

County Schools Superintendent Reviews Budget Impacts, Changes

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

CRANFORD — Carmen Centuolo, Union 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 said 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 the state desired. 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 Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that she thought Ms. Centuolo did a "good job" introducing her new position. She said 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 Times*.

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

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Carmen Centuolo



CAMPAIGN TRAIL...Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks (right), GOP candidate for Congress in the 7th Congressional District for the Republican primary to be held in June, chats with State Senator Tom Kean, Jr. (LD-21, Westfield), the new State Senate minority leader, at the January 8 Westfield Town Council re-organization meeting.

Union County Jail Escapees Return To Prison Following Their Capture

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

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 "S10-a-night" when located by U.S. Marshals and Mexican immigration 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 hiding in an apartment where he was later captured. At the scene, federal and local authorities also arrested 19-year-old Odalys Cortez of Pennsylvania, formerly of Elizabeth. Cortez was charged with resisting arrest.

A confirmed member of the Bloods

gang, Espinosa was to be sentenced to 17 years in prison after pleading guilty to manslaughter for his involvement in a drive-by shooting in Elizabeth in 2005.

Blunt was awaiting trial for robbery and weapons-possession charges from a shooting at a Hillside convenience store, authorities said.

Mr. Romankow said Blunt used a 10-pound iron handle to a fire-sprinkler-shutoff valve, which he obtained from an unlocked closet in the high-security section of the jail. He and Espinosa took turns banging on the cinder block for some two weeks. The inmates hid the hole with posters of bikini-clad women. They stuffed sheets under their blankets to hide their disappearance, authorities said.

According to published reports, jail guards did not notice that the two inmates had escaped until 20 hours later.

As part of the investigation, Mr. Romankow said his office performed a reenactment of the escape and found there was a considerable amount of noise generated from banging on the jail wall. Also, officials said inmates are to be checked every eight hours and

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BOE Officials Remain Concerned Over Aid Formula

By JESSICA E. JASKULA
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — With the State Assembly and Senate passing the new state-aid funding formula last week and Governor Jon Corzine signing the measure, Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education Business Administrator Anthony Del Sordi gave an update on state aid at last Thursday's BOE agenda-setting meeting.

Under the new funding formula, the district expects to receive an additional 10 percent in state aid for 2008-2009, or an increase of \$451,000.

"Of course, nothing is ever what it appears to be, and as more information was revealed, it became apparent that Scotch Plains-Fanwood was one of 120 districts that will have to give some of these new funds back to its taxpayers," he said.

He then spoke about the township's "local fair share," a calculation based on wealth using the district's property value and income level.

"Since it is anticipated that we will be above our local fair share, we must return about 7 percent of our additional state aid to the taxpayers," he said.

Mr. Del Sordi said the formula changed the terminology from "thorough and efficient expenditure levels" to "adequacy levels," or a calculation from the state on what it should cost to educate a student in elementary, middle and high school (\$9,649 for elementary, \$10,350 for middle and \$11,289 for high school in 2008-2009).

"Also our district is currently spending close to these levels. We are expected to be above adequacy," he said.

"On the positive side, it would appear that our district is in line for additional aid during the next few years because of our enrollment in-

crease since 2001-2002. With some luck, we may receive funds for preschool," Mr. Del Sordi said. "Unfortunately, at this point, I am more concerned about 2008-2009 than the years that follow."

Linda Nelson, board vice president, told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that the funding formula seems to be more of a plan to limit school spending.

"If a district can't raise revenue through taxes, and there's no commercial or industrial ratables in town, and the state gives you a limited amount of state aid, you have no money to spend," she said.

"Not only can such a school district not provide new, needed programs, but it will eventually have to cut programs and staff and would have no chance of providing new programs that the state has indicated will be necessary in the future [such as preschool and full-day kindergarten]. A funding formula, on the other hand, would help maintain quality programs and would provide seed money to help districts without such programs as full-day kindergarten to start them."

Also at the meeting, Joan Mast and Merrie Snow, mathematics supervisors, recommended to the board the postponement of math leveling from sixth to seventh grade. Mrs. Snow said that this would give students an "extra year to mature and show what they know." She also said students would be more accustomed to the extra math time and the process of moving from room to room.

"We'll be able to determine the best placement for our students as they move forward," she said.

Board member Sasha Slocum said the curriculum committee "unanimously supported" the postponement. "This is the right move," she said. "It's a positive step forward."

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DOWNTOWN ART...The mural painted on the side wall of Mezzogiorno Restaurant on Park Avenue in Scotch Plains, above, in view of the municipal-building parking lot, became the focus of last week's planning-board meeting. After discussion, the board allowed the mural to stay.

Planning Board OKs Mural At Park Avenue Restaurant

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — The township planning board on Monday night gave its ex-post-facto approval to a mural painted last year on the side of the building that houses Mezzogiorno Restaurant on Park Avenue.

Mezzogiorno's owner, Francesco Sabetta, told the board he "had no idea" when he commissioned the mural that he was required to apply for a variance from local sign regulations, which allow a maximum of 5-percent coverage of a building's façade, including the placement of an establishment's name.

The mural — which includes the restaurant's name, qualifying it as a sign — covers the entire side of the building and faces the parking lot adjacent to the municipal building.

Board member Mike Michalisin asked Mr. Sabetta what would happen if he sold the restaurant or if the building's owner secured a new tenant. When Mr. Sabetta promised he would paint over the mural if circumstances change, the board decided to include, as a condition of its approval, a requirement that Mr. Sabetta be

responsible for doing so if necessary.

When board member Marc Ginsberg wondered if the board might be "opening up a can of worms" by allowing the mural on the side of the Mezzogiorno building, other board members noted that there are no other buildings where a mural could potentially be painted.

Township construction official and zoning officer Robert LaCosta said in his 30 years with the township, the Mezzogiorno mural was only the second one he had encountered.

At the beginning of its first meeting of the new year, the board re-elected Maria Sartor to a fourth year as chairman. Mrs. Sartor, who is starting her 26th year with the board, said that, of all the activities in which she participates, "this is my favorite and will always be my favorite."

Joseph Doyle was re-elected vice chairman. Mrs. Sartor called him "one of the board's most valuable resources." The board appointed Ferriero Engineering of Chester as its engineer but put off making appointments of a planner and an attorney until its Monday, January 28, meeting.



DAY OF HOPE...Members of the community gather January 9 for the grand opening of the Center For Hope Hospice and Palliative Care's new facility, Peggy Coloney's House at Hope Village, at 1900 Raritan Road in Scotch Plains. Pictured, from left to right, are: Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks, Union County Freeholder Chairman Angel Estrada, Dr. Robert Wegyn, the center's medical director; Jack Coloney, husband of the late Peggy Coloney; Robert Coloney, center president and CEO, and Al Sauer, the center's board chairman.

Deer Hunt Underway In Ashbrook Reservation

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — The annual deer reduction program in the Ashbrook Reservation began last Saturday and will end by February 9 or 10, according to Township Manager Thomas Atkins. At its meeting on Tuesday, the township council awarded an \$11,300 contract to Wildlife Management Services to reduce the herd by as much as 70 deer. Half of the contract will be reimbursed by Union County.

The program, which has been conducted by the Mountainside firm since its inception in 2006, was undertaken after several years of increased deer-related traffic accidents as well as

numerous deer straying off the reservation and onto adjacent neighborhood properties. Mayor Martin Marks said on Tuesday that proper safety precautions would be taken and that any gunfire heard by residents would be from the hunt. Mr. Atkins told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* the program would be conducted mostly during daytime hours during the week and on weekends.

As he did last week, the mayor said the program seems to have had a positive effect, saying that in 2006-2007, 61 deer carcasses had been removed from township streets while the figure for the 2002-2005 years was more than 400. The program,

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MEDIA FRENZY...Reporters and camera crews flock to the Union County Police Headquarters on North Avenue in Westfield last Thursday, where escaped convict Otis Blunt was locked up after his capture in Mexico City on Tuesday, January 8. See photos at www.timesnj.com/photos.

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