

The Westfield Leader

— Established 1890 —

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Can a Fix Be Found for Exploding School Costs & State Mandates?

April 19 marks the call for voting on the area public school budgets and to choose among those seeking seats on the boards. Between now and then, the school board members, PTOs and the superintendents will be hard at work promoting the budgets to the voters in hopes of approval at the polls.

In our region, about two-thirds of property taxes go to pay for the public schools. In the past several years, property taxes in New Jersey have risen sharply, particularly in this area. There appears to be no end in sight to the climb, nor do the state leaders have a plan to resolve matters. Worse yet, many of the state leaders do not even have an inclination to address this problem. This is of vast concern for homeowners, for legislators seeking re-election and for the citizenry-at-large.

Ten years ago (1995), the public school budget for Westfield was \$47 million of which \$41.5 million was paid for by property taxes. The enrollment then was 4,692 fulltime students plus 111 "others."

Ten years ago (1995), the public school budget for Scotch Plains-Fanwood was \$39.7 million of which \$34.6 million was paid for by property taxes. The enrollment then was 3,996 fulltime students plus 82 "others."

Today (2005), the Westfield Public School system requests a budget of \$77 million of which \$66 million is to be paid for by property taxes. The enrollment today is reported to be 5,154 fulltime students plus 926 "others."

Similarly (2005), the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Public School system is requesting a budget of \$67 million of which \$58.7 million is to be paid for by property taxes. The enrollment today is reported to be 4,500 fulltime students plus 701 "others."

In the 10-year span, the Westfield school budget has increased from \$47 million to \$77 million (64 percent). The fulltime enrollment has risen 10 percent, but there has been an explosion in the size of students classified as "others" (from 111 to 926). Counting fulltime plus "others," enrollment has risen 26.6 percent.

In the 10-year span, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood budget has increased from \$39.7 million to \$67 million (69 percent). The fulltime enrollment has risen 12.6 percent, but there has been an explosion in the size classified as "others" (from 87 to 701). Counting fulltime plus "others," enrollment has risen 27.5 percent.

We're not really sure who/what these "others" are, but they seem to play a large role in the numbers.

Dr. William Foley, Superintendent of Westfield Schools, told this newspaper that Special Education costs mandated by the state now amount to \$15 million this year in Westfield. Four-million dollars of aid is expected from the state to pay for this mandate. Similar complaints from other schools systems in the area have been heard.

In our opinion, the size of the increase in school expenditures cannot be fully explained by the increase in reported enrollment and general inflation alone. Other services and amenities must be in the programs - more teachers, gifted and special programs and smaller class sizes - and the "others?"

The state of New Jersey has not been a major factor in providing funds to our schools, such as the state does for Elizabeth, which accounts for 80 percent of their funding. We remain largely on our own.

So it seems that because we are on our own, we should do our utmost to avoid the state and their unfunded mandates. The state seems only able to penalize our success and they seem completely unable to correct the failures of others such as Newark, Plainfield, Camden, Paterson and Elizabeth.

It's a very complicated subject and we appreciate the time given to us last week by Dr. Foley, Westfield School Board President Anne Riegel and Vice President Ginny Leiz. They answered all the questions asked, but we hardly knew enough to know what to ask.

We gathered that Dr. Foley believes that the property tax increases cannot continue forever. Sooner or later there's going to be a bust. Dr. Foley noted that past Governor James McGreevey even left us with a time bomb - one that will explode next year with school budgets.

It goes like this: Schools were mandated to spend down their cash reserves (surplus) this year and last to give the appearance that property taxes are coming under control in time for this year's governor and legislator races. But next year, the bomb explodes after they all are safely elected. There will be no cash reserves and the artificially disguised costs this year will return with a vengeance.

We sense someone must have some good ideas of how to deal with this situation - Dr. Foley might be one such person. We'd like to see a written action plan by someone who knows and supported by those who care.

Letters to the Editor

President Is Trying to Do Right Thing: Fix Social Security, Not Pass The Buck.

In response to Travis Hudelson's letter regarding Social Security, I again plead for people to understand and research the facts.

While I disagree with his comments on our current federal deficit, his comments only prove my original assertion that much is misunderstood about Social Security and the "trust fund."

Any suggestion that a Social Security funding problem is "40-plus years away" is in disagreement with many highly regarded economists and think tanks of both the liberal and conservative persuasion. Two facts are undeniable: Social Security is a pay-as-you-go system; and outflows will exceed inflow within about 12 years.

Yes, the bonds in the trust fund do carry the full faith and credit of the U.S. government. However, without changes to Social Security, we will need to begin to pay down that debt in 2017.

The only way to do that is to increase taxes or decrease government services. It's no more difficult than balancing your checkbook - If your expenses exceed your income, you end up in debt. The current plan to use the trust fund to pay benefits after 2017 is similar to using your credit card to pay your mortgage.

Mr. Hudelson describes a situation where America's creditors are no longer willing to purchase our debt as a reason not to fix Social Security now. First, that is certainly not our current situation, as reflected by U.S. Treasury bonds continuing status in the capital markets as the

"risk-free" investment.

There is no risk that the U.S. government will be unable to pay its bills "today and tomorrow." Second, how can he be comfortable with the value of bonds in the Social Security trust fund being able to fund future benefits, when he seems to doubt America's ongoing ability to issue debt?

Based on his assertion, we should question the value of the bonds in the trust fund, not be relying on them to be able to pay future benefits. Apparently Mr. Hudelson likes to have things both ways. If anything, fixing Social Security now alleviates the problems that Mr. Hudelson sees.

The "senior executive and low-income workers" analogy is completely flawed. Remember that in the real world, the "senior executives" (i.e. high wage earners) pay nearly all of the taxes, while the "low-wage workers" pay very little in taxes and are net consumers of government benefits. Tax rate cuts have repeatedly led to growth in the economy and increased tax revenues.

Based on Mr. Hudelson's depiction of our country as a business leaves me very glad that he's not our CEO. Apparently he thinks nothing of promising workers a retirement package, and then passing the buck, or renegeing on that promise if things get too tough. President Bush is trying to do the right thing - fix Social Security now, not pass the buck.

Rich Johnston
Westfield

Bicycle Race in Westfield Disrupts Neighborhoods for Area Residents

I was extremely upset to learn that the Downtown Westfield Corporation was a party to the second annual Westfield Classic Criterium bicycle race.

It is obvious that they do not live in the neighborhood where the race is held. First of all, the race begins at 7:30 a.m. Since we begin our day in my household at 4:45 a.m. weekdays, we value our sleep on weekends.

The noise that the race brings begins long before 7:30 a.m. and renders sleep impossible. Last year, I had to repeatedly ask people, their dogs and their bicycles to move off of my lawn. Some of them were rude when asked to move. By the end of the race, there were water bottles, papers and tissues that I had to clean from my property. My mother, who is 80 years of age and handicapped, had difficulty

getting out of our driveway with her car and greater difficulty getting back home.

The notice that the residents received indicates that the race is being sponsored by the "Cranford Bike Team/Carmichael Training Systems." Why isn't it being held in Cranford? Were they smart enough not to allow the race in their town? Why are we allowing our town to promote "Carmichael Training Systems?" - it is not a local business. I do not live in Westfield to have large numbers of strangers walking about my neighborhood and sitting on my lawn. Now that the race is on a Saturday instead of Sunday, my household will need to do errands and will have to leave and come back repeatedly. Is this what you want where you live?

Janice Karlen
Westfield

Minnesota Tragedy Shows How Rap Music Can Influence Kids

In regards to the nightmarish story in Minnesota this past week, please let this alert us as parents on how rap music is influencing many of our children. Last Monday, 16-year-old Jeff Weise went on a rampage shooting to death his grandfather and grandfathers companion, then invading his Minnesota school with two pistols and a shot gun, and shooting nine people, killing seven and injuring two before shooting himself to death.

Music has influenced children for centuries. It influences their dress, their attitude, and respect. Growing up, you could always tell by the way students dressed and spoke the type of music they enjoyed. If you wore a tee shirt and ripped jeans, you were into Led Zeppelin, or the Stones. If you were a real rocker, you had a faded denim jacket with Leon Russell Live across the back. If your hair was to your shoulders, and work boots were the orthotics of choice. Top 40 listeners, had bell bottoms, button down shirts, converse colored sneakers, and styled hair covering the ear. R & B listeners were smooth dressers, with silky shirts, and polyester pants, and Sunday shoes. The listened to Marvin Gay and Al Green.

I was totally confused because I liked all music. My clothing choices were all over the board. Today, almost all kids look and dress the same. The explicit music influence in this country is over-

whelming. Some hard rock and rap music contain negative advice to our children. They refer to negatively to the young women of our society. They sing about violence, and killing. Not only has it influenced our youth, it has influenced the parents, the media, and corporate America.

The generation gap has defiantly narrowed. Children our wearing what they want, saying what they want, watching on cable what they want, and listening to everything they want.

Everybody has a right to listen to what makes them happy, until it affects other people in a negative way. The horrors of Columbine and Red Lake can't continue. Hard rock has always pushed the envelope in regards to music content. Rap music evolved from hip hop, a fast tempo poetry style of music. It was a way for the singer to express what his feelings were. When The Sugarhill gang broke out with "Rappers Delight" in 1979, it was a delight. But somewhere in the last several years, the words "hip hop" has been exchanged for explicit demeaning words.

Our children are sponges, they absorb what they hear, and see. We have babies killing babies across America. This is a frightening fact.

"Look at me, I've been Shattered."
Sam Vassallo
Westfield

There Are More Important Issues Than Iraq War And Social Security

I've been reading with great hilarity the recent "letters to the editor" regarding the President and how it prompted the deployment of so many protesters - especially as it came around the same time so many New Jersey Democrats were being arrested for improprieties.

It's ridiculous to be so concerned about the war and Social Security and not care about issues a little closer to home: property tax reform, the reasons Richard Codey came as Governor yet doesn't get his party's endorsement now, a Governor that hired his inexperienced "boyfriend" for arguably the most important security job created in this state in the last 50 years, (inexperienced in security not in being a "boyfriend"). I can say this because a New Jersey politics "circles the bowl." I haven't read about any brutal police/protestor confrontations in Trenton recently.

So for all those protestors (read: liberal Democrat) who say the war has dragged on:

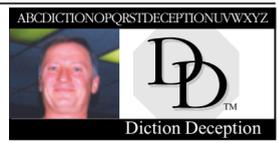
It took less time to take Iraq than it took Janet Reno to take the Branche Davidian compound. That was a 51-day operation.

They've been looking for evidence of chemical weapons in Iraq for less time than it took Hillary Clinton to find the Rose Law Firm billing records.

It took the Marines less time to destroy the Medina Republican Guard than it took Ted Kennedy to call the police about Chappaquiddick.

It took less time to take Iraq than it took to count the votes in Florida.

Nick Aloe
Scotch Plains



Below are four arcane words, each with four definitions - only one is correct. The others are made up. Are you sharp enough to discern this deception of diction?

If you can guess one correctly - good guess. If you get two - well-read individual. If you get three - word expert. If you get all four - You must have a lot of free time!

All words and correct definitions come from the board game Diction Deception.

Answers to last week's arcane words.

1. Capybara - A large, tailless, partially web-footed rodent of South America
2. Ticpolonga - An extremely venomous Indian snake
3. Runcation - A weeding
4. Gingili - Sesame seed or the oil from it

NULLIPARA

1. Useless; of little or no value
2. A woman who has not borne a child
3. A traitor; turncoat
4. Apathetic; disinterested

CLACHAN

1. A hamlet in the Highlands of Scotland
2. Solidified; hardened
3. A state of insensibility; numbness
4. Hanging in clusters, such as with grapes

STREPTITANT

1. Harsh; raspy
2. Oozing; seeping
3. Noisy, loud
4. Salty; saline

ERUCTATION

1. Shameful; corrupt
2. The act of belching
3. Swelling or state of being swollen
4. The act of stretching and yawning

Letters to the Editor

Visitor Considers WF Parking Policies As Entrapment, Surprise

Editor's Note: This letter was sent to Westfield Mayor Gregory McDermott, the clerk of the court and copied to Mr. Dan Bane, CEO of Trader Joe's.

Enclosed is payment of the fine for the above referenced citation. I am paying this under protest, and without admission of guilt simply because I believe it is more expeditious than to attempt to dispute the citation.

However, I wish to convey my disappointment and surprise at the practice of ticketing cars in Lot 8.

Clearly the Trader Joe's (TJ) in Westfield generates significant tax revenue and benefit to Westfield. As the only Trader Joe's in the area licensed to sell wine and beer, consumers such as I from Manhattan and surrounding areas make monthly or even weekly pilgrimages to Westfield. While in the town, we also dine and shop and enjoy the many other venues Westfield has to offer. We happily bring revenue into Westfield.

Having recently relocated back to New York City from Santa Monica, Calif., my one regret is that there is still no Trader Joe's in Manhattan (and when one does finally appear, it is questionable whether alcohol will be sold). So I gladly drive to Westfield for my 'fix'. I am also on the board of a charity based in Scotch Plains and make a TJ stop whenever I'm in the neighborhood.

Yet it seems that the town chooses to punish consumers by a conscious practice designed to entrap drivers into parking in Lot 8, resulting in parking fines. These fines can hardly surpass the legitimate revenue generated by the store and its shoppers, and create tremendous ill will in the process.

When approaching from the street, there is no legible, noticeable signage to help drivers distinguish the Lot 8 driveway from the one leading to the Trader Joe's lot. While there are two small signs at the Lot 8 entrance, and others scattered around the lot, they are not clearly legible (especially in the rain). A large sign should be posted at the entrance to Lot 8 stating "Permit parking only Monday through Friday - no Trader Joe parking except on weekends" and Trader Joe's should post a large sign at their driveway indicating "Trader Joe Parking". Finally, a Permit Parking sign should be posted in front of every parking space in Lot 8.

I have parked in Lot 8 on weekdays several times over the past two years and never received a citation. The proximity of the lot to Trader Joe's and the lack of any wall or fence separating it from the Trader Joe's property further confuse the issue.

In the spirit of good community relations, I hope that you see fit to cash my fine check, dismiss the citation, and take positive steps to make the signage on lot 8 clear so that only intentional scofflaws will be ticketed.

Otherwise, once Trader Joe's does finally open a Manhattan store, Westfield will see its Trader Joe's attendance, and the resultant revenue slip away. And to Dan Bane, if you want investors in the Manhattan store, give me a call!

Douglas Denoff
Manhattan, NY

Letters Reprinted from March 30, 1995

Strategic Planning Needed to Keep Our Priorities for Schools in Focus

Considerable debate during this election has centered on the subject of change. It is important, however, to identify the kinds of change that are needed. Change simply for the sake of change is not the solution. Westfield is well recognized for its quality education and high level of achievement. We must not lose sight of this enviable position.

The Board of Education must look at new ways to continue these high quality programs in a more cost-effective manner. This is where the community needs leaders with experience and knowledge of the educational process to provide viable, equitable solutions.

Responsiveness to the citizens of the community should be a primary objective of each member on the board. We must listen carefully and recognize the entire community as our constituency. Open lines of communication between the schools and community are imperative for a better understanding of the issues.

Maintaining a balance between concerns of board members, parents, professionals and community is a chal-

lenge. Board members must be able to make difficult, and sometimes unpopular, decisions while addressing the needs of the children and responding to the needs and concerns of diverse community groups. Academic achievement is central to this vision, but instructional programs cannot be sustained without maintenance and upgrades of our facilities, commitment to our goals, evaluation of the curriculum and development of the professional staff.

In order for us to move forward, strategic planning is critical and must involve continuous re-evaluation to keep our priorities in focus. To be effective, planning and evaluation must be ongoing and responsive to changing conditions within the educational system, the community and the state. Long-range plans should be consistent with student needs and community expectations.

My highest priorities remain focused: a sound education for every child and an appropriate environment for learning. I will continue to work to identify and address future needs and ensure the provisions for continued excellence in education.

Darielle Walsh
School Board Incumbent
Westfield

People, Including Teachers, Have Concerns Over the Strategic Plan

I bring this letter from the Scotch Plains Fanwood Education Association signed by Mrs. Barbara McGuane, its President, dated March 6, to your attention at this time, as it demonstrated the wide concern about continuing on the course of change identified in the board's five-year Strategic Plan. I quote as follows:

"Dear Dr. Sheldon: Please accept this letter as a revision of our letter dated March 6 in light of the Board of Education's timelines. In view of the controversial nature of the Strategic Plan, the Scotch Plains - Fanwood Education Association strongly encourages the Board of Education to consider whether the Strategic Plan should, in fact, con-

tinue to be the best method for long-range planning in the Scotch Plains-Fanwood school district. We urge the members of the Board of Education not to approve any new goals for implementation prior to review of the merits of the Strategic Plan as a planning model."

This request of the Board of Education by the teachers professional association clearly shows that the concern over the Strategic Plan is not limited to a small group of disgruntled citizens as believed by the board. There by misdirecting the board's decisions in this matter.

Albert J. Syvertsen
Board Member and Candidate
Scotch Plains

School Bd. Has To Get Financial Act Together

The school board of Westfield is wasting taxpayers' money. The 1994-1995 budget was rejected by the voters. Last year, Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Mark C. Smith, Dr. Robert C. Rader, the board Secretary, and school board members held a meeting with the Town Council and the Mayor. The school board explained that if the budget they proposed was not passed, there would be no money for repairs or improvements to existing school buildings. The budget did get trimmed by \$765,000. But look around!

There have been improvements made to Wilson School (gutters, roof and outside lighting), Franklin School (new gutters and roof repairs), Westfield High School (new doors) and Tamaques School (new blacktop). Where has the money for these repairs and improvements come from? Better yet, what could have the extra \$765,000 gone for?

A balanced budget is always a difficult thing to achieve, but everyone, not just the taxpayers, has to give up a little.

Examples: Eliminating exorbitant salary increases for teachers just because they have received a doctorate degree. This degree doesn't automatically make them a better teacher.

All employees of the school district should be paying for one half of their health insurance benefits, as is the standard in professional corporations today. Eliminating longevity pay. Not to say that we don't appreciate what the administrators, teachers and others do for the children of Westfield, but considering the salaries they already receive, this is a perk we can do without.

It cost the school board around \$200,000 in preparation expenses to propose the latest bond issue which was rejected by the taxpayers. Surely this waste could have been eliminated by listening to the taxpayers in the first place and by formulating alternative plans.

The 1985 bond issue should be now paid in full. If so, every household's property tax should be decreased by the amount they were assessed to pay for this bond. In conclusion, there is no question that the school board has built up a sizable reserve from 1985 to 1994. We should request a state audit of our district. Changes must be made and new board members elected.

Michael Sworen
Westfield