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Gary Whyte Recognized On Receipt of State Award

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

COUNTY – The Union County Freeholders last Thursday honored Mountainside resident Gary W. Whyte as the recipient of a New Jersey Governor's Jefferson Award for "Good Neighbor." The Jefferson Awards is a joint program run by the Community Foundation of New Jersey, *The Star-Ledger* and The Governor's Advisory Council on Volunteerism. Mr. Whyte received the Good Neighbor Award for his work fighting Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva (FOP), a rare connective tissue disease.

The award honors those that "achieve measurable community impact and represent outstanding acts of public service, without the expectation of recognition or compensations."

Mr. Whyte has been raising awareness of FOP for 16 years. He received the Jefferson Award on June 16.

"The Jefferson Award is the highest honor for public service of volunteerism honoring the informed and involved citizen," according to the resolution read by Freeholder Angel Estrada at Thursday's meeting.

Mr. Whyte has been going around the state to get municipal and county governing bodies to support a resolution recognizing FOP. He told the board that, to date, he has succeeded in getting resolutions passed from 522 of the state's 566 mayors since he started the FOP Awareness Initiative in 2002. Mr. Whyte also said there is legislation in Trenton to designate April 23 each year as "Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressiva Awareness Day" in New Jersey. He hopes to have it approved by the Legislature and signed by the Governor by the end of the year.

"On April 23 in 2006, the University of Pennsylvania found the gene in the body that causes the disease," he said, adding that phase two clinical trials are "very promising" for a "potential drug treatment."

In other business, the board passed a resolution to award a \$116,092 contract to Neglia Engineering Associates, of Clark, for design and construction administration services for the Ponderosa Park multi-purpose turf fields in Scotch Plains.

The board also awarded a \$1.5-million contract to Grade Construction of Paterson for improvements to Meisel Park Field in Springfield. Also, an \$80,832 contract for architectural and engineer-

ing services at the Galloping Hill Golf Course in Kenilworth was awarded to Reese Jones, Inc. of Montclair.

Ron Zuber, director of parks and recreation, said the project includes bunker hole improvements on hole number six, renovation of two existing bunkers on hole 16, construction of two new tees and improvements to preexisting tees on hole 13, and grading and drainage improvements on holes 6 and 14.

The board also approved a two-year contract with NMS Laboratories of Willow Grove, Pa., for \$100,000 for postmortem toxicology lab services in the medical examiner's office. Director of Public Safety Andrew Moran said the contract is up \$10,000 from the last few years due to the increased caseload in the ME's office.

Mr. Moran said monthly cases have risen from an average of 18 per month in 2015 to 22 per month in 2016 and have now reached 28 a month in 2017. He said most of the caseload increase "can be tied to the opioid epidemic." He said each case costs around \$300 in lab fees.

During Freeholder comments, Freeholder Chris Hudak said in relation to the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico that New Jersey has the third-highest Puerto Rican population in the country. He said he "cannot feel a sense of a lack of urgency from the federal government and surely when there is a disaster of this magnitude it takes an enormous amount of time to move resources and equipment into place."

He added that the House Republicans' proposal to eliminate the state and local tax deduction on federal tax returns is "another example of transferring wealth from this state."

"New Jersey is already a donor state in terms of the tax policy in the country and that would just exacerbate that problem," he said. "It will hurt people in New Jersey in a bad way." The board passed a resolution opposing the proposed Congressional tax code overhaul for that reason.

On the issue of Puerto Rico, Mr. Moran said the county has been advised that some of its rescue equipment is on standby and police officers from the *Urban Areas Security Initiative* (UASI) area are setting up teams of eight officers each that will be deployed for up to two weeks at a time. The UASI area includes Jersey City and Newark as well as seven counties including Union.



David B. Corbin for The Westfield Leader and The Times
SEEKING REELECTION...Assemblywoman Nancy Muñoz (R-21st, Summit) and Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (R-21st, Westfield) sat down with editor Paul Peyton to discuss state issues as they both seek reelection in November.



SPEAKING AT SAVANNAH...Westfield Mayoral candidate Shelley Brindle and Ward 1 council candidate Linda Habgood speak with residents of the Savannah, hosted by Pat Pfaffenbach and Susan Furliman.

Cranford Township Launches New Website

CRANFORD — After months of planning, the Township of Cranford has launched its new official website, www.cranfordnj.org, that is designed to make it easier for the public to access official information, meeting and activity schedules and official forms. Of-

icial township news announcements and alerts also will be prominently displayed on the website homepage as well as links to the many boards, committees, community and civic organizations.

One of the features of the new site is "How do I?" where viewers can get answers to their questions. Some of the most frequently asked questions and answers are already programmed into the section.

The site also includes links to various official department social media accounts like the police, fire, parks and recreation, Downtown Cranford, first aid squad and Board of Education.

**LEADER/TIMES
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Bramnick, Muñoz Talk Prop. Taxes, High Density Housing

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

TRENTON — Assemblyman Jon Bramnick and Assemblywoman Nancy Muñoz, Legislative District 21 Republicans seeking reelection this November, talked about issues ranging from property taxes to school funding to high-density housing during an interview with *The Westfield Leader* and *The Times* last Thursday. Mr. Bramnick serves as minority leader while Ms. Muñoz is minority whip.

Asm. Bramnick said "taxes and affordability" is the number one issue voters are concerned about. "And that's what we have stood for since we have been in the Legislature, trying to make New Jersey more affordable."

"Remember the Legislature is controlled by Democrats and has been for 15 years and people forget that. And it's those policies that we've tried to stand up against as the minority in the Legislature. So I think the argument to send two more Democrats to the majority at 52 (Democratic seats) when we (GOP) have 28 (seats) in the Assembly isn't going to change much except raise your taxes," Mr. Bramnick said.

Asw. Muñoz said "property taxes are crushing people." She said "people in our generation" have an exit plan to leave New Jersey, "because they can't afford to live here anymore." She said if Democrats reach 54 seats they would have a super majority, creating a "veto-proof majority." There are a total of 80 seats — two per each of the 40 districts statewide — in the Assembly.

Asm. Bramnick said the Legislature has not addressed high-density housing. "The courts are controlling this issue, meaning the courts are going to allow thousands of units to go into a place like Cranford. The Democrats in the Legislature do not want to address this issue. They say its affordability (housing). I don't think that's it...I think they are not terribly concerned about this overdevelopment in some of these towns. And that causes a problem with property taxes because if you have so many more people in the schools, so many more people using those services, the cost will go up."

On another issue, Asw. Muñoz said she has sponsored a bill, since 2010, addressing unused sick day payouts for retiring government employees. "You're getting paid out in today's salaries or hours that you have no record of from 35 to 40 years ago...Where's the record that you never took a sick day and you're going to be awarded for not taking a sick day? It's a benefit that's there in the event you need it."

She said all 16 towns in District 21, which includes Cranford, Garwood, Mountainside and Westfield, "owes at least a six-figure payout, whether it's to the municipalities (or) to the school (district)."

"And we fought for a 2-percent cap (on property-tax increases). When Jon Corzine was the governor property taxes went up 7 percent a year. Now whether you like (Governor) Chris Christie or not,

it was a coalition of Gov. Christie, us — all the Republicans — and a few Democrats to cap property taxes to 2 percent. It hasn't been perfect. But there's been a substantial reduction in the rise of property taxes," Asm. Bramnick said.

Asm. Bramnick said he assumes his opponents and other Democratic candidates are going to be part of a coalition with gubernatorial candidate Phil Murphy supporting higher taxes. "That's why you have people moving to Florida. That's why you have people planning to leave New Jersey," he said.

Asw. Muñoz said statistics show that 5 percent of New Jersey's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is paid out in property taxes. "That's a 25-percent increase since 2000," she noted. She said the 2-percent cap has caused the rate of tax increases to go down, "and we have to keep that in check."

One issue coming up is the 2-percent interest arbitration cap on police and firefighter contracts which is set to expire on December 31, 2017. "The Democratic candidate for governor and [their] opponents have not said if they will reinstate this. This is a really important part of what has kept our property taxes at just a 2.8-percent increase versus a 7-percent, an 8-percent (increase) every year prior to the cap," Asw. Muñoz said.

Asm. Bramnick said most mayors, governing bodies and counties favor continuing the interest arbitration cap. "I'd like to give raises to everyone, but you have to have the money to do it, and right now, because of bad policies over a long period of years, we don't have the money," he said.

On school taxes, Asm. Bramnick said the problem is the high cost of special education. He said lawmakers have been pushing to spread out the risk of special-ed costs by creating one pool of money "and move that around depending on who has to pay this special-education cost." He said Republicans "have done what we can to get it on the front burner" but the bill has not moved in the Legislature.

"If it's a public school within the district they (the state) are only paying 75 percent of its (special-education costs) greater than \$50,000," Asw. Muñoz said. "It should be 100 percent the state is picking up. That is a crippling cost."

The state only pays for 14.9 percent of the total special education costs per district, she said. Asw. Muñoz said limiting it to this percentage has "tied the hands" of towns in getting additional funding. She also questioned why the costs of out-of-district placements are not capped.

On the Gateway rail tunnel, Asm. Bramnick said the federal government, New Jersey and New York will split the cost. "So it would save an incredible amount of money for New Jersey, but we've got to get it done and we have to get it done now," noting that commuters "want a direct line and they want a line that works," he said. Asw. Muñoz called the project "imperative" for the state.

The video can be viewed at goleader.com/services/video/2017/

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