

County Mg. Releases \$436.8 Mil. Budget; Taxes to Jump 6 Percent

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

ELIZABETH — Union County taxes will jump \$15.4 million or 6 percent under a \$255.3 million tax levy unveiled by County Manager George Devanney last week. The tax levy accounts for 58 percent of the county's total revenue stream to fund a \$436.8 million spending plan. The overall budget is up \$22.4 million over last year.

County taxes have risen from \$150.1 million in 2000 to \$255.3 million this year — an increase of \$104 million over an eight-year span. Mr. Devanney told reporters at last Thursday's freeholder meeting that the average county taxpayer would pay \$82 more in county taxes this year.

He said county employees' health insurance, up \$2 million, pensions, up \$6 million, \$9 million in salary increases and an ongoing \$2-million operating deficit at Runnells Specialized Hospital represent some of the biggest increases in the budget.

"We are trying to make Runnells, once again, self-sustaining within two years," Mr. Devanney said.

He said Runnells is being transformed from an acute rehabilitation unit to a subacute facility for such medical procedures

and conditions as joint replacements, hip fractures and strokes.

"These changes are not expected to significantly change the hospital's financial status this year, but will permit a planned expansion that will allow Runnells to become totally self-sustaining by 2010," Mr. Devanney told the freeholders in his budget message.

He also cited a combined half-million-dollar loss at Union County's three public golf courses — Ash Brook in Scotch Plains, Galloping Hill in Kenilworth/Union and Oak Ridge in Clark — as contributing to the budget

have recommended the county look to management contracts, operating leases and concession agreements to improve efficiencies at the county's golf facilities. He said the county would look to maximize usage of the courses, seek private investment to enhance the quality of its golf facilities and strive to increase attendance and community participation.

The county manager said he is requesting that non-union employees increase their contributions for health insurance by "as much as 1.5 percent of their salaries." These same employees will have their raises delayed until July 1. Mr. Devanney said that health insurance payroll deductions and delaying raises would produce \$1 million in savings. He said county employees have had payroll deductions for health care for 10 years.

In response to December's escape of two prisoners at the Union County jail, the county manager has recommended that a county department of corrections be created whereby the jail director would report directly to the county manager and the freeholders. Currently the jail director runs the division of correctional services and reports to the county's public safety director.

In addition, 51 corrections officers would be hired this year to improve the jail operations, as well as reduce overtime costs. Additional cameras have been installed and razor wire has been added along the jail's perimeter and on sub-roofs.

Under questioning by reporters, Finance Director Larry Caroselli said eliminating the tax increase this year would require significant budget reductions.

"There would have to be widespread layoffs," he said. The county has 3,000 employees.

"We would have to make significant cuts in our benefits costs," Mr. Devanney said, adding that the county would have to get concessions from its employee unions during labor negotiations to cut hospital coverage in health insurance premiums.

Mr. Devanney added that, "There would not be a department or service that would not suffer" if significant reductions occurred.

"[There] would be a lot of pain and heartache," Mr. Caroselli added.

The county manager said he would meet with Freeholder Al Mirabella, finance committee chairman, to schedule budget meetings, with the goal of introducing the budget in April and adopting the spending plan in May.



COUNTY BUDGET...The Union County freeholder board will soon begin budget and county tax deliberations. Members of the freeholder board are shown as they took office in January.

increases. Mr. Devanney said state officials

Local Officials Weigh In on Plan for State Fiscal Crisis

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

AREA — Two weeks after New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine hosted a town hall meeting in Cranford, at Union County Community College, presenting his four-pronged plan to rescue the state from the verge of bankruptcy, state Assemblywoman Linda Stender issued a press release opposing the Governor's proposal to hike tolls on three of New Jersey's major highways.

She said she "is opposed to Governor Corzine's toll hike." While agreeing that "efforts to reduce our state debt and ending the practice of spending beyond our means must be made, it is unreasonable to penalize residents and businesses that solely rely on thoroughfares, such as the New Jersey Turnpike and (the) Garden State Parkway. A solution to our budgetary problems must instead focus on cuts in spending while preserving assets that have a history of benefiting the residents of this state."

While legislators and other public officials weigh in on the Governor's proposal, the Governor's office issued a press release eliminating one of the three major highways from the plan.

Route 440 "would not be necessary or essential to the overall plan he is proposing for restructuring New Jersey's financial situation and to reduce debt." No other reason was offered for eliminating Route 440 from the proposal.

Toll hikes proposed for the other two highways, the Garden State Parkway and the New Jersey Turnpike, remain as a part of the Governor's overall plan.

In addition to quadrupling the tolls, the Governor's plan calls for selling 75 years worth of the future tolls to raise \$38 billion now for debt reduction and new projects. He calls for a

spending freeze, \$2.5 billion in unspecified reductions of the budget and no more bonded debt without voter approval. The state has \$32 billion in bonded debt. The Governor also says the state faces an additional unfunded liability of \$80 billion for pension and benefits for public employees and retirees.

The Governor's office announced a list of public officials, community and religious leaders, businesses and citizens who will join the 44 existing members of the Governor's steering committee, who will provide counsel to the Governor as the plan develops.

The press release quoted the Governor as saying, "I am proud to announce that these new additions to the steering committee have come forward to help advance the discussion about the financial emergency facing our state. The financial restructuring and debt reduction initiative will not only pay down state debt, but will also fund transportation projects and infrastructure improvements for generations." The list of existing and new members to the steering committee can be found on the state's website at www.nj.gov under restructuring.

The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times spoke with several local mayors regarding their position on the Governor's proposal.

Mountainside Mayor Robert Vigilanti expressed his position on the Governor's plan to *The Times*, stating, "I am totally opposed to it. I'm not an economist, but it doesn't make sense to borrow and saddle our grandchildren with the debt. I think the government is on the wrong road. Before we raise tolls, let's cut out all the garbage in our system."

"We have to live within our means; I think the state should live within its means. Half of the senate and assembly

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SEEKS SUPPORT...7th District Congressional candidate, Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks, center, and his opponents meet with the Westfield Republican Committee on Monday at the home of Assemblyman Jon Brammick (LD-21). See story on page 2.

New SPBPA President Sees 'Potential' in Downtown

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Dr. Frank DiLollo, the new president of the Scotch Plains Business and Professional Association (SPBPA), said the downtown business district, while having "unbelievable potential," needs both a "facelift" and "some progressive thinking."

Dr. DiLollo, who opened his chiropractic practice on Park Avenue 14 months ago after 13 years in Roselle Park, told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that he is hopeful that designating the downtown as a Special Improvement District (SID), which the township council seems set to do before the summer, would have a positive effect. He expressed his hope that a SID manager overseeing the downtown would "strategically bring in businesses that will do well here," while also providing a boost to existing businesses.

Nine individuals, representing four businesses, formed SPBPA in 1994. Today, the organization boasts more than 100 members and sponsors the Saturday Farmers Market in the summer and fall and the annual downtown holiday celebration in December. Dr. DiLollo, the group's fourth president, was recently elected to his post along with Vice President Ray Pardon, Secretary Russell Huegel and Treasurer Stephan Hoeckele.

Among his goals for SPBPA, Dr. DiLollo said he wants the group's members to keep in touch with each other and also to, where possible, refer business "inside," or to one another. He plans to hold four networking nights, one per quarter, to allow members to meet with each other and exchange ideas in an informal setting.

SPBPA is also planning a fundraiser, on April 25, for the scholarship funds it distributes each year to graduating high school seniors.

Dr. DiLollo, who has lived in Scotch Plains and Fanwood since 1994, relocated his practice in early 2007 and said that business is "fantastic." He believes the downtown has "got so much potential," and given his location, he said he has "a vested interest in what happens" there.

"I've always had it in the back of my head to do something in town [for those veterans]," Mr. Wussler said. "It would be nice for us to have a

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READY FOR BUSINESS...The Scotch Plains Business and Professional Association board of directors elected its officers for 2008. Pictured, left to right, are: Ray Pardon, vice-president; Russell Huegel, secretary; Dr. Frank DiLollo, president; and Steve Hoeckele, treasurer.

SP Budget to Rise 6 Percent Or \$1.4 Million Over 2007

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Township Manager Thomas Atkins last week presented to the township council his 2008 municipal budget recommendations, which include a 5.8 percent increase in appropriations.

Calling his proposed spending plan "lean," Mr. Atkins said he made "considerable" reductions in requested funding from various municipal departments before submitting the budget to the council, which will spend the next six to eight weeks reviewing the appropriations and revenue sides before introducing a spending plan in April or May.

The \$24,856,503 budget submitted is \$1,356,426 higher than last year, with more than 85 percent of that increase due to mandated spending increases for insurance, pension contributions, sewerage authority fees, police salaries and debt service, Mr. Atkins said.

The council has not yet scheduled budget meetings, but Mr. Atkins suggested that, unlike last year, department heads not be included in the deliberations. At the council's conference meeting on Tuesday, he said that, "when you see the potential [property] tax increase, you're not going to feel sorry" for any department whose budget request was cut. "There are going to be hefty problems this year."

For nearly an hour, Mr. Atkins reviewed highlights from his proposed

budget. He will submit the final one before retiring this summer. Prior to starting his presentation, when he distributed to the council and the press a sheet containing some general comments on the township's finances, Richard Samuel, the township Democratic Party chairman, demanded a copy for himself.

When Mr. Atkins refused, Mr. Samuel said he was entitled to a copy of what he termed a 'public document.' Mr. Atkins said the two members of the press were given copies because they needed it to write their articles for the public to read.

"You write things that are trash,"

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Fanwood Planning Board Discusses Bicycle Project

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

FANWOOD — The Fanwood Planning Board discussed potential 2008 projects and swore in Daniel Zucker as a class two planning board member

figure out, "How to help make the town more green," Board Chairman Gregory Cummings said.

The board discussed asking the borough council to expand the "trash district" within Fanwood. This area is



OATH TO SERVE...Daniel Zucker is sworn in as a new member of the Fanwood Planning Board Tuesday night. Pictured, left to right, are: board attorney Robert Renaud; chairman Greg Cummings; John Celardo; and Mr. Zucker.

at their meeting on Tuesday evening.

The 2008 projects could include a bicycle master plan. The project now involves putting up new signage; however, some members wanted the plan updated to add bicycle paths to roads to make it safer for cyclists.

"That project is very '70s and the roads are not safe with the volume of people on them. We could update the project by creating more shoulders to make it safer for bicyclists in town," board member Jack Molenaar said.

The board also created a "green" committee to discuss the environmental resources inventory and to

behind the Martine Avenue stores. The board said it would like to expand the current lot and add another area downtown.

"There has been a problem with storeowners trying to carry their garbage out, especially in the snow, because they don't plow in the area," Mr. Cummings said.

The board addressed complaints from residents about the new light at the Getty Station on South Avenue. "I'm going to ask what we can do about that. Residents have been complaining that the traffic light is too bright there," Mr. Cummings said.



MOVING IN...With the renovations of the Scotch Plains Municipal Building nearing completion, new police department furniture was delivered this week.

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