

Berkeley Hts. Officials Reduce School Budget By \$325K After Defeat

By KIM KINTER

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

BERKELEY HEIGHTS — The Berkeley Heights Township Committee cut the municipality's 1999-2000 school budget by \$325,000 Monday, following the rejection by voters less than a month ago of the \$27,404,938 tab originally proposed by school board members. The spending plan now stands at \$27,079,938.

The budget was turned over to the Township Committee for review after it was defeated at the polls on April 20 by a vote of 572 to 541. It was the first time in 40 years that voters defeated a school budget.

State law requires that when a school budget is rejected by voters, it must be turned over to the municipal government, which can either cut it or leave it unchanged.

Although Mountainside residents send their high school students to Governor Livingston High School in Berkeley Heights, they pay tuition only and have no vote in the school budgets developed by the Berkeley Heights school board.

During Monday's meeting, which lasted several hours, the school board and Township Committee finally agreed to trim \$325,000 from the 1999-2000 budget, drawing applause from those in attendance.

Under the revised budget, \$150,000 earmarked to update air conditioning in the Governor Livingston High School auditorium and \$12,000 in professional fees associated with the updating were cut, according to Board Administrator William Van Tassel.

In addition, \$163,000 tapped for the school district's surplus fund, which has been set up to handle long-term projects and expenditures, was cut, he said.

As a result of the cut, township school taxes based on the average assessed \$295,000 home will rise by \$76, Mr. Van Tassel said. If voters had passed the original budget, school taxes would have increased to \$101.

The Township Committee passed a resolution accepting the changes Monday, and now the state must follow through with a pro forma review. The school board then plans to vote on and approve the revised budget during its regular meeting on Thursday, May 20.

The meeting was one of three public sessions the Township Committee has held since receiving the budget from the school district the week of April 20.

An informational meeting was held on May 3, during which school officials presented their budget to the Township Committee and the public. The meeting was also open to members of the public, who could ask questions and voice concerns.

David Cohen, Deputy Mayor for the Township of Berkeley Heights, explained that the first meeting was held for any public comment and "venting" that needed to be done following the school budget defeat.

He said that about "300 plus" people showed up at the meeting, presenting "well thought-out pros and cons. There were a lot of questions, but everything was very civil."

That was followed by a meeting last Thursday in which the public and the Township Committee presented ideas

about how to trim the school budget. Members of the Township Committee, who were assisted in their research by their financial adviser, focused on the school district's capital reserve account.

Mr. Cohen said the Township Committee asked school officials to try to cut between \$500,000 and \$1 million from their 1999-2000 budget.

"We asked them if they could make some changes in the capital reserve account," he said. "However, we don't want to be shortsighted and cut, and then have twice as big an increase the following year."

So, he said, the Township Committee asked school officials to take home what the committee and public had said, digest it and then decide what, if anything, it can do.

"It wasn't presented as an ultimatum," he noted.

Mr. Cohen said the Township Committee attacked the task of looking at the budget differently than most municipal groups traditionally have.

Each of the committee members decided to have the public become very involved. Berkeley Heights Mayor Vincent Crisafi, Jr. removed himself from the proceedings because he is seeking a teaching position within the district and currently serves as Assistant Wrestling Coach at Governor Livingston High School.

"We would be remiss if we just cut the budget," Mr. Cohen said. "Although it was defeated, because it comes to us doesn't mean that we should make a big slash. We'd rather not, if anything has to be cut, cut any programs that affect the students."

Ron Amorino, the Chief Financial Officer for the Township of Berkeley Heights, said the school budget accounts for more than 50 percent of the local taxes, and people are beginning to notice year after year of increases.

At the same time that school budgets increased, he said, local taxes rose last year after the municipality had continually dipped into its surplus without replenishing it. In addition, homes were reassessed last year, resulting in an increase in the average priced home from \$127,000 to \$295,000.

Mr. Cohen speculated, however, that the reason the budget was turned down had less to do with taxation than with residents just not understanding details of the school budget.

"We had some people say to us after Monday's meeting that it (the process of reviewing the budget) was like a true town meeting," Mr. Cohen said.

He observed that school district officials "explained the process, had professionals explain areas that people had questions with. After their explanation, it would have been more difficult for us to ask them (the school district) to cut any more than they did," he remarked.

Mr. Cohen said he was "very happy" with the outcome and that the Township Committee had wanted to come to a mutual agreement, which he felt had been reached.

Mr. Van Tassel, meanwhile, said, "We would have liked to do the project (updated air conditioning for the high school auditorium). We certainly understood that we had to make some decisions."

Town Considering Purchase of Device To Detect Lightning

By PAUL J. PEYTON

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD — The serious injury sustained by a high school baseball player in the Essex County community of West Orange from a sudden lightning strike has gotten Westfield Fourth Ward Councilwoman Janis Fried Weinstein thinking about the safety of athletes, young and old, who participate in competitive sports leagues in the town.

The Clifford High School (East Orange) center fielder was taken to Saint Barnabas Hospital Medical Center in Livingston after being critically injured by the lightning strike last month.

At last week's Town Council conference meeting, Councilwoman Weinstein recommended that the town consider the purchase of a lightning warning system. When activated, the system sends a loud alarm, which gives people between 10 and 15 minutes warning of possible lightning strikes in the immediate area.

Mrs. Weinstein said the incident in West Orange occurred during a light drizzle that did not cause officials to postpone the game.

"I think it is important that we think about what we can do (regarding lightning strikes in parks)," she said.

Mrs. Weinstein, a member of the Westfield Recreation Commission for which she chairs the Parks and Fields Committee, presented her recommendation to the Commission. Commission members felt the concept had merit.

Councilwoman Weinstein presented the council with information regarding a Lightning Prediction System manufactured by Florida-based Thor Guard, Inc.

The system, which costs around \$5,000, is equipped with a sensor that monitors energy in the air as far away as 15 miles, and evaluates the potential for lightning within an area of approximately two miles in radius. When lightning is detected, an air horn is activated.

The range for the warning system, under normal weather conditions, is approximately 700 yards.

"I think the need is there with the numbers of kids we have out on the fields," Councilwoman Weinstein noted.

She suggested that by placing the device at the Conservation Center on Lamberts Mill Road, the system would cover Memorial Field, Houlihan Field and Tamaques Park.

Town Administrator Edward A.

Gottko said he believes the warning system, if placed at the Center, would not reach Houlihan.

First Ward Councilman Gregory S. McDermott suggested that the device should be located at Tamaques Park, the largest and most active of Westfield's parks.

Councilwoman Weinstein noted that a representative from the manufacturer, which has an office in Belleville, could come to the town and evaluate the distance the warning system would reach.

Thor Guard's system is in use at a number of golf courses in New Jersey. It is also used by the Baltimore Ravens of the NFL (National Football League) and Professional Baseball's Cincinnati Reds.

According to information released from the manufacturer, when the danger of a lightning strike is gone, an "all-clear" signal activates, thus enabling activities to resume.

Second Ward Councilman Matthew P. Albano, favoring the purchase of the device, said the proposal represents one of those circumstances when the council "should be proactive rather than reactive."

Public Hearing Set On Comcast Franchise With Mountainside

By KIMBERLY A. BROADWELL

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

MOUNTAINSIDE - The public hearing for the renewal of Comcast's franchise in Mountainside will be held Tuesday, May 18, at 8 p.m. at Borough Hall. The time and date of the hearing was set during Tuesday's agenda setting meeting of the Mountainside Council.

The current franchise agreement with the cable company has been in effect for 10 years and expires in October 1999.

In March, representatives from the local cable company were available during the council meeting to answer questions that Mountainside citizens had about upcoming negotiations.

Robert Smith, of Fanwood represented the company as the Area Director of Public and Government Relations and Buck Dopp of Mountainside, Comcast's Vice President and General Manager, was attended the meeting.

Area residents inquired about the possibility of more Mountainside air time on the access channels, and if the company could somehow include Berkeley Heights broadcasts because Mountainside high school students attend Governor

Livingston High School.

At the time of the March meeting, both Comcast executives stated that under the current franchise agreement, Fanwood and Mountainside were sharing an access channel, but that new engineering was currently being looked into to give both borough's more air time.

Also, the Comcast representatives noted that the current cluster of community programming channels available to Borough residents included Mountainside, Scotch Plains, Fanwood and Westfield, and that Berkeley Heights was not presently included in that cluster.

Both executives also stated that changing the cluster or adding to it was something that was already being looked into at the request of council members.

In other business, council gave Acting Administrator, James J. Debbie, Jr. authorization to co-sign checks and drafts during his six-month appointment as Borough Administrator. Mr. Debbie, who also serves the Borough as the Chief of Police, is filling in for Gregory Bonin who left the municipality for another position.

According to council members, the Borough will review the appointment six months from now, in October, to determine whether the appointment should become permanent.

In other business, Mayor Robert F. Vigianni announced that Senior Citizen Coordinator Lisa Cassidy is currently conducting a senior citizens survey to learn more about the needs of Mountainside seniors.

According to the Mayor, Ms. Cassidy is trying to find out what the transportation and daily living needs are of area seniors. Surveys can be found at the Mountainside Library and at the front desk of Borough Hall. Surveys must be returned by Tuesday, June 15.

Local Man Is Charged With DWI After Crash

By SUZETTE F. STALKER

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD — A 43-year-old Westfield resident was charged with driving while intoxicated following an accident Friday night in which his 1989 Isuzu Sport Utility Vehicle struck a tree on Mountain Avenue, authorities confirmed.

Detective Sergeant John M. Parizeau of the Westfield Police Department said Gregory Costine, 43, was traveling north on Mountain when his vehicle veered to the right and struck the tree.

The accident was reported to police at 10:31 p.m., according to Sergeant Parizeau, who said Costine was traveling alone in his vehicle. It was unknown how fast he was traveling when the accident occurred.

The driver, who was unconscious, was transported by Westfield Rescue Squad volunteers to University Hospital in Newark, where he was in

stable condition after sustaining head and chest trauma, hospital spokesman Roger Ramsey said Tuesday.

Costine was also charged with failure to wear a seat belt, according to Sergeant Parizeau. The area where the accident occurred was temporarily closed to vehicular traffic while the crash was being investigated.

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