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FIFTY CENTS



GRIDLOCK ALERT...A car accident on Route 22 at the Mountainside/Westfield border blocked morning rush hour traffic on May 8. The patient was transported to Overlook Hospital in Summit.

Postal Service Implements New 800 Telephone Inquiry System

By DEBORAH MADISON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

The U.S. Postal Service has implemented a new customer service telephone inquiry department to answer all incoming telephone calls made by customers to local post offices. When customers call the old telephone number for their local post office, they will hear a recording announcing the new 800-customer service number. When customers call directory assistance, requesting the telephone number for a local post office, they will also be given the new, toll-free customer service number, 800-ASK-USPS (800-275-8777).

The new system has been implemented in some regions of New Jersey and will be gradually implemented throughout New Jersey and the entire Eastern region in the near future, said Spokesperson for the Postal Service, Carl Walton.

The new system was adopted in Westfield, Scotch Plains, Fanwood and Mountainside earlier this month. The new call center will provide customers with information about most commonly asked questions including: Zip codes, mailing rates, hours of operation, product and service information, change of address and other typical issues.

The press release stated that many customers used to get busy signals or their calls did not go through when calling a local post office because of the volume of calls received. Mr. Walton reported that many more calls have been getting through to the new call center than were previously received by local offices, an indication that the system was working as planned.

Customers preferring to call their local post office directly will be given the direct number, by the customer service representative, when inquiries require information specific to a local office, which cannot be answered by the customer service center.

Each local post office that has been transferred over to the new system has a new local telephone number.

Scotch Plains Postmaster, Jim McDade said in the press release that 80 percent of all calls to a local post office sought information on such topics as zip codes, post office hours and locations and mailing rates.

"The U.S. Postal Service is making it easier for customers to get information and to resolve service issues by telephone," said Mr. McDade.

"Establishing a telephone call center makes it easier for our customers to get prompt, accurate information about the postal service and give us more time to resolve local service-related issues," he said.

Scotch Plains Teens Admit to Assault Of 13-Year-Old Girl

By LAUREN S. PASS
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

On Monday, two Scotch Plains teenagers stood before Superior Court Judge John Malone and pled guilty as adults to aggravated sexual assault, admitting they took part in the violent attack on a 13-year-old female near Park Middle School in Scotch Plains on January 2.

According to Assistant Prosecutor Casey Woodruff, 17-year-old Mark Russell and 16-year-old Jesus Gonzalez waived out of juvenile court after the Prosecutor's Office filed motions to have them treated as adults for prosecution purposes, due to the nature of the crime, as was noted in a press statement.

Both boys admitted to forcing the victim to perform oral sex, and to restraining the girl while others molested her. Gonzalez also admitted to a count of sexual assault because he followed the girl inside the school after the group attack and forced her to perform oral sex.

Manuel Batista and Bryan Soriano, both 16 years old at the time of the

offense, have pled guilty to first-degree aggravated sexual assault, which will be treated as a second degree crime by the prosecutor's office. They have both been released on bail pending sentencing.

According to the press statement, one juvenile, who was 14 years old at the time of the attack, remains in the George W. Herlich detention center awaiting his waiver hearing.

The four other co-defendants now face evaluation at the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center in Avenel, to determine whether they are compulsive and repeat sex offenders. If they are found to be repeat offenders, they will remain at the Avenel Center.

"We believe that the juvenile court, for these defendants, would not have been appropriate, especially in light of the physical injuries and emotional trauma inflicted on the girl," Union County Prosecutor Thomas Manahan said in a press statement.

Because they have pled guilty as adults to first-degree charges, they

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County Freeholder Board Approves Expenditures For Vocation Training and Education in Township

By FRED ROSSI
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

The Union County Freeholders last week approved a \$14 million bond ordinance to finance construction of a new academic building at the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools in Scotch Plains. This will enable expanding the student body and increasing the number of courses offered.

Freeholder Daniel Sullivan said that an additional building will allow the school to offer a full-time program rather than the current half-day curriculum and, "address the needs of those who want a vocational education." He added that the county is eligible for a 40 percent reimbursement from the state for the project, meaning the \$14 million price tag could be lowered

to less than \$9 million. Mr. Sullivan said the new academic building could be ready for use by September 2003.

Calling the approval, "the best thing for Union County and its students," Freeholder Mary Ruotolo said at the Freeholders' meeting that the project demonstrates "our commitment to quality education." She said, "Usually the first cuts in public school education budgets are in the vocational and technical areas and job training."

"It is important," she added, "to recognize that not all students want to follow a college education path."

In other matters, the board approved two resolutions concerning educational opportunities for youths and senior citizens in Union County.

A resolution was approved implementing the "College for Teens" program, which will provide about 100 county high school students with the chance to attend classes at Union County College in Cranford this summer. The three-week program is open to students in all of the county's 21 municipalities with a minimum grade point average of C or better.

The Freeholders also backed a resolution renewing the "Senior Scholars" program at Union County College. The program will be extended further, into next spring rather than the end of this calendar year, because of an in-kind contribution from the college.

The board also approved a resolution that continues a contract with former professional boxer Gerry

COUNCIL TO BEGIN ENFORCEMENT OF NEWSRACK ORDINANCE

Senior Citizen Housing Land Lease to Be Rewritten by Town

By LAUREN S. PASS
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

At Tuesday night's regularly scheduled conference session a lengthy discussion took place on renewing the land lease for Westfield's Senior Citizen Housing Corporation, located on Boynton Avenue.

The lease, which expired in October, is for the land located at 1133 Boynton Avenue, the lease for the land at 1129 Boynton Avenue was set six years ago for approximately 35 years.

The original lease for 1133 was set for 50 years, to go along with the 40-year mortgage, which was provided through New Jersey Housing and Finance Agency (NJHFA).

The mortgage was in place when the original lease was signed. Senior citizens paid off the mortgage in a period of 27 years due to a restructuring of the financing that took place in the 1980s.

Karen Simon, the Housing Manager of Second Westfield Senior Citizen Housing Corporation, told the Mayor and council that they are asking for a 35-year extension, in case they need to apply for another mortgage.

According to Town Attorney Robert Cockren, the last lease carried multiple restrictions on senior citizens' ability to borrow money from lenders other than government agencies.

He also explained that seniors pay the town quarterly, in lieu of taxes, in a formula of 6.28 percent of the gross revenues they receive in rent. It was not clear to anyone present where the formula came from.

Mr. Cockren added that he had been in contact with Leonard Zucker, the attorney for senior citizens. Mr. Zucker had requested that all places in the lease where it said NJHFA be replaced with the word, "lessee," a proposal which Mr. Cockren was uncomfortable with.

Second Ward Councilman Matthew Albano stated that Ruth Smith, Executive Director of Westfield Senior Citizen Housing Corporation, approached the council on this subject last June, in regard to the lease renewal.

Councilman Albano added that there were questions as to whether senior citizens had complied with the terms of the lease, especially the payment in lieu of taxes.

Town Administrator James Gildea told *The Westfield Leader* that Senior Housing had complied in 2001, and that the total for both houses had been \$141,000. He added that he would be asking Town Treasurer Lih-Huei Tsai to look over payments for the past five years.

First Ward Councilman Carl Salisbury stated that the lease would allow them to mortgage or borrow monies, but that the town was not responsible to repay, should they default on the loan. He asked about what happens to the town's property title, should the lender re-possess, and questioned whether the lender could come in and build something else on the property.

Mrs. Simon responded that there is a deed restriction on the property.

Second Ward Councilman Rafael Betancourt asked if the council could retain the right to look over all loan

agreements before they are signed. Mayor Gregory McDermott asked why senior citizens wanted a 35-year lease, rather than a shorter time period.

Third Ward Councilwoman Claire Lazarowitz questioned why it has taken a year for the council to respond.

Mr. Gildea responded that the issue was given over to Mr. Cockren late last year, and that there was a change in the town administration. He said that there were multiple other complications and various questions, adding that he has frequently been on the phone with Mrs. Smith.

Mr. Cockren explained that the lease is a long, complicated document, and that he did not want to get involved in a full rewrite or to do something unintended.

Fourth Ward Councilman Lawrence Goldman stated that he felt there should be a non-disturbance agreement, meaning that the lease would be severed if they were to default on the loan, or there should be a restriction that the property can only be used for senior housing. He

added that the old lease needs to be thrown out and a new one be written.

Councilman Betancourt stated that a new lease may be more advantageous for them to borrow. The council was in consensus that a new lease be drawn.

Mrs. Smith told *The Leader* that she was in favor of a new lease being drawn.

"I want to protect the town too," she said. She added that they are asking for a 35-year lease should the corporation need to take a 30-year mortgage. Though they had no current plans of doing so, Mrs. Smith stated that there is a hope of a third complex, due to the need for low-income senior housing, which is evident through their three- to five-year waiting lists.

In other business, the council will award a bid of \$46,145 to TC Graphics for all printing purposes.

Mr. Gildea announced that the waiting list for parking was being cleaned up, and they were currently up to 1999.

The demolition of a home will

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Mayor McDermott, Local GOP Officials Visit White House

By LAUREN S. PASS
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

Last Tuesday five local residents, including Westfield Mayor Gregory McDermott visited the White House and met with President George W. Bush. While in Washington the group also met with senior strategists and attended a luncheon hosted by the Republican National Committee (RNC).

Approximately 90 residents from six states were invited to attend. The states represented are considered swing states, and the GOP is trying to increase the grass roots effort for the November election.

President Bush spoke to the group for a half an hour on many issues including the state of the White House and where the nation

stands in the eyes of the world.

According to Mayor McDermott security at the White House was stringent and no one was allowed to personally converse with the President.

Mayor McDermott told *The Westfield Leader* that it was an honor to even be considered to meet the President. He went on to say that it was an interesting experience to meet with political strategists because they are on a different level, in that they are in politics full time.

Michelle Albano of Westfield, a GOP Team Leader, was also in attendance. Mrs. Albano said that President Bush's talk was nice because it was informal.

Ron Frigerio and Bill and Giovanna Palatucci of Westfield also attended.



ART IN WESTFIELD...The Westfield Art Association held its annual Art in Westfield show and sale last Saturday in the downtown. Pictured, above, visitors to the event pose for a photo amid all of the festivities.

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MEET AND GREET...Westfield Senior Citizen Center resident, Pearl Levine, chats with Mayor Greg McDermott, 3rd Ward Council Candidate Andy Skibitsky, and 3rd Ward Campaign Treasurer Larry McDermott during Andy Skibitsky's Fundraising Meet & Greet held at his home on Saturday.

WESTFIELD POLICE BLOTTER

SUNDAY, APRIL 28
 • Police reported an incident of criminal mischief, in which a window was damaged on a motor vehicle belonging to a Benson Place resident.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 1
 • Andrew W. Donaldson, 26, of Union was arrested at the corner of South Avenue and West Broad Street and charged with possession of a hypodermic needle, following a search incidental to his arrest on several warrants.

Donaldson, who was wanted on warrants issued by the municipal courts of Kenilworth, Garwood, Newark and Elizabeth, was turned over to the Kenilworth Police Department. He was released on his own recognizance on the Westfield charge.

THURSDAY, MAY 2
 • A Clark resident reported that an unknown person used a sharp object to inflict scratches on his motor vehicle. The incident occurred while the vehicle was parked on Elm Street.

FRIDAY, MAY 3
 • An East Broad Street resident reported that an unknown individual or suspects entered his unlocked motor vehicle while it was parked on South Avenue, West. A wallet containing cash and credit cards was

discovered missing.

SATURDAY, MAY 4
 • Thomas Fanning, 25, of Springfield was arrested at the corner of Elm Street and Kimball Avenue and charged with driving while intoxicated. He was released on his own recognizance.

SUNDAY, MAY 5
 • A Westfield resident reported the theft of \$29 worth of lottery tickets while she was at a South Avenue convenience store.

TUESDAY, MAY 7
 • Joseph W. Ashby, 23, of Westfield was arrested in the 900 block of South Avenue, East, and charged with possession of less than 50 grams of suspected marijuana. He was issued a summons and released.

SATURDAY, MAY 11
 • Caroline Helfman, 18, and David Connor, 20, both of Westfield, were arrested following a motor vehicle stop at Scotch Plains Avenue and Clarence Street and charged with possession of drug paraphernalia. Each was released after being issued a summons.

• It was reported that \$1,030 was stolen from a safe located inside an Elm Street supermarket.

MONDAY, MAY 13
 • Christopher Kinsella, 33, of Westfield was arrested in the 500 block of First Street and charged with driving while intoxicated. He was released on his own recognizance.



SPIRITED STUDENT...At a recent honors assembly, St. Peter's Prep in Jersey City, Principal John R. Raslowsky, left, presented the 2002 Spirit Award to Westfielder and Prep senior Joseph Serzan. Based on the nomination of students, faculty and staff, the award is given each marking period to students who embody the spirit of St. Peter's Prep and who have demonstrated leadership skills in the school. Joseph is a member of the Prep forensics team, the Petrean yearbook staff and the Prep golf team, as well as a member of the National Honor Society. He coaches the boys junior varsity basketball team at Holy Trinity Interparochial School in Westfield, and he helps direct retreats at his parish, St. Helen's Roman Catholic Church in Westfield. Joseph is a 1998 graduate of Holy Trinity School. He is the son of Mary Clare and Joseph Serzan of Westfield. He will attend Fairfield University in Fairfield, Conn. in the fall.

Scotch Plains Assault

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1
 could each receive a sentence of 10 years in a state prison. This crime falls under the state's "No Early Release Act," requiring 85 percent of time served before an individual becomes eligible for parole.

This means that Russell faces a minimum of 8½ years and Gonzalez a minimum of 12¾ years, while Batista and Soriano will serve no less than 4¼ years each, pending the judge's final sentencing decision.

They will also be subject to the requirements of lifelong community supervision, notification and registration under New Jersey's Megan's Law.

If the case had gone to trial, and the suspects convicted of aggravated sexual assault, they could have faced a sentence of up to 20 years.

Russell and Gonzalez now remain in detention, where they have been held since their arrest several days after the assault, pending the posting of any bail prior to sentencing.

Sentencing for Russell and Gonzalez has been scheduled for Friday, September 13.

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SP-F BOE Honors Mr. DiFrancesco; Debates School Hours for 2002-2003

By JENNIFER PINTO
 Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

SCOTCH PLAINS -- The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education honored Scotch Plains resident and Former Governor Donald DiFrancesco during the Open Agenda Meeting on May 9.

The school board, friends, and members of the community discussed the work that Mr. DiFrancesco has given and continues to contribute to the community of Scotch Plains and Fanwood.

Many people mentioned that they felt reassured by the SP-F school system, considering that it had produced someone so honorable.

Erik Rosenmeier, Athletic Director, as well as other members of the athletic department of Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School (SPFHS), recognized Mr. DiFrancesco by presenting him with his own SPFHS baseball jersey, while announcing that the baseball field would be named "DiFrancesco Varsity Field Complex."

The festivities for the event included patriotic tunes sung by the McGinn Elementary School kindergartners and by fifth grade girls. In addition, SPFHS students ended the event with two instrumental perfor-

mances.

After the two-hour ceremony, the official agenda for the meeting was discussed.

The first item of discussion was the revised 2002-2003 calendar, which was approved by the board. The board also attempted to pass the revised school hours for 2002-2003 in order to settle transportation bids earlier.

Parents expressed concerns about changing the school hours without consulting the community and the Parent Teacher Association. Parents didn't agree with the revised schedule and felt that the proposed starting and ending times for all of the schools were not reasonable.

Members of the public also felt that it was not appropriate to discuss such a complicated issue at such a late hour, considering that Mr. DiFrancesco's recognition ceremony had ended at 10 p.m.

One of the main concerns was having the fifth graders start at 8:30 a.m. and end the day at 3:15 p.m., while sixth through eighth graders in the same school would start earlier, at 8:05 a.m. and end at 2:35 p.m. Members of the public felt that having two different schedules in the

EZ Pass System Remains Plagued By Technical and Fiscal Challenges

By DEBORAH MADISON
 Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

Plagued by extensive technical and financial difficulties on many of New Jersey's major highways, the EZ Pass Mass Transit System will have accumulated a debt of \$469 million by 2008, when the bond contract becomes due, according to Director of the NJ Turnpike Authority, Michael LaPolla.

Defects repeatedly occurring at over 250 lanes on the Garden State Parkway and the NJ Turnpike are resulting in thousands of violations being issued in error to valid users and a deficit of correct fare charges on thousands of accounts.

With over a million users traveling through the EZ Pass tolls daily, Mr. LaPolla told *The Westfield Leader* and *The Times of Scotch Plains-Fanwood* that there was probably a two percent margin of error -- between 12,000 to 18,000 false violations per day.

"For the overwhelming majority of customers, the system works and is a great convenience," he added.

Westfield resident and Westfield Leader Bookkeeper, Karen Hinds told the Leader that she and her entire family have been EZ Pass users for the past year and a half. They have not had any problems, according to Mrs. Hinds, with violations or improper billing. Her husband, Don, uses EZ Pass almost daily. Mrs. Hinds said, from Westfield to Paterson and her daughter uses it to and from Montclair. They have used EZ Pass on the NJ Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway with no problems.

"It really speeds up our trips with hardly any waiting," Mrs. Hinds said. "We really like using it."

The system was originally designed to pay for itself by an estimated \$450 million in violation and fare charges, to fund the overall \$500 million installation and operation price tag. However, the collection of valid violation charges has fallen far short of original estimates, while technical problems are plaguing valid customers.

Plainfield resident, Marvin Daniels, who also uses EZ Pass almost daily, told the Leader that he has had numerous violations in error despite being a valid cardholder. Mr. Daniels said that he frequently gets violations in the mail showing a photo of his car, allegedly going through the tollbooth without paying. "The antenna just doesn't pick up the signal from my badge," Mr. Daniels said. He claimed that the badge is

always properly mounted on his windshield. Each time he gets a violation, Mr. Daniels said, he has to fill out a dispute form.

Part of the problem is that antennas installed on the tollbooth plazas are failing to pick up the signal from users' ID badges, mounted on their windshields. Some of these signal problems, explained Mr. LaPolla, may be due to improper mounting of the badges, which some users prefer to hold and flash at the antennas.

"Users who switch cars may not be flashing the badge at the proper moment for the antenna to pick up the signal," Mr. LaPolla said. This results in the system recording the car's license plate number as a "toll-cheat" and issues a false violation. Some reports, however, have indicated that the antenna on the tollbooths were improperly installed, not following the manufacturer's specifications.

Chase Manhattan Bank has been hired to oversee the credit card and violations charges. They get paid for each and every look at a credit card or violation charge, costing the flawed system millions of dollars.

"The transit system has a negative cash flow due to these design flaws," Mr. LaPolla explained.

Assemblywoman Linda Stender told *The Leader* and *The Times* that, "either gross mismanagement or criminal intent" was behind the massive system failure. "If you follow the money trail, you'll find an alphabet soup of companies involved in making huge profits on this whole deal," she said. "And now all of these companies are pointing their fingers at each other to blame for the system failures."

PB Farradyne, based in New York, a subsidiary of the International Engineering firm of Parsons Brinckerhoff, was the management coordinator overseeing several other companies involved in different aspects of equipment design, production, installation and operation of the EZ Pass system.

PB Farradyne, specializing in transportation engineering and planning has been the management firm for many major public works projects, including construction of airport terminals at JFK and the Times Square Re-development Project.

The corporation oversaw installation of the antennas by MFS Technologies, a subsidiary of World-Com.

The NJ Turnpike Authority ultimately oversaw the entire operation, according to Ms. Stender. A spokesperson for Parsons Brinckerhoff said that the company was declining to comment and referred all questions to their client, the NJ Turnpike Authority.

"It's difficult to comprehend how things could get this messed up with all of these professionals involved," Ms. Stender commented. "This is either gross incompetence or just another example of the debacles of business and stock manipulation typical of NJ business deals," she added.

Able Engineering, one of the companies involved in the installation, in an "Enron-type situation," saw their stock skyrocket, never paid the contractors and then disappeared behind the smoke-screen of bankruptcy after making huge profits, Ms. Stender pointed out.

Ms. Stender also alleged that the decision to hire this project out as a "professional service," which did not require choosing the best offer, was an ethically questionable practice.

Shortly after the inception of the project, there were allegations of non-disclosure and conflicts of interest on behalf of State Transportation Commissioner, Frank Wilson, who awarded the contract to MFS, rather than to the lowest bidder, shortly before he interviewed for a job in the private sector with MFS. These allegations, brought to suit by Lockheed, Inc., who was the lowest bidder, were dismissed in Appellate court.

"The state never stepped in and in the end, the taxpayers are the ones being ripped off," Ms. Stender said.

Currently, the Transportation Committee is conducting an investigation, with testimony from some of the original legislators, including Frank Wilson, who were involved in the hiring of the construction and engineering firms.

Another reason for the major system design flaws, alleged Ms. Stender, was that successful, "best-practices" of EZ Pass usage in other states was never studied, which

should have been done, she claimed.

EZ Pass has been installed in more than 19 other states throughout the East Coast, without these major technical problems, reported Mr. LaPolla. He said he could not explain why so many problems were occurring in the New Jersey area, but that the reasons were being investigated.

"This whole situation needs to be thoroughly investigated by the State Commissioner," Ms. Stender suggested.

The hearings being conducted by the Transportation Commission will most likely result in a report, with proposed legislation to prevent this type of damage from occurring again, Ms. Stender said, along with some corrective measures.

According to Ed Oatman, Public Relations Spokesperson for Ms. Stender's office, the Governor has given the Transportation Committee 120 days, until June, to rectify the issues of both the technical problems and the financial deficit of \$469 million.

Westfield Council

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 take place at 1109 Columbus Avenue, and another home and garage will be torn down at 708 Garfield Avenue.

According to Town Engineer Kenneth Marsh, neither property can be subdivided without a variance.

Councilman Salisbury stated that the newswrack ordinance has not been enforced, and that an enforcement officer needs to be appointed.

Discussions about the regulation of news boxes first started in early 1998 by then Mayor Thomas Jardim, Councilman Goldman and former First Ward Councilwoman Gail Vernick, who were all concerned about the number of boxes that they thought had begun appearing on the sidewalks of Westfield. Concerns centered around aesthetics and safety.

The ordinance, which was passed in November of 1999, set a permit fee of \$25 for the first newswrack installed and \$10 for each subsequent machine.

While not limiting the number of machines at any one location, the ordinance does restrict each newswrack owner to no more than one machine at any one site.

Councilman Salisbury added that resident, Bruce Long, had voluntarily done the initial assessment, and would now be doing a thorough assessment of all newswracks in town.

Councilwoman Lazarowitz suggested that Mr. Long be approached to be the enforcement officer.

Councilman Salisbury also announced that a draft of the porch ordinance should be ready for the next conference session. He stated that the ordinance would encourage the building of new porches as well as keeping old porches, adding that the Board of Adjustment had questioned the front and side yard setbacks for new porches.

Mr. Gildea informed the council that he has spoken to the manager of the Garwood Shop Rite in reference to shopping carts and parking in and around Gumbert Park. He added that the manager stated he would keep the area clear of shopping carts and that the owner is looking to buy more property for parking. There are currently 16 permit spots in the Shop Rite parking lot that the Borough of Garwood owns and is unwilling to sell.

Mr. Marsh told the council that he found a modular fence-like barricade that folds up with lights and space for signs. He can purchase two 30-foot long fences for \$1,700, to go across South Euclid Avenue during the closures for baseball. He said that the baseball association would be responsible for setting them up and taking them down. He added that these barricades could also be used for road construction.

Councilman Betancourt stated that some residents are opposed to even a temporary closure of South Chestnut Street, and that he does not want to divide the neighborhood. He said that it may be beneficial to contact the RBA group for the traffic calming project proposed for that area.

Mr. Marsh presented the council with another draft of the curb assessment policy, and will further revise that to combine with the 1998 ordinance.

First Ward Councilman Peter Echausse suggested a two- to three-year town wide road plan, which would identify priority streets.

Mr. Gildea asked Mr. Marsh how many petitions for roadwork he receives from residents. Mr. Marsh responded that he sees approximately two to three petitions a year.

The next public meeting of the Town Council will be held on Tuesday, May 21.

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