



Happy Easter

THE WESTFIELD LEADER

Ad Populos, Non Aditus, Pervenimus

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SIXTY CENTS

Majority of Mayors Say Merging Leads to Loss of ID, Higher Taxes

By DEBBIE HOFFMAN, RAYNOR DENTIZIO and FRED ROSSI
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

AREA — Finding ways to raise revenues without compromising services to citizens is the preferred option for the mayors of Fanwood, Scotch Plains, Mountainside and Garwood, where state aid is being threatened under Governor Jon Corzine's budget proposal to cut or eliminate funding to small towns, officials told *The Westfield Leader* this week.

"We have to recognize the gap with less state aid," Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr said. "How can we still bring services to our residents for a better price?"

"I don't want to lose the character of Fanwood. It's why I moved here," she added. "We have to look at how we can maintain services to keep it affordable for our citizens."

The sentiment is echoed by Garwood Mayor Dennis McCarthy. "There aren't a lot of ways to save money since Garwood already is careful in how it spends money because of its size."

"We are having brainstorming sessions with surrounding towns to see how we can get creative in sharing services," he said.

He added that merging with a neighboring community "hasn't been a topic of conversation."

As reported here last week, Garwood would lose \$393,138 in state aid. Mountainside stands to see a reduction

of \$249,939 in municipal funding. Fanwood would lose \$186,669, with Scotch Plains seeing a \$271,429 reduction in state aid.

Mountainside Mayor Robert Vigilanti said he feels that many residents like living in a small town and would not want to be part of a larger municipality.

Mayors and council members of all four towns reiterated the fact that they already share services in many areas.

Fanwood and neighboring Scotch

Plains already share a school system. They also share many other services, including the tax assessor. The two towns also have combined volunteer fire departments and first aid squads.

"[Elected] municipal officials receive zero compensation," Mayor Mahr added. "We have no health care benefits or pensions."

Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks called a merger with Fanwood "really premature." He said there are "a lot of difficulties involved" in a merger — "logistical, legal and emotional" — and that "we need to tread carefully."

Mayor Marks said he believes that as the governing bodies in towns like Scotch Plains and Fanwood "get deeper into their budget discussions this year, the thought of consolidating more services will become more earnest."

Scotch Plains Township Manager Thomas Atkins said he thinks "any shared service initiative that Fanwood might approach us about, the township council would objectively study it. They wouldn't say yes or no without objectively studying it."

He said one potential legal drawback to any outright merger between the two towns is that, unlike Scotch Plains, "Fanwood doesn't operate under the rules and regulations of civil service," meaning that personnel decisions on matters, such as hiring and promotions, don't have to be made in accordance with state department of personnel guidelines.

Mr. Atkins offered one specific example of where a merger would require significant changes in operations, namely the police departments of the two towns.

"Do we become a department that's under the regulations of the personnel department or do we not?" This would be important, he said, because it "relates to how appointments and promotions are made."

Mountainside, Garwood and Fanwood are members of a regional board of health run by Westfield, along with Roselle Park, New Providence, Summit and Springfield. Mountainside also shares the welfare director with Westfield and has a shared tax collector.

Mountainside also has part-time engineers and building inspectors and share equipment rentals with Union County. High school students from Mountainside go to Governor Livingston in Berkeley Heights.

"We have been sharing services with Union County for the last three years," Mountainside's Mayor Vigilanti said.

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MS BOE Awaits County Approval of Budget

By KATHERINE EMIRE-NIEVES
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE — Gene Nagel, budget and finance chairman of the Mountainside Board of Education (BOE), said at its March 11 meeting, that the board is still awaiting approval of its \$14,830,640 budget, \$12,596,121 or 85 percent of which would be raised in local school taxes.

Union County Executive Superintendent of Schools Carmen Centuolo has not yet announced her decision.

The board is scheduled to present the budget to the public on Tuesday, March 25, at its regular meeting. BOE President John Perrin said that the public did not attend the last budget presentation, perhaps because Mountainside has supported the budget in recent years, he said. Mr. Perrin said he hoped residents would attend the meeting on March 25 and ask questions.



LUCKY CHARM...Daniel "Danny Boy" Stender of Westfield wears his leprechaun outfit. With his Irish red hair and blue eyes, he hopes everyone had a Happy St. Patrick's Day.

Three Candidates Vie For Mountainside BOE Seats

By KATHERINE EMIRE-NIEVES
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE — PTA President Carolyn Williams, Lauren Elmlad, the daughter of board member Carmen Venes, and Cathy Jakositz, who ran unsuccessfully for a seat on the Mountainside Board of Education (BOE) in 2006, are the three candidates vying for two seats that will open up on the Mountainside BOE at the end of the 2008 term. Those seats currently belong to John Perrin, BOE President, and Scot Worswick, who served one three-year term; neither chose to seek re-election.

Ms. Elmlad was raised in Mountainside and continues to live there, now on Stoney Brook Lane, with her husband, Brett, and their two children, who attend Beechwood School, one in first grade and one in the preschool handicap class.

Ms. Elmlad has a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology with a minor in Public Administration, and a master's degree in behavioral and organizational psychology, both from Kean University. She is certified in student personnel services, K-8 elementary teaching and as a substance awareness coordinator.

She is a homemaker and works with special-needs children on weekends at The Connection for Women and Families in Summit.

Ms. Jakositz told *The Westfield Leader* that she is running primarily because she wants to give back to her community.

She said one of the key issues currently facing the board is finding a new chief school administrator (CSA) who is well-qualified, understands the district and can keep it moving in the right direction.

CSA Richard O'Malley has announced his resignation, effective in June.

Another important issue is the budget, which she noted, "is a comprehensive budget [that seems to have] targeted every group...The budget has been put out there, and we need to get

it passed."

In regards to the possible merger of towns, Ms. Elmlad said Mountainside would prefer to remain independent, and she doubted that merging with another town would save money and that merging was not in Mountainside's best interest.

"Berkeley Heights seems to have its own problems — tension — between the mayor and the council," she said. The borough's high school students attend Governor Livingston High School in Berkeley Heights.

With regard to the effect such a merger might have on test scores, she said, "I think it depends on what town it is. Berkeley Heights would probably be fine. They have the same caliber of residents and students. I think their test scores would be competitive with ours, and our test scores would be competitive with theirs."

"I want to see the high level of education continue," Ms. Elmlad said. "In the past, we were in violation of state mandates for special education, [and now we] seem to have come into compliance."

Candidate Jakositz said she is running again to bring a personal approach back to the board. Ms. Jakositz said she believes the teachers and the BOE are at odds, and she would like the transition between them to be smoother for the sake of the school children.

Ms. Jakositz is originally from Union. She and her husband, Thomas, have been Mountainside residents since 1995, and reside on Woodacres Drive. They have two children, a second grader in Beechwood School and a third grader in Deerfield School.

Ms. Jakositz has a B.A. in teacher of the handicapped and a M.A. in administration and supervision from Kean University. She also has graduate degrees in school counseling and as a Learning Disability Teacher Consultant (LDTC), which qualifies her to work on a child study team. She works at the Union middle school part-time as a special education teacher.

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STAMP OF APPROVAL...Roger Brody (above) wins the Westfield Gold Award and the "Vince" Grand Award for best exhibit, "The Prominent American" series, at the annual Westfield Stamp Show held in the community room of the Westfield Municipal Building last Saturday.

Caruana: State has Forced WF to 'Reinvent,' Downsize

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — First Ward Councilman and Finance Policy Committee Chairman Sal Caruana delivered a detailed municipal budget preview Tuesday night during which he spoke about how Governor Jon Corzine's fiscal "scheme" has caused the town to "reinvent" itself. While cautioning that figures used in his report were preliminary, Mr. Caruana said that to budget for the expected level of expenses, Westfield would have to "downsize" and look for new revenue streams.

Mr. Caruana said — after combining a \$150,000 revenue loss, which factors in the state aid drop, with \$805,000 in mandated costs (library, Rahway Valley Sewerage Authority) and \$550,000 in salaries and wages (collective-bargaining agreements) — the town "is starting with a \$1.5-million budget deficit."

Westfield, which sported a \$36-million budget in 2007, has a \$3.89-million surplus with which to work; however, because it does not want to deplete the entire amount, the town envisions using \$3.2 million and borrowing \$1.5 million out of its sale of assets account, according to Mr. Caruana.

Reached after the meeting, Mr.

Caruana explained that there are "finite" assets in the town. When Westfield sells off these "tangible assets," such as land or buildings, the proceeds received go into the surplus. Mr. Caruana said the state's Green Acres program stipulates that towns cannot sell off certain assets, including parks and recreation areas. What is left, after the Green Acres restrictions, is land with "limited value and limited market ability," which the town refers to as its "odd-lot inventory."

The town has not dipped into its sale of assets account since 2004, according to Town Administrator Jim Gildea.

Mr. Caruana said, under the mandated 4-percent cap, Westfield's tax levy could increase \$797,000 over last year. In addition to the tax increase, the town would incur \$1.2 million in "pass throughs," which include pension and health-care costs, as well as debt ser-

vice and capital-improvement monies. Between the tax increase and "pass throughs," the town would be hit with a \$2-million increase.

Mr. Caruana warned that the town could see, at maximum, a 10-percent municipal tax increase. As a result, he said the town would have to cut costs and services, as well as raise revenue sources to "replenish" the surplus. He said the prevailing taxation system acts as "a disincentive to well-managed communities" such as Westfield.

Third Ward Councilman Mark Ciarrone said, "The state is crushing municipalities and passing the costs on to them."

He remained steadfast that "cuts are going to happen."

Third Ward Councilman David Haas said, "If we don't make changes, we'll be in worse shape next year."

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GW BOE Approves Student Calendar for 2008-2009 Year

By RAYNOR DENTIZIO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD — The Garwood Board of Education approved the 2008-2009 academic calendar for students during its meeting on Tuesday night. Due to ongoing negotiations, the board did not address the calendar for staff members.

The student calendar calls for 183 in-session days, with winter break scheduled from December 24 until January 2 and spring break from April 10 until April 17.

Although the staff calendar has not been discussed, Board President Adele Lewis said that the board wanted to set the schedule for students since many parents plan vacations in advance.

"This is the part that we know will stay in place," said Ms. Lewis. "We hope the staff portion of the calendar will follow shortly."

Along with other borough departments, the board of education is looking for ways to reduce costs through shared services. With Garwood's municipal state aid potentially being halved due to state budget cuts, the borough council is requesting that departments look for ways to share services with

other municipalities. Santo Villaraut, the board of education's representative to the borough council, said that he met with council members to "come up with some ideas for shared services." Mr. Villaraut said this essentially was a brainstorming session and that additional meetings will be held to discuss their ideas.

The board also sent a measure regarding commencement activities back to committee after a vote on its second reading split four-to-four. As the rule stands now, current board members are allowed to present diplomas to their own children during commencement. The new measure would have extended the privilege to former board members, as well. Some board members felt that expanding this practice could create more confusion during graduation and ultimately draw attention away from the students.

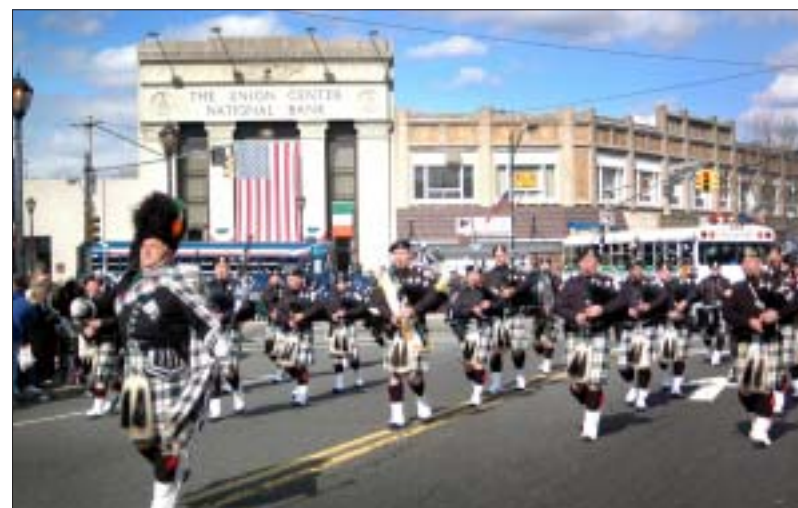
"At least with nine sitting board members, you know the max you're looking at is nine," said Ms. Lewis.

The measure will return to committee and be addressed at a later meeting.

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IT'S SHOW TIME...The Westfield Community Band, under the direction of Thomas Connors, will perform its third annual Spring Concert on Sunday, April 6, at 3 p.m. at Temple Emanu-El in Westfield. Classic Broadway melodies will be featured with "Salute to Richard Rodgers." For more information, please see westfieldcommunityband.com or call (908) 789-4080.



EMERALD DELIGHT...The Army band from Ireland marches in the St. Patrick's Day parade in Union Township last Saturday to the delight of all who are Irish that day.

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