

Westfield Re-Imposes Housing Fee on Developers

By RACHEL LOGAN
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD—The town council passed an ordinance to re-impose fees on select developments to fund the municipality's enforcement and administration of "affordable" or "Mount Laurel" housing.

Residential developers will pay 1.5 percent of the increase in equalized assessed value, or 6 percent for each unit above the zoned limit.

Commercial developers will pay 2.5 percent of the equalized assessed income on additions, replacements or unimproved lot constructions.

Councilman Sam Della Fera explained that the ordinance "spares

taxpayers the burden" by moving the fee to parties more directly involved. Developers are exempt from the fee if their construction is to be used for non-profit, hospital-related or for worship.

Transit hubs, government buildings and public amenities are also exempt. All affordable housing constructs are exempt.

Fees collected from developers will be held in an affordable housing trust fund.

Money from the sale of affordable units, rental income from municipally-operated affordable units, repayments and recaptures will also be held in the fund.

The fund is to be used for the construction and maintenance of affordable units, as well as for land purchases and road developments required for their construction. It can also be used for "green" projects.

Additionally, the money can be used to help households earning less than 30 percent or less of regional median income with rent, fees and emergency repairs.

Fund money can be used for administrative fees, but no more than 20 percent can be used in this fashion.

A similar ordinance was in effect between 2006 and 2013, but was repealed following the uncertainty of state law in the wake of several court rulings that questioned each municipality's affordable housing requirements.

According to Mr. Della Fera, the ordinance was beneficial. He said it was either the taxpayers or the developers.

The ordinance, which was given the blessing of the planning board on July 6, passed unanimously.

Resident John Kean inquired about late-night construction in downtown, where he lives in an apartment above a business.

Mr. Kean said he was awakened Tuesday at 12:30 a.m. to the sound of a jackhammer as crews worked on the road outside his home. According to Mr. Kean, he has been awakened multiple times over the past year for similar projects.

"Even though it's businesses mostly, people live there," he said.

Even if the improvements couldn't be moved to daylight hours, Mr. Kean asked that residents be notified so as to "prepare" themselves for the nightly noise.

Mayor Andy Skibitsky responded by noting that the downtown area is

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SWEET SOUNDS...Residents delighted in Tuesday night's continued Sweet Sounds Downtown jazz series sponsored by the Downtown Westfield Corporation.

Paul Lachenaur for The Westfield Leader

Bergen Laments Bail Reform Costs, Hails Shared Services

By BRIAN TRUSDELL
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD—Nearly one-fifth of the \$9.9-million tax increase in Union County's budget this year was due to the state's mandated bail-reform law, a \$1.8-million charge that will continue for years to come, according to Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders Chairman Bruce Bergen.

Thirty-three new positions, including 18 in the sheriff's department, 11 prosecutors and four facilities staffers to keep buildings open during the week-

ends and holidays, were required to comply with the bail system that will begin in January.

The new mandates focus on "risk assessment" – demanding a preliminary hearing for suspects accused of an indictable offense within 48 hours of arrest. The justification for the overhaul, approved by voters in a 2014 referendum, is to reduce the number of people detained merely because of an inability to afford bail.

"Certainly my biggest concern is cost," said Mr. Bergen, who visited The Westfield Leader's offices for a conversation with the publication's editorial board on August 3. "This is estimated to cost \$45 million statewide. The state kicked in zero."

Mr. Bergen explained that while state law requires the state pay for local costs that result from its mandates, the bail reform change "doesn't fall within the confines of the law."

It is a matter of, "this is what the policy is, so you need to deal with it," he said. That means the county is stuck paying to upgrade the state court system within its jurisdiction.

Mr. Bergen discussed a wide variety of topics with The Leader's editors, from the county's \$580-million debt to initiatives ranging from recreation and county emergency dispatch services to an animal shelter.

The more than half a billion dollars of debt includes a \$59-million general

improvement bond that was expected to be approved Thursday, August 18. The freeholder board has adopted general improvement bond ordinances in nine of the last 11 years during the summer. This year's approval is by far the biggest in that time, exceeding 2011's \$49.6 million. It is \$15 million more than last year's.

This year's bond includes \$8 million more for parks and recreation, \$4 million more for Union County College and \$4 million more for the Gordon Street Bridge in Roselle over the freight rail tracks linking North and South Avenues.

Mr. Bergen was quick to thwart criticism over the debt, citing the county's improved bond rating over last year, which is equivalent to 0.9 percent of the county's equalized assessed property value.

In other matters, Mr. Bergen explained his reasoning for pursuing the continued development of Oak Ridge Park in Clark. The county has delegated details of the plan to the Union County Improvement Authority (UCIA) in a shared-services agreement.

The 90-acre area, which had been operated as a golf course for 80 years until converted into a park in 2009, includes the only archery range in central New Jersey. Plans call for adding a two-sheet ice skating rink.

While exact costs are still unknown,

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HOW MAN SEAS MUST A WHITE DOVE SAIL... Eastman Plaza in Cranford was the focal point Sunday for Union County Peace Action Day, the 14th year of the event.

Susan M. Dougherty for The Westfield Leader

Westfield Zoning Board Okays 10 Applications

By DELL SIMEONE
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD—The zoning board of adjustment met on Monday evening and approved 10 applications. The following applications received a nod from the board.

Theodore and Kathryn Schlosberg, 26 Scudder Road, sought to install a nine-by-22-foot aluminum three-season porch enclosure contrary to code. David Edelson, 21 Manchester Drive, sought to construct first- and second-floor additions contrary to code to add a study to the first floor and a master suite on the second floor. Joseph Bresnahan, 18 Moss Avenue, sought to construct a second-floor addition and widen the front porch; the second floor will house a master suite, with two walk-in closets, a bathroom and a laundry room.

Zachary Chororos, 717 Boulevard, wished to construct a roof over a walkway deck at the rear entry door of the home. Rocco and Erin Romano, 900 Columbus Avenue, wished to

construct a second-floor addition and a front porch addition that is contrary to code. The second floor will house three bedrooms and one-and-a-half baths. Ellen Dragowski, 605 Girard Avenue, sought to construct a six-foot wooden fence in the front yard contrary to code. It is to replace a chain link fence and will face Sherwood Place.

Joseph Matthew, 44 Mohican Drive, sought to install a six-foot fence in the street side yard contrary to code. Sue Ann and Thomas Butera, 516 Prospect Street, wished to construct an 11-by-12-foot deck off the rear of the home contrary to code. Eugene and Sandra Eng, 210 North Chestnut Street, sought to construct a family room and powder room on the first floor and add a fourth bedroom on the second floor. Ethel and Greg Esposito, 312 Temple Place, sought to construct a deck at the rear of the home contrary to code.

The following applications will be

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Casale Plan Public Hearing Is Sept. 13 at Lincoln School

By BRIAN TRUSDELL
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD—The council confirmed that it will hold its regularly scheduled meeting on Tuesday, September 13, at Lincoln School instead of borough hall to accommodate a larger-than-usual crowd when it conducts a public hearing on the redevelopment plan for the largely abandoned Casale-Petro properties.

The venue was tentative until Borough Clerk Christina Ariemma could assure it was available. Borough Attorney Bob Renaud explained, upon a question from Councilwoman Ileen Cuccaro, that the board was not obligated to vote on the plan September 13. It would be unusual, he said, but not unprecedented.

The introduction of the plan – which envisions a 315-unit apartment complex with ground-floor retail for the 5.3-acre site between South Avenue and the NJ Transit rail line – was a disputed matter at the council's last gathering on July 26, when Mayor Charles Lombardo had to break a 3-3 tie to permit it. Three of the council's four Republicans opposed the introduction, arguing it should wait until the summer vacation season was over and residents had returned home.

The formal process of rehabilitating the blighted industrial properties, which date back to the late 19th century, has been ongoing for nearly two years. It was the focus of two contentious planning board meetings in April at Lincoln School before that body approved the plan and forwarded it to council for its adoption.

The council also is scheduled to hear at its next meeting on Tuesday, August 23, from consultant Jill Hartman, who has been advising the borough with regard to its "affordable housing" obligation mandated

by the New Jersey Supreme Court. Planning board planner Victor Vinegra has used the borough's "Mount Laurel" obligation as a major justification for the high density of the Casale redevelopment plan.

Mr. Renaud suggested that Ms. Hartman would make a general presentation for the benefit of the public, and then she and the council would retire into executive session to further discuss the status of the borough's immunity from affordable housing – sometimes referred to as "builder's remedy" – lawsuits.

Historical Committee Chairman Bruce Paterson invited council members, along with the public, to join a guided tour of the Casale property on Wednesday, August 17, at 11 a.m. The tour will be conducted by Mike Madeira, a Casale family relative and the owner of the Madeira Pipe Organ Services Co. still operating in part of the building plant. Local resident Pat DiFabio, who worked at the plant during World War II, also will be a guide, Mr. Paterson said.

"Sooner or later we will not have a factory that was here for a long time," Mr. Paterson said in a lamenting tone.

Also related to Casale, Mr. Lombardo tasked the finance committee with reviewing three proposals from law firms responding to the council's request for legal advice and counsel in negotiating with the prospective developers of the property. Russo Development of Carlstadt, N.J., has purchased the Petro Plastics property and is in contract to buy the Casale parcel as well. It has submitted the concept of the 315-unit apartment complex complete with an artist's renderings but has not been designated as the developer.

The relatively short meeting of little

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INFORMATIONAL VISIT... Union County Freeholder Chairman Bruce Bergen, left, chats with Westfield Leader interim assignment editor Brian Trusdell at the publication's Westfield offices about contemporary issues in the region.

Horace R. Corbin for The Westfield Leader

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SUMMER BBQ...The Union County Republican Party hold their annual barbecue in Mountaineer at the home of County GOP Chairmen and Councilman Glenn Mortimer and his wife, JoAnne. Of the over 60 in attendance, pictured, left to right, are Assembly Minority Leader Jon Bramnick (R-21, Westfield), Mr. Mortimer, Lt. Governor Kim Guadagno, Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz (R-21, Summit), Mrs. Mortimer and Rep. Leonard Lance (R-NJ07).

Photo courtesy of Glenn Mortimer

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