proposes Debt Restructuring Plan

By DEBBIE MADISON  
 Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

CRANFORD — New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine described the current debt situation as a “financial crisis” which 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](http://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, extraordinary 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.

Several citizens suggested renegotiating public employee contracts to bring those benefits more in line with those of the private sector, and 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 health care benefits.

The Governor said those contracts were negotiated by previous administrations, adding that he did not believe the solution lay in reneging 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

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David Samsky for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

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), Assemblyman Eric Munoz (LD-21, Summit), Jon Bramnick (LD-21, Westfield) and Union County Freeholder Chairman Angel Estrada.

## Fanwood Wants to Unveil Budget by Early March

By TED RITTER  
 Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD — Mayor Colleen Mahr and the borough council hope to introduce the proposed municipal budget within a few weeks.

In an interview with *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* at Borough Hall Tuesday evening, Mayor Mahr said, “We’re facing a deadline of early March [in order to be eligible to submit] an extraordinary municipal aid application.”

The borough has applied for – and received – state aid dedicated to property tax relief for the past few years; last year, Fanwood received \$325,000 in “extraordinary aid,” helping to limit the tax increase for local residents.

Adopted last August after a long wait for word from the state about the fate of the borough’s aid application, Fanwood’s current \$8.3-million municipal budget, with nearly \$4.6 million covered by property taxes, resulted in a 4.3 percent increase in the total (municipal, school and county) tax rate.

This year, Mayor Mahr said she directed municipal department heads to look at “a number of scenarios” with an eye toward reducing their budgets by up to 5 percent.

“We didn’t want to look at a flat budget this year,” Mayor Mahr said. “A frozen or a flat budget is not an exercise I wanted to go through,” she said, pointing to anticipated increases in insurance, pension, and other expenses generally beyond the borough’s control.

The borough’s chief financial officer, Fred Tomkins, met with department heads as they analyzed line items

and prepared their proposed spending plans, which “we just got back from the departments,” Mayor Mahr said.

The next step will be for the mayor and council to hold a series of six or more special meetings, tentatively scheduled to begin February 11, at which the borough will begin to actually put the proposed budget together.

Although six council budget meetings have been scheduled so far through late March, borough clerk Eleanor McGovern said, “There might be other [meeting] dates added [and], they’ll all be advertised.”

“February will be a very busy month for us,” the mayor added.

Mayor Mahr said last month she was planning to form a citizens’ budget review committee and asked local residents to submit resumes.

However, with the early March budget introduction deadline fast approaching and only two resumes received so far, the mayor said there might not be enough time this year for such a review.

“I don’t need a dog-and-pony show; I need a substantive and significant [budget] review process,” Mayor Mahr said.

“I’d like to bring in our citizens and engage them in the budget process,” she said.

“I’d like to get out there more and hopefully bring [a budget review committee] on for 2009,” she said, adding that she would like participants to be able to have a “significant length of time” to study the budget.

“We take this very serious because it’s the number one issue in every campaign,” the mayor said.



Fred Rossi for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

PRIME CHOICE...Scotch Plains resident makes selection in private, voting at the Scotch Plains Library in the first-ever February Presidential Primary Election in New Jersey on Tuesday, February 5. See story on page 12.



David Samsky for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WHEN PIGS FLY...Governor Jon Corzine stands next to a slide depicting an animated figure of a 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 six and seven for the full slide presentation.

## SP Council Urged Not to Enact Law on Cell Tower Placement

By FRED T. ROSSI  
 Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — A cellular technology consultant told the township council Tuesday night that enacting an ordinance setting out specific zones where cell phone towers would be permitted is “probably not a good idea” because township officials would end up having less control over the size and location of such towers.

Bruce Eisenstein, a professor of computer and electrical engineering at Drexel University and a consultant on cellular technology issues to more than 80 municipalities, spoke for nearly two hours with council members as well as two members of the township zoning board of adjustment, chairman Jim Fawcett and Jim Pate at Tuesday night’s council meeting.

Mr. Eisenstein first provided an overview of the history of cellular technology leading up to the 1996 federal Telecommunications Act, which he said, “opened up the market for the cell phone industry in the U.S.”

He noted that Congress had included provisions in that law that prohibited municipalities from banning cell towers outright or discriminating against cell phone companies. Mr. Eisenstein said after “years of investigating by the FCC” determined no health threats from cell towers, Congress also prohibited municipalities, specifically local land use boards, from considering environmental health effects when considering cell tower applications.

Amendments to the 1996 law expanded the uses of cell phones, to

where they’re “becoming less phones and more computers,” Mr. Eisenstein said, pointing to increased text messaging, Internet access, camera and video in recent years.

Mayor Martin Marks asked Mr. Eisenstein about the pros and cons of enacting a local ordinance specifying

to file a use variance application with the zoning board, which could find it difficult to deny if a plausible case was made that signal coverage in that zone would be strengthened.

These situations created by an ordinance, Mr. Eisenstein told the council, means local authorities would



David B. Corbin for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

GIANTS WIN...The area virtually shut down Sunday night with house parties everywhere as fans watch the dramatic Giants victory over the Patriots in Super Bowl XLII. Guests at the Corbin house celebrate after Eli and the Giants stormed back for the win.

where in Scotch Plains cell towers can and cannot be situated. Presently, cell towers are not a permitted use in any zone in the township, meaning that all proposals to erect a tower need a use variance approval by the zoning board.

Mr. Eisenstein said the use variance requirement means the zoning board “is the control valve” for where towers are built. Enacting an ordinance, he said, could mean cell phone companies wishing to build a tower in a permitted zone would only need a construction permit — and no other approvals or a public presentation — before proceeding. And if a cell phone company wanted to locate a tower in a non-permitted zone, it would have

“lose all practical control” over where towers are located. “You have more control now” by compelling cell providers to appear before the zoning board for every application.

Mayor Marks agreed, saying such an ordinance “may be doing more harm than good” by giving residents “a false sense of security” about where towers will be placed.

The mayor asked Mr. Fawcett and Mr. Pate with their zoning board colleagues about retaining Mr. Eisenstein as their professional expert for future cell tower applications.

Mr. Eisenstein said his role would be to “look at an application and tell [the board] what I think of it.”



Fred Rossi for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

BUSINESS SOCIAL...Scotch Plains business people enjoy socializing at the Scotch Plains Business and Professional Association (SPBPA) party Monday evening at Mezzogiorno Ristorante on Park Avenue in the township. About 40 members of SPBPA attended the group’s annual New Year Party.

## Bids Expected on Southside Field Architect in 60 Days

By MARIA WOEHR  
 Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — The Scotch Plains Recreation Commission will review bids for an architect for the Southside Field improvement project in the near future. The bids will be submitted for evaluation in the next 30 to 60 days, Recreation Director Ray Poerio said at Monday night’s commission meeting.

Once the conceptuals are finalized by Millburn-based Hatch Mott MacDonald, the engineering firm working with the commission, the bids will be reviewed.

The township has bonded \$2 million to develop a new artificial turf and lighted soccer field behind the southside fire department.

Recreation officials said the renovations are scheduled for completion by the fall and will be partially funded from grants that the recreation commission received last year. A conceptual grant was supplied by the Union County freeholders last year and the recreation department also received funding for a playground and trees for the southside field.

“We have \$230,000 to \$240,000 in grants to utilize (for the project),” Mr. Poerio said.

In other business, two Scotch Plains residents, Mary DeJesso and Elsie

LeStrange, asked the commission to hire instructors so that senior citizens could learn how to use the three computers that are available for their use at the Scotch Hills County Club.

The commission had interviewed volunteer instructors, but learned that seniors preferred to use the computers during the daytime. So, the commission has set aside funds in the budget for an instructor. The commission did not specify an amount because the commission has not reviewed the budget for their approval.

“We were told we would get an instructor so that the seniors could learn. Seniors programs always get overlooked. We haven’t had new programs in three to five years,” Ms. LeStrange said.

“We are doing our best to budget senior programs and have budgeted for an instructor,” Mr. Poerio said.

The commission will also begin field scheduling. “It is always challenging to organize all the organizations that come to us. Every year we have a different schedule and every year we have construction, so that also creates more of a challenge,” Mr. Poerio said.

The commission announced that it is also hiring maintenance staff. In other news, softball registration ends tomorrow, Friday, February 8.

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