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SIXTY CENTS

State Moves Closer to Shutdown Of Muhlenberg Medical Center

By JOHN MAGUIRE
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

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 Miriam 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.

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Samuel Quits Council Race; No Replacement Yet Named

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

SCOTCH PLAINS - Less than three months after declaring his candidacy and three weeks after formally gaining his party's nomination, Democrat Richard Samuel last week dropped out of the fall campaign for township council.

Mr. Samuel, who has been party chairman since the 2006 municipal elections, was set to oppose Republican Mary DePaola for the council seat presently held by two-term GOP Councilwoman Paulette Coronato, who is not seeking re-election.

The Township Clerk's office confirmed receipt of a copy of a letter sent to the Union County Clerk's office from Mr. Samuel announcing he was dropping his candidacy.

Although Mr. Samuel told other news outlets last week that he was leaving the race due to personal time constraints and a desire to be involved with the presidential and congressional campaigns, he did not confirm those reasons when contacted by The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times earlier this week. "I have no interest in talking to you," he told this reporter during a brief telephone call. "You've had no interest in talking to me during the year and I have no interest in talking to you."



Richard Samuel



HAPPY SHOPPERS...Ashley and Aidan Correll, formerly of Fanwood, are pleased as they get an early start on learning how to shop for healthy foods at the Scotch Plains Farmers Market last Saturday. The market will be open each Saturday in the parking lot at Park Avenue adjacent to the municipal building throughout the summer.

Assistant Principal Position Cut By BOE at SP-F High School

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

SCOTCH PLAINS - The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education (BOE) commented, last Thursday, on the elimination of a full-time assistant principal position at the Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School.

In response to an e-mail from Lori Katz, dated June 5, BOE President Trip Whitehouse said, "For the past year, we have had three vice principals in our high school. Effective July 1, with the retirement of Mr. (Ronald)

Upperman, we have made some realignments to their roles and responsibilities."

"The driving force behind this realignment was cost," Mr. Whitehouse added. "As school districts are squeezed by funding formulas, it is imperative that we look to opportunities to see where we can conserve expenses that minimally impact classrooms."

The vice-principle position will be given to three individuals, with the responsibility of athletic supervisor

going to Rob Harmer, former athletic director and supervisor of health education.

Ms. Katz expressed her concern in her e-mail that was acknowledged at last week's meeting.

"The athletic director position is full-time as it is," wrote Ms. Katz in her e-mail. "Is there room in the day of the athletic director to take on any other responsibilities? Extra-curricular activities should not be run from the main office."

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

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

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 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 Devanney to the "redecorating" of Mr. Devanney'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. Devanney's sister-in-law is a furniture salesman who may have benefited in the sale, that Mr. Devanney's mother-in-law is on the Rannels 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

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MUHLENBERG HEARING...John McGee, president and CEO of Solaris Health Systems, which owns Muhlenberg 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.

Board Amends Ordinance On Dead-End Frontage

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

FANWOOD - The Fanwood Planning and Zoning Board of Adjustment heard two variance applications at its regular monthly meeting June 25.

Fanwood resident David Chango, residing at 169 Coriell Avenue, was granted variance approval for replacement of his driveway and a 30-foot retaining wall along the front of his property. The board decided that he did not have to obtain board approval because the retaining wall was less than four feet in height.

Although the new retaining wall will encroach on the borough's right-of-way by several inches, Borough Engineer Joseph Pryor said the encroachment was small.

The board also approved an application for a bulk variance by Timothy L'Hommedieu of Terrill Road. The

variance is for a cantilevered addition to his kitchen. The addition added two feet to the side of his house, but was still within the required side-yard setback.

Board Attorney Robert Renaud discussed with the board an amendment to an ordinance regarding the definition of frontage at the end of a dead-end street. The amendment clarifies that the end of a dead-end street should not be considered to be frontage for a lot, which does not include a cul-de-sac or the sidelines of the dead end, but only the end of the street.

Board member Peter Sayles disagreed with the phrasing suggested by Mr. Renaud, stating that it was unclear and confusing.

Mr. Sayles suggested the amendment needed to be split into three separate sentences, while Mr. Renaud preferred the one-sentence definition.

The need to clarify the definition came up during a recent application by developer Paul DiFrancesco, seeking to construct a house fronting onto the dead-end street, St. John's Place, on a subdivided lot, behind an existing home fronting on Woodland Avenue.

After hearing hours of testimony in January and again in April from various experts in civil engineering, traffic and fire safety, board members cited fire safety concerns as their chief reason for rejecting the application.

The board voted to accept the amendment with the phrasing written by Mr. Renaud.

The next agenda meeting of the planning board will be held on Monday, July 14, and the next regular meeting will be held on Wednesday, July 23.



The Declaration of Independence by Charles Diletto, Philadelphia Bicentennial 1976.



FIRE UP THE GRILL...Scotch Plains Republicans held a fundraiser on Saturday where mayoral candidate Nancy Malool and council candidate Mary DePaola greeted supporters.



CHECKING THE GOODS...With plenty to choose from, area residents make their selections of fresh fruits and vegetables at the Scotch Plains Farmers Market last Saturday.

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