

## More Than 1,000 Speak Out Against Proposed Muhlenberg Closing

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

PLAINFIELD — More than 1,000 people attended the final public hearing last Thursday at Plainfield High School to discuss Solaris Health 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 closing.

"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, but cannot handle major life-threatening situations, such as strokes, heart attacks and even pregnancy.

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

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John Maguire for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times  
 DON'T CLOSE OUR HOSPITAL...Members of the Plainfield High School Youth Leadership Group hold posters urging the state's Health Planning Board to keep Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center in Plainfield open, during Thursday's hearing at Plainfield High School.

## Planning Board Denies South Ave. Office Building

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — After hearing concerns from a half-dozen neighbors, the planning board on Monday night, on a split vote, denied an application for a two-story office building on South Avenue.

D. Villane Construction had sought approval for the 1,580-square-foot building at the corner of South Avenue and Jersey Avenue to house its offices and a meeting room for clients. At earlier hearings in April and May, an architect, an engineer and a traffic consultant had testified on Villane's behalf.

At Monday's hearing, attended by about 25 neighborhood residents as similar to earlier meetings, Peter Steck, a professional planner testifying for Villane, told the board the triangular-shaped lot was "a difficult property to develop," but said Villane had "done a good job" with their proposal. He said the property was "not well suited to residential use," and concluded that the proposed office building would not have a significant negative impact on the neighborhood.

Six residents spoke in opposition to the application after Mr. Steck's testimony, with Jersey Avenue resident Michael Brennan saying the township's master plan discourages commercial development in residential areas.

Steve Bronski, another Jersey Avenue resident, suggested that the Villane company either donate or sell the property to the county or the township for use as a park as a way to thank "the community that has been a big part of their success."

Several Jersey Avenue residents raised concerns about the safety of neighborhood children playing in the street and the risk that could be posed

by cars exiting the Villane parking lot and driving on Jersey Avenue toward Hetfield Avenue.

Three board members voted to approve the application, with Alice Agran saying the building would be a "low-impact use." Dominick Bratti called the plan "better than anything else that could be there," such as a gas station or an extension of the county's public works yard located across South Avenue.

Township zoning official Robert LaCosta noted that the property is located in a B-1 zone that allows for commercial development of the type that Villane was proposing. But Councilman Jeffrey Strauss, noting that a significant number of neighbors had attended each of the hearings on the application, said the board should not be seen as forcing the development on the neighborhood.

"We have to think about what the neighbors there think" about the proposal, he said. Councilwoman Paulette Coronato agreed, saying it was important to "preserve the residential character of Scotch Plains."

Board Chairwoman Maria Sartor also voted against the application, citing concerns about the safety of neighborhood children, as well as preserving the "character of the neighborhood."

The board also approved a site plan application for a 10,920-square-foot retail building at the site of the former Club Malibu on Terrill Road. The building will house an Advanced Auto Parts outlet and four additional stores. The property, which is located between the Jade Isle restaurant and the Jiffy Lube auto service outlet, has been vacant since the Malibu building was razed in 2003, four years after the nightclub closed in the wake of a fatal shooting in its parking lot in late 1998.



Courtesy of Amy Carow  
 SUPER 8...The Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School (SPFHS) Class of 2008 forms the shape of "08" at its senior picnic on Tuesday, June 3, sponsored by Project Graduation of the SPFHS PTA.



Susan Dougherty for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times  
 MAKE THAT BUCKET...Longingly surveying the prizes available to those who can make a basket, Andrew and Matthew Kipp of Fanwood hope their mom can sink it for the proverbial two points during Sunday's Fanwood street fair. The fair is sponsored by the Fanwood Business and Professional Association.

## Scotch Plains Council Approves \$24.6 Mil. Budget By a 4-1 Vote

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — By a 4-1 vote, the township council on Tuesday night approved a \$24.6 million municipal budget, which will be financed in part by an 8.5-point, or 5.6 percent, increase in municipal property taxes. A tax point equals \$100,000 in spending in the township.

Democratic Councilman Jeffrey Strauss said it was a "stable tax rate." Councilwoman Paulette Coronato noted that Scotch Plains' municipal property tax increase will be the lowest of any town in Union County, equal to a \$96.80 increase for the average assessed home of \$121,000.

In remarks at the start of the public hearing, Ms. Coronato said the council, in crafting the 2008 spending plan, "had to deal with two unprecedented factors," namely the state's new 4 percent cap on municipal tax levies and the reductions in state aid as proposed by Gov. Jon Corzine.

Scotch Plains is slated to see a reduction of \$271,000 in its state assistance this year. Had the township received that state aid, which is equal to nearly three tax points, the tax increase would have been five points, a level equal to last year. Ms. Coronato said if the full amount of state aid was received that the municipal tax increase this year would have been about 3.5 percent.

Mayor Martin Marks explained that most communities are exceeding the 4 percent cap mandated by the state

because of loopholes and exemptions granted by state officials, and added that the average property tax increase in New Jersey this year "will be well in excess of 4 percent."

Three residents spoke during the public hearing. The mayor told a resident from Rambling Drive who questioned the council about excessive municipal spending that the governing body had little leeway in adjust-

ing expenditures. Most of this year's increase was due to mandated spending increases for health and other insurance, pension contributions, negotiated contracts and sewerage fees.

The two other residents who spoke were local Democratic Party officials — Richard Samuel, the party chairman and a candidate for township council, and Phil Weiner. Mr. Samuel

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## Area Schools Close Due to Extreme Heat

By KATIE ROGERS  
*Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*

AREA — As temperatures neared 100 degrees this week, school districts across Union County called for early dismissals and closures.

In many school districts, such as Westfield, Berkeley Heights and Scotch Plains-Fanwood, only parts of the schools are air-conditioned. As a result, students were let out for half the school day.

Sally Roland, executive assistant to the superintendent of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood school district, said schools were forced to shut down due to the extreme heat.

"Most of our schools are not air conditioned," Ms. Roland said on Monday. "Only one school is. Right now we are looking at possible single sessions, but the decision hasn't been made."

She said students must be in school for at least four hours in order to count for a legal, instructional day of school. Therefore, if students complete half days in the hot classrooms, they will not have to make up days at the end of the year.

Judy Rattner, superintendent of the Berkeley Heights school district, said her schools followed suit with half days on both Monday and Tuesday.

"Parts of the middle school and high school are air-conditioned," Ms. Rattner said. "But there wasn't enough air-conditioned space for us to circulate the classes."

The Westfield school district stayed open for a full day on Monday, and a

half-day on Tuesday, according to Lorre Korecky, coordinator of school community relations.

Westfield schools had already reached the limit of allowable days off and had set their final school day for Thursday, June 19, which will have a four-hour session and graduation to follow at 6 p.m.

"The kids were encouraged to drink water and stay hydrated," Ms. Korecky said. "The blinds were drawn and the lights were low. A lot of efforts were made to keep the kids and teachers cool."

Westfield schools' concerns were rescheduled to coincide with cooler temperatures. The sixth and eighth grade Choral and Orchestra Concert originally scheduled for Tuesday night at Roosevelt Intermediate School was rescheduled for tonight. Edison School concerts originally scheduled for June 11 were moved to June 12.

For students in the Mountainside school district, schools did not let out early, according to Sue Nugent, secretary to the Chief School Administrator. Although, students at Beechwood and Deerfield Schools were dismissed Tuesday at 1 p.m. due to the heat.

"We didn't have to let out early, our schools are air-conditioned," Ms. Nugent said. "I'm sure the kids are bummed."

Cranford schools were closed on Monday and Tuesday due to the heat. Garwood schools remained open even though the schools only have some air conditioning.



Katie Rogers for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times  
 THE HEAT IS ON...Students at Scotch Plains Fanwood High School stand outside the school after being dismissed early, due to the heat wave.

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