



THE WESTFIELD LEADER

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Mountainside, Garwood See Red Over Proposed Municipal Aid Cuts

By DEBBIE HOFFMAN
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

TRENTON — Under Governor Jon Corzine's proposed state budget, Garwood would lose \$393,138 in state aid, 51 percent of what the borough received last year. Mountainside stands to see a reduction of \$249,939 in municipal funding.

And that does not sit well with Mountainside Mayor Robert Vigilanti or Garwood Council President Kathleen Villaggio.

"I'm still trying to figure out what the Governor wants us to do," Mayor

Vigilanti said.

Mr. Corzine is calling for a \$190-million reduction in state aid given to municipalities, known as the Consolidated Municipal Property Tax Relief Aid program. Small towns, those with populations less than 10,000, would take the hardest hit.

Of the 526 municipalities in New Jersey, 323 are considered small towns. Three of those towns fall within *The Westfield Leader's* readership area: Mountainside (population 6,602), Fanwood (population 7,174) and Garwood (population 4,153).

The Governor's plan is intended to prod these towns to find ways to share services with neighboring communities. Examples include consolidating police, fire and public works departments, and sharing municipal courts and health departments. The ultimate goal would be for the smaller towns to merge with their larger neighbors.

William Dressel, executive director of the New Jersey League of Municipalities, said that small-town mayors were "shocked and dismayed" by Mr. Corzine's announcement. "It even rocked an old dog like me."

"I'm trying to figure out how this happened and what I can do to save our small towns," he added.

"I went to a rally of small-town representatives in Trenton last week. We all talked about how we already share services," Ms. Villaggio said. To make up for this cut, "we would have to make drastic cuts in services. There is no way to make up that kind of cut."

"It just gets worse every day," Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr said at her borough council's meeting, after learning the borough would lose \$186,669.

Mountainside Councilman Glenn Mortimer echoed the sentiment. "I don't know what they are looking to accomplish by punishing small towns," he said. "I, for one, would fight a consolidation of towns. It would punish our residents."

Mountainside resident Audrey Cunningham said, "One of the reasons why I left Essex County to move to Mountainside was the benefit of lower taxes, as well as the small-town feel of a unique little town, which my kids love."

"It's nice to know your neighbors and to be able to go to school, participate in sports and share community memories with your fellow Mountainers," she added. "The librarian and local police officers know my kids. I know the parents of all my kids' friends, which gives me some level of security in this big, impersonal world."

Although a larger town (population 29,944), Westfield stands to see a drop in aid of \$411,844 or 9 percent.

"All of the Corzine cuts will end up getting pushed down on the town and transferring [the problem to municipalities]," Westfield Mayor Andy



ONE LESS OAK TREE ON OAK AVENUE...Damaging winds over the weekend felled an enormous oak tree in Westfield. According to neighbors, one trunk from the base of the double-based tree fell onto a house on Saturday evening, interrupting power. Early afternoon on Sunday, the other trunk fell in the opposite direction, making traffic impassable. See story on page 10.



HEAVILY ARMED IN IRAQ...LTC Tim Whalen (right) is accompanied by a heavily armed companion (name tag Patter) while walking in Iraq. The colonel provided his thank you to citizens in the Westfield area for their letters during a phone call from Baghdad to the newspaper last Friday.

Live from Iraq, Col. Thanks Community for Its Support

By HORACE CORBIN
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

IRAQ — The "great people at home keep us going," Lieutenant Colonel Timothy Whalen, out of Fort Stewart in Georgia, told *The Westfield Leader* on Friday afternoon. "We could not do what we do without the support we get back from home."

Interviewed from Baghdad, Col. Whalen spoke to the newspaper for nearly an hour, discussing a range of topics surrounding the war in Iraq. He talked about the downward trend in violence and the impact of the surge, as well as the focus on "capacity building" while securing the population.

The interview can be heard in its entirety at goleader.com.

Born in Brooklyn, N.Y., the colonel said he spent a lot of time in Westfield with his aunt and uncle, Alice and Bill Kelly, in the early 1970s.

He then left for West Point and, eventually, active duty. His wife, a high school teacher, and his four elementary school-aged children live in Texas.

Col. Whalen lauded the "unbelievable outpouring of generosity" from area towns and thanked all local houses of worship. Col. Whalen said the donations have a "tremendous impact" on the troops, specifically mentioning the work of St. Helen's Roman Catholic Church, which he remembered was "only being built" in 1972 when he spent time in Westfield.

Col. Whalen discussed topics ranging from the exit strategy, the difference in Iraqi and American culture and the danger of pulling troops out too soon.

The colonel said attacks in the southern belt of Iraq, comprising eight provinces, had decreased from 27 attacks a day in 2007 to less than five, recently. He said during the last few days, the

southern belt, "about the size of West Virginia," had experienced no attacks.

"Believe it or not...this is the first time that's happened in the 12 months we've been here," he said, noting an 80-percent drop in attacks in the area and a 65-percent reduction throughout the country.

"It's truly amazing to see the change that has taken place," he said.

He said the "window of opportunity" is the best and most open it has been for the solvency of economic and agricultural institutions in the region. However, in order for that to happen, "security had to be in place before...We had to get the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police and the institutions viable enough so they can sustain this thing over the long haul."

In terms of "the surge," the increasing of troop levels to 165,000, the colonel said it has led to successes.

He said because of the increased numbers, the military has been able to go into "AQI (Al-Qaeda in Iraq) sanctuaries" and clear them out. The surge has allowed the military to go on the "offensive" in these regions. The difference now, however, is that the military stays in these regions.

"We're living in 57 outposts [in the southern belt]," he said. "We don't commute to work. We know we're not going to be there forever, so we bring in Iraqi security forces and partner with them..."

"We've established over 1,600 checkpoints, manned by Iraqis, the Sons of Iraq, who are tired of violence," the colonel said. He said the troops have had "tremendous success" in stopping "accelerants," including improvised explosive devices (IEDs), before they reach their destination.

"We inspect everything coming in

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BEAUTY IN IRAQ...Baghdad is a metropolitan area of eight million people, with many mosques, canals and palaces.

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Garwood Mayor: 'No Immediate Plans to Merge'

By RAYNOR DENITZIO
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD — Facing a significant loss of revenue, as Governor Jon Corzine's state budget eliminates aid to small towns in order to drive consolidation, Mayor Dennis McCarthy responded at Tuesday night's borough council meeting, saying, "At this point in time, the council has entertained no discussion about merging."

Without the traditional state aid, the council's finance committee announced that the municipal portion of the property tax would increase as much as \$533 per household. The municipal portion is about 20 percent of the total property tax bill. Other property tax portions are rising also — the school tax is about 60 percent, and the county tax is about 20 percent of the total.

The borough budget introduced at

Mountainside Prepares to Fight Any Proposed Mergers by State

By EBONY MCQUEEN
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE — With the state's current fiscal crisis, consolidation of many small municipalities is a consideration.

If approved by the State Legislature, the proposed Fiscal Year 2008-2009 budget would have a direct effect on small municipalities, including Mountainside.

The borough's municipal aid is already down \$249,000 from last year, but the Governor will offer all 323 towns in the state with populations of fewer than 10,000 residents, which includes Mountainside, \$32 million to help them share services or consolidate.

Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (LD-21, Westfield) attended Tuesday night's borough work session to inform the governing body about changes the proposed state budget could have on the borough's board of education.

According to Mr. Bramnick, the County Superintendent of Schools contends there is a plan to merge and

WF Board Asks Homeowner To Consider Alternatives

By RAYNOR DENITZIO
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — The Westfield Board of Adjustment asked homeowner David Barbosa to consider alternatives to replacing a deck structure in his backyard during its meeting Monday night.

The board revisited the application after the State Superior Court Assignment Judge for Union County, Walter Barisonok, remanded the case to them following a suit brought against the board and Mr. Barbosa by neighbor Cynthia Foulke. The judge ordered the board to hear Mr. Barbosa's application to construct a porch and revisit the variance it granted to him earlier regarding paving on sections of his property.

During the meeting, Mr. Barbosa stated that he has a problem at his house with water draining into the basement. He argued that the pavement was necessary to alleviate the problem.

"I need to fix this condition," Mr. Barbosa said. "It is deteriorating my foundation which is already old to begin with."

Mr. Barbosa said removing the present structures in the rear of the house was also necessary to help lessen the water problem and that

Westfield Council Addresses 'Failure of Gov.'s 2009 Budget'

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — The Westfield Town Council unanimously agreed to a resolution Tuesday that addresses "the failure of the Governor's proposed state budget for the 2008-2009 Fiscal Year (FY) to treat property tax relief as our priority."

First Ward Councilman and Finance Policy Committee Chairman Sal Caruana said the resolution is being introduced statewide by the League of Municipalities and is intended to "help municipalities lobby for more state aid."

In his FY 2008-2009 budget, presented to a joint session of the State Legislature in late February, Governor Jon Corzine made "many unpleasant choices" and called for the slashing of \$189 million in municipal property tax relief. In 2008, Westfield will experience a \$411,844 reduction in municipi-

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pal aid, a 9-percent decrease.

The proposal now goes to the Legislature, which must pass a balanced budget by the start of the state's next FY, which begins July 1.

According to the language in the resolution, the aid decrease, along with the new 4-percent levy cap, will "actually increase municipal taxes in the Town of Westfield for calendar year 2008."

When addressing the increase, Mr. Caruana said, "the impact is a very significant hit for us. No doubt, it will impact our tax rate."

The ordinance, according to the councilman, attempts to educate legislators on "the impact this [loss in aid] is having on the property owners in the name of property tax relief" and asks legislators to "seriously reconsider restoring some of these cuts."

replacing it would not only allow him to utilize his backyard, but it would also be more aesthetically pleasing to the neighborhood. He argued that the house was in a state of disrepair when he purchased it, and he has taken steps to improve it.

"I made that house 10-times better than it was before," Mr. Barbosa said. Ms. Foulke said she did not feel that Mr. Barbosa had proven hardship and that the board should reject his application because of this, not focus on aesthetics.

"To my mind, they (the board of adjustment) have a continuing modus operandi to approve things based upon appearance rather than hardship," Ms. Foulke said.

According to Vincent Loughlin, board attorney, hardship is just one of the factors which the board considers when granting a "d" variance, the type being considered in this case.

After hearing the testimony from both Mr. Barbosa and Ms. Foulke, the board was leaning towards denying Mr. Barbosa's request for the porch structure. If the board had ruled in such a way, it would have prevented any construction at the site in the future. Mr. Barbosa agreed to explore alternatives and revisit the matter at a



THREE AMIGOS...Community supporters and friends enjoy each other's company last Thursday night at the Westfield GOP cocktail party in the Ward Mansion. Pictured, left to right, are Jerry Infantino, Leo White and Gary Fox.

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