

## Concerns Raised Over Proposed PSE&G Power Grid Upgrade

By PAUL J. PEYTON  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — PSE&G has put its power grid project for the south side of Westfield on hold. The project is part of a statewide initiative.

According to documents published on the Westfield website, PSE&G says it will be replacing 26kV utility lines with 69kV transmission lines throughout its coverage areas.

“PSE&G and its contractors will be upgrading the electric system in your neighborhood to continue to

provide safe, reliable service. Construction crews will be actively working on the PSE&G and public rights-of-way in Westfield, as well as surrounding communities, to install taller, sturdier utility poles and run new electric wires along an existing pole line. There are no planned service interruptions associated with this work,” according to a letter sent to residents by PSE&G.

The utility’s work will start with tree trimming and tree removal in preparation for replacement of utility

poles. That work is expected to start “on or about” Monday, March 18, along Scotch Plains Avenue, Shackamaxon Drive, Rahway Avenue, Grove Street, Central Avenue and Sycamore Street. Resident James Foerst, a former town councilman, said the new power grid would stretch 2.1 miles.

“In accordance with the Board of Public Utilities’ (BPU) Vegetation Management Rules, we are required to trim and remove trees, where necessary. If applicable, trees that have been removed will be replaced with smaller, utility compatible trees,” according to a letter sent to residents on the streets impacted.

“These upgrades are needed to address the increased demand for electric reliability throughout PSE&G service territory. As populations have increased and consumer electronic needs have evolved, the 26kV legacy networks of the last century have been taxed. The addition of a 69kV network will alleviate the demands on the existing 26kV network,” according to a PSE&G fact sheet on the project.

Councilman Doug Stokes, who represents the fourth ward where the upgrades are to occur, said in an email obtained by *The Westfield Leader* that, “PSE&G...advised that this work is required by the (New Jersey) Board of Public Utilities in order to enhance the current electrical system for all residents which will limit and/or shorten future power outages due to severe weather events or other system failures.”

Mr. Stokes told *The Leader* that PSE&G has said the upgrade would enhance the electrical grid by connecting two area substations, including Cranford, thus lessening the risk of power outages caused during severe weather events such as hurricanes.

Mr. Foerst expressed his concerns on  
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## Cranford Experts Express Opinions on 750 Walnut

By CHRISTINA M. HINKE  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

CRANFORD — James Brunette, a licensed real estate broker, and Maurice Rasched, licensed as a professional engineer, with a specialty in traffic engineering, provided their opinions on 750 Walnut Avenue at the planning board hearing last Wednesday. This 30-acre tract of land is owned by Hartz Mountain Industries, which is seeking to rezone the property for residential use in order to erect 905 apartments.

Mr. Brunette spoke about the viability of the industrial and the office space market in the state. The office commercial market is improving, while the “industrial market is on fire,” Mr. Brunette said.

He said there are shortcomings regarding the property. “It could be retrofitted to meet the requirement people would want,” Mr. Brunette said. He showed examples of properties in other municipalities where property owners have made improvements to buildings to attract tenants. Some attractions include lounge areas, eateries, gym space and outdoor space, he said. For an industrial use, he said a 35-foot ceiling height is desirable, and Hartz could change the ceiling heights. Hartz’s real estate professionals have said they have been unsuccessful in finding tenants. Bank of America occupied a large portion of the commercial space, but has vacated the premises.

Also, there is a demand for smaller industrial spaces between 25,000 and 50,000 square feet, Mr. Brunette said. A tenant at 750 Walnut Avenue, Lab Corps, had wanted to downsize its space at the site, “and couldn’t come to an agreement (with Hartz),” Mr. Brunette said. Lab Corps occupies 85,000 square feet. “They are in the midst of evacuating,” Mr. Brunette said.

At the start of Mr. Rasched’s testi-



PACKED HOUSE...Commuters and public officials pack the Westfield Train Station last Wednesday night to express their opinions and complaints to NJ Transit officials. NJ Transit Executive Director Patrick Corbett and New Jersey Department of Transportation Commissioner Diane Gutierrez-Scaccetti heard from municipal officials, Union County Freeholders and state representatives who demanded answers on the restoration of the one-seat ride service and train-service improvements.

## Mayor, Council Vow to Back Residents In PSE&G Project

By FRED T. ROSSI  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Mayor Shelley Brindle assured residents on Tuesday that the town government shared their concerns about the now-halted PSE&G plan to upgrade its utility poles on the south side of town and threatened legal action if the utility attempts to re-start the project without significant changes.

At the town council’s meeting, which was attended by well over 100 residents who jammed the council

chambers, nearly 20 residents spoke in opposition to the project that called for new, higher utility poles carrying wires with three times the kilovolts as present. PSE&G planned to run the new poles and wires from Scotch Plains Avenue south to Shackamaxon Drive, then east to Rahway Avenue, then south to Grove Street and then to Central Avenue before turning south to Sycamore Street and onto the Garwood border.

The new poles would be 15 feet higher than the existing ones. PSE&G had also planned to cut 54 trees and trim another 43 in order to make room for the new poles.

PSE&G Mayor Brindle said, is “very aware” of the town’s concerns and has been asked to look at potential alternative routes or solutions, including placing the wires underground. She said the utility will host a public workshop where residents will have the chance to question PSE&G representatives about the project and whatever new plans are developed.

Town Attorney Thomas Jardim addressed residents on Tuesday night and vowed the town “is ready to pursue all legal avenues to ensure PSE&G acts in a reasonable manner.” He said the utility needs to explore all viable alternative routes for the wiring as well as demonstrate that the upgrade is necessary and that there are no

health and safety concerns related to any revised plans.

Scotch Plains Avenue resident Jim Foerst, a former member of the council, addressed the governing body and exhorted members to “take up our cause” in opposition to the project and “stop PSE&G from ruining my neighborhood.” He said Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (R-21st, Westfield) has pledged his “100 percent support” to stopping the project. In the few days since the PSE&G project became more widely known, Mr. Foerst mobilized residents living along the affected streets, with more than one hundred turning out for Tuesday’s council meeting, most of them wearing blue ribbons as a show of solidarity against the project.

“We can’t be a transmission alley for a private entity,” Mr. Foerst said as he pleaded with the council members to oppose the project. “Anything less,” he told the mayor and council, “is a dereliction of your duty.”

David Krieger, a Shackamaxon Drive resident, spoke at length about the “sense of horror” he experienced last weekend upon learning of PSE&G’s plans. He cited possible health risks associated with being in close proximity to high-voltage wires and said he didn’t want to play “Russian roulette” with his family’s health.

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## 2019 Westfield Budget To Include No Tax Increase

By FRED T. ROSSI  
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Town administrator Jim Gildea says the 2019 town budget will be introduced on March 26 and said “the big story” is that there will be no increase in municipal property tax rates for the first time in many years.

At the town council’s conference meeting on Tuesday, Mr. Gildea briefed the governing body on the \$46.7-million spending plan, 38 percent of which is made up of salaries and wages for town employees. He said the town’s “very good fiscal health” provided enough flexibility to keep the municipal tax rate stable while also funding various services and programs.

He noted that the percentage increase in the local tax rate has been steadily declining for the past eight years, from a 4.3-percent increase in 2012 to zero this year.

Some \$4.9 million of surplus will be used this year — about \$800,000 more than last year — to keep the tax

rate flat, but Mr. Gildea said there is still about \$9.5 million in surplus remaining, a level he called “very, very healthy.”

Some 59 percent of the budget this year will be funded via property taxes, and Councilwoman Linda Habgood reminded her colleagues that this year’s rate is two percentage points lower than last year as increased revenues from other sources have helped to keep property tax rates in check.

One revenue source that will not increase this year — and which has not risen for a number of years — is state aid, which will remain at \$3.073 million.

Mr. Gildea said the town’s health insurance costs went down 5 percent while debt service will increase this year by a “measly” \$4,000. Salaries and wages will rise 3 percent in 2019 while fees paid to the Rahway Valley Sewage Authority will increase by \$289,000. The total operating budget will increase by about \$255,000, Mr.

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Courtesy of Westfield Public Schools

CHINA DAY...Second graders at Westfield’s Franklin Elementary School enjoy traditional Chinese games during “China Day” on February 21, one of many activities that offered the students the chance to learn about Chinese language, history and culture.



CLOSED...Theresa’s Restaurant has closed after 25 years in downtown Westfield. See story on page 2.

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