

Taxes Going Up Between Four And 13 Percent; SP Up 4.22 Percent

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

AREA - Homeowners in the county will soon receive tax bills with hikes ranging from \$400 to \$900 (or 4 to 13 percent) from last year.

Westfield taxpayers face an average property tax bill hike of \$655 (or 6.5 percent) for a total bill of \$12,238, according to tax information obtained by *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* from the town's tax collector's office.

School taxes are going up \$334 to \$7,529, county taxes are up \$150 to \$2,448, and Westfield municipal taxes are up \$164 to \$2,150. The open space tax is up \$7. Town taxes are based on an average home assessment of \$183,500 in 2008 and \$181,500 in 2007.

School taxes account for 61 percent of the Westfield property tax, while the county and town represent 20 and 18 percent of the tax bill, respectively.

"Overall, between county, school and

town, it is not as bad as it could have been. Unfortunately, it's going to be worse next year," said Town Administrator Jim Gildea, saying that municipal pensions will not be exempt from the 4 percent cap on tax increases next year, as was the case in 2008.

Property taxes in Scotch Plains are going up 4.22 percent on average, according to the Scotch Plains Township Manager Tom Atkins. The increase, based on an assessment of \$121,000, is \$415.

The total township tax average bill this year will be \$10,254. Broken down by tax entity, township residents will pay \$6,590 to the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education, an increase of \$264 over 2007; \$1,840 to the township, a \$96 increase, and \$1,722 to the County of Union, up \$53 over last year.

The school tax accounts for 64.27 percent of the total township tax bill,

followed by the municipal tax of 17.95 percent and the county, which represents 16.79 percent of the tax bill.

Scotch Plains residents will also pay open space taxes of \$77 to the county and \$24 to the township.

"It's (the 2008 increase) probably a little less [than in previous years]," he said. "We have seen years when [taxes] went up by \$500 to \$600."

"We have not been under 4 percent in years, unfortunately," he acknowledged.

Mr. Atkins predicted that in future years, many towns would face budget years like Fanwood did this year, resulting in "elimination of programs."

Garwood and Fanwood have yet to adopt their municipal budgets as both had to wait for the state to approve their extraordinary aid requests. Those numbers were announced July 11.

Based on tax rates supplied by Garwood's chief financial officer, Sandy Bruns, Garwood residents will pay \$7,794 in property taxes, \$887 or 13 percent more than 2007, based on an assessed home of \$100,000. This year, residents will pay an average of \$3,500 for their local school tax, \$173 over last year, \$1,640 to the county, a \$534 hike, and \$54 for the county's open space tax for a total of \$5,194, excluding the municipal tax, which will not be revealed until the municipal budget is completed in late August. Last year borough residents paid \$2,424 on average in municipal taxes.

At Tuesday's Borough Council meeting, Council President Kathleen Villaggio said the municipal taxes would increase \$177.

Garwood will receive \$750,000 in extraordinary aid. Mayor Dennis McCarthy has said while significant, it would not reduce tax bills.

In Fanwood, 2008 tax rates have yet to be sent to the town, according to county and municipal tax officials. Last year, residents paid \$8,754 on average based on an assessment of \$85,000. That breaks down to \$5,541 for school taxes, \$1,425 for county, \$1,723 for municipal services and \$66 for the county's open space tax.

Fanwood will reduce its tax burden through the receipt of \$425,000 in ex-



BBQ IGNITES HOME...A house located at 38 Shady Lane in Fanwood caught fire last Saturday night. Neighbors reported that the homeowners were barbecuing around 6 p.m., left the grill on and went inside the house. Shortly after, someone heard a pop from the back of the house, and realized it was on fire. Residents Wayne and Angie Mags and their guests all escaped unharmed. Shady Lane residents (specifically Kate Franciscus at 26 Shady Lane) are taking up a collection to help the owners with any immediate needs.

FW Council Hears Suggestions On Trimming Municipal Budget

By MARTIN SWEENEY
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD - The Fanwood Council convened for the second time in three days on July 16 at Fanwood Borough Hall for further public hearings on the 2008 municipal budget.

"There will be no formal action taken on the budget tonight," said Mayor Colleen Mahr in the meeting's introduction. The council made clear that despite the \$425,000 the borough received in extraordinary aid, budget cuts are still inevitable.

Former Councilman David Pickering of Watson Road addressed the council, revealing to the public that the council spent a long time (roughly two hours) in executive session on Monday night because the Carriage House lights were "shining

in [his] bedroom all night" until nearly 10:30 p.m.

Mr. Pickering asked the council if it had come to a conclusion about certain amendments to the proposed budget or whether the council would pursue the discussed topic of personnel layoffs, to which Mayor Mahr responded that the council had not finalized their plans on either subject.

Mr. Pickering brought up the potential library merger with Scotch Plains Public Library, saying the Fanwood Public Library received a statutory \$392,000 in the proposed municipal budget.

"This town cannot afford that library," said Mr. Pickering, who has experience in library focus groups and previously sat on the library's board. Mr. Pickering also encouraged the council to cut Fanwood's bulky waste collection service, a "luxury" that other towns do not incorporate in their budgets.

Joe Nagy of Oakwood Court asked Chief Financial Officer Frederick Tomkins specific questions about the budget's "structural deficit." Mr. Tomkins said Fanwood's generated surplus revenue dropped \$500,000 from 2006 (\$920,000) to 2007 (\$420,000), which, in large part, accounted for the budget's shortcomings prior to receiving the state aid.

Phil Ugoni spoke again on the behalf of the Fanwood Police Benevolent Association Local 123, asking about the possibility of a referendum or a waiver through the state to pass the budget as it stands with the \$425,000 in aid.

"We can go through waivers... but then me and you pay higher taxes," Mayor Mahr said. She said the council had not discussed a referendum "in any way, shape or form."

Mr. Ugoni urged the council to immediately inform personnel about layoffs when a final decision is reached. "It is a disservice that it has gone on this long," said Mr. Ugoni, explaining that talk of the potential

layoffs causes "undue stress on all the employees of the borough."

He also asked the council what the approximate impact on a Fanwood resident's tax bill would be to retain the lowest paid officer employed by the borough. The council did not answer his question.

Mayor Mahr provided the public with a few numbers attached to the borough's police force, saying that the force was composed of 21 employees with various salaries, averaging out to roughly \$100,000 per employee in 2007, including overtime pay and excluding benefits.

"We don't look at this as a police problem... the borough and myself look at it as a town-wide problem," Mayor Mahr said. "I find it very uncomfortable... I don't come into the police department nearly as much as I used to because of the atmosphere there... I get it."

Marian Menzer of Byron Lane provided the public with a different perspective. Ms. Menzer, 81 and a resident of Fanwood for 46 years, said her tax bill for one quarter was \$3,217 and her income was \$3,244 per quarter. She confessed that neighbors often confront her and say that "moving is the only option" for her, although she would prefer to stay in Fanwood. Ms. Menzer said she is currently looking for a job.

With 17 years worth of experience working with the school budget as an assistant to the Superintendent for the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education, Ms. Menzer empathized with the council's task at hand with budget cuts but reminded them that there are places in the budget where money can be saved.

"We can't do everything for everybody," she said. "I didn't think I would be working at 82."

Mayor Mahr thanked Ms. Menzer for adding balance to the meeting, saying that Ms. Menzer's case is a "powerful and sobering reality" for



Fred Rossi for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 GETTING TOGETHER...Hundreds of Scotch Plains residents enjoyed themselves last Thursday evening at the downtown block party sponsored by the Cultural Arts Committee.

Scotch Plains 'Very Close' To Naming New Manager

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

SCOTCH PLAINS - Mayor Martin Marks says the township council is "very close" to announcing the appointment of a new township manager after a search and interview process that began late last year.

Speaking earlier this week with *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*, the mayor said the council had agreed on Monday to make a formal offer to one of the two candidates who was still being considered. He said he hoped to be able to introduce the new manager at the council's Tuesday, August 12 meeting, which will also be the final meeting for outgoing manager Thomas Atkins, who is retiring at the end of next month after 28 years of running the day-to-day operations of the municipal government.

The mayor, saying he didn't want to jeopardize anything, declined to provide further details about the candidate. But he said the five council members took the process of choosing a new manager "very seriously," and added, "We were unanimous in deciding who should receive an offer." He said he hoped to hear back from that candidate "within days."

"It was an arduous process," the mayor said. "It was many weeks, there were many candidates and there were many interviews." He called the council's decision one of the more important ones that members would make, given its "long-lasting repercussions." He said the final two can-

didates were each interviewed three times by the council.

Jersey Professional Management (JPM), a management consulting firm in Cranford, initially facilitated the search. Mr. Atkins told *The Times* this week that he and Dan Mason from JPM were involved in all interviews the council conducted with every candidate throughout the process. In addition, once the pool of candidates was winnowed to three, each individual spent a day in Scotch Plains meeting with various department heads and having lunch with Mr. Atkins.

Having a new manager in place by early next month would be "fortunate" in terms of a transition and a few weeks of overlap with Mr. Atkins, the mayor said. Mr. Atkins' final day is set for Friday, August 29, although he will be asked to attend the council's Tuesday, September 9 meeting so council members and others can recognize him for his years of service.

Robber Strikes Woodland Avenue Home

FANWOOD - Last Sunday, a resident of Woodland Avenue in Fanwood was robbed.

A woman claimed her car broke down at the Fanwood residence and needed to use a phone. When the resident returned, the suspect pulled out a firearm and directed the Fanwood resident into her living room, stealing a purse and fleeing the scene. See Police Blotter on page 8.

New Health Director Tackles Restaurant Regulations

By SARA MAGNOLA
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WESTFIELD - Megan Cornish is now in her third month since being appointed acting health officer for the Westfield Regional Health Department, whose jurisdiction encompasses Fanwood, Garwood, Mountainside, New Providence, Roselle Park, Springfield and Summit, in addition to Westfield.

"Every day is different," Ms. Cornish told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* of her multi-faceted position. Prior to her recent promotion, she was the department's nursing supervisor for about one year, and beginning in 2004 she held the position of nursing coordinator for the Morris County Health Department.

The Westfield Regional Health Department is responsible for responding to environmental complaints, collecting vital statistics, providing educational programs, holding routine health screenings and performing restaurant inspections to ensure that New Jersey's State Department of Health and Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) rules and regulations are being followed throughout the region.

Ms. Cornish's predecessor, Robert Sherr, went into partial retirement this spring, after serving in the department for almost 30 years. He currently provides support and guidance to Ms. Cornish on a consulting basis, and will continue to do so until the start of 2009.

"We're in touch a lot," Ms. Cornish said. "Even if I don't call him, he calls to make sure everything is okay. He's been wonderful."

The same is true of the community, who, according to Ms. Cornish, has been equally "wonderful" throughout the transition.

Among the many challenges she faces, she said one of the largest has been enforcing and implementing new methods of restaurant inspection to be in compliance with new state-mandated changes.

"Before, the law said we would go in and make sure [the establishment] was clean and people were washing their hands," Ms. Cornish told *The*

Leader. "Now we're actually looking very specifically into how the food is prepared, [including] temperatures and making sure there is no cross-contamination, so it is a much more involved process."

All inspections are unannounced and restaurant owners and managers are required to let the inspectors inside when they show up. In keeping with the new state guidelines, inspections now must be conducted while food is being served, so the inspectors see first-hand that everything is being done to code, which Ms. Cornish said is "better for the community."

While the state requires yearly inspections, the department conducts them twice a year at a minimum, as well as looking into any consumer complaints regarding a restaurant.

Recently, the department responded to a complaint from a Westfield resident, who became ill after eating from a local caterer. The health department "went in immediately" to investigate, according to Ms. Cornish.

The complainant, whose husband sits on the board of health, thought the chicken she consumed, might have been the culprit, but the health department's investigation "did not find anything that could have definitely made that person sick," Ms. Cornish said.

"The thing with food-borne illness that a lot of people don't realize is that [we] eat so many things throughout the day and it's really a food history of days, making it very, very hard even for the pros at the federal level to pinpoint exactly what it is [making someone sick]," Ms. Cornish said.

When questioned by *The Leader* if people can feel safe eating in local establishments given the aforementioned situation, as well as the national phenomenon of wide-spread reoccurring Salmonella outbreaks, Ms. Cornish said during her time as acting health officer, there have been no reported cases of St. Paul Salmonella within the department's jurisdiction and that restaurants in the area have been eager to open their



MEETING AND GREETING... State Senator Leonard Lance, Republican candidate for the seventh congressional district seat, campaigns at the Scotch Plains Farmer's Market last Saturday. Pictured, left to right, are: Monica Felsing of Fanwood, Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks and Senator Lance.



Sara Magnola for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 NEW HEALTH OFFICER...The newly appointed acting health officer for the Westfield Regional Health Department, Megan Cornish, is shown in the department's office on East Broad Street in Westfield last Friday.

PAGE INDEX			
Regional	2-3	Real Estate	9-15
Editorial	4-5	Classifieds	14
Community	6-7	A&E	17-18
Obituary	16		
Education	14-16		
Sports	9-13		