

Lawmakers, Mayors Differ Along Party Lines on Property Tax Tool Kit

By PAUL PEYTON

Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

AREA – As municipal officials prepare to tackle municipal and school budgets come January, 33 reforms aimed at controlling property taxes remain stalled before the State Legislature.

These include arbitration reforms that would impact how towns negotiate contracts with collective-bargaining units, civil-service reforms and teacher contracts, as they relate to the 2-percent cap on school tax levies.

Westfield Mayor Andy Skibitsky is among the mayors saying they are in need of property-tax reforms in preparation of next year's municipal budget. He questioned why state lawmakers are holding up the reform package after passing the 2-percent

cap onto towns and school boards.

"I don't understand what they (legislators) are thinking if they pass the 2-percent cap but they don't give towns a tool kit," the mayor said. "Even with the tool kit, we were going to have a difficult time. Without it is just unthinkable."

Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr, a past president of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors, described the tool kit as "a sound bite that has been overplayed" by the Christie Administration. She also said property-tax reforms should have been approved by lawmakers before the state lowered the cap on tax levies.

"The tool kit is not everything it is cracked up to be," she said. "It (municipal budgets) all comes down to revenues and expenses."

"[The tool kit] is not going to have any effect on our budget come January 1," Mayor Mahr said. "The best thing Trenton can do is to keep their hands off our [municipal] aid. This is money that comes back to us. It is not a handout."

She said, in her judgment, the 33 reforms in the tool kit are not the "be-all and the end-all" that will help towns fall within the new cap. She also believes New Jerseyans have a misconception that property-tax increases will not be greater than 2 percent overall, when, in fact, municipal, county and school taxes will each rise 2 percent, with the county following an equalization process county-wide.

Mayor Mahr also questioned the absence of procedures on how local governments can place referendums before voters to exceed the state cap.

Scotch Plains Mayor Nancy Malool admitted she is "anxious" about the upcoming budget process. She said arbitration reform could help her town, which is currently in negotiations with its local Policemen's Benevolent Association (PBA) and will soon begin the same process with its public works union. "[Currently], when it goes to arbitration, it is out of our [control]."

"It (arbitration reform) would give us some backup," Mayor Malool said.

In addition, she said, civil-service reform, should it pass, would enable Scotch Plains to end what she said amounts to a "complicated, bureaucratic (civil-service) system that makes it difficult to lay off or even demote municipal employees."

"No matter what happens, it's going to be tough to get to 2 percent (cap)," Mayor Malool admitted.

State Senate Minority Leader Tom Kean, Jr. (LD-21, Westfield) said the only way that the newly imposed 2-percent cap on municipal and school tax levies is going to control property taxes is with the passage of the tool kit.

"Property taxes have skyrocketed in New Jersey because government, particularly at the local level, costs far too much. Current law is complicit in this cost escalation by condoning, allowing and even encouraging outrageous contract and arbitration awards for compensation and benefits to public employees," Mr. Kean said in a column published in *The Record* last week.

"At the center of this property-tax reform package is a hard 2-percent cap on compensation and benefit increases that can be awarded by arbitrators," Mr. Kean said. "Combined

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At BOE, Parent Questions Singing of 'Christian' Song

By KIMBERLY A. BROADWELL

Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS – A township resident questioned the board of education last Thursday Scotch Plains regarding her concerns over her son singing "Joy to the World" in last year's winter program held at the Coles Elementary School.

Lisa Rafel said her 8-year-old son, who still attends the school, sang along with his class a "Christian Song glorifying the Lord as the Savior." She stated that she felt that this was a form of prayer to a God that her family does not believe in.

"There is no place for prayer in public school," Ms. Rafel said. "If students were praying to Allah, then parents would be flooding the school with complaints." She also suggested that the Scotch Plains-Fanwood School system adopt a "more concrete policy on no prayers in school."

Superintendent of Schools Margaret Hayes spoke out, saying, "We do not advocate that singing in a holiday concert is indeed praying. We do sing a variety of songs from various reli-



Courtesy of Sue Fiorendo

HONORS DESERVED...On Veterans Day, students at St. Bartholomew Academy welcomed veterans from World War II, the Korean War, Desert Storm, Iraq and soldiers currently serving in the military. The visitors spoke of their experiences and answered questions. Students looked at photos and mementos, tried on soldiers' gear plus presented cards and gifts to their honored guests.

Shared-Services Forum on Hold Until Payment Dispute Is Resolved

By FRED T. ROSSI

Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — Mayor Nancy Malool says she wants to reschedule a second public forum on the shared services report, but needs to first resolve an issue regarding additional payment to the consultant who assembled the report and its recommendations.

Last week's forum to discuss the shared services report was postponed, the mayor said at the township council's conference meeting on Tuesday, primarily because she was "not comfortable" holding a second session without the presence of consultant Dan Mason of Jersey Professional Management (JPM), the author of the report, to explain various aspects of the report's conclusions and recommendations.

Mayor Malool said that Mr. Mason was requesting that he be paid an additional fee to attend the two public sessions while the mayor said she felt that the original state grant to fund the study also covered all of Mr. Mason's public appearances to discuss the details of the report, which was issued earlier this year and made public two months ago.

In the spring, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Shared Services Study

Committee, which is made up of representatives from Scotch Plains and Fanwood, recommended that Mr. Mason be paid an additional \$5,000, as opposed to the \$15,000 requested by Mr. Mason. Fanwood paid its \$2,500 share, but the Scotch Plains governing body has balked at making the payment. The mayor felt that since Mr. Mason authored the report, he should be present at the public forum to defend it and explain its recommendations to the public.

Among the main recommendations in the JPM report were merging the two communities' police departments and public works departments and moving the Fanwood municipal court

to the Scotch Plains municipal building and relocating the Scotch Plains Recreation Department to the Fanwood Borough Hall.

"We're kind of at a standstill," Mrs. Malool said on Tuesday, and called the dispute over the \$2,500 a "distraction" from what she said was "the bigger picture" of moving forward on further discussions of shared services between the two towns.

As the council continued discussing the payments to Mr. Mason, Township Attorney Jeffrey Lehrer urged that further talks be held in closed session, which the council did after its regular public meeting later on Tuesday evening.

Township Council Discusses New RVSA Appointment

By FRED T. ROSSI

Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — The township council, at its conference meeting prior to the regular meeting, discussed whether to name a permanent representative to the Rahway Valley Sewerage Authority (RVSA). Councilman Kevin Glover, noting that long-time commissioner Joan Papan has technically been a holdover appointment since February, asked the council to consider appointing Dan Sullivan as Mrs. Papan's replacement.

Touting Mr. Sullivan's "outstanding technical background," Mr. Glover said the name representative

would "recognize some of the issues going on" at RVSA, namely those issues that have been reported in the media in recent months, including problems with the facility's new cogeneration plant.

Deputy Mayor Dominick Bratti agreed, saying it was "time to have some new people involved" who would "bring a fresh eye" to RVSA matters, especially in the wake of the recent media reports.

Councilman Jeff Strauss defended Mrs. Papan, saying she "served our community well" and adding that he did not see the need to make a change

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Paul Peyton for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WELCOME ABOARD...Bonnie Lacina, new Scotch Plains Township Clerk, is ready to serve the residents. See story below.

Bonnie Lacina Takes Over as Scotch Plains Clerk

By PAUL J. PEYTON

Specially for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS – After being greeted the last 23 years by Barbara Riepe, residents will have a chance to get to know new Township Clerk Bozena "Bonnie" Lacina. The new clerk began her duties on November 9.

After serving as the Borough of Metuchen clerk for 15 years, she said she jumped at the opportunity to join the Scotch Plains municipal staff. The new clerk is a graduate of Fordham University, and she holds a degree in International Studies. After graduation, she was a substitute teacher for the Perth Amboy School District for a few years before becoming clerk in Metuchen. She chose not to go into international politics and stay in New Jersey after getting married.

"One of the reasons I stayed (in Metuchen) was that I loved my job. I love being able to help the public and have them get problems solved. They can come here and see a friendly face who will absolutely try to help them with what they need," she said when interviewed at her new office on Fri-

day. Mayor Nancy Malool, Deputy Mayor Dominick Bratti and Township Manager Chris Marion first interviewed Mrs. Lacina. She was then brought back for a second interview before the township council, at which time she was hired.

She said the job of a municipal clerk "remains constant." "People come in and need copies of things, [such as] death certificates and marriage licenses," she said.

The clerk handles the writing of council-meeting agendas, minutes and contracts; the position also calls for handling everything from filing annual dog and cat licenses to wedding and domestic-partner licenses, in addition to handling all requests for copies of public documents. The clerk is also responsible for overseeing all municipal and school elections, including tabulating election results.

"It's the day-to-day business that needs to get done here in Scotch Plains," Mrs. Lacina said.

Mrs. Lacina is taking classes to become a certified municipal registrar, who records all vital statistics

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Horace Corbin for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCRUMPTIOUS ...Troops and their families line up for chow, Saturday night, at the NJ National Guard Army in Westfield, as citizens honor them for their service at the Casino Night fundraiser to assist families of the soldiers.



Benjamin B. Corbin for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

HONORS, THANK YOU...Scotch Plains Mayor Nancy Malool speaks of the sacrifice of the nation's soldiers during a Veterans Day ceremony last Thursday in Scotch Plains on Park Avenue.

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