

Letters to the Editor

These Digital Gangsters Over Their Current Version Of Westfield History

It was delightful to finally get away to the beach with my family a few weeks back, bob up and down with the waves, and get put to sleep by the ocean breeze. Did you know those waves just keep coming, one after another? They never stop.

While relaxing on the beach, I enjoy catching up on our local news. When I got to the editorial page of the August 15th edition of the *Westfield Leader*, I could not be less surprised to see Westfield 20/20 opined as "Disingenuous" while making the local news again, this time in connection with the gun violence vigil it organized after the El Paso and Dayton shootings. Between watching the seagulls in front of me crow over a piece of bread and reading the editorial board's contribution, I became reminded of the public comment portion of the January 24th, 2017 Westfield town council meeting.

I have always found Westfield politics and these town council meetings to be cordial and have a high level of decorum. However, this was Westfield circa DJT + four days. At that meeting, Westfield 20/20 co-founder Marci Bandelli and then citizen Shelley Brindle lambasted then Mayor Skibitsky and the council. For 10 uncomfortable minutes the mayor and council sat through a disrespectful and dramatic scene orchestrated by "two women ask(ing) about the Downtown Task Force and what it has been doing to fill vacancies in the downtown." (*Westfield Leader*, January 26, 2017, page one).

"Are we coming up with any plans to work on this?" resident Marci Bandelli asked. "I'm devastated with Panera closing," she said. Shelley Brindle said including Lord & Taylor seems "disproportionate" to the smaller shops in the downtown. "It seems this whole process...there is a lack of transparency," Ms. Brindle said.

The attack went on and on. In my personal experience living in or serving Westfield, I had never heard, read, or seen, (nor am I associated with), anyone being so disrespectful to our fellow neighbors, never mind to those serving our community through public office.

I cannot stress enough how hard it is to serve the public. I am confident Mayor Brindle would agree with this statement as the truth, as fact. In a term when Westfield went backwards on one-seat ride to New York City, and we continue to see long-time merchants in our downtown needing to move or close, in a year when PSE&G has tried to divide the southern part of our town with high-voltage power lines, taxes went up for almost half of the town, and a big employer announced plans to move their employees from our downtown to another, during a month when a non-disparagement agreement was required to part ways with our DWC executive director of 18 years, followed by the Rialto closing, all the while Lord & Taylor saga continues, Mayor Brindle still deserves our support while she serves her elected term. I am grateful for our mayor's service.

Not all of this is Mayor Brindle's fault - most of these issues are exogenous factors, just like the matters for which Ms. Brindle attacked her predecessor who had recently guided our town out of the Great Recession. Exogenous shocks to a local economy can be fixed, yet it takes time. Mayor Skibitsky was unable to execute on all of the ideas and recommendations put forward by his Downtown Task Force by the end of his term. Mayor Brindle was elected for four years to come up with a solution of her own that will very much look like the non-partisan Initial Report of Research and Recommendations published April 14 of 2017 by the Mayor's Downtown Task Force. To that end I have no issue with our current mayor. Shelley Brindle is my mayor for as long as she serves the office. Her best effort for making use of the DTF's research and recommendations, while complying with the New Jersey state laws that mandates our master plan be reviewed and revisions be made every 10 years, will be considered when her own term expires.

Maybe if Mayor Skibitsky had his meetings streamed live on Facebook

Bottled Water Controversy in Newark

A U.S. district judge last week ruled she will not order the City of Newark to provide bottled water to residents who are pregnant or have children age six or under in the eastern part of the city.

For more than two and a half years, Newark's drinking water has contained levels of lead that are among the highest of any city in the nation. Citizen groups had asked the court to take action, presenting evidence that Newark's response to the citywide public health crisis has been inadequate and leaves many residents unprotected.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency instructed the city to provide bottled water "as soon as possible" to some residents served by lead pipes, due to high levels of lead in the water. But

that January 2017 evening would have been more cordial, but maybe not. If you don't already know about Westfield 20/20, some members (but, definitely not all) are making it very difficult for anyone to join the local conversation in public, online, or with inclusive social and public opportunities. Neighbors serving our town in public office, yet supporting an opposing point of view, find themselves cropped out of photos intended for distribution to local media outlets and heckled in the public forum, even at council meetings. Merchants supporting the efforts of the wrong public servant get a visit, a scolding, then a picture together on social media to remind everyone that everything is just fine here, there is nothing to see. Those online yet not subscribed to the preferred boutique identity or caught disagreeing with these digital gangsters over their current version of history are publicly charred. Dracarys! Volunteers left out of an amazing neighborhood or school experience because they said something wrong out loud. CSuites receiving calls from one neighbor demanding another neighbor be fired from their job because they don't sit quietly and go along with all this nonsense. I could go on. Just like those waves they keep coming and coming, one after the other.

I find it ironic that two-and-a-half years later *The Leader* is opining about a vigil recently organized by Westfield 20/20, where Marci Bandelli and now Mayor Brindle were still at it, this time for drawing attention to their selective outrage under the disguise invitation to community thought and prayer, and from behind the brand name of our town. They just never stop, these two. Marci and Westfield 20/20 provoking matters with Mayor Brindle just sitting there watching, letting it all happen like that.

By appropriating the brand name Westfield for their own political purposes, it's hard to miss these activists when searching for a merchant in town, a local realtor, or even the Westfield Class of 2020. I mean, they'd be foolish to not rebrand as "Trump 20/20" considering the central argument that organized their existence and the rights protecting their activities are not used to promote Westfield in a positive way, at all. When I was at the PSE&G forum at Edison School this past spring, Councilwomen Joann Neylan and Dawn Mackey were working up front together, taking the arrows from the public, and answering questions, while PSE&G stonewalled our neighbors. To be fair Mayor Brindle was also present in the back of the room, stationed at "trees." Marci Bandelli and her activists however were nowhere to be found. At the time of this letter, and with the Rialto story tugging at the heart of our brand, Mayor Brindle is again on defense and Westfield 20/20 remains quiet and safely sheltered behind Westfield branding.

As their identity exists now, Westfield 20/20 muddies our town's brand and is a distraction for Mayor Brindle while serving her term in office. At this moment, our Westfield brand is fragile. We don't need all this negative noise their most vocal members are making right now, and certainly not for another year. What happens after 2020, do we get our brand name back, or do we need to sit through this until 2024? Why hijack all of Westfield to a single date in 2020? If their members truly cared for the issues of our town, and wanted to do good for our brand, if they wanted to be inclusive and be a genuinely positive force for all the neighbors and merchants hustling to make our hometown beautiful, wouldn't they want to be with Westfield every day?

The Leader had it correct in the August 15 edition, Westfield 20/20, and what they offer to the issues specific to Westfield, is indeed "disingenuous." You will find evidence to support *The Leader's* editorial board claim, and how disingenuous Westfield 20/20 is, at the next town council meeting on September 3, 2019 when Marci Bandelli does not show up to ask Mayor Brindle what she "has been doing to fill vacancies in the downtown."

Edward J. Stellingwerf
Westfield

Union Leaders Respond After Kean University President Quits

Kean Federation of Teachers President James Castiglione, AFT New Jersey President Donna M. Chiera and American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten issued the following statements calling for an open, inclusive national search for next Kean University president after Dawood Farahi resigned:

AFTNJ's Chiera said, "Dawood Farahi's announced retirement presents us with the question of how we should move forward in the best interests of the students of New Jersey. Are we going to forge a new collaborative working relationship by including direct union representation in the selection of the next president? While we have had many differences with management at Kean over the years, this is an opportunity to listen to all voices and rebuild the Kean community with a focus on academics and student success."

The KFT's Castiglione said, "The

KFT looks forward to partnering with all stakeholders, including trustees, faculty, students, staff and community, in a comprehensive, open, national search for the next president of Kean University. With the university at a critical crossroads, it is imperative the next president have a proven track record of respectful, collaborative and inclusive higher education leadership."

The AFT's Weingarten said, "For years, we have organized to expose Dawood Farahi's incompetence and cronyism that has hurt Kean's vital mission and reputation, as well as its students and faculty. Finally, with Farahi's exit, the Kean community can begin to heal and realize their school's potential as the premier New Jersey institution it is destined to be. The path to rehabilitation is long, but it begins with a legitimate search process for a new leader so Kean can be the economic and educational engine that Union County needs."

Editorial Commentary

DWCs Poor Transparency In Hiring of Interim Director

Last Monday, the Downtown Westfield Corporation (DWC) meeting included a lengthy executive session. The DWC had announced just a week earlier that the board and long-time executive director Sherry Cronin had agreed to "mutually separate" after 18 years.

We had a reporter at the August 26 meeting, although we knew there was an executive session, as the notice said, "official action may be taken at this meeting." Our reporter, Dominic Lagano, was asked to leave after the resolution to enter into executive session was passed by the DWC board. When he asked if he could come back later, he was told "no" and "see you on September 9," a reference to the board's next meeting.

Our reporter inquired with Town Administrator Jim Gildea about the agenda, and one was forwarded to him the next day, August 27, listing the executive session as 7:40 p.m. The board was to return to open session at 8:30 p.m., followed by a "potential board vote on next steps" at 8:35 p.m.

In the past our reporter has received agendas in advance of meetings.

So, given what our reporter was told, we were surprised on Thursday when we received a DWC press release in which DWC Chair Patricia Hanigan announced the hiring of Kathleen Miller Prunty as the interim DWC executive director. Her tenure in the position is expected to be for six months. In our view, Ms. Prunty was a good choice, and it hopefully shows a concerted effort by the DWC to find a pool of qualified candidates from which to select the next director.

These are challenging times for Westfield, with the sudden closing of the Rialto Theatre, the centerpiece of downtown Westfield for the past 97 years, and the likelihood that Lord &

Taylor, the town's largest retailer, not to mention taxpayer, could be the next one to close in the next few years. The retail giant was sold by its parent company, Canada-based Hudson Bay Company, for \$75 million to Le Tote, Inc., an online fashion rental subscription service. Le Tote "will also continue to own the real estate and leases associated with the remaining 38 Lord & Taylor stores," according to a report by CNN Business.

The Westfield store, located at 601-613 North Avenue, is owned by Trumbull, Conn.-based LT Westfield LLC. Taxes on the 5.42-acre property are \$499,444, according to tax records. Reportedly, Le Tote "has agreed to pay \$58 million in annual rent on the Lord & Taylor stores that are leased for 'at least' the next three years," according to news reports.

The above mentioned properties are critical to Westfield. We hope these properties are not going to be housing developments in the years ahead.

So while we wish Ms. Prunty the best in her new role, we call for more transparency from the DWC board in how they run their meetings and their overall decision making.

The DWC is funded by an annual \$400,000-plus budget funded through a tax on downtown properties that are in the Special Improvement District (SID) that was created in 1996 by the Westfield mayor and town council. It is not free, as some may think. The tax is incorporated into the leases of downtown businesses that make Westfield an expensive place to do business and turn a profit.

We encourage the downtown business community to attend DWC meetings and ask questions. After all, they are paying for the SID and should have a say on the future direction of the DWC.

Rich Bodmer Seeks, 'Save the Rialto'

As I came down the stairs into my kitchen, my mom asked me "where you going and what are you dressed up for?" As I could feel the blood rushing to my face I said "downtown to the movies." Before I could be discovered I went out the back door and jumped on to my bike. What I didn't reveal to my mom as I was pedaling away was I was going on my first date since we had moved into the town.

As I arrived downtown I met my date and we headed into the Rialto. After tickets were paid for it was off to the snack bar. My order was a bag of popcorn to share along with some drinks. Popcorn is the perfect snack for a first date. You see, in the mind of a 14-year-old boy you have to plan the perfect first date. A boy at this age will spend many hours planning this very important moment in his life. It is the beginning of manhood. Popcorn is a major component in a strategic plan. The idea is that during the movie you happen to brush hands as you both reach for some popcorn. Based off of her reaction you would know whether you could try and hold her hand as you were leaving the Rialto. This very scientific plan has been perfected throughout time. Besides that Kevin's much older brother Tommy who was 16 told me.

When I got home that night my mom and dad were in the living room watching TV. My mom asked how I liked the movie? Before I could even answer my father said, "Your mom really wants to know, how was your date?" You see neither of them were ever concerned about where I was. Because they knew if I was on my bike I was going somewhere in town. They never had to be concerned the entire time I was growing up in Westfield. The Rialto has just closed. Yes, it

might not have been a state-of-the-art theater, but was one of the most valuable businesses in Westfield. The Rialto was a destination business, meaning people from outside of Westfield and town went there for a reason. No one from another town is coming to Westfield just for a coffee. In most cases, a night at the Rialto would be a feeder system to the surrounding businesses. Diner, shopping, ice cream or a cup of coffee before or after seeing a movie is what we are losing. In other words the Rialto brings business to our downtown. But more importantly it is a part of your children's youth that has been taken away.

Raising children with all of the craziness that we see in the news makes a vibrant downtown an important tool in raising your children. Remember. Now the Rialto brings the number to 22. Westfield now has 22 vacant store fronts. I am running for town council and I have the business background to help the present administration solve this dangerous problem.

Rich Bodmer Candidate
Westfield Ward 2 Council

Tina Simitz Seeks Reelection To The Garwood BOE

I am writing to express my reasons for running for re-election for the Garwood Board of Education. When I was elected by write-in vote in 2016, as a mother of three school-aged children, I was frustrated by the lack of communication between the school and parents. With 25 years of marketing experience, I know that communication is key to the success of any endeavor.

In my first term, as chair of the Education/PR Committee, and now as vice-president, I worked to open the lines of communication between Lincoln School and parents. This included a "Kindergarten Tea" presentation for families whose children were entering school for the first time

to set expectations of themselves, their children, and the administration. Along with Dr. Quigley, we also initiated a Middle School orientation for children entering the 5th grade, a student's first real step toward independence. Last, I successfully championed the execution of the Facebook page, so that the Garwood community can stay informed of current school events.

If re-elected, I pledge to continue this work and ensure accountability and openness of administration in providing our children the best education possible. Please support me on Tuesday, November 5 by voting Column 6.

Tina Simitz
Vice-President, Garwood BOE



Tina Simitz

Westfield Ward 3 Councilman LoGripo Seeks Reelection

I hope everyone had a relaxing Labor Day weekend and a great summer. As we enter the homestretch of election season, I want to thank the good people of Westfield for being so involved in our community. This is the only place I could have ever imagined raising my family, and the foundation of our town is the amazing, welcoming and warm people who live here.

This has never been about politics for me. I love serving on the town council and doing my part to help move Westfield forward. That is why I will always work with Democrats, Republicans and Independents alike

to do what is best for our community. I believe in public service with a philosophy rooted in honest government, transparent operation and complete accessibility to our residents. That perspective has helped me to work with both parties to maintain a fiscally responsible agenda, while continuing to deliver high-quality government services.

I look forward to working to earn the support of Ward 3 residents again this fall, and if I haven't knocked on your door yet, I promise to make it there in the coming weeks.

Westfield Councilman Mark LoGripo

Revelation Creative to Host 2nd Annual Networking Event

WESTFIELD, NJ — On September 18, Revelation Creative is hosting its 2nd Annual Business Back-to-School, an educational and philanthropic networking event designed for inventors, entrepreneurs, executives, aspiring leaders, and those committed to the cause of supporting the success of business in New Jersey. The event will take place at Ferraro's, 14 Elm St., Westfield, NJ 07090, from 5:30 to 8:30 p.m. Business Back-to-School: Tips, Tricks, and Tools to Get Your Company Ahead of the Curve will feature a keynote presentation by Susan Ascher, president and CEO of The Ascher Group, of Short Hills.

Passed hors d'oeuvres will be served along with plated dinner during the presentation portion of the evening. Dinner and dessert are included in the price of admission, as well as access to a top-shelf open bar. The event includes a silent auction with fabulous prizes to be won like a one-year membership to the Park Avenue Club, a round of golf for four at one of New Jersey's top courses, and a corporate headshot session with

the official BBTS event photographer. Proceeds from the event will benefit Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) of Union County (www.casaofunioncounty.org), which recruits, trains, supervises, and supports community volunteers to advocate for abused, neglected, and abandoned children placed in foster homes or residential facilities.

Sponsors for this event include Investors Bank, Mazars USA LLP, Santarlas Law, and the New Jersey Association of Women Business Owners (NJAWBO).

Sponsorship opportunities are still available. Those interested in becoming a sponsor to support this worthy cause are encouraged to contact info@revelationcreative.com for information about the promotional packages available.

To register for the event, go to www.bit.ly/RCBBTS2019. Seating is limited.

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Susan Ascher

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