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

By DEBBIE HOFFMAN, RAYNOR DENITZIO 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 Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* 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. He said 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

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## Street Furniture Design Approved by Planning Bd.

By DEBORAH MADISON  
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD — The borough's planning and zoning board of adjustment approved a recommendation made by the board's street furniture committee regarding design choices for benches and trash receptacles for the downtown at its monthly agenda meeting on Monday night.

The street furniture will be purchased by the developers of the Goddard School and Town Bank as a requirement of their site approval, and will be placed in front of the new buildings on South Avenue, officials said. Future developers may also be required to purchase street furniture as a condition of their site approvals.

Peter Sayles, chairman of the street furniture committee, presented the design options for street furniture to the board from the choices he researched on websites. The design chosen by Mr. Sayles will closely match existing benches and streetlights already in place throughout the borough, he told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*. The new benches and trash receptacles are made by the same company as the existing benches, Victor-Stanley in Maryland, and can be seen on its website at VictorStanley.com.

Each receptacle will cost the developer approximately \$936 and has an attached cover which will prohibit an



ON A ROLL...The Easter Bunny encourages children to gather eggs at the annual Easter Egg Hunt in Scotch Plains last Sunday. The event was moved indoors to Park Middle School due to inclement weather.

## Mayor and Councilman Glover Clash As Council Begins Budget Meetings

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Facing a potentially large cut in state aid and significant reductions in other revenue sources, the township council on Tuesday held its first meeting on the 2008 municipal budget, a session dominated by sharp exchanges between Republican council members and Democratic Councilman Kevin Glover.

At the end of the hour-long meeting, Mayor Martin Marks asked that Township Manager Thomas Atkins meet with department heads to discuss how appropriations this year could be cut 5 to 10 percent. Earlier, Mr. Atkins provided an overview of the \$24.9 million budget he proposed last month, a spending plan that is \$1.4 million higher than last year.

He said if no changes are made to appropriations, and revenues this year are the same as in 2007, municipal property taxes would rise 13.6 points (one point in Scotch Plains equals \$99.505). However, with state aid possibly being cut by \$271,429, construction code revenues down \$100,000 from last year and investment income declining by as much as \$200,000, another six points would be added to the 13.6-point figure. Thus, taxes could rise between \$1.4 and \$2 million this year for municipal services.

In addition to spending cuts, Mr. Atkins told the council that increasing projections for other revenue sources, such as the fund for delinquent taxes and court revenue, could offset some of the tax burden. The council also faces a new state-or-

dered tax levy cap of four points. But he called the 2008 financial picture "a little worse than I expected."

As was the case during last year's budget discussions, Mayor Marks and Councilman Glover argued — sometimes loudly — about spending and tax priorities, and, in particular, about Mr. Glover's letter last week to local newspapers, in which he wrote that "had [the mayor] listened to me last year, we could have lowered taxes without any harm to the financial health of the township."

A year ago, Mr. Glover voted

then called the mayor "incompetent when it comes to financial matters."

"If I am incompetent, then I am in good company," the mayor responded, listing Democrat Jeffrey Strauss and Republicans Paulette Coronato and Nancy Malool — who all voted with the mayor to approve last year's budget — as well as Mr. Atkins, Chief Financial Officer Lori Majeski and the township's auditors as having "wholeheartedly backed" last year's tax and spending plan.

Earlier, Mr. Glover criticized Councilwoman Coronato for having



NOT RUNNING...The Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School field is closed awaiting construction of the turf field addition. Neighboring towns of Plainfield, Kenilworth and Cranford are helping by providing facilities for the track team to practice.

against the budget, saying he favored using more expansive revenue projections and more of the township surplus to lower the property tax increase to two points from the five-point increase that was ultimately approved. Mr. Atkins said, on Tuesday, that such a move would have reduced this year's \$3.4 million surplus by \$300,000.

Mayor Marks twice told Mr. Glover that if his comments to the newspapers were the result of him not understanding the municipal budgeting process, he would have to be described as "misguided and inaccurate."

"If you do understand it," the mayor said, "then you are a liar." Mr. Glover

"painted a pretty gloom and doom picture" during last year's budget talks, specifically about the effect of the sub-prime housing slump on the township's finances. "I like to look at things better," he said. "The world didn't come to an end" last year. "This country will get better."

The mayor said the sub-prime mortgage woes have been "a contributing factor to the overall economic downturn," and called Ms. Coronato's words last year "right on target." Ms. Coronato, meanwhile, said several times that the council needed to be "careful with our surplus" during the present economic downturn.

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SUPER SCIENCE...Scotch Plains-Fanwood School Superintendent Margaret Hayes enjoys the work of a student during the Science Fair at Park Middle School last Friday.



EMERALD DAY 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.

## FW Prepares to Apply For Extraordinary Aid

By TED RITTER  
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD — In light of Governor Jon Corzine's recently announced plan to significantly reduce state funding to municipalities, with the largest reductions targeting small towns with a population of less than 10,000, like Fanwood, Mayor Colleen Mahr said in a phone interview with *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that Fanwood will apply for extraordinary aid, which must be dedicated to reducing the municipal tax levy.

For the past few years, the borough has successfully applied for extraordinary aid. The council wants to introduce the spending plan before early April in order to preserve the option of applying for "extraordinary municipal aid" from the state.

The borough's proposed municipal budget is expected to call for a municipal spending increase of one-half of one percent over last year's \$8.3-million municipal budget, which included nearly \$4.6 million to be supported by taxes.

The borough, earlier this month, was told by the state to expect a 17 percent reduction in funding, amounting to nearly \$187,000.

"It's sobering to look at such a bleak picture," said Mayor Mahr, noting that this comes during a year when the borough's pension obligations increased 65 percent, revenues are down, and other mandated costs have gone up.

Fred Tomkins, the borough's chief financial officer, in a phone interview with *The Times*, said Fanwood's budget scenario is "about as grim as it gets."

"We did more than hold the line," said Mr. Tomkins. "We did the best we could on the spending side, but we have to do more."

Mr. Tomkins said that will likely require "changing services, or combining services," with other towns.

"I think between now and July, even if we wind up getting extraordinary aid, we'll have come up with

some specific things that we can do," Mr. Tomkins said.

Mayor Mahr yesterday was expected to travel to Trenton and testify before the Assembly Budget Committee, speaking not only in her capacity as a small-town mayor, but also as this year's president of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors.

"The message [to the state] is that you have come at [small towns] when we're in the middle of budget season," Mayor Mahr said.

"There is a tremendous amount of anxiety, frustration and anger [among small town governments]," she said, referencing the municipal funding cuts.

At last week's regular, monthly borough council meeting, the governing body approved a resolution "opposing the failure of the Governor's proposed 2008-2009 Fiscal Year state budget to treat property tax relief as our priority," hoping to get the state to restore funding or at least phase-in aid reductions.

The council also approved an ordinance giving the borough the option to exceed its state-mandated 2.5 percent municipal property tax increase "cap."

Mayor Mahr also said she would like to hold a "town hall" style meeting in April to get some ideas from residents on how the borough should proceed in the time between the budget's introduction and its adoption.

"Government works best when there is open and transparent communication; it's my responsibility as mayor, and it's the responsibility of the governing body, to work on a budget that our residents can swallow," Mayor Mahr said. "And right now we're introducing a budget that we don't like."

The mayor has said the borough will hold a public hearing before adopting a final municipal budget in late-June or early-July, after getting official word from the state about extraordinary aid.

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HEALTHY MEETING...The Fanwood Rescue Squad's corroded, 30-year-old flagpole is being replaced this week by Scouts of Troop 104, led by Eagle Scout candidate Courtney Slaten, who is also a member of the squad. Pictured is the old flagpole after it was removed last weekend. The new pole will stand a few feet away, surrounded by new pavers.

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