

1,000 Vow to Fight On at Hearing On Muhlenberg Med. Center Closing

By JOHN MAGUIRE
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

PLAINFIELD - More than 1,000 people attended the final public hearing last Thursday at Plainfield High School to discuss Solaris Health Care System's application to close Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center in Plainfield as an acute-care facility.

Heather Howard, commissioner of the Department of Health and Senior Services, along with five members of the State Health Planning Board, listened to members of the public who spoke out against the proposed closure.

Scores of people held "Save Muhlenberg" signs and applauded as Muhlenberg employees, clergy and residents pleaded with the board to reject Solaris' application. They asked for more time to work out a solution

to keep the hospital open.

While the speeches were passionate, attendees were more restrained than they were at the first hearing, conducted on May 6, where a spirit of optimism prevailed. More than 30 people spoke about what Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center means to them and their community.

"The only reason we are here is because of the deliberate rape and destruction of Muhlenberg Hospital by Solaris," said James Colvin, a local pastor.

Hospital employees also voiced their opposition to the closing.

"Minutes matter," said Dr. Marianne Warner of Westfield, arguing that it would take too long to transport patients in need of urgent care to other hospitals such as JFK in Edison.

According to Solaris, a "satellite emergency department" will remain. That facility will be able to handle issues such as broken bones and burns, not life-threatening matters such as heart attacks and strokes.

Dr. Warner, chairman of the hospital's Obstetrics and Gynecology Department, said that Muhlenberg "is an integral part of the community." She emphasized that closing Muhlenberg as an acute-care facility would put lives at risk. "Please do the right thing - don't close Muhlenberg Hospital," she said, to cheers from the audience.

Bernadette Countryman, senior vice president at Trinitas Hospital and head of nursing, said that a plan was in place to meet the needs of the community. She said that "the Trinitas family has the means and ability" to meet their needs.

There were jeers in response from the audience.

"I think Solaris has thrown in the towel," said Henry McNally of Fanwood. "Muhlenberg has been central to me and the whole area." He implored the board to "look for a different model than the one Solaris has presented."

Some attacked the demeanor of board members seated on the stage. "This is not blah-blah-blah - this is a matter of life and death," one person shouted, accusing a board member of not being interested in what those present had to say.

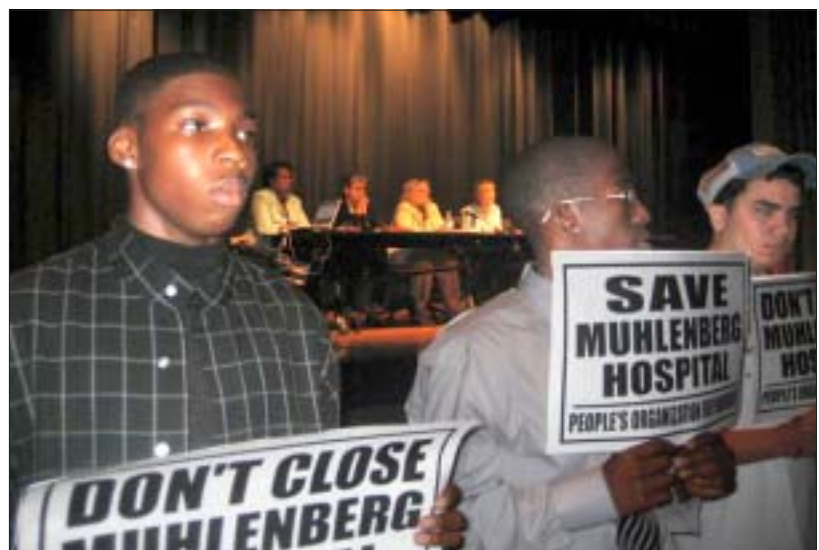
"Five people from the board are here," said Chairwoman Judy Donlen, who presided over the hearing. "We only needed to send one," she added.

Others attacked Solaris management and pointed to inconsistencies in its financial disclosures leading up to the decision to close the hospital.

"Take a look at the 990 Solaris filed with the IRS," said John Gostel, a local accountant, while questioning the legitimacy of Solaris' claims that Muhlenberg was hemorrhaging funds due to charity care. He called on the board to conduct an independent audit of Muhlenberg's accounting books.

"Since 2003, Solaris has moved successful functions of the hospital to JFK Hospital in Edison," in a deliberate attempt to undermine the case for keeping Muhlenberg open," said Mr. Gostel. Before approving any application by Solaris, he called on the state to "conduct a comprehensive community impact study" and explore different ownership options.

Others simply called for more time to work out a solution and asked that the board require Solaris to retain its



John Maguire for The Westfield Leader
 DON'T CLOSE OUR HOSPITAL...Members of the Plainfield High School Young Men's Leadership Group hold posters urging the state to keep Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center in Plainfield open, during last Thursday's hearing.

Board Postpones Decision On Psychologist Office

By CHRISTINA M. HINKE
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - The Westfield Board of Adjustment postponed a hearing Monday night for a psychologist whose practice is in her home, which violates a town ordinance.

Psychologist Sandra Morrow has practiced out of her home at 635 Forest Avenue for 19 years. Recently, she received a "cease and desist within five days" notification from the Westfield zoning office. She said when she first set up her practice in March 1989, her business complied with the zoning law at the time.

In 1998, the law was amended to not allow psychologists, among others, to practice in a home.

She said she currently is semi-retired, sees about 15 patients a week, one patient at a time, and does not perform group therapy, a function not allowed per an amendment to the law in November 1989. Ms. Morrow said her scope of practice is typically helping people with stress management, children with learning disabilities and children who have "school phobia."

Soon after setting up her business, Ms. Morrow said she hired a contractor to enclose the front porch to act as a waiting room. She also had French doors installed for access from the porch to the dining room, where she sees her patients, to "afford myself privacy." Permits were given by the zoning office.

The board carried the case to September 8.

Three neighbors were present to oppose Ms. Morrow's application. They will have the opportunity to speak at the continuation of the case. In the meantime, Ms. Morrow can

continue practicing in her home.

Next, the board denied a six-foot fence at 793 West Broad Street. In 1998, the town amended the ordinance to a maximum height of four feet for a fence in the street side yard. Applicants Michael and Caroline DeFreitas hired a fencing company to replace the panels of the existing six-foot fence because it was dilapidated. Mr. DeFreitas said the posts were not removed, just the panels. He said he spent about \$240 per panel and there were about 12 panels.

Three applications regarded garages. Neil Grote of 174 Lincoln Road was approved to construct a garage 10 feet from his home, where a minimum of 15 feet is required per town ordinance for fire safety reasons.

"I'm trying to save a tree," he said of the location, which has an old Maple tree situated at the 15-foot mark. Board member Robert Burslem hesitated with his "yes" to approve the application.

David Peregrin of 875 Bradford Avenue was denied his application to replace a 17-and-a-half-foot high garage in disrepair with a 20-foot high garage. The zoning law is a maximum of 15 feet. Mr. Peregrin cited safety as a hardship because the ceiling height is too low for a person to stand in the storage space in the rafters.

Board member Chris Masciale said, "I think their needs to be an amendment to the current ordinance."

George Lanzano of 6 Tamaques Way was denied a use variance for their garage. Mr. Lanzano said he wanted to use the rear of the garage as a recreation room for his two sons, ages 11 and 14. He planned to install

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10

Deerfield Principal Phillips Introduced at BOE Meeting

By KATHERINE EMIRE-NEVES
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE - Newly appointed Deerfield School Principal Robert Phillips introduced himself to the public at the board of education's (BOE) Tuesday night meeting. He thanked the district for the welcome he has received and said that Mountainside has an "outstanding" school district.

Mr. Phillips said that he will bring his core philosophical values, such as putting children first, to his job. He added that he is "excited" to start working in middle school again, which he favors because of the enthusiasm of the age group.

Jeanette Baubles, who recently replaced Richard O'Malley as chief school administrator and preceded



Greg Ryan for The Westfield Leader
 READY FOR THE HEAT WAVE...Last weekend, workers put the final touches on the Westfield Memorial Pool Complex before filling it with water. After a one-week postponement, the pool is being given finishing touches to be ready for the Saturday, June 14, opening. Extreme weather conditions were said to have caused the opening date to be pushed back. See pool photographs at goleader.com/photos.

County Chair Commits to Attending WF Meeting, Hospital Discussed

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - Westfield officials drafted a resolution, Tuesday night, stating the municipality's concern over the closing of Plainfield's Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center. Next week, the town will formally introduce the resolution, which asks the state to take a closer look at the matter.

Facing multi-million-dollar losses, Solaris Health Care System, which owns Muhlenberg, filed the required "certificate of need" to close the facility.

While acute-care services will cease, Solaris will operate a satellite emergency department at the facility.

Effectively, the town's resolution will ask the department of health, which is responsible for conducting a full review of the "certificate of need," to assure that the decision will not be "harmful to the public interest."

Second Ward Councilwoman Vicki Kimmins has recently attended various Muhlenberg-related meetings. She told the council, Tuesday, that Muhlenberg serves a vital function to area residents, and its closing would cause hospitals such as Overlook to "feel a crunch."

She said, "Our residents use [Muhlenberg]. [If it is closed], we are

concerned that they would see more waiting times at other hospitals. It's going to be a disaster." Ms. Kimmins said Westfield's resolution, similar to those of neighboring towns, seeks to "buy more time" in order for the hospital to find a buyer who can downsize the operation.

Ms. Kimmins said the CEO of Somerset Medical Center informed her that if Muhlenberg downsized, "it could be a viable hospital." She said the notion that Muhlenberg has failed because of the amount of charitable care offered is untrue. She said Somerset took on more charitable-care cases than Muhlenberg and is in better financial shape.

Ms. Kimmins said Westfield's resolution neither asks the department of health for an extension, nor does it "evaluate" Solaris in any way; rather, it asks the department of health to "think before they close [Muhlenberg]."

In other business, Town Adminis-

trator Jim Gildea said Westfield officials, including he, the finance chairman and the mayor, had met with Union County Freeholder Chairman Angel Estrada and the county's tax assessor to better understand the tax-calculation formula used to determine Westfield's annual assessment. Mr. Gildea said the experience was "enlightening" and noted that, primarily, a ratio of market and assessed home values determines a town's assessment. The lower the ratio, the higher the taxes.

Separately, Mayor Andy Skibitsky said Mr. Estrada is committed to coming to a summer conference meeting in order to explain the county's role in providing services to Westfield citizens, and the council will have an opportunity to ask questions.

Public Safety, Transportation and Parking Chairman Mark Ciarrocca announced that Westfield has con-

Garwood Approves Pay Cuts for Mayor, Council

By RAYNOR DENITZIO
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD - The Garwood Borough Council proposed more than \$100,000 in changes to the 2008 municipal budget on Tuesday, including the approval of pay reductions for the mayor and council.

The pay cut, which takes effect on July 1, trims \$5,150 from the 2008 budget.

The mayor's salary will be cut from \$2,400 to a new amount of \$1,800. Council members will see a new salary of \$1,500 compared to their old salary of \$2,000, according to Councilman Anthony Sytko.

"That was something I pushed for and we were able to come to an agreement on with the finance committee," Mr. Sytko said.

Council President Kathleen Villaggio recommended additional changes to the municipal budget through a combination of reductions and anticipated revenue. These include decreasing the amount of money set aside for seasonal public works employees by \$5,000, raising the percent of funding reserved for uncollected taxes from 97.26 to 97.75 percent and higher anticipated revenue from the municipal library and sewer charges.

In addition, Ms. Villaggio said that the borough received word that its Consolidated Municipal Property Tax Relieve Aid (CMPTRA) will be partially restored in the amount of \$154,933.

"We have been officially notified by the state that we can include this amount in our 2008 budget," Ms. Villaggio said.

Including the CMPTRA money and the proposed reductions, the borough's budget would decrease by \$259,583. Ms. Villaggio said this would lower the budget's tax impact from an average municipal tax in-

crease of \$518 to \$378 per house assessed at \$100,000. The council is also awaiting word on additional state aid, which could result in further tax decreases.

The borough's budget will not be finalized until the state's budget is approved by the State Legislature in July.

Acting as the borough's Alcoholic Beverage Control board, the council also heard applications for place-to-place transfers from Rosie's Wine Bar owner Josh Rosenberg and The Station Bar and Grill owner Robert DeStefanis. Place-to-place transfers allow restaurants to serve alcohol in outdoor café settings.

The board received one letter from a tenant who lives above Rosie's Wine Bar opposing the application, citing an increase in noise. Three residents who live near Rosie's Wine Bar also attended the meeting to express their support for the place-to-place transfers. The residents said they felt such restaurants enhanced the borough and attracted customers from neighboring towns.

"I think it's an accolade to the town that restaurants and eateries such as these are supported," said Roni Epstein, a neighbor of Rosie's Wine Bar.

Local residents Bruce Paterson and Anne Leonard also voiced opinions regarding the applications. Ms. Leonard said that she thought the council should require the serving of food with alcohol at the restaurants. Mr. Paterson also suggested that the council should cap the number of restaurants it allows to serve alcohol outdoors at four.

The board ultimately voted to approve both of the applications, with the stipulation that food be offered to patrons dining outside. In approving a prior place-to-place transfer appli-



TICK TOCK...Richard Edge, left, and Jack Gordin inspect parts for restoring the clock from the 1930s that hangs at the corner of Elm and East Broad Streets in downtown Westfield.

Westfield Memorial Pool To Open Saturday to 9,700

By KATHERINE VOWELL
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - The Westfield Memorial Pool is now in its final stages of completion of a \$2.5-million upgrade. As the pools were being filled with water Monday morning, Bruce Kaufmann, Westfield recreation director, gave *The Westfield Leader* a private tour of the pool to witness first hand the improvements that have taken place over the past nine months.

"The recreation commissioners have toured the new pool and are very pleased with the result," said Bill Palatucci, chairman of the Westfield Recreation Commission. "We wish the weather had cooperated, but the new pool will provide years of enter-

tainment for thousands of Westfield residents."

The pool opening was delayed one week due to extreme weather conditions and is set for this Saturday, June 14, at 10 a.m. "Contractors and workers have been working seven days a week for the past month and a half because the weather has logged everything back," Mr. Kaufmann said.

Some of the changes to the main pool include a changed direction of the shallow and deep ends increasing the water surface, and allowing more room for individuals who do not wish to swim laps. A jet pool has also been installed in the main pool.

The pool has included handicap accessible ramps to the deck area and

PAGE INDEX					
Regional	2-3, 9	Obituary	8	Real Estate	11-15
Editorial	4-5, 9	Education	17-18	Classifieds	16
Community ...	6-8	Sports	11-15	A&E	18-20