

County Schools Superintendent Reviews Budget Impacts, Changes

By DEBORAH MADISON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

CRANFORD — Carmen Centuolo, county schools superintendent, discussed her expanded duties and the budget restrictions placed on local schools with school superintendents and members of boards of education last Wednesday at Union County College in Cranford.

She will oversee the budget process to assure compliance with state expenditure restrictions in all districts of the county.

Addressing the budget cap of 2 percent placed on some districts by Governor Jon Corzine, Ms. Centuolo said the districts would have to start sharing in new, innovative ways to make up for the deficit in financing imposed by the Governor's budget.

She acknowledged that there is already much sharing going on but emphasized that districts that have an abundance of materials, programs and knowledge would have to share more with those districts that do not.

"For Union County, I see sharing as not just providing for students in our districts but providing for all students in Union County," Ms. Centuolo said. "Some don't have an adequate tax base," she added.

The biggest challenge, Ms. Centuolo

explained, will be to share across districts that have diverse District Factor Groups (DFG), not just with geographic neighbors. Districts will have to start sharing across financial, racial and DFGs, regardless of how difficult it is to accept these differences, she said.

"I'm not saying that every student from Elizabeth will come to Westfield, but we need to open up our doors," she said. If children from other districts have special needs — such as bilingual-program needs, special-education needs or other special interests — the county needs to be able to send a child anywhere in the county, Ms. Centuolo told the audience.

"We need to do a lot of self-analysis of how we could begin to do this," she noted. "The government wants consolidation and efficiency so badly," Ms. Centuolo said. "Now is the time to do this, before the state mandates it."

She said, however, that she did not see the state mandating consolidation in the near future.

Many districts already share services, such as group purchasing of banking and materials. Other areas in which districts could pool their buying power include computer leasing and textbook purchases, Ms. Centuolo suggested.

"Collaboration, not regionalization," Ms. Centuolo said.

In order to facilitate this process, Ms. Centuolo said that she was forming four committees that would look at different aspects of shared services. She asked those in attendance to sign up for the committees, which include Special Services, Transportation and Food Services, Professional Development and Innovative/Challenging Programs.

She explained that she would bring the committees together in a few months to collaborate and share ideas.

After her presentation, Ms. Centuolo answered questions from the audience. Responding to a question about her position's power of line-item vetoes, Ms. Centuolo said that the veto was designed to encourage districts to do their homework and negotiate better deals, as well as economize and consolidate programs. She said she would look at whether districts could justify costs with precise figures based on research, not just guesswork.

In closing, Ms. Centuolo said that this process was necessary before mandates were imposed to ensure the efficiency that the state desires. In regards to the new funding formula, Ms. Centuolo said that her office has been asking the Governor's Office where the money will come from, but has not received an answer.

Westfield Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dolan told *The Westfield Leader* that she thought Ms. Centuolo did a "good job" introducing her new position. She said that Westfield already displayed a willingness to cooperate and share services with students from other districts coming into Westfield and vice-versa.

"We are certainly open to continuing this cooperation, especially with Ms. Centuolo's offer of assistance," the superintendent told *The Leader*.

Superintendent Margaret Hayes of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood school district said, "Dr. Centuolo gave a very positive presentation, and we look forward to working with her on how boards of education can increase shared services."

Scotch Plains BOE President Norman "Trip" Whitehouse told *The Leader*, "The budget formula, in terms

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Carmen Centuolo

Planner Thornton Takes Job With State Highlands Council

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — During a January 9 meeting, the planning board announced that Town Planner Judith Thornton, who began full-time in September 2006, had taken a job with the state's Highlands Council. She will remain on as a consultant, earning a \$100-per-hour fee.

When reached at her new office, Ms. Thornton said she "would never have dreamed about leaving, but then this came along."

The Highlands Council primarily works to develop a regional Master Plan for the Highlands region. Ms. Thornton now serves as the council's principal planner.

During Ms. Thornton's tenure in Westfield, she helped the town re-examine its Master Plan and fulfill its Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) obligations, as well as advising the land-use task force on its overdevelopment recommendations.

Fourth Ward Councilman Jim Foerst, who chairs the council's Code Review and Town Property Committee and serves on the planning board, said her departure "came as a surprise. We knew we had a gem, but she was cherry-picked by the state."

"She wasn't looking," Mr. Foerst said. "The state knocked on her door."

Mr. Foerst told *The Leader* that the town has advertised for a replacement and has begun to receive résumés.

"She did a lot — historic preservation, affordable housing, Master Plan, land-use. She did so much for the town," he said.

In terms of historic-preservation, Mr. Foerst said Ms. Thornton "teed up" the ordinance, which received "unanimous

support" and will be presented in early February.

Ms. Thornton, while not a member of the land-use task force, gave her thoughts to the group, leaving it "in a good position," said Mr. Foerst.

Ms. Thornton, speaking about her work with the task force, said, "We found some ideas weren't workable. The big reason [it took so long] was that we wanted to do a thorough job. Instead of some of the broad, sweeping changes, only the best ideas were retained."

Mr. Foerst said her departure would affect the council's work on its COAH obligations.

"One of the first questions [we will ask a prospective employee] will be to gauge their experience with COAH. That's an important piece of the package," he said.

Ms. Thornton agreed, saying that dealing with COAH obligations "would have been one of my major focuses [if I continued in Westfield]."

Ms. Thornton said the town must conduct an analysis of its housing stock and employment opportunities before developing a "compliance plan" to satisfy its requirement.

"There is a mountain of work to be done," she said.

Town Engineer Ken Marsh, who worked in concert with Ms. Thornton on many town initiatives, said a recent six-month COAH extension "gives us some breathing room. It's a critical item, though."

In addition to COAH, Ms. Thornton will consult on such items as the Master-Plan reexamination, Mr. Marsh said.

Ms. Thornton, saying the reexamination was "hard to complete," told *The Leader* that it is "finished in draft form"

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Judith Thornton



THE BLUNT TRUTH...Union County Police transport convict Otis Blunt, who escaped from Union County jail in Elizabeth, to the high-security Union County Police Headquarters in Westfield last Thursday, after he was captured in Mexico City last Tuesday through the efforts of an international manhunt. On Friday, the New Jersey Department of Corrections transported Blunt to New Jersey State Prison in Trenton. See photos at www.goleader.com/photos.

Union County Jail Escapees Return To Prison Following Their Capture

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Two inmates who escaped from the Union County jail in Elizabeth on December 14 are now back in custody and being held at a state corrections facility in Trenton, officials confirmed last week.

Members of the media swarmed the Union County Police Headquarters, located on North Avenue in Westfield, last Wednesday when Jose Espinosa, 20, was brought in, and again on Thursday, when Otis Blunt, 32, was led into police headquarters.

Union County Prosecutor Ted Romankow said Blunt was taken into custody by U.S. Marshals in Mexico City, Mexico, at 4:30 Eastern Standard Time. He said Blunt was staying at a "10-a-night" when located by U.S. Marshals and Mexican immi-

gration authorities.

He was arrested without incident, the prosecutor said, and flown back to John F. Kennedy Airport, where he was turned over to Union County police officers. Blunt's return to the United States was handled by the U.S. Department of Justice, Union County Executive Assistant Prosecutor Eileen Walsh said.

Espinosa, who is in the United States illegally from Mexico, according to Ms. Walsh, was captured in Elizabeth, a few blocks from the jail from which he escaped.

Both inmates broke out of the county jail by removing two cement cinder blocks in their adjoining cells, jumping onto a rooftop below and then leaping 25 feet from a third-floor roof to make it over a barbed-wire fence.

Espinosa sprained his ankle and, according to news reports, hailed a cab at a nearby train station to a hotel, before staying in an apartment where he was later captured. At the scene, federal and local authorities also arrested 19-year-old Odalys Cortez of

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WF Council Authorizes Phase 1 of Downtown Plan

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — The Westfield council endorsed "phase 1" of the Downtown Improvement Plan before discussing aspects of the proposed historic-preservation ordinance during Tuesday's conference meeting.

Engineer Christopher Statile and Sherry Cronin, executive director of the Downtown Westfield Corporation, presented the final draft of the improvement plan, which focuses on South Avenue between Westfield and Central Avenues.

While the town, in 2006, approved \$660,000 for the project, the architect estimates the plan to cost \$690,000, Finance Policy Committee Chairman and First Ward Councilman Sal Caruana said.

However, Mr. Caruana said the plan affords the town the "flexibility" to substitute alternatives in order to lower the cost.

Mayor Andy Skibitsky said, "The bid specs are drafted in such a way — like a menu — that if we need to pull things, we can."

Mr. Statile spoke about the 2,100-foot-long undertaking, which he deemed to be "not an insignificant project."

He said the goals of the project included enhancing the corridor's ap-

pearance and encouraging traffic-calming.

The plan calls for landscaping and lighting improvements in and around the Westfield Train Station, as well as the erection of 55 new shade trees.

Mr. Statile said the arrangement would not lead to a loss of parking spaces. Also, the existing bus stop would be moved closer to Boulevard, which would provide extra on-street parking, he said.

Sidewalks and Belgian-block curbing would be replaced, while "real brick-paver crosswalks" would be placed at intersections to discourage speeding.

Ms. Cronin said two or three pay stations would be installed along South Avenue for convenience.

She added, "This is the first major step of the implementation of the downtown-improvement plan."

Both third-ward councilmen supported the endeavor.

Councilman Mark Ciarrocca called the proposal a "great idea."

"We have been trying to do this for a really long time...It's a tremendous first step," he said.

Councilman David Haas echoed his comments.

"That street (South Avenue) has needed work for a long time," he said. "It's very exciting to see this."

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GW Planning Board Hears St. Anne's 'Manor' Proposal

By KATHY MARQUES
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD — James Ward of Ward and O'Donnell Management presented his development proposal for knocking down the former St. Anne's School and constructing "The Manor at St. Anne's," during Garwood's January 9 planning-board meeting.

Mr. Ward proposed to build an age-restricted (55 and above), 47-unit, three-story condominium complex.

"I would love to build this beautiful complex and sell [the units] at a low rate to residents. I think this would enhance the town's appearance while generating over \$400,000 a year in tax revenue for Garwood," Mr. Ward said to the more than 60 residents present at the meeting.

Mr. Ward's attorney, Glenn Kienz, from the law firm of Weiner Lesniak, LLP, asked planning-board members Mayor Dennis McCarthy and Councilwoman Kathleen Villaggio to step down

from the appeal hearing.

He said since Mr. Ward is requesting a use variance, state law forbids elected officials on the planning board to vote on the appeal. Mr. Kienz also asked all board members who worship at St. Anne's to step down in order to avoid any conflicts of interest.

"When in doubt, step out," he said.

Eventually, three board members stepped down, with board member William Nierstedt voluntarily removing himself because he served as a church-board member. The church still owns the school.

Councilwoman Villaggio told *The Westfield Leader* she wanted to "clear up rumors," she claimed that resident Bruce Paterson was spreading.

She said, "The mayor and I did not accept any money (campaign contributions) from Mr. Ward's law firm. People are saying that this is the reason why we have to sit out, and that's not true. You

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ONE FOR THE AGES...Developer James Ward has proposed to take the former St. Anne's School, below, and transform it into the age-restricted "Manor," above.



POOLING TOGETHER...The Westfield Memorial Pool complex undergoes reconstruction to meet its spring deadline for reopening. Westfield Recreation Director Bruce Kaufmann reported that the work is on schedule.

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