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SIXTY CENTS

## Citizens Vow to Fight Against Closure of Muhlenberg Hospital

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

PLAINFIELD - An estimated 900 residents packed a public hearing on Tuesday evening at Plainfield High School to discuss Solaris Health Systems' closing of Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center as a result of them losing more than \$10 million per year in operations.

The crowd, with signs and T-shirts advertising their protest of closing Muhlenberg, called to save the hospital. Many citizens spoke passionately at the podium about the impact that the hospital closing would have on Plainfield and surrounding commu-

nities. Representatives of the State Health Planning Board conducted the meeting with local and state representatives in attendance. Assemblyman Jerry Green (D) of Plainfield and Assemblywoman Linda Stender (D) of Fanwood represent Plainfield as part of the 22nd Legislative District. Mr. Green, deputy speaker of the State Assembly, said, "Muhlenberg did not look out for Plainfield."

Ms. Stender was not in attendance, citing a prior commitment - Mayor Colleen Mahr of Fanwood spoke on her behalf. The mayor noted the importance of the hospital to the region.

Councilman Kevin Glover of Scotch Plains stirred the crowd saying, "Make this about Main Street, not Wall Street."

Carmen Salavarieta, a voice in the Plainfield's Latino community, called for more time to work out a compromise. Mrs. Salavarieta has been a member of the board of the Plainfield Health Center for 25 years. She cited the importance of Muhlenberg to the Latino community, and said the loss of the hospital would hit immigrants hard.

"They would take care of the people - papers or not," she said of Muhlenberg. According to Mrs. Salavarieta, many lower-income residents simply can't afford to have healthcare and Muhlenberg is a refuge for them. She recognized that the decision to close Muhlenberg is due to the hospital having to bear the financial burden of charity care, but said, "Give us time to work it out." She feared that many immigrants, "paperwork or not," without any means of transportation would not be able to afford costly cab rides to JFK Medical Center in Edison, and if they make it there, would not receive adequate care.

Other residents were angered by what they view is a systematic effort to deprive Plainfield of accessible healthcare. Jesus Delvi asked the board where the money to keep Muhlenberg open had gone.

"Westfield, Fanwood is where the money has gone," he shouted. With many cheering, he said, "We will fight to the end," and that "if Martin Luther King were alive, he would see the closure as a violation of civil and human rights."

Others were less emotional, but eager to point out that they thought closing Muhlenberg would have a devastating impact on the area. Using a domino analogy, Jim Uffer of South Plainfield said, "If Muhlenberg goes down, others will be affected."

"You have the power to keep this hospital open," he told the board, but went on to question whether they had the "vision and courage" to do so. "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful and concerned citizens can change the world," he added.

Amidst the emotions of the night, the board remained composed, but clearly felt the intensity of the exchanges. At the end of the session, the board promised to see if another public meeting could be scheduled so more residents would have the opportunity to speak.

Activists said they were not wait-  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

## Garwood Field Project Delayed Over Wetlands Issue

By RAYNOR DENITZIO  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD - The borough's athletic field complex project could be delayed up to 12 months after the borough recently learned that a portion of the property is designated as wetlands. The borough must now seek permits from the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) before proceeding with the project.

According to the minutes from the complex project committee's April 3 meeting, Gordon Raupp of Kinsey Associates informed the committee "that his firm has determined that the area for the project encompasses wetlands." Since state law restricts construction in wetlands, the project will require permits from the DEP.

Borough Administrator Christina Ariemma said the borough is in the process of hiring an environmental consultant and hopes to present its plan to the DEP following the committee's next meeting in June.

According to Councilman Steve Napolitano, the committee was informed that a portion of land to be used for the project lies in a flood zone.

"We have pretty much a design plan that we're going to present to the DEP," Ms. Ariemma said. "We're going to meet again the first Thursday in June, and probably then shortly thereafter, we'll be going to the DEP."

Ms. Ariemma said in addition to the cost of hiring the environmental consultant, approval of the plan by the DEP could take between six to 12 months. "There's nothing we can do about it," Ms. Ariemma said. "We have to do this stuff."

The borough also learned in late



PARKING UP THE WRONG TREE...Business and property owners came en masse to the Westfield Town Council meeting, Tuesday, to implore the council to reconsider raising tickets for overtime parking meters from \$20 to \$32. Those in attendance spoke about three facets of the current parking situation - a lack of parking spaces, fines that are too high and enforcement that is too aggressive. At top left is current Finance Policy Committee Chairman Sal Caruana. At top right is Gregory Wyn-Williams, owner of Baron's Drug Store. For more photos, see goleader.com/photos.

## Business Owners Protest Parking Fines at Westfield Council Meeting

By MICHAEL POLLACK  
Specially written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - Westfield Town Council members listened as, one by one, business owners protested the raising of ticket prices for overtime parking fines and demanded more parking capacity. After public comment, the council voted unanimously to introduce the ordinance necessary to raise the current \$20 fine to \$32.

Approximately 100 citizens attended the three-hour meeting, with the majority representing the Westfield Action Group, comprised of those united against the proposed hike.

Michael Blancato of Summit, a business owner, started the evening off by calling the council "out of touch" with the needs of business owners. Mr. Blancato said it is the town's responsibility to work towards a solution that would provide adequate parking.

Specifically, Mr. Blancato asked the council to consider a ruling that would create a 10- or 15-minute "grace period" after a meter has expired and help educate the public on how all meters and pay stations work.

Jesse Sayegh, who runs the Rialto, described the downtown theatre as an "anchor," helping to bring in people from the outside community to spend money in other Westfield shops and

restaurants. Mr. Sayegh noted that his attendance dropped by 13,000 last year, compounding his problem, not only do larger movie theatres have digital capabilities, but parking is free.

On a more local scale, Mr. Sayegh noticed that while business is down in Westfield, attendance has risen at the Cranford Theatre, which Mr. Sayegh also owns.

Bob Saunders, who runs a CPA firm at 241 North Avenue, pushed for a parking deck to stop the downtown from "bleeding."

He suggested New Street, the Lord & Taylor lot and the Elm Street lot as possible locations.

With the current parking arrangement, Mr. Saunders joked that it might be easier to start "dropping people from an airplane."

Finance Policy Chairman Sal Caruana, while acknowledging that capacity issues do exist, said there is "ample parking" at the Elm Street lot near Trader Joe's.

Mayor Andy Skibitsky, throughout the evening, remained firm that he would not address a parking deck, saying, "It's not in the cards."

More than capacity and rate, members consistently spoke out against the level of enforcement.

Mr. Saunders said the parking-enforcement officers behave like "vultures." Barbara Coopersmith of Forest Avenue said she did not agree with the "spirit of enforcement" that pervades the town, detailing an experience of returning to an empty lot during a snowstorm and finding a ticket on her windshield.

A Westfield employee who lives in Morris Plains spoke of receiving two tickets within two hours.

She said the current policy amounts to "sucking quarters out of [my] pockets," and though she works in town, she has made a "concerted effort not to shop in Westfield." She asked the council to "take a step back" and reassess the situation.

Gary Goodman of Cranford, chairman of the Westfield Area Chamber of

Commerce, said Westfield's downtown is an "asset"; however, he said it is "in trouble."

He said the town council, instead of enforcing a parking policy, has gotten itself into the parking business.

"I want you out of the parking business," Mr. Goodman said to extended applause from the audience.

Responding to Westfield officials, who, in previous meetings, have called the proposed \$32 overtime meter rate comparable with other Union County towns, Mr. Goodman said "You have a different asset than Roselle. Westfield is unique, and these policies endanger its uniqueness."

Tim Boyle, co-owner of the 16 Prospect Street restaurant, asked that the council "not put a hurdle in front of us" and forge a "greater partnership" with business owners.

He said increasing fines was a "mistake the [town] cannot make. It could mean the loss of businesses."

Second Ward Councilwoman Jo Ann Neylan said it is difficult to sit from the dais and hear the council described as "adversarial" to the business district.

"We invest time and love the town. No one is here to put people out of business," she said.

Mr. Caruana added that he listened to the concerns of business owners and attended Downtown Westfield Corporation meetings. Mr. Caruana said after consulting with business owners, the council made changes for their betterment. In one instance, Mr. Caruana said landlords wanted more control over parking permits, and the council addressed that matter.

Later, Joe Spector, who owns the Leader Store, did acknowledge that Mr. Caruana came to meetings but said, "Many felt demeaned by comments [Mr. Caruana] made and the fact that follow-up meetings never happened."

He suggested partnering with the private sector or the county to place a deck on North Avenue by Lord & Taylor or on Elm Street by Stop and Shop.

Regardless of what the town decides,  
CONTINUED ON PAGE 14



INTENSE...Approximately 900 citizens met at Plainfield High School Tuesday night to protest and let state legislators know how they feel about the closing of Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center.

## Philhower Winner Honored; Kids Petition to Save Staffer

By CHRISTINA M. HINKE  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - Philhower Award 2008 recipient Catherine McGarry was honored at a reception at McKinley Elementary School Tuesday evening prior to the board of education (BOE) meeting. The auditorium was filled with students, parents and staff supporting her.

"I was overwhelmed and so surprised and thrilled," Ms. McGarry told *The Westfield Leader* about when she found out she was selected.

She said that as part of the award, she received a stipend for class supplies, adding she plans to go through some catalogues with students to determine how to spend it.

Kerry Paone, a parent to Lily, a first grade student in Ms. McGarry's class, said to *The Leader*, "she is so patient." Ms. Paone, a former art teacher, was also invited to do art projects in Ms. McGarry's class.

Another parent, Wendy Connolly, has had two of her children taught by Ms. McGarry.

"It's such a crucial year. Nurturing a kid to get past that hurdle of a big day to transition in to the full year is crucial. She is the one that made it easy for my kids," she told *The Leader*.

Liz Emslin and Ms. Connolly presented a handmade book made up of letters and notes given by the people affected by Ms. McGarry's teaching, and which also contained class photos. Ms. Emslin showed *The Leader* a particular verse by C. Everett Koop in the book that she said sums up Ms. McGarry: "Life affords no greater responsibility, no greater privilege, than the raising of the next generation."

"I always try my best to make the most of our days together," Ms. McGarry said in her speech.

"I know you have the foundation to be successful," she said to her students.

Claudia Andreski, principal at

McKinley, presented the award to Ms. McGarry. Ms. Andreski said when she asked the students to describe Ms. McGarry that "nice" came up a lot.

Teacher appreciation also came up at the BOE meeting following the reception.

The official meeting began with a plea from middle school students involved in the peer leadership program to save Marie Koch's job as student assistance counselor. There were many speeches about how Ms. Koch's anti-bullying agenda within the peer leadership program is crucial to the students.

About 25 students attended the meeting and had a petition to save Ms. Koch's job with 300 student signatures.

The BOE is eliminating her position as part of the staff cuts that were announced as part of the budget process. Three guidance counselors are planned to cover the peer leadership program in addition to their other duties.

About 11 students came up to the podium to speak about how Ms. Koch is important to the program.

"When you have someone like Ms. Koch, it gives you such a sense of security," said student Liz Connolly. "She has helped us become more caring young adults," said Roosevelt student Tyler Varian.

Edison Intermediate School student Michael Osbourne said that, as part of his leadership in the Big Brother/Big Sister portion of the program, he and five other Big Brothers have helped a sixth grader, who was bullied by other students because of his race, ethnicity and culture, and because of their actions, he is not being bullied any longer.

Kathy Kennedy, a parent, came before the board speaking about her concern for the elimination of the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14



ALL HOOKED UP...Westfield families enjoy the 9th Annual Fishing Derby at Mindowaskin Park last Sunday sponsored by the Westfield Policemen's Benevolent Association, Local 30. For more derby photos, see goleader.com.



PERFECT TOGETHER...Last month, the Westfield Symphony Orchestra (WSO) celebrated its 25th birthday at the Plainfield Country Club. Former Governor Thomas Kean attended the gala and remarked that "The Westfield Symphony Orchestra and New Jersey are perfect together." Pictured, from left to right, are: Mark Fleder, WSO board president; WSO members Jane Kelly and Jane Francis; Gov. Kean, distinguished honorary chairman; and Carolyn Fleder.

### PAGE INDEX

Regional ...2-3, 8, 12	Obituary ..... 10	Real Estate .... 15-23
Editorial.....4-5, 13	Education ..... 9	Classifieds .... 23
Community..6-7, 11-12	Sports ..... 15-22	A&E..... 24-26

Horace Corbin, Publisher