

Capacity Crowd Attends Meeting To Discuss FW Budget, Layoffs

By KATHERINE VOWELL
 Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD — Fanwood's budget concerns and the recent issue of lay-off notices were the focus of a special public meeting held by the Fanwood Borough Council on July 9, at Forest Road Park Community Center. The room was filled to capacity, and some individuals were even forced to stand outside in the rain to hear the public meeting.

Mayor Colleen Mahr opened the meeting by saying, "Never before has the mayor and council been so transparent in wanting to hear from you and also wanting to talk to you."

"This is not about a particular union. This is not about a particular person. This is about you and me, who pay

very high taxes in the State of New Jersey, and we are faced with decisions we must make," Mayor Mahr said.

Although Mayor Mahr stated that cuts would be made "across the board," the focus of the public discussion primarily revolved around the potential layoffs of police officers.

"I will not support anything that will jeopardize the safety of Fanwood or the safety of the police officers working on the street," said Councilman and former Police Chief Anthony Parenti.

Resident Jenny Wegner said, "I find it appalling that you want to lay off the cops. If I had it my way, there would be 50 cops, so that I could walk outside anytime and feel safe."

Fanwood Police Corporal Ron Greco told the council, "There are only 21 officers in Fanwood, and it has been at that level since 1974. We don't need to rush to a decision."

Westfield Patrol Officer Kevin O'Keefe said that the reduction of police officers would affect the number of motor vehicle stops in the borough, which would have a direct correlation to an increase in crime.

"If you think this town is this safe because of coincidence, you are mistaken," Officer O'Keefe said.

Kevin McGovern, an associate attorney for the borough's Policemen's Benevolent Association (PBA), said, "There is a reason municipalities don't lay off police officers. It does not save money. Your police officers are a source of revenue, and reducing their numbers will not save you money in the long run."

Mayor Mahr responded by stating, "It has been a very contentious few months between the council and the PBA. No one wants to fight with the PBA, because no one wins in this situation."

The mayor and the town's chief financial officer, Frederick Tomkins, offered a PowerPoint presentation prior to the open discussion in an effort to help the public better understand the budget.

"Fanwood has been hit with many challenges since the beginning of the year. The first had been with the aid cut to municipalities under [a population of] 10,000, which started us on this slippery slope," Mayor Mahr said. "We need to be proactive. We need to tell you that we are looking to permanently cut costs in the Borough of Fanwood, and we are looking to get by on less."

"The state enacted a new cap law [in 2007] that requires us to only be able to raise the levy by a certain percentage," Mr. Tomkins said. "Part of our problem is because we've lost

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Katherine Vowell for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
MONEY TALKS...The special Fanwood budget meeting attendance on July 9 overflowed the room capacity. Some stood outside in the rain to hear the discussions on the borough's budget crisis and potential layoffs.

FW Studies Sharing Police/Emergency Services with SP

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Last Tuesday, the council passed a resolution supporting Fanwood's application for a \$50,000 state feasibility study grant to look into the possibility of sharing police dispatch and other emergency communications with Scotch Plains. This comes after Governor Jon Corzine's push for small communities to share services. It was emphasized that at this time neither town has any formal commitment to any type of new joint services beyond the feasibility study itself.

The council also approved the resolution authorizing an agreement with Union County to allow Scotch Plains, Fanwood and the Board of Education to temporarily store certain field maintenance equipment at the county engineering building on South Avenue. This arrangement is in anticipation of the county developing the Sevell property on Cooper Road to include new parkland and ball fields for use by township youth sports leagues. The county purchased the land five years ago.

The council renewed the township's contract with City Connections LLC to provide hosting and other support for the township's website, scotchplainsnj.com. The relationship began early last year with a significant upgrade to the website. This year's contract runs from July 1 through June 30, 2009, and amounts to \$6,190.

Stanley Goldstein, who heads a committee for the Scotch Plains-

Fanwood Board of Education, which is putting together a three-to-five year strategic plan for the school district, spoke at the council's conference meeting last week.

Mr. Goldstein asked the council to provide its input since "the council affects the Board of Education and the district, and vice versa." Mr. Goldstein said the board wants the council to act as a "stakeholder" and requested council members to provide their thoughts on "what the school district should look like in three years."

Mayor Martin Marks said he would ask Deputy Mayor Nancy Malool and Councilman Kevin Glover, who is the council's liaison to the board, to meet with committee members in coming weeks.

This evening, the township's cultural arts committee is sponsoring a summer block party at the Alan Augustine Village Green adjacent to the municipal building.

At the township council's meeting last week, Steve Goldberg detailed some of the highlights of tonight's program, which runs from 7:00 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.

The party will have inflatable children's rides, face painting, clowns and games. The Stage House Inn will provide food and drinks for a small fee. Also, a disc jockey will play music.

It is expected that a portion of Front Street, near the intersection of Park Avenue, will be blocked off from vehicular traffic to provide space for the event.



Laura Morkowitz for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
KIDS ON BOARD...Area residents gathered at LaGrande Park, last week, for a showing of Surf's Up. Every Tuesday is movie night at the Fanwood park.



Martin Sweeney for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
NO LAYOFFS PLEASE...Phil Ugoni, representing Policemen's Benevolent Association (PBA) Local 123, foreground, addresses the Fanwood Council on Monday night, urging the council to consider the needs of the borough's employees when making the remaining budget cuts. Pictured, from left to right, are: Councilman Anthony Parenti, Councilwoman Joan Wheeler and Mayor Colleen Mahr. See related stories on this page.

Fanwood Receives \$425,000 In Extraordinary Aid from State

By TED RITTER
 Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD — Mayor Colleen Mahr and the Borough Council, met at a special budget meeting Monday night, following last week's announcement that Fanwood is to receive \$425,000 in extraordinary aid from the state.

Mayor Mahr said the aid, which can only be spent to reduce the municipal tax levy, was "one of the largest amounts [the Department of Community Affairs] doled out...this is very good news for Fanwood."

However, Chief Financial Officer Fred Tomkins said the aid only "gets us to the point where we're still slightly above the [mandated] tax levy cap."

"The levy is still rather significantly high," Mr. Tomkins said.

"Now we're looking at 18 percent," said Mayor Mahr, noting that while that figure (which would include school and county taxes, too) is less than the nearly 30 percent tax increase reflected in the \$8-million municipal budget introduced this spring. "We still have some very specific decisions that need to be made."

"We're in a position where we've done well with extraordinary aid," Mr. Tomkins said. "But, at some point, the state is going to tell us that we have to solve our own problem; [the aid] won't be there forever."

Mr. Tomkins said he has recommended "some suggested cuts" in the introduced budget, including reducing capital improvements, and "other cuts we probably need to talk about in executive session, since they involve labor contracts and personnel."

Mr. Tomkins estimated that even with the extraordinary aid and his recommended cuts factored in, the borough's budget is still in excess of \$85,000, which would translate into a tax increase of \$471 for the average homeowner.

"We need to make decisions and go forward for the residents and employees and for the budget itself," said Mayor Mahr, adding that Fanwood is "not alone in looking at double-digit increases" in the tax rate.

"I see towns throughout New Jersey that are no different from us going to a four-day work week," the mayor said.

"We are looking to make permanent reductions," continued Mayor Mahr. "We're still going to have a [budget] gap six months from now."

Pointing to last week's community-wide budget meeting that drew approximately 200 people (see related story), the mayor said, "[People]

want leadership and want us to make hard decisions."

Councilwoman Donna Dolce said the governing body will have to determine "what is an acceptable tax increase, if any, for next year; I don't know what we're aiming for."

Mr. Tomkins responded by noting that the borough's portion of the total tax levy limits the governing body's ability to "significantly reduce" taxes.

"We still have to do what we can," said Councilman Bruce Walsh. "But if you cut some of the things that make living in Fanwood so good, then what are we doing?"

"If we're telling the residents that we're going to make cuts and we're going to reduce taxes, we're giving them false information," agreed Councilman David Valian. "We have to be clear that any decisions we make have strong impacts, not just little dents," he said.

During the meeting's public comment portion, Phil Ugoni, representing Policemen's Benevolent Association (PBA) Local 123 (the local police officers union), asked, "Do you actually need to go into executive session to discuss [what cuts may be made]?"

When borough officials confirmed that executive session was required to discuss personnel, collective bargaining and related issues, Mr. Ugoni said, "There are many other towns that have not spoken about layoffs yet; I just ask that you very carefully make your decisions."

"This has not been easy for all of us," responded Mayor Mahr, before adjourning the meeting into executive session. She said the governing body wants "the least amount of impact on our employees and the most amount of impact on our tax rate."

Now that the extraordinary aid numbers are in, it's likely that the governing body will work to finalize the budget as quickly as possible, and then schedule one last public hearing prior to adoption.

Board OKs Two Deck Plans; Loses Water Co. Appeal

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — The zoning board of adjustment approved two variance applications last week permitting homeowners to install decks in the rear of their homes.

Ken Heger of 2019 Birch Street plans to install a new 12-foot by 14-foot deck in his back yard, which abuts the ball field and parking lot of St. Bartholomew's Church. The far edge of the new deck will be about three feet off the ground and 23 feet from the property line; a minimum 30-foot setback is required.

In moving to approve the application, board member Chris Abel said the deck will have "de minimus impact" on neighboring properties.

Michael Talty of 16 Blue Ridge Circle also plans to install a deck in his back yard, which abuts a wooded area in the southwestern section of Scotch Plains. The nine-foot by 14-

foot deck will extend to 22.3 feet from the property line; a minimum 30-foot setback is required. Mr. Talty said the new deck will be situated above a patio area, and the board, concerned that the patio might be used for storage, included a stipulation in its resolution of approval that the patio not be enclosed.

At the start of the meeting, board attorney Vincent Loughlin said he was "very disappointed" by an Appellate Court's decision last week upholding a lower court's overturning of the zoning board's 2006 rejection of Elizabethtown Water Co.'s application to subdivide its Jerusalem Road property, so that half of the tract of land could be sold. The water utility had sought to cut the 16-acre property, which is classified as a pre-existing non-conforming lot, into two eight-acre tracts, with the northern half being sold off and likely devel-

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Mike Szuch Replaces Stroz For GOP in FW Council Race

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

FANWOOD — The Fanwood Republican Committee has named Mike Szuch to replace Joel Stroz on the fall ticket to run for Fanwood Borough Council. He joins Robert Manduca in race against Democrats Joan Wheeler, an incumbent, and newcomer Russell Huegel.

According to Ted Trumpp, the recently retired Fanwood GOP chairman, Mr. Szuch is a native of Fanwood, living across the street from the Brunner Elementary School in "one of the oldest homes in town."

A first time candidate for public office, he is a graduate of Rutgers University in New Brunswick and served in the Peace Corps.

Mr. Trumpp said Mr. Stroz, an attorney and a candidate for borough council last year, opted not to run due to an increase workload and other obligations.

"He just didn't have the time for it and this (borough council) does take time," Mr. Trumpp said.

When reached for comment on Monday, Mr. Szuch said he has lived in the borough since 1969. He said he

decided to enter the race after being contacted by GOP Councilman Anthony Parenti, a retired borough police chief.

"I'm actually thrilled to be a part of the whole thing," Mr. Szuch said. "I think being a long-time local might give me an advantage — bringing back the long-term spirit."

The candidate holds a degree in biology from Rutgers University and is currently a union electrician. Although not active with the local GOP party, Mr. Szuch listed the current budget debate and the possibility of municipal layoffs among the issues he is most concerned about, as well as the redevelopment of the borough.

"[Fanwood] was quite a different town in the 1960's I think Fanwood has a lot of potential. It's a little jewel in Union County," Mr. Szuch told The Westfield Leader and The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times.

He expressed concern on local property taxes, saying he not want to see cuts in public safety. "I would hate to see Fanwood lose its character. Part of Fanwood's character is that it has that small town character," Mr. Szuch said.



David B. Corbin for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
THIS ONE COUNTS...Opposing squads from the St. Barts' Old-timers Men's Softball League and the Scotch Plains Police Department take part in the first annual All-Star game. Next year, the teams plan to play for charity. The police drubbed St. Barts 22-14. For more, see page 9.

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