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POPCORN™

Mulan:
Yentl Goes Oriental

By Michael S. Goldberger

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THE word™

BY JO & JOHN JACOBSON

HOW DO YOU SPELL RELIEF?

Hopefully This Go Around With Teachers Union Will Produce a Quick and Fair Settlement

Last week's decision by the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education to call an impasse on salary contract negotiations with the teachers union, known as the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Education Association (SPFEA), hopefully, does not indicate that negotiations will travel down the same road as they did during the previous collective bargaining session two years ago.

It took 17 months before the last contract agreement was reached in September, 1996. As part of the last agreement, teachers received salary increases of 3.92, 3.34, and 3.59 percent each year over the course of the three-year deal which was retroactive to July 1, 1995.

One important element of negotiations is that both management and employees are on a level playing ground. While the union may stage demonstrations or picket in front of schools before classes start or after school, the Board of Education may impose a "last best offer" contract after lengthy bargaining. Two bills before the New Jersey State Legislature, however, would remove the public employers' ability to declare a "last best offer" on teachers contracts.

The New Jersey School Boards Association has opposed giving up the "last best offer" measure, stating that the association believes its loss would unfairly tip the balance of negotiations to the teachers' side.

We agree. The teachers have ample opportunity to reach a fair settlement with the Board of Education through the collective bargaining system.

There are also bills pending to make benefits such as sick leave negotiable. Another pending bill would limit teacher salary increases to 1 percent more than a rise in the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) strongly opposes this bill, believing that capping salary increases would effectively "destroy the collective bargaining process."

While we believe salaries need to be competitive with similar districts in the area, it is important that teacher salary increases and benefits be in sync with private sector jobs.

It is our hope that the current bargaining sessions will produce a contract before schools open this fall to keep the education process moving forward. The last contract produced a number of tactics that we, frankly, found objectionable.

For instance, as part of a request by the SPFEA, teachers did not attend Back-to-School Nights and opted not to decorate their classrooms in an effort to force their bargaining position with the school board. Educators chose not to work Election Day. Public employees have the option to take off any holidays when schools are in session. The union took advantage of this option in an effort to demonstrate to the school board its displeasure over the course of contract talks.

We want to emphasize that negotiations, which began in January, are still in the early stages. The request for a third-party mediator from the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) should not necessarily be taken to mean that the district is in for another lengthy, knock-down, drag-out bargaining session.

It should be noted that even if SPFEA members begin the school year without a new contract, they are still covered under the old agreement. Any pay raises would be retroactive to July 1.

Over the past 15 to 20 years, teachers in New Jersey have made substantial gains in salaries. In addition to tenure, competitive salaries and benefits, staffers can also earn additional education degrees at the district's expense and move into a higher salary bracket.

In general, New Jersey teachers score quite well when salaries are compared to the national average. According to statistics from the United States Department of Education for the 1994-1995 school year, New Jersey had the highest starting salary at \$30,000, and tied with New York State for the highest average salary at \$47,000.

Entry-level salaries for Scotch Plains-Fanwood teachers are currently \$34,400. A master's degree with 30 credits is worth a maximum average of \$66,000 this year. With more than 60 veteran staffers retiring over the last three years, the new contract, we expect, will address lower-end scale salaries.

In Westfield, beginning teachers earn \$38,500; \$41,300 with a master's degree, and \$57,900 maximum with a master's and 30 credits.

Summit teachers were lower on the starting range this year, with salary figures spanning \$35,300 to a maximum of \$48,000. Teachers with master's degrees started at \$38,500 and rose to a maximum of \$58,098 with 30 additional credits.

Beginning Cranford teachers earned \$35,000 this year, rising to a maximum of \$52,090. The salary range for Cranford teachers with graduate degrees is \$39,350 to \$65,000.

One thing we would like to see changed is the timing of the annual NJEA convention. The convention, currently held in November, might better be held in the summer — such is the case with the National Education Association which just held its convention in New Orleans — or perhaps during winter break. We don't believe additional time needs to come out of the school year for this purpose.

In terms of the new contract, our hope is that the new agreement will be reached sooner, rather than later, so that the coming school year will not be disrupted with the bargaining process. In the interest of a timely contract agreement, we encourage both sides to keep their bargaining tools at the table and their eyes on academic goals.

Publisher's Note

This past Sunday morning I was surprised and pleased to notice that the downtown trash containers in Westfield were emptied in the vicinity of our Elm Street office. To be sure it was town-wide, I walked a few blocks. They all were empty. Someone in government is to be congratulated for taking action on this long-standing and aggravating weekend problem. I understand that Mayor Thomas C. Jardim, Fourth Ward Councilman Lawrence A. Goldman and Town Engineer and Public Works Director Kenneth B. Marsh conferred on the subject last week. Presumably a permanent fix is in place. It is a great first step in assuring the quality of our downtown for everyone.

Realtors Thank Leader and Donors For Support of Recent Towel Drive

On behalf of the Greater Union County Association of Realtors Community Service Committee, thank you to *The Westfield Leader* for the publicity given for our recent collection drive for tired towels, toiletries and linens.

The response generated by your publicity was overwhelming. We had people from Union, Middlesex, Essex, Morris and Somerset Counties visiting our office with their donations.

Many took the time to express their gladness that the committee was doing this worthwhile project and that these items could be put to good use by the recipients.

We have previously held two drives (plus an extra for the overflow after the drive ended) and we thought we had been blessed then with the number of items given.

This year far surpassed our earlier collections and we can only say thanks to each and every person who made the trip to us. We tried to individually thank each visitor but some left items at our door when we were closed, so we want to make sure that all know how much their thoughtfulness was appreciated.

The agencies benefiting from the donations were: Robert Wood Johnson Health Care Facility, Holy Trinity Pantry, Heart for Humanity, Homeless for

Union County through the Plainfield "Y," Park Hotel for Homeless, First Congregational for homeless shelters, and the Cranford Family Care Association.

Each time our Community Service Committee holds a drive, we find that community members are most generous and we say a big thanks to them and to our Realtor members for their donations and support, and to your newspaper for publicizing our efforts.

Carol Hyman
Executive Vice President
Westfield

PTA Council Lauds Residents' Support Of School Budget

On behalf of the Presidents' Committee of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Parent Teacher Association Council, I would like to thank the citizens of our community for voting "yes" on the school budget in the recent election.

Your support of the budget will enable the children of this community to continue getting an excellent education, and we thank you for that support.

Mary O'Connor
Corresponding Secretary

2 popcorns
"Hey, that's the same guy who played Kocoum in *Pocahontas*."

Such was the astute observation of my 12-year-old daughter, Erin, the second generation in our clan to be raised on Disney. She was referring to Shang (voiced by B.D. Wong), the dashing male lead in *Mulan*. One would think that the limitless world of animation would be immune to the hazards of typecasting. But here's the hot news flash: Disney recycles, and recycles, and recycles. Hence, the same brush strokes for Shang as for Kocoum.

Apologists pointing to the Bering Straits theory of North American migration may argue that these Asian-American doubles do indeed have an anthropological connection. But more likely than not, the Mouse Factory big-wigs are simply convinced that little girls swoon most for heroes with cheekbones like Silky Sullivan's. And when you're serving a segment of society that thinks nothing of watching the same movie several times a day anyway, repetition is easily mistaken for artistic virtue.

In this cookie cutter rehash, Buena Vista plops a heroic Chinese girl smack dab in the way of plundering Huns. Her mission impossible? Uphold the family honor by saving China from the invading hordes. No more, no less. That's what this woman's liber gets for not attracting the right guy and marrying well in the first place.

Now a bit long of tooth, the stunning renaissance at Disney that began with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) has come to a natural end, its formula worn thin. Of course, even Rome went on for a while after its fall. So, expect a few more stencils like this before the redoubtable Disney reinvents itself.

No cute pats and pans or architectural gargoyles come-to-life in this variation on the financially successful theme. Instead, the bulk of the funny business is handled by Mushu (voiced by Eddie Murphy), the ancestral dragon with a poor track record for righting family adversity. Previously unable to bring her family honor via the dating game, individualist Mulan (voiced by Ming-Na Wen) disguises herself as a man and joins the Imperial army in place of her sickly father. Assuming the sidekick role, Mushu seizes the opportunity to seek his own redemption.

Wisecracking Mushu prattles on in a running commentary while the cross-dressing title character makes like a combination *G.I. Jane* and *Yentl*. AKA Ping, she/he is indomitable, but gentle. A regular war machine...yet understanding. But most of all, as singer Helen Reddy might have extolled, she is Woman! And certainly, she doesn't need a man to define her worth.

Amazingly, this Chinese Joan of Arc's fellow troops aren't aware of the gender bending that's going on in their very own midst. Having proven himself, Ping is just a great guy. A heckuva warrior. In short, a real man's man.

Making these contradictory points, the producers go overboard. So intent on

saying and doing the right thing, *Mulan's* script aspires to a political correctness that eclipses all common sense. Once assailed as the last bastion of male chauvinism because of stereotypes perpetrated in classics such as *Snow White* and *The Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella*, Disney's knee-jerk stance comes off as a disingenuous ploy motivated more by marketing concerns than artistic considerations. But even more disconcerting is the rather curious insertion of Mr. Murphy's soul brother dragon. His verbal shucking and jiving in the name of comedy is curious if not downright embarrassing.

Too much of *Mulan* disappointingly qualifies as just nice enough. The only adequate drawing hardly explores the Oriental possibilities; the connect-the-dots direction breaks no new ground, and the musical score is a mere ghost of Disney hits past.

Trying to teach values as well as entertain, this latest bit of didactic Disney has become awkwardly skewed, the watered-down victim of opinion poll decision making and formulaic plodding. And despite the wonton flavor, *Mulan* still boils down to the same old soap.

Mulan, rated G, is a Walt Disney Pictures release directed by Barry Cook and Tony Bancroft and features the voices of Ming-Na Wen, B.D. Wong and Eddie Murphy. Running time: 86 minutes.

Assembly Bill Will Return Sales Tax to Municipalities

From the Desk of Westfield Mayor Thomas C. Jardim

On June 29, a bill that will have an enormously positive impact on downtown Westfield passed the New Jersey State Senate. The bill, co-sponsored by Assemblyman Richard H. Bagger, of Westfield, and known as State Assembly Bill No. 747, will return one-sixth of the sales tax revenue generated within downtown business improvement zones (up to \$100,000 per year) to that municipality to be used for improvements within a special business improvement zone.

As all can see, Westfield's downtown is clearly booming, as many of the persistent retail vacancies are now being filled. Much of this success must be attributed to the work of the Downtown Westfield Corporation (DWC), which has brought a clarity and focus to efforts to improve both the appearance and activities to promote Westfield's central business district.

The passage of Assembly Bill No. 747 is vital to Westfield's continuing efforts to improve its downtown into a thriving shopping, entertainment and eating destination for Westfield's residents and visitors alike.

The rationale for Assembly Bill No.

747 is clear. Special improvement districts are funded through an assessment of the property owners located within that district.

However, experience in municipalities in New Jersey and elsewhere has shown that special improvement district (SID) assessments cannot be increased beyond a certain point, as eventually, the special assessment can price properties out of the market, creating a decrease in desirability and, eventually, vacant storefronts.

On the other hand, well-supported special improvement districts provide a high investment return, both for the municipality in which the special improvement district is located and the state in the form of increased sales tax revenue.

For example, for every dollar spent by the SID in Red Bank, there has been \$85 of private investment over and above the SID assessment. In Englewood, there is a \$1 to \$96 ratio of private investment to SID assessment. Although figures are not yet available for Westfield, a walk downtown surely demonstrates that the investment that we have made in our central business district through our SID is beginning to pay off.

Thus, rather than diluting the state sales tax to support particular downtowns throughout the state, Assembly Bill No. 747 would actually have the effect of increasing overall the size of the sales tax pie.

One caution with respect to Assembly Bill No. 747 is needed, however. Like most spending measures, the bill is subject to annual appropriations being made by the New Jersey Legislature. This means that any sales tax revenue returned to Westfield must be used to provide additional services or, better still, one-time, "bricks-and-mortar" items that do not require ongoing appropriations.

As Trenton could pull the rug out from under us at any time, we must not become over-reliant on these additional dollars.

The next step for Assembly Bill No. 747 is approval by Governor Christine Todd Whitman. At our Town Council meeting of July 7, I asked the Town Council to go on record to urge the Governor to sign Assembly Bill No. 747 into law as soon as possible. Passage of this important piece of legislation is vital to the success of the cultural and economic heart of Westfield — our downtown.

Westfield Chamber Announces Car Show In Downtown July 16

The Westfield Area Chamber of Commerce, celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, will sponsor its second of four 1998 Westfield Classic Car Shows next Thursday, July 16, from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. It will be held on Quimby Street in downtown Westfield.

"We have a strong following of classic car owners who look forward to showing their cars in Westfield," commented Darryl Walker, Chamber Vice-Chairman.

The Westfield Classic Car Show is free to the public, and offers family fun and entertainment, according to Chamber Executive Director Debbie Schmidt.

Many stores will remain open until 9 p.m. that evening. "DJ Stickshift Eddie" will provide musical entertainment, and six trophies will be awarded to the cars in various categories, including "funkiest" and "farthest distance traveled."

The other Classic Car Shows will be held on Thursdays, August 20 and September 17. Quimby Street will be closed to traffic from 5 to 9 p.m. for the events, and there is limited space for 60 cars to be displayed. For information or to enter a car, please call (908) 654-4100.

Letters to the Editor

Councilman Goldman Praises Changes to Westfield Zoning

The Laws and Rules Committee introduced a comprehensive overhaul of Westfield's Land Use Ordinance at the Town Council meeting on Tuesday. The new ordinance is hundreds of pages long and is the product of many persons' work efforts over a period spanning several years.

Within the complex document are several interesting changes which serve to advance various initiatives which are underway in town. These changes and their benefits merit highlighting.

Downtown improvement efforts will be served by the elimination of office space as a permitted conditional use on the first floor in the central business district. Except for existing uses which are grandfathered, in the future, the ground floors of downtown buildings will be restricted to retail, service-oriented businesses and restaurants.

Office use will be on upper floors only. This change is intended to enhance business in retail stores by increasing foot traffic. Retail businesses feed upon the customer bases of other retail businesses. There are also aesthetic benefits because offices on ground floors are generally shrouded by darkened windows.

Rehabilitation of the Central Avenue corridor will be enhanced by a change which permits gas stations along that street to include canopies (similar to the Mobil Station on South Avenue) in their renovation plans. Some gas station owners have been seeking to do this for several years, but renovation plans have been thwarted by the terms of the current ordinance.

Facelifts of properties along Central Avenue are welcomed improvements to the "gateway" to our downtown.

Improved signage. As part of our continuing efforts to update the look of Westfield, pylon, or tower-type signs of the

kind used by car dealers and gas stations along Route No. 22, will no longer be permitted in connection with new development. This will prevent commercial areas along major thoroughfares in town from taking on a highway look, as older commercial properties are put to new uses.

These and other improvements are being implemented as tools to promote responsible, yet progressive, development in Westfield.

As an adjunct to the new Land Use Ordinance, and as work continues on revising Westfield's Master Land Use Plan and on preparing a formal Downtown Improvement Plan, the town is very fortunate to have the participation and input of two talented individuals who are relatively new to Westfield government, but each of whom has valuable experience to offer.

Martin Robins, a second-year member of the Planning Board, who was voted its Chairman this year, brings to the Planning Board a distinguished professional career as a governmental planner and policy analyst. Most notably, he is one of the primary architects of the current public transportation system in New Jersey. He is a long-time Westfield resident, and I was very pleased to recommend his appointment to Mayor Thomas C. Jardim last year.

Mr. Robins crafted a solution to a controversial aspect of the new Land Use Ordinance. A revised coverage area ratio plan was designed with the laudable intent of maintaining consistency in terms of lot coverage within neighborhoods. However, its implementation could have also dashed the intentions of numerous home owners throughout the town to build additions to their homes. A "grandfather" provision will permit existing owners who bought their properties under current zoning regulations to improve their homes within the present guidelines for a period of several years.

The second individual is Michael La Place, the Executive Director of the Downtown Westfield Corporation, which administers our Special Improvement District.

Mr. La Place, a professional planner, fills a long-existing void in Westfield municipal government. Several of his ideas pertaining to the central business district are receiving continuing attention by the Planning Board.

I believe that the new Land Use Ordinance preserves the small-town charm of Westfield, but at the same time accommodates the realities of modern life. The advent of the ordinance is an under-heralded, positive step forward for the town.

Lawrence A. Goldman
Westfield Councilman, Fourth Ward

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