

WF BOE Projects \$4 Million In State Aid Cuts for 2010-2011

By MAGGIE DIGGORY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - The board of education (BOE) meeting Tuesday evening following Governor Chris Christie's budget address left board members balancing the reality of the state's fiscal problems and its deep impact on the school district's budget for 2010-2011.

"The rules changed today. Based on what we heard, our state aid will be cut 92 percent," said Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dolan, during her opening remarks Tuesday evening.

Up until today, the district was planning a budget based on state aid decreasing from zero to 15 percent. The

Westfield school district currently receives approximately 6 percent of its operating budget from state aid, according to board member Richard Solomon. The board projects 2010-2011 state aid will be 1 percent, a decrease of \$4,250,000.

The budget for the current school year is \$90 million, \$85 million of which is for operations. Debt repayment, grants and entitlement programs amount to \$5 million. Westfield receives \$5 million in state aid for operations. [Source, Public Notice, *The Westfield Leader*; March 26, 2009 - <http://www.goleader.com/09mar26/23.pdf>].

The district expects to receive the

exact state aid figure today, Thursday, March 18. A public meeting is scheduled for Tuesday, March 23, at 8 p.m. and the Finance Committee will present a budget using the exact state-aid figures.

Superintendent Dolan has meetings scheduled with the district staff, administrators and teachers unions in the coming days.

"The day of reckoning is here. We need to look through a new lens," said Board President Ginny Leiz, as she asked fellow board members to share their reactions to the larger than expected cut in state aid.

Board member Richard Mattessich said, "That we don't lose the quality we've built over the years. We bit the bullet last year and made a lot of cuts. We're in as good a state as we can be."

Board Vice-President Julia Walker described Governor Christie's budget announcement as "Trenton said, 'Here are the rules and we're giving you no money to follow them.' We were cut loose today. We are self-funded."

Mr. Solomon summarized how he viewed the district's options for revising the 2010-2011 budget. "We have a couple of options: one, go to the associations for suggestions and give back [but], that won't be enough. Second, significant program cuts. Third, raising more money from property taxes. We can go to the public with an amount up to the cut in state aid," he said. He concluded that a combination of things would need to occur and called for "community-wide discussion."

One member of the public, Mitch Slater, who is running for a seat on the BOE, remarked, "I'm curious why [the board] couldn't wait a week to vote on the teachers contract." The board ratified a three-year contract March 9 with the teachers' union, giving teachers pay increases of 3.9 percent for each of the next three years.

Superintendent Dolan responded that the board already was aware of the state's fiscal problems and, in a cooperative effort, the teachers' union came to the table and "focused on what needs to be done for our schools."

Tuesday night, the board also ratified the Westfield Association of Educational Secretaries' (WAES) union contract retroactive to July 1, 2009, through June 30, 2012. As of press time, salary increase figures were not available.

According to the board, the WAES made concessions regarding members' health insurance by eliminating traditional indemnity insurance, increasing in-office visit co-pays and prescriptions, as well as increasing contributions to members' health insurance coverage.

The WAES had been without a contract during the current school year. "The secretaries met us, the priorities they came with were met," Ms. Walker said.

The board asked for an update on the school and administrative buildings after the weekend Nor'easter. Business Administrator Robert Berman said that the board office and the high school took on water.

Water came into the varsity gymnasium and also entered the auditorium stage during the spring drama performance on Saturday evening. The band room in the basement lost a half-dozen ceiling tiles and water soaked into the carpet. The facilities staff worked throughout the weekend to ensure that school would open on Monday.

Mr. Berman said there is "a maintenance budget and [they] can do repair work. These things happen."

Mr. Solomon suggested looking into using leftover monies from the bond to renovate and expand the high school to repair the Gym 5 roof.

Mr. Berman said he would consult the bond council to make sure they could use the monies in that matter.

The two-hour meeting ended with the board going into executive session, as it did for 20 minutes earlier in the evening.



THE POWER OF WATER...A youngster at Valley Road in Clark gazes at the flood waters of the Rahway River last Sunday after the storm deluge of Saturday.

Courtesy of Nick Karter

Freeholders OK \$900,000 In Contracts for 2010 Elections

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

ELIZABETH - The Union County Freeholders approved \$900,000 in funding for elections to be held throughout the county this year.

B&B Press of Somerville was given a \$149,569 contract to print absentee and provisional ballots for this year's Primary and General elections. Full Service Mailers, Inc. of Garfield was given a \$65,781 contract to mail sample ballots for this year's School, Primary and General Elections.

Royal Printing Services of West New York was given a \$474,240 contract to print ballots for School Board, Primary and General Elections, and a \$110,000 contract to print voting authority books, poll books "and all other printing needed to run an election within the county" for the 2010 election cycle.

In addition, the freeholders approved \$40,000 contracts to Liberty

Boards of Educ. Brace For Deep Aid Cuts

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

AREA - School districts are bracing for deep cuts in state aid. *The Westfield Leader* placed calls to local districts at press time for comments. Districts had anticipated a 15-percent cut in aid but now believe the number could be as high as 90 percent.

Mountainside School Business Administrator Roderic McLaughlin said Governor Chris Christie alluded in his budget speech to the fact that the aid cut would result in a 5-percent total budget reduction. Statewide, Mr. McLaughlin said, this would reduce school budgets by more than \$1 billion; locally, Mountainside could stand to lose almost all its \$780,000 in aid.

"It's scary...You would like to think the state wouldn't put us that far off the mark [in terms of aid expectations]," he said. "We are waiting with baited breath."

Scotch Plains-Fanwood Superintendent of Schools Margaret Hayes and Business Administrator Anthony Del Sordi were meeting when *The Leader* called Wednesday morning.

At Tuesday night's Westfield Board of Education (BOE) meeting, Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dolan said, "The rules changed today. Based on what we heard, our state aid will be cut 92 percent," or \$4,250,000.

The Garwood BOE approved a tentative budget Tuesday night. Its budget committee is scheduled to meet tomorrow to recalculate aid numbers, which were to be released yesterday by the Department of Education after press deadline.

Transport of Union, University Van Lines and Princeton Van Service of Ewing to transport voting machines to and from the polling locations.

Freeholder Al Mirabella asked if the county could save money by combining printing contracts. "Maybe we can get a reduced cost?," he said.

Deputy Clerk Alan Falcone said the Clerk's Office put out a request for proposals for bids on all three contracts, and noted that B&B, Full-Service and Royal Printing came in with lower bids in the areas they were granted contracts. He said Full-Service also sorts the ballots and brings them to the Post Office.

"Over the years we found this was actually the cheapest way of doing it, was to split it up in this manner and bid it out separately," Mr. Falcone told Mr. Mirabella.

In other business, the board approved a resolution to have County Manager George Devaney award contracts to agencies under the peer grouping aging grant. A half million dollars will be funded to the county for this grant from the state with additional funds sought for the second and third years of the program.

Human Services Director Frank Guzzo said the state provides peer-grouping monies to counties that either operates a county hospital, as Union county does with Runnells Specialized Hospital in Berkeley Heights, or a county-run nursing home. Those counties that receive these funds are "required to provide only 10 percent of revenues towards home-health services and hospice care," he said. Mr. Guzzo said the remaining funds from the grant can go into the county's general fund "and be used for any purpose." In Union County's case, up to 70 percent is dedicated to "general human services" including hospice and home healthcare with the remainder going to services such as Paratransit.

"These dollars plug gaps in services that would be unfunded because there are no other dollars to fund them," Mr. Guzzo told the board.

Under the state's 10-percent minimum, Mr. Guzzo said the county would only be required to fund \$200,000 for home-health services and hospice care. "With the allocation that we are expecting it is closer to \$2 million," Mr. Guzzo said.

He said pending legislation would remove the 10-percent requirement, meaning counties would not have to fund anything to home-health and hospice services. "That would surely

break the backs of the social services agencies in this county and others particularly in times as difficult as they have been over the last two or three years," Mr. Guzzo said.

Mountainside resident Gerry Gallagher of the Center for Hope Hospice said the board awarded Hope Hospice \$204,000 in 2008, \$189,000 in 2009, and \$180,000 this year.

"This is a very important source of funding for those that provide this care. While this year is \$9,000 less than last year, we are grateful for whatever you can provide us," Mr. Gallagher said.

The board also approved, on second reading, an ordinance to appropriate \$200,000 to construct 10 to 12 bunkers at the Galloping Hill Golf Course in Union. Funds will be drawn from the county's capital surplus account.

Garwood resident Bruce Paterson said the county took out bunkers years ago to speed up play. He said, by putting them back, golf will be slowed, and revenues would be reduced.

"This [additional bunkers expenditure] is loony," Mr. Paterson told the board.

Cranford resident Jim Buettner suggested the golf operations staff or prisoners in the S.L.A.P. (Sheriff's Labor Assistance Program) install the bunkers to save money.

John Bury of Kenilworth announced that as chairman of a budget panel for the Union County Watchdog Association he has developed a review of the county budget whereby he questioned \$5.8 million in expenditures of the \$469-million county executive budget. Among them is \$200,000 in lobbying costs and \$250,000 in legal fees.

The board also approved a resolution, sponsored by Freeholder Chairman Dan Sullivan, that opposes Senate Bill 201, which would require local governments to place all documents on their websites. Mr. Sullivan said he opposes the legislation because no funding has been provided to offset the costs.

The freeholders Fiscal Affairs Committee will hold meetings today, March 18, and next Thursday, March 25, at 4 p.m. to review the executive budget.

Correction

A candidate's name for the Mountainside Board of Education was misspelled in last's week's edition. The correct spelling is Jim Ruban. We regret the error.



HAPPY BIRTHDAY...The Rotary Club of Westfield celebrated the 105th anniversary of Rotary International recently with a visit from their district governor. Pictured, left to right, are: District Governor Alex Cauwels, Past District Governor Dr. D. Michael Hart and Club President Mark Swingle.

Skibitsky, Haas React To Christie's Budget Talk

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - Mayor Andy Skibitsky opened Tuesday's council conference session by referencing Governor Chris Christie's budget address.

Governor Christie, in his speech, outlined how his administration would seek to combat a \$10.7-billion deficit next year and begin to stop the "madness" that has gone on in terms of state spending and government growth.

The mayor said he was struck by the fact that the state's total debt (\$51 billion) had tripled since 2002 (\$17 billion).

"Obviously, when you look at the numbers, something had to be done," Mayor Skibitsky said. "He promised he was going to shake up Trenton, and it looks like he has."

The mayor said it was "shocking" to read that in 2009 the state had lost 121,000 private-sector jobs but gained 11,300 government jobs.

"Not Westfield, though. In the past four years, the town has reduced or eliminated 27 positions," he said of his

town. The Christie administration has proposed a 2.5-percent annual property tax increase cap. Also, the governor alluded to cutting aid to schools by \$800 million and assistance to towns by \$450 million.

"It's going to be tough," Second Ward Councilwoman Vicki Kimmins said. "But we need that."

"There are a lot of difficult decisions that have to be made at the state level...the [town's] Finance Policy Committee has a lot of work ahead of them," the mayor said.

David Haas, the vice-chairman of the Finance Policy Committee, told *The Westfield Leader*. "As I said four years ago, I don't have an answer for fixing the state budget. In fact, six months ago, I'd have said it was unfixable. I want to wait and see what he does."

Mr. Haas continued, "If he combines [what his speech outlined] with some of the other changes people in Trenton are talking about, such as pension changes, healthcare contributions and reform of the interest-arbitration system, I'd be ecstatic."



Greg Ryan for The Westfield Leader

STORM DAMAGE...The heavy rainstorm last Saturday downed many trees and flooded basements throughout the area, causing damage to homes, blockage of roads and some loss of electric power. Pictured above, Westfield firefighters raze off the area where a tree damaged a home on the 800 block of Shadowlawn Drive, rendering it uninhabitable. Police and firefighters were kept busy around the clock.

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*Based on total market share for CBRB through GSMLS data for the period 2/1/2009 - 1/31/2010

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