



# THE WESTFIELD LEADER

Ad Populos, Non Abitus, Pervenimus

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SIXTY CENTS

## State Moves Closer to Shutdown Of Muhlenberg Medical Center

By JOHN MAGUIRE  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

**EAST WINDSOR** — After stating that closing Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center was the only viable option, the State Health Planning Board voted unanimously on Thursday in favor of shutting the 130-year-old acute care facility. The final decision now moves to Heather Howard, commissioner of health and human services.

More than 150 supporters from Plainfield and surrounding areas made the trip to a Holiday Inn ballroom in East Windsor to voice their opposition to Solaris Health System's plan to close the 396-bed facility and leave

behind a satellite emergency room, nursing school and handful of other outpatient services.

Citing Muhlenberg's inability to remain financially viable, declining occupancy rates and that surrounding hospitals such as JFK in Edison have adequate capacity to absorb Muhlenberg's closure, the state health department recommended that the board approve Solaris' application with conditions.

Topping the department's list of recommendations was that Solaris maintain a satellite emergency room at Muhlenberg for the next five years, or until the facility can be sold to a new

owner. In its 19-page report, the department also recommended that Solaris be required to maintain its license to operate the hospital as an acute care facility for two years and that a community advisory group be established to insure that the healthcare needs of the affected communities are being met.

The public comment portion of the meeting was emotional and heated, as local leaders, Muhlenberg employees, community activists and concerned citizens rose one last time to ask the board not to close the hospital.

Local political leaders from Plainfield and surrounding communities also spoke out against Solaris' application.

State Assemblyman Gerald Green (LD-22, Plainfield) said, "I was hoping to keep the hospital open." He said he could not support the health department's recommendation and objected to several of the conditions it had proposed.

Union County Freeholder Bette Jane Kowalski spoke in opposition to the closure as well. "Healthcare involves so much more than financial considerations," she said. "The freeholders and Union County are committed to stand with you" against the closure, she added.

"We need that hospital. Please, let us keep it," said Plainfield Mayor Sharon Robinson Briggs. She recommended Muhlenberg be given to Plainfield and the surrounding communities and that a statewide lottery be set up to aid ailing hospitals throughout New Jersey.

Elizabeth Speidel, representing the Department of the Public Advocate, recommended that more detail be provided in the department's recommendations to the board and that Commissioner Howard explain why working class minority communities are the most hard hit by hospital closures.

In a scene reminiscent of earlier public hearings on the issue, citizens spoke passionately about what Muhlenberg means to them and the community, and expressed disappointment with Solaris and the board.

"I know it has been rubber-stamped already," said Rebecca Kelly of Plainfield to the board. "Based on your line of questioning, it appears to me that you have already made up your mind," added Adrian Mapp, a former Union County freeholder.

"Solaris is the evil empire here," cried Mirian Shastri of Plainfield, with Solaris' President and Chief Executive Officer, John McGee, seated five feet away. "They have been misleading you, and this is not right," she added.

With tears in her eyes, Vera Howell, a long-term Muhlenberg employee, said, "Close your eyes and imagine this were your town. This is a shame and a disgrace."

"It's all about money?" she asked. There was plenty of anger directed at Solaris and its management for their

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John Maguire for The Westfield Leader  
**MUHLENBERG HEARING...** John McGee, president and CEO of Solaris Health Systems, which owns Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center and JFK Medical Center, speaks before the State Health Planning Board in Trenton last week as the crowd demonstrates against the application to close Muhlenberg.

## MS BOE Approves Revised 2008-09 School Calendar

By MARTIN SWEENEY  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

**MOUNTAINSIDE** — During the Mountainside Board of Education (BOE) meeting on Thursday, June 26, board member Carmine Venes proposed amending the 2008-2009 school calendar to eliminate one day from the mid-winter recess, scheduled from February 13 through February 15, and adding more school days to the beginning of winter break in December. The intention of the plan, Mr. Venes said, is to "make the end of school a lot shorter, so that more learning could take place."

"We're always talking about instruction, instruction, how we can get more instruction in place," Mr. Venes said, reasoning that more learning would take place during the winter as opposed to the last few days of school when "they have fans going and it's too hot to work."

BOE President Mary Beth Schaumburg retorted that students would likely receive comparable levels of instruction whether it took place on the last few days of the school year or the last few days before winter break. She also said Mountainside's school calendar "follows the Berkeley Heights calendar to a certain degree," and that the changes Mr. Venes proposed would have to be approved by the Mountainside Education Association (MEA) before the board could approve the amendment.

Mountainside teenagers attend Governor Livingston High School in Berkeley Heights.

The board made note of Mr. Venes' proposal and decided to consider the changes at a later date after the MEA was consulted.

Following discussion of the calendar, the board unanimously approved the revised calendar for the 2008-2009 school year. According to the Chief

School Administrator Jeanette Baubles, the schedule was changed because the State Department of Education released the dates for NJ ASK standardized testing in late April, and these testing dates conflicted with a scheduled professional development day.

"If we're having standardized testing, we need to ensure that we had a full day of school," Ms. Baubles said.

The board announced that its summer school program received approval from the executive county superintendent.

Ms. Schaumburg said that the district had "a very successful closure of schools" for the summer, and thanked Wayne DeVico, head of the custodial staff, for the staff's "excellent job" in setting up and cleaning up from graduation.

The board announced that both Deerfield and Beechwood schools would remain open over the summer on Monday through Friday, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The board unanimously approved all finance and personnel motions without discussion. The items included the recognition of retiring Mountainside faculty, appropriation of funds for improvement of education for staff members and the approval of recently hired teachers.

Ms. Baubles remarked that the district had done "quite well" with student teachers. She provided the example of Vincenzina Morano, who will now teach in the special education department at Deerfield School and will be a summer camp aide at a district camp.

At the conclusion of the meeting, board member Gene Nagel thanked all those who helped contribute to the "wonderful graduation" held at Deerfield on June 25. "They had real nice speeches for the kids," he said.



Freedom Song... The Westfield Community Band will perform on the gazebo at Mindowaskin Park in Westfield during the town-wide Independence Day celebration tonight, July 3, at 7:30 p.m. at the park. The band's performance will be part of its 96th season of summer concerts. See release on page 7.



Katherine Vowell for The Westfield Leader  
**JAZZY TUNE...** Westfield's Tuesday Jazz Night kicked off July 1, with performances outside the train station, Central Avenue, East Broad Street and Elm Street. Jazz nights, sponsored by the Downtown Westfield Corporation, will continue throughout the summer from 7 to 9 p.m. every Tuesday evening.

## Council OK's Salaries; Non-Union Workers Get 3.75 Percent Hike

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

**WESTFIELD** — The town council approved salaries for library, police and salaried non-union employees, Tuesday, as well as for the mayor and council.

Instead of applying an "across-the-board" percentage increase for all town employees, the finance committee differentiated the rate among various parts of the workforce, Town Administrator Jim Gildea told *The Westfield Leader* Monday morning.

Non-union full-time employees will see a 3.75 percent increase in pay, which is "consistent" with increases given to fire department and Teamster employees, according to Mr. Gildea.

Among the salaries approved, Mr. Gildea will earn \$139,000 in 2008, and Town Clerk Claire Gray will make \$81,000.

New town planner William Drew will earn \$93,000, and Recreation Director Bruce Kaufmann will make \$83,000.

Town Engineer Kenneth Marsh will make \$118,900 in 2008. Mr. Gildea said Mr. Marsh's three-year appointment agreement ends in November, and the town engineer has informed the council that he is "interested" in retiring. Mr. Gildea praised Mr. Marsh's work and cautioned that the decision is "subject to change."

Appointed part-time employees, including the planning board, board of adjustment and municipal attorneys, prosecutor and defender, will see a 3 percent pay hike.

Robert Cockren, town attorney, will make \$64,000; municipal defender Michael Panagos, \$14,997; municipal prosecutor Christine Nugent, \$32,000; board of adjustment legal

counsel Vincent Loughlin, \$12,800; planning board legal counsel Russell Finenstein, \$12,300.

The police and fire chiefs, along with both deputy fire chiefs, will see a 4 percent pay increase in 2008 to maintain a level of "separation" between themselves and the captains.

In 2008, police captains will make \$108,000, while the police chief makes \$118,000. In 2009, a police captain will earn \$117,000.

A fire captain makes \$97,000 in 2008, while deputy chiefs make \$103,000, and the chief earns \$114,000.

"We have to create some separation... so that there is some worth to being a chief besides the desire to be one," Mr. Gildea said. "If not, all of a sudden, is it worth being chief?"

He also noted that Westfield's police

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## Freeholders Pass \$438 Mil. Budget; Two Area Residents Dispute Costs

By PAUL J. PEYTON  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

**ELIZABETH** — The Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders last Thursday approved a \$437.8-million budget by an 8-0 tally, following a public hearing, which included a shouting match between a resident and a freeholder.

The budget is up \$2.3 million over last year with county taxes increasing by \$13 million. Taxes will rise in all but two, Summit and Winfield, of the 21 municipalities in the county.

Locally, county taxes in Westfield will increase by \$1.5 million to \$25.1 million. The average assessed home in

Westfield will see an average increase of \$147, raising the tax to \$2,445.

In Scotch Plains, taxes will jump to \$14.2 million, an increase of \$429,816 over 2007. Fanwood's county tax portion will inflate by \$115,320 to \$3.9 million. The average home in the borough will pay \$1,456 in county taxes, which is \$43 over last year.

Garwood's share of county taxes will rise by \$169,115 to \$2.2 million. Mountainside residents will pay \$6.4 million, up \$189,486 over last year.

Westfield has the second highest, per-home county tax, trailing only Summit. Mountainside is third.

The board also adopted a \$26.1-million ordinance for the county's annual capital projects, an amount included in the \$437.8-million budget. Among the projects are \$20 million in funding for a performing arts building at the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools in Scotch Plains and \$3.9 million for the county's annual road-surfacing program.

During the budget hearing, Tina Renna, president of the Union County Watchdog Association and a Cranford resident, got into a verbal exchange with Freeholder Dan Sullivan. Mrs. Renna was stopped several times by county counsel Robert Barry for what he viewed as violations of Robert's Rules of Order, which guide elected governing bodies. A county sheriff's officer instructed her to leave the microphone when her time was up.

During the exchange, Mrs. Renna focused on a number of points ranging from what she said was a new \$47,000 Chevy Tahoe purchased by the county for County Manager George Devaney to the "redecorating" of Mr. Devaney's office. She also alleged wrongdoing in how furniture is being purchased for a fitness center at the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools.

She inferred that Mr. Devaney's sister-in-law is a furniture salesman who may have benefited in the sale, that Mr. Devaney's mother-in-law is on the Runnells Specialized Hospital payroll, which ran a half-million dollar

deficit last year, and that the county manager's wife was administrator for the county's Open Space Trust Fund at a time when the county spent \$500,000 towards construction plans of a children's museum in Union County, which was never built. That museum is now planned for Newark, officials said.

Mrs. Renna also said the county's director of golf operations was replaced by Mr. Devaney's "personnel trainer" and will be paid \$110,000 per year, an increase of \$11,000 over the previous director, she alleged.

On the county jail, Mrs. Renna said new directions department director Brian Riordon lives in Atlantic County and drives a county vehicle for which he is reimbursed for his gasoline.

"The jail is pretty much all we need Union County government for," Mrs. Renna said.

After hearing her comments, Mr. Sullivan responded, "We get it. It's all personal with you," later saying that Mrs. Renna was contacted by her husband, Joe Renna, then a county employee, to sell advertising space in a publication published for the Union County Alliance.

He said when the Rennas stopped receiving paychecks from the county, Mrs. Renna started criticizing county government, while her husband ran for freeholder in 2003 and 2004.

Mr. Sullivan said lawsuits filed over the years by Mr. Renna "cost the county \$400,000" in legal fees.

During the exchange, Mrs. Renna told Mr. Sullivan, "You're going to hell," to which Mr. Sullivan quipped, "I'll see you there, (but) you'll be there before me."

Mr. Devaney called Mrs. Renna's statements "allegations, lies and distortions." He said all furniture purchases by the county are through the state's public bidding law, where the lowest bidder is awarded the contract.

Discussing Mrs. Renna's accusations concerning his wife, Mr. Devaney said, "They are nothing but lies."

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## Garwood BOE Switches To State Health Benefits Plan

By LAURA MORTKOWITZ  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

**GARWOOD** — The Garwood Board of Education (BOE) voted June 24 to switch from Horizon to the state's health benefits plan for its employees effective September 1.

The BOE elected to participate in the health program provided by the New Jersey State Health Benefits Act of the State of New Jersey. Under changes implemented by the state in June of 2007, a School Employees Health Benefits Commission was created to provide health care benefits for active and retired education employees.

According to Assemblyman Jon Bramnick's office (LD-21, Westfield), school districts have been able to participate in the state health benefits plan "all along," although changes were made to state benefits in 2007.

School business administrative consultant Ernie Turner said under the new plan the district will pay the current premium cost it has through its insurance carrier.

The current health plan premium was slated to go up 52 percent this year, amounting to \$30,000 a month, board member John Sullivan said. This would have amounted to approximately \$510,000 for the year, according to Mr. Turner. If the district were with the new plan for the entire upcoming year, it would have cost \$445,000; however,

the district will remain under the current health plan until September 1.

The way in which the state restructured the state health benefits is "very favorable," Mr. Turner said. "It was meant, in my opinion, to encourage schools to switch to it," he said, adding that it was "very unprofitable" to stay with a private plan.

In connection with the new health plan, the board approved a one-year contract for group medical insurance consulting services with Grinspec Consulting at a cost of \$12,000. The group will assist the district in transitioning to the new plan. Grinspec will come before the board in September to explain how the change will affect all of the employees, Mr. Turner said.

The board also agreed to the revised payment of bills in the amount of \$517,424. At the previous meeting, the handwritten checks were not included in the total. A list of approximately 70 items was presented.

"The items [on the list] are all worthy of attention by the board of education," Mr. Turner said. "The items are not going to go away; they will have to be dealt with."

The board agreed to transfer an anticipated surplus of \$200,000 into a reserve account. This money will be available to the board should it need to transfer the funds during the year, officials said.

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