

Candidates Debate Taxes, Over Development Issues

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Town Council and mayoral candidates debated a range of issues Monday night at the forum sponsored by the League of Women Voters and *The Westfield Leader* newspaper. Westfield TV-36 is airing the debate, starting Wednesday and continuing through to Election Day, Tuesday, November 8.

Issues focused on curbing property tax increases, furthering the Department of Public Works' (DPW) efficiency, stunting rampant over-development, the revitalization of South Avenue, allocating state aid and increasing responsiveness of municipal government to requests from residents. During the mayoral debate, Mayor Andy Skibitsky said he is working with the Downtown Westfield Corporation (DWC), through the state, to receive "a 'smart growth' grant to study the South Avenue corridor to see what we can do to redevelop that area. It's a troubled area. By reaching out to the state, there's a lot that we can do."

Former Mayor Tom Jardim responded that South Avenue, part of the Westfield special improvement district, is "quite frankly, not getting its money's worth. If its not getting its money's worth, then it's really just a nuisance tax on those businesses there and can potentially hurt those businesses. I'm distressed to hear about another study because I think we've had enough studies."

In terms of allocating state funding, Mr. Jardim challenged local Republican officials who represent Westfield, specifically naming Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (R-21, Westfield), who was in attendance, to help the town garner appropriate funds.

"The legislators have the ability, at times, Assemblyman Bramnick, to deliver to their towns and their home districts the resources that were needed. When I was mayor, I worked very closely with Alan Augustine and Rich Bagger. In particular, former Mayor Bagger was extremely responsive in terms of getting Westfield what it needed in terms of roads' funds."

Mayor Skibitsky said he is "seeking aggressively to receive state aid. State aid will fund the North Chestnut Avenue paving project and the South Chestnut project next year. We need to

go out and aggressively get state aid if it's available. We need to get more out of Union County. Twenty percent of our taxes go to Union County and I'm not sure what we get out of it. We got that monstrosity on North Avenue (the Ralph Froehlich Public Safety Building) and we're not even invited to the grand opening."

During closing statements former Mayor Jardim, addressing the question of why he wanted to run again as mayor, turned his focus to the once ballyhooed



Tom Jardim and Andy Skibitsky

parking deck. "When you waste over \$700,000 studying a flawed parking deck plan that was too big, too expensive and rightly defeated in a referendum by residents, I say 'why indeed.'"

Mr. Skibitsky said he is a frugal person. "Look at my haircut," he joked. "I work hard to control the taxes. When my opponent was mayor, the tax rate rose 25 percent over four years." The mayor noted that to combat the hike, former Mayor Jardim "sold \$1.7 million of town property to developers and used that to pay for operation expenses. That's not good business management. That's not how you run a business. That's like taking a piece of your land and selling it every year to pay for your electrical bill. You'd call that an Enron style accounting tactic."

His opponent, former Mayor Jardim replied that Mayor Skibitsky made a factual error. "The taxes didn't increase by 25 percent; they increased by 11 percent. Since I've left office as mayor, taxes have increased by 34 percent. In one year alone, we in-

creased by 11 cents for every \$100 assessed value. There's simply no reason for that. My opponent, who apparently voted against that increase, said 'I'm troubled by it, but I simply don't have the answers.' My question is, 'if my opponent doesn't have the answers, who is going to have the answers?' We're elected to have the answers. We need to cut our expenses and get serious."

The night was not devoid of mud-slinging. First, Mr. Jardim said that he looks for in his council members a willingness to serve and stay past 10 or 11 p.m. some nights to achieve a goal. He stressed attending recreation commission meetings. "Quite frankly, without attacking my opponent, he was on the recreation commission and unfortunately, his record of attendance wasn't particularly good."

Mayor Skibitsky responded, "talking about attendance, when you appointed yourself to the planning board the last year, you missed 50 percent of the meetings. That's an extremely important board."

In terms of over-development, Mayor Skibitsky said he was proud of the job the council did in four months, noting the corner lot ordinance to curtail shoe horning of new homes, the passing on first reading of a height restriction ordinance and the present concepts of examining a floor area ratio and architectural review board.

Former Mayor Jardim replied "lowering the height by three feet won't solve the problem. Ask any developer if that'll solve it. You need to make them pay for the impact they cause."

In the council debate, Fourth Ward Democratic challenger Tom Bigosinski, who for the past two years served as one of three members of the Tree Preservation Committee, said, "Developers don't understand their impact on the neighborhood. A lot more can be done. There's a failure to empower the committee with the ability to enforce some of the tree preservation ordinances."

In particular, Mr. Bigosinski said the committee has the ability to require that trees that are removed, are replaced and a fine be levied on any developer removing trees that fall outside the plan.

Eric Leuthold, Fourth Ward Republican candidate, related that from the people he's spoken to, besides taxes, their greatest concern is over-development.

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CAMERA ROLLS...Westfield candidates for mayor and council take their seats and the crowd gathers for filming of the 2005 Westfield Candidates Forum Monday night. A standing room only audience listened to the articulate candidates discuss their views and request votes in the upcoming November 8 election. TV36 will air the program through to election day.

Officials Concerned Over Lower Math Scores on Tests at Edison

By MEGHAN GILL
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Tuesday night's Board of Education meeting featured Superintendent Dr. William Foley's report on school violence, vandalism, and substance abuse, school quality assurance objectives, as well as the report on testing, presented by Assistant Superintendent Dr. Margaret Dolan.

The results presented were from the 11th grade High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) and New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK), a test administered to 3rd and 4th graders. Dr. Dolan presented the findings of the test results to the board, and explained that the tests are not equivalent to each other. The HSPA results for 2005 indicated that 95.5 percent of students are proficient in language arts, and 93.1 percent in math, while 4.5 percent were partially proficient (below state standards) in language arts and 6.9 percent in math.

The results for the language arts GEPA test found that 88.7 percent of students were above the state standard at Edison Intermediate School while 93 percent of Roosevelt Intermediate School were above the state average. However, the math results reflect a larger variation, with 80 percent above state standards at Edison and 89.7 for Roosevelt. Twenty percent of students at Edison School are considered below state standards in math, while 10.3 percent of students are below the state average at Roosevelt. The science test results showed 93 percent of students above state standards at Edison and 95.9 percent at Roosevelt.

"We can do better," Dr. Foley stated. "I am not thrilled with these results. Changes have happened, but I am frustrated because math hasn't improved."

He explained that the administration will bring in outside help to differentiate math and said the district is planning on an after-school program at Westfield High School for middle school students to help improve both skills and attitude or aptitude.

With this issue in mind, the board approved the funding of \$27,720 for consulting services to include customized training and individualized mentoring for teachers, workshops for administrators on supervising initiative teachers and off-site support to teachers for middle school math teachers at Edison from IDE Corp., located in Ramsey.

Dr. Dolan stressed that the results are an average of all students across the district, including those with disabilities and those who attend out-of-district schools. "The test is harder for the eighth graders. The GEPA numbers give stories that are inaccurate," she stated.

"We have found that those students who are considered economically disadvantaged have more trouble," she said. Three percent of students in the district are considered economically disadvantaged, determined by those who participate in the free or reduced lunch program. She also is looking into the achievement gap among African-American students, whomake up 3.8 percent of the district, approximately 15 to 30 students per grade.

"We want to target low income students. Some will be African-American students, but not all," Dr. Foley clarified.

Dr. Foley indicated that the district

might have to perform a district assessment, which costs around \$10,000 per grade. Some steps the administration will take to improve the middle school test results are staff training, after school tutoring and student mentoring.

In other business, there were 19 incidents of violence, vandalism or substance abuse in the district during the 2004-2005 academic year.

"Our kids are great. We don't have a lot of discipline problems," Dr. Foley stated.

Westfield Police Department Detective Ron Allen, the high school

liaison and school resource officer, spoke to the board about measures that are being taken to prevent violence and other incidents in the high school, such as the hallways being staffed, administrators in the school, and that he has a very visible presence in the school four days per week.

Four peer leader students from the eighth grade presented a report on the bully-proofing program that they are teaching to younger students, and talked about how the learning experience has made a significant impact on themselves and the elementary school children.

WF Council Introduces First Phase of New Website URL

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — At Tuesday's conference session, the Westfield Town Council discussed grading requirements, repealing redevelopment ordinances and the town's new website.

As of October 1, westfieldnj.net is defunct. The new website housed on www.westfieldnj.govoffice2.com.

Administrator Jim Gildea said the town asked Webmaster Darryl Walker "to end service and take the official status away. We will ask him to redirect the address. It hasn't happened yet. We don't have control yet."

Mr. Gildea said .govoffice2.com site is temporary until a .gov extension is established. He requested thetownofwestfield.gov or westfieldnj.gov. "This is an intermediary site, so people can sign up for e-alerts, give feedback but mostly, in the process of building a site, we need volunteers to grow the site."

Mr. Gildea said Mr. Walker "continues to host the town's e-mail until it is moved to another avenue. Ultimately, we will have another host."

Fourth Ward Councilman Larry Goldman said the town had the ability to post e-alerts on the old site (westfieldnj.net), but didn't "except for a few out of the police department. So the new site is great, but who's posting the data?"

"The new site is only as good as the department is disciplined to put the information in," he added.

First Ward Councilman Peter Echausse, chair of the Finance Policy Committee, explained that the town's URL will change to a .gov extension and the new site will feature frequently asked questions, an online poll and e-alerts tailored to suit one's interests.

Mayor Andy Skibitsky said the new website "is very user-friendly and

easy to navigate." He reminded, "This is phase one. In the coming weeks and months, we'll have it set up to download forms and make online payments."

The council, explained Mr. Gildea, tabled three demolitions from the previous conference session because the town implemented new grading and height rules.

Town Engineer Ken Marsh said that if a building permit is granted, construction will continue at the framing stage. A height check will be conducted before the CO (certificate of occupancy) is issued.

"Assuming they're granted a building permit, in the framing stage we'll do a height check," Mr. Marsh added. "Anytime we do the foundation inspections, we can check the grade."

Second Ward Councilman Sal Caruana asked if "we (town) require, when a homeowner files plans to attach a drainage plan?"

Mr. Marsh explained that the town does require a grading plan on a single-family residence. He said the plan details how the roof and driveway drainage should work; ideally, both go to the street. The grading plan is just to verify, "We're not creating a problem that wasn't there before."

Fourth Ward Councilman Jim Foerst gave an update on the Code Review and Town Property Committee. Councilman Foerst explained his intentions to repeal previously established redevelopment ordinances and asked the council, "Is there a benefit or a detriment to doing redevelopment on the South Avenue lot? If we do something, are we missing out on grants? We've heard the parking deck proposals and they have been defeated. Are there public or private funds available? Remember, we will be doing remediation on lots one and

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Scotch Plains Mourns Death Of Police Chief Mark Zyla, 46

By FRED T. ROSSI
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — Flags in Scotch Plains flew at half mast this week and mourning bunting was draped at the front of the municipal building in memory of Police Chief Mark Zyla, who died early last Friday morning, a year-and-a-half after taking over the department's top position.

Mr. Zyla, 46 years old, collapsed at the Sun Tavern in Fanwood shortly after midnight on October 14 and died a short time later at Muhlenberg Regional Medical Center in Plainfield. Crowds of mourners gathered on Sunday evening and Monday for Chief Zyla's wake in Scotch Plains prior to a Tuesday morning funeral.

Several streets were closed off on Tuesday morning for Chief Zyla's funeral procession from the Rossi Funeral Home to St. Bartholomew the Apostle Roman Catholic Church, where a standing-room-only crowd of family, friends, residents and police officers from around the state gathered for a mass featuring a stirring bagpipe rendition of "Amazing Grace." Burial took place at Fairview Cemetery in Westfield.

In honor of Chief Zyla, who joined the police department in 1983, an unoccupied township patrol car was parked in front of the funeral home throughout last weekend and for the

duration of the late chief's wake and funeral services, township police officers wore black bands over their badges.

Saying that the township family was "devastated" by the Chief's death, Township Manager Thomas Atkins told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that Mr. Zyla was "a highly dedicated law enforcement professional" who was "a very stabilizing force in the police department," even in the years before he assumed the top leadership spot. Mr. Atkins said members of the department viewed Chief Zyla as someone who was "fair, impartial, who always worked hard and gave them (department officers) a fair shake."

"He loved the kids," Mr. Atkins added, referring to Mr. Zyla's years of coaching various Police Athletic League football and baseball teams. "And he really loved Scotch Plains."

Mayor Martin Marks called Chief Zyla's death "particularly devastating for me in that Mark and I had become good friends. He and I played together on the same summer softball team and shared the same competitiveness on the field," he told *The Times*. "Being able to crack a joke, many times at our own expense, was also something we were able to share."

The mayor said that, "above all, Mark was a dedicated husband and father who showed great pride and

affection when speaking of his family. There is no doubt he deserved and received the respect and admiration of the township's municipal team and most certainly of the officers under his command."

Mr. Zyla became chief of police in May 2004, succeeding Marshall Nelson, after a 21-year career with the department. Chief Zyla was promoted to sergeant in 1995 and in 2001 was elevated to lieutenant. Between 2001 and 2004, he served for 13 months as commander of the uniformed division and for a year as education, training and internal affairs officer. Prior to joining Scotch Plains in 1983, he had served a year with the Union County Police Department.

When announcing his promotion to chief last year, Mr. Atkins cited Chief Zyla's administrative and supervisory experience as well as his performance during written and oral examinations that were part of a lengthy selection process.

"His record speaks for itself," Mr. Atkins said of Mr. Zyla at the time. "He is the best equipped to lead us into the future."

During his formal swearing-in as police chief on May 1, 2004, before a standing-room-only crowd of family, friends and law enforcement colleagues from throughout Union County, Mr. Zyla called it "one of the proudest days of my career," and emotionally acknowledged the presence that evening of his mother, who was widowed when Mr. Zyla was a boy.

Mr. Zyla is survived by his wife Joan, two daughters Kristin and Courtney, his mother Patricia Zyla and a sister, Karen Di Pietro. Mr. Atkins on Monday named Captain Brian Mahoney as acting police chief. An 18-year veteran of the department, he was promoted to his position as captain in May 2004.



Chief Mark Zyla



STIRRING TRIBUTE...Hundreds of police officers from across the state gathered Tuesday morning to mourn the loss of Scotch Plains Police Chief Mark Zyla who died suddenly last Thursday night. Photos of the moving procession in Scotch Plains can be viewed at www.goleader.com/photos.

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