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SIXTY CENTS

## New Jersey Property Tax Reform Summit to Include Mayor Marks

By FRED ROSSI  
Specially Written for The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — A group of state and local elected officials, including Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks, will take part in a property tax summit next week to brief municipal officials from around the state on the property tax relief and prospects for permanent property tax reform.

A similar forum was held a year ago; with mayors listening to then-Governor Jim McGreevey announce his property tax relief initiative. This year's session, set for May 6 in Lawrenceville and sponsored by the New Jersey State League of Municipalities, was to include a report from Susan Bass Levin, Commissioner of the Department of Community Af-

airs, and State Treasurer John McCormac on the state budget and the implications for municipalities, followed by a panel of state legislators discussing the prospects for property tax relief.

Mayor Marks, a member of the League's Executive Board, told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that he contacted League Executive Director William Dressel to ask that some municipal officials be included on the legislative panel.

As a result, Mayor Marks and Somerdale Mayor Gary Passanante will join Assembly Speaker Albio Sires (D-33), Assemblywoman Linda Greenstein (D-14, Monroe), Assemblymen Steve Corodemus (R-11, Atlantic Highlands) and Kevin O'Toole (R-40, Wayne) and Senator John Adler (D-6, Cherry Hill) in speaking to municipal officials about the prospects for an initiative to place a referendum on the November 2005 ballot asking voters whether a state constitutional convention should be held next year to reform the state property tax system.

Similar efforts have failed in recent years, and Mayor Marks sounded a bit pessimistic about prospects this year.

"The constitutional convention is not dead yet," he said. "But if it's not dead, it's pretty darned close." He said the matter seems to be stalled in the Assembly and noted that the Senate has not yet taken up the issue.

Talking about next week's forum, Mayor Marks said he is "looking forward to sitting down with my fellow mayors" to talk about property tax reform, an issue he has championed for several years. He promised to "hold no punches back" from state legislators and said he would "hold their feet to the fire" on the reform issue.

Mayor Marks said he "wholeheartedly" supports a plan put forward by Republican gubernatorial candidate Doug Forrester that calls for a cut in state spending to support a 30 percent reduction in property taxes over three years.

"We should have come up with this a long, long time ago," said Mayor Marks.

The Forrester plan is similar to one drafted by Assembly Republicans.

Mayor Marks, however, questioned why Republicans did not address the issue when they had the Governor's mansion and both houses of the state legislature.

"Where were they in the 1990s with this (Assembly Republican's) plan?" Mayor Marks said.

"I'm skeptical at best that we will see this plan come to fruition," said Mayor Marks, noting that a constitutional convention remains a "safety valve" should the Legislature fail to act on property tax reform.

He said a plan by gubernatorial candidate Bret Schundler's plan offers tax breaks to businesses and corporations as well as to residential property tax payers. Mayor Marks said he believes the focus must be on residential property taxes.



Benjamin B. Corbin for The Westfield Leader

SPECIAL VISITOR...Gubernatorial Republican candidate Bret Schundler visited the office of *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* on Wednesday morning to invite the public to a special forum sponsored by the Mountainside Republican Club during which attendees can meet the Republican gubernatorial candidates. The forum will be held on Wednesday, May 4, at 7:15 p.m. at the Mountainside Borough Hall. Pictured, left to right, are: Assignment Editor Paul Peyton, Mr. Schundler, *Times* Publisher Horace Corbin, Sports Editor and Assistant Publisher David Corbin and Arts & Entertainment and Education Editor Michelle Helen Le Poidevin.

## SP-F BOE VP Russo Calls Budget Passage 'Gratifying' for Schools

By BETSEY BURGDOFF  
Specially Written for The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — While a few surrounding towns, including Westfield, are dealing with residents voting down the tax levy placed upon them in regards to school budgets, Scotch Plains Board of Education (BOE) members can rest assured their budget will remain untouched since the \$58.7 million school tax levy put before residents passed by a mere 132 votes at the polls on April 19.

"It is very gratifying that our community continues to support our schools," BOE Vice President Thomas Russo told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*. "I thought our budget was reasonable."

Mr. Russo continued saying, "A great deal of help will be needed from the state in the future," in order to keep the tax levy to a minimum.

The board adopted a \$67,084,688 budget with 75 percent of the budget committed to salaries and benefits of teachers and staff.

In recent years, state aid has dwindled off leaving the majority of the tax burden solely to residents. "It's

hard to be optimistic," Mr. Russo said.

This year, the Scotch Plains budget showed an increase of 4.5 percent over last year's. Mr. Russo noted that there was a double-digit increase in health benefits for teachers and administrators, while the budget only saw an increase in the single digit range.

According to BOE newcomer Warren McFall, the passing of the budget was more critical than the BOE election.

"I want to maintain community support by working tirelessly on the budget process," Mr. McFall stated.

Scotch Plains homeowners will be responsible for approximately 78 percent of the levy with the remaining 22 percent being the responsibility of Fanwood property owners. This will show an increase of approximately \$300 annually for Scotch Plains homeowners and a roughly \$400 per year increase in Fanwood.

Newcomers Mr. McFall, Don Parisi of Scotch Plains and Sasha Slocum, who ran unopposed for the Fanwood seat, will be sworn in as board members at the BOE's reorganization meeting on Tuesday, May 3.

## New Cooper Road Island Site Plans To Be Presented at Meeting Next Wk.

By FRED ROSSI  
Specially Written for The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — Revised site plans for the proposed housing development on the Cooper Road island in Scotch Plains show that the driveway leading to the home has been moved from a spot that some felt presented a traffic hazard. The new plans also result in the size of the property being significantly smaller than the required lot size in that neighborhood.

The Zoning Board of Adjustment is set to resume its hearing on Thursday, May 5, on the application by Mark Lustbader of West Orange, who represents HUB Realty, the potential buyer of the property that is situated on the western side of the island.

At the initial hearing in January, it was revealed that the property — originally believed to be 39,338 square feet in area — was actually smaller when rights-of-way along Cooper Road were excluded. The neighborhood is an R-1 zone, meaning that lots are required to be at least 40,000 square feet in size.

The new site plan, which was provided to *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood*

*Times*, calls for a 6,000-square-foot portion of the northern edge of the property along the westbound lane of Cooper Road to be ceded to the township for possible road widening purposes. That would mean the actual property would measure 33,405 square feet in area, more than 15 percent smaller than the required lot size for the R-1 zone.

The revised plan also shows that the driveway that would lead to the house has been moved about 120 feet, from near the western juncture of the eastbound and westbound lanes of Cooper Road, to a spot across from Wellington Downs on the eastbound side of Cooper Road.

In January, concerns were raised about the original placement of the driveway and possible risks to vehicles traveling on Cooper Road as well as cars exiting the driveway. The proposed house faces the eastbound lane of Cooper Road, according to the revised plans.

At next week's hearing, it's expected that several dozen neighbors, who have formed a group, "Save The Island," to oppose the development,

will speak out in opposition to the application.

Formed late last year, the group claims that, besides the property being smaller than allowed by township



CLOSING FOR GOOD...The Union County Trap and Skest range in Cranford will close its doors for good after 78 years in business on Monday, May 2.



Benjamin B. Corbin for The Times

COMING TOGETHER...Completion is nearing on the construction of the Union County Engineering Building on South Avenue in Scotch Plains.

## Mayor Marks Sees Twp. Property Reevaluation in Next Few Years

By FRED ROSSI  
Specially Written for The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — Reiterating a sentiment he expressed earlier this year, Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks said on Tuesday that he expects a reevaluation of all township properties to take place in the next few years.

The mayor made his remarks at the township council's meeting during a colloquy with Ramapo Way resident Al Muller, who had expressed his concern that new, more expensive homes being built in his neighborhood would affect older homes' property tax levies if a reevaluation was done.

"It's a double-edged sword," Mayor Marks said as he noted that a reevaluation, which hasn't been done in Scotch Plains in more than 20 years, would aim to bring assessed property values for tax purposes more into line with market values.

Presently, the average assessed value of a property is about 30 percent of its market value.

The mayor said the goal is for any reevaluation to be revenue neutral to

the township, with one-third of properties seeing an increase in property taxes, one-third seeing a decrease and the remaining one-third seeing no change.

In February, Mayor Marks also expressed his feeling that a reevaluation will soon be forced upon Scotch Plains by the county, a procedure that would likely cost about \$1 million.

In other business during its brief meeting, the council passed an ordinance establishing a so-called Cap Bank. As explained by Councilwoman Paulette Coronato, the state forbids certain municipal appropriations from rising more than 2.5 percent each year.

If that level is not exceeded, the difference between the actual increase and the 2.5 percent figure can, in essence, be put into a special account that can be used in the next two years. Mrs. Coronato said that this year's figure is \$121,297.

The council approved a resolution appropriating an additional \$6,250 to pay for security fencing around the perimeter of the communications tower at the southside

firehouse during the construction phase that is expected to begin in early June.

The council also approved a resolution declaring an emergency that allows the township to immediately purchase a new comminutor, which is a grinder, at the Lamberts Mill Road sewage pumping station. The existing apparatus has experienced operational problems recently, and the resolution declaring an emergency regarding the comminutor will allow the township to bypass the usual bidding procedures and, instead, award the contract quickly.

Franklin Miller Inc. of Livingston will provide the new equipment at a cost of \$24,300.

The council also approved a resolution authorizing the lease/purchase of three new Ford Crown Victoria vehicles and one Dodge Durango four-wheel drive vehicle for the police department. The cost of the three cruisers is \$68,335 while the four-wheel drive vehicle will cost \$24,182.

At the end of the 35-minute meeting, Mayor Marks issued a proclamation declaring today, April 28, as Arbor Day in Scotch Plains.

## Planning Bd. to Continue Hearings On Two Subdivision Applications

By FRED ROSSI  
Specially Written for The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — The Scotch Plains Planning Board will continue hearings next month on two subdivision applications that involve several vexing issues that need to be resolved prior to any approval.

The board will seek to complete work on May 23 on an application by Esther Stuart, who wants to sell her property at 2 Balfour Lane to a developer who would then divide the irregularly-shaped and oversized lot into two lots and build two new homes.

To comply with minimum lot size requirements in that neighborhood, Ms. Stuart purchased an additional 7,000 square feet of adjoining land to bring her lot size to 80,000 square feet, thus allowing it to be split into two 40,000 square foot parcels. The property is situated at a bend in the

road where Balfour Lane meets Allenby Lane.

One issue concerns the front yard setback of the home that would be built on the westernmost lot. Jerry Spitzer, who lives in the house next to that lot, told the board that two new, large two-story houses would not only be detrimental to his own property but also be an "eyesore" in a neighborhood of mostly ranch houses.

He asked that the proposed front yard setback of a new house be increased so that he would not be facing the back of the new house when he stood in front of his own home.

When the board discussed increasing the front yard setback for the new house, a question arose about the actual width of the proposed westernmost lot and how much of a side yard variance was being sought from the board. There were also some questions raised about the highly irregular shape of the two proposed lots. There was some discussion about potential landscaping and buffering between Mr. Spitzer's property and the adjoining one being proposed.

The other application that will be continued on May 23 is one by Northeast Developers Inc. to subdivide a tract of land at 1925 Lake Avenue into three new lots on which new homes will be built. A brook traverses the rectangular-shaped property, resulting in what attorney Robert Kraus said was "a good deal of wetlands."

Several plans were presented on Monday night, including one calling for a cul-de-sac to be created for

access to the rear property and another calling for a flag lot-type property at the rear.

Neighboring properties on Lake Avenue, which are also cut in half by the brook, are similarly shaped. Several neighbors spoke in opposition to the application, mainly citing the effects of flooding from the brook on the proposed rear house. "Nowhere else in this neighborhood has this been done," Mike Sullivan, a Lake Avenue resident, told the board.

The board pondered whether an environmental impact statement might be needed before the application was continued. It was agreed that the Environmental Commission should evaluate the application.

At the start of the meeting, it was announced that Board member Harriet Shafran had resigned. The board also agreed to recommend to the Township Council that two paper streets on either side of the former Club Malibu site on Terrill Road be vacated.

Baldrige Real Estate Inc. is preparing a site plan application to the Planning Board for construction of an AutoZone retail auto parts store on the Terrill Road property formerly occupied by Club Malibu, which was closed in late 1998 after a fatal shooting in its parking lot.

The former nightclub building was razed two years ago. The two streets in question, Edwin Place and Croyden Place, are unimproved streets that exist on official township maps but are not traversable by cars.

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