

# The Westfield Leader

— Established 1890 —  
The Official Newspaper of the Town of Westfield  
Legal Newspaper for Union County, New Jersey

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## Critical Information Needs to Come From the Professionals

If Hurricane Katrina taught America anything, it is that communication is critical in emergencies, and that it must come from the professionals. In an effort to answer questions we have been receiving on where to donate items (medical supplies, bottled water, etc.) and how to arrange transportation for these goods to be sent the Gulf Coast victims, we often were referred to press officers or websites. There's very little real substance that comes from these official channels during a time of crisis. The information is often sanitized, inexact, out-of-date or of little real use.

When we're able to get through to department heads and professionals on the firing line, meaningful information flows. As example, Westfield Fire Chief Dan Kelly was able to provide insight. Union County Division of Environmental Health and Emergency Management Director Ben Laganga was very busy but able to relay important information through his sources during the rapidly changing situation.

On the surface, it may not seem like it's that important to have a few moments of contact with those professionals directly involved in the work. But for the public, and to us, the contact provides insight and reassurance that the information is valid and things are happening. Our leaders need to have this frank interaction with the professionals as well.

In the past, it was easier to reach professionals and department heads to obtain candid information. But due to policy changes, such as, at the county, reaching a department head these days is rare. It seems that department heads are ordered not to talk to the press, but refer all inquiries to the public information office. This seems to be a more common practice of government and industry these days.

Over the summer, we put together a story on road projects. We contacted Director of Engineering and Public Works Frank Dann, a highly qualified profes-

sional who had talked to us in the past. He referred us to the public information office, which sent us a press release we had already reported on.

It is important that department directors be permitted to speak to the press to ensure that the most factual information is reported. County spokespersons cannot know everything and sometimes simply cannot provide a complete answer to basic questions.

Municipal officials do not have spokespersons and do talk to our reporters. Most often, town administrators will talk to us. The value of this is immense.

We hope that the County of Union will change its policy and have department heads speak directly to the press in the future. Union County has many experienced directors who are well versed on county business — whether it is roads, parks, finance, budget issues or emergency management.

We invite department heads to submit columns regarding important issues our readers need to know about. We hope they will be permitted to do this.

There are good examples of how this does work. Recently, Kimberly Ricketts, New Jersey Director of Consumer Affairs took the time to interview with us directly. Her comments are reported in this edition, as well as part one last week. She consented to have the interview video-taped and we will post the 45-minute discussion on the Internet this week. We offer the video to the local TV stations for airing.

We are ready and willing to work with state, county and municipal officials, whether it is important everyday business, or during critical times of local and national emergencies to ensure that vital information reaches the communities we serve.

Direct interactions from professionals need to flow vertically, also — to our leaders who must make critical decisions based on the best available information.

## It's Our Turn To Reciprocate; Help Hurricane Katrina Victims

In all likelihood, many from this area are making cash donations to help those desperate and suffering from the tragedy of hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the neighboring Gulf Coast. The scope of the anguish is mind-boggling.

We cannot hope more for relief to be achieved soon, and for the misery to lessen. The National Guard, Coast Guard, police, firemen and thousands of volunteers deserve praise for their exhausting, difficult labors to save lives and end this plight for hundreds of thousands.

In three days from this publication date, it will be September 11. Four years ago, our area suffered anguish and the nation, the world, came to our aid and comfort. Now it's our turn to reciprocate.

In the midst of this disaster, for which we locally were untouched, it is heartwarming to see our children take action in their compassion to help in the best way they know — such as raising donations with brownies and lemonade stands. They remind us of the good in the human spirit. It's frustrating for many who wish to donate material goods. At this time, transportation and distribution resources are very

scarce. There will be considerable need for material goods later.

As citizens generously open their hearts and wallets to save and console fellow Americans from this misery, we urge the government to hurl a lightning bolt at those who gouge, defraud and exploit.

We strongly disagree with those spreading racial hatred to enhance their personal and political positions. It is time to put aside selfish pettiness. New Jersey — stand up and show what we're made of.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the IRS are publishing lists of approved and legitimate agencies for donations. Check their lists to be sure fraudulent solicitors don't dupe you — stealing from those who are so very distressed.

FEMA can be reached on the Internet at [www.fema.gov](http://www.fema.gov). Look for the *Volunteer or Make a Donation* link.

The IRS is on the Internet at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov). "Some organizations, such as churches and governments, may be qualified even though they are not listed."

More information can be found on the main government website on the Internet — [www.firstgov.gov](http://www.firstgov.gov).



## Town Commentary The Challenges As Home Demolition Trend Accelerates

By Sal Caruana  
Westfield Councilman Ward 1

The Westfield Leader has been following the progress of a project on Sylvania Place in Westfield and I would like to take this opportunity to add some additional information and to also discuss the tear down trend.

Having heard concerns from Sylvania Place residents in e-mails to the town council, Mayor Andy Skibitsky and I organized a meeting near the building site on Sunday, August 28. Over a dozen homeowners attended and the sequence of events they described gave us cause for concern too.

A new builder in town owns the property in question, and the project began as a second and third floor renovation of a classic 'Arts and Crafts' period bungalow. When the walls and floors were opened, 'balloon construction' was revealed (an extended infrastructure that made the planned renovation technically impossible).

Under these circumstances, the owner decided to demolish the home and build something new (one can argue that, given the age and style of the house, balloon construction could have been anticipated at the outset).

The builder contacted the town's building official with a demolition request. Our building official properly used his discretion to grant this request without council approval because the project was at a point where there were imminent safety hazards in a delay. Had the request been submitted to the town council, it is important for you to know that under state law, our municipality has practically no ability to deny a demolition permit. The laws of private property (absent a historical designation) give the homeowner almost an inalienable right to tear down his or her own home.

The purpose of a demolition permit and council approval is to ensure that prior safety measures (such as the disconnection of all utilities) are inspected and complied with. Our building official insured they were.

Upon demolition, the Sylvania Place residents were concerned by the sudden change and saddened by the loss of yet another vintage home — a trend disturbing to many of us in Westfield who believe it is threatening two of the basic fabrics of our town — architectural diversity and historic preservation.

After the demolition, the builder proceeded to frame out the new house with new timber, though he had not yet filed a revised building plan with the town. The neighbors alerted the town's zoning officer who issued a Violation Notice. The zoning officer told the owner that he must submit a revised plan showing that the proposed construction was in compliance with our zoning laws; or if it was nonconforming, he must appear before the Board of Adjustment to seek permission for the variances needed. The builder was advised to proceed only on those portions of the job that would be conforming because all of the work he did in the interim would be "at his own risk."

The next event was the most perplexing in the sequence. Apparently, the builder placed a tarp over the newly framed house and work continued away from public (neighbors') view. When the tarp was removed a few days later, many of the new timber used and previously seen in the new framing had now been replaced with old (original) timbers, and old timbers were being used for additional framing.

Why, the residents asked, would a builder put up new timbers then remove them and replace the with old timbers? These were interior wall studs. What architectural or structural importance would be served by using old rather than new timber?

The mystery remains, but perhaps the builder stumbled upon the fact that when he demolished the home, he also demolished (forfeited), under our building codes, all of its many preexisting or grandfathered variances. Consequently,

the builder could not rebuild the house even as it was without board re-approval for the prior nonconformities. Some speculated that the use of old timber might have been an ill-conceived attempt to reclaim "un-demolished" status and avoid needed board approval in restoring the old variances.

The day after our meeting on Sylvania Place, Mayor Skibitsky, Councilman Peter Echausse and I discussed the issues and our own concerns with DPW head Ken Marsh and Town Administrator Jim Gildea.

Conversations were had subsequently with our building and zoning officials. The decision was made to order the jobsite secured and closed given the fact that non-conforming work had been done (rebuilding a previously existing wall that had lost its variance once the demolition occurred). The builder cannot resume work until he submits a revised plan that is conforming or a revised plan with variances that have obtained the approval of the Westfield Board of Adjustment, which will probably take weeks.

Thankfully, the efforts of concerned neighbors helped to call the attention of our Building Department and town council to a situation where it was needed.

As the demolition trend accelerates, the rate-of-loss of vintage homes is impacting more than the architectural diversity and charm of our community; it will change our economic and social diversity as well. More and more potential "starter homes" are going to builders who often replace them with high-priced "McMansions" and, if left unabated, over time, young families or families of modest incomes will find it difficult to settle in Westfield.

Many of the new homes are often much larger than the ones they are replacing and they bring with them their own set of negative impacts too by changing the character and continuity of blocks and neighborhoods — dwarfing some of the adjoining properties and yards, and accommodating above-average-sized families that add additional stresses to our stretched education and infrastructure capacities.

In the coming weeks (and after a year of study), the town council will be introducing, for discussion, proposals that seek to lower the maximum height and sizes of new homes relative to the size of their building lots. We will also focus on growing safety and quality of life issues, such as: unfenced demolition sites; incessant construction noise; and front lawn Port-a-Johns and open front lawn dumpsters (where alternative sites exist).

The rights of private property development should also attach obligations to be a good neighbor. During construction, a broader exchange of courtesies between the homeowner, contractor and neighbors will help us all get through this period of boom.

Older homes cannot be saved without the help of sellers who must be encouraged to test their property's value in the open public market. If you are a senior citizen or other homeowner with a home or property in disrepair, please do not succumb to fears or doubts that your home is not desirable as is, or that a home inspection will be an automatic deal-breaker, or that your home is of maximum value only to an owner or builder intent on demolishing it.

Whether you have lived one year or fifty years in our midst, a family's home often becomes a family's legacy in the Town of Westfield. Please give a new family the opportunity to own, restore or improve yours, and give your friends, neighbors and community the opportunity to continue to enjoy its presence. By testing the public market for the best bid, a seller gives his or her home the opportunity to survive and prosper. It is a great gift indeed to a community that urgently needs you to help to preserve its classic and diverse architectural character.

Please help us to endure.

## Letters to the Editor

### County Watchdog Lashes Out At Freeholder Sullivan Column

Listed under a heading 'Union County News,' Freeholder Daniel Sullivan speaks of the GOP's website as tired and the same old website with the same old candidates with a total lack of vision for Union County. He goes on to arrogantly ask GOP Freeholder candidate Patricia Quattrocchi "maybe your next campaign release can explain why the GOP hasn't won a countywide election since 1994."

I'd like to direct Freeholder Sullivan to another website for the answer [www.unioncountywatchdog.org](http://www.unioncountywatchdog.org). This site will give several explanations as to why no one has been successful at beating the Democrats in a county-wide election since 1994. It will tell him how the all-Democrat Freeholder board used over \$350,000 in tax dollars a year in both 2003 and 2004 in the weeks leading up to the elections on commercials and mailers featuring the incumbent freeholders.

It will tell him of the \$72,000 yearly no-bid contract with Message and Media for media consulting services, which the county has no documentation to show the public what they do for this money. It will also tell him that the Democrats also have a contract with this same firm to handle their freeholder campaigns and the result is that a constituent would be hard-pressed to tell a campaign mailer from a government mailer.

It will also tell him how the county's Office of Public Information, whose employees I have personally seen on the campaign trail the past two years, won't tell what their budget is or even give an accurate accounting as to the days off that these employees took in 2003 and 2004. This is the department that churns out

press releases featuring campaigning freeholders 'ad nauseam' and this website will tell him the exact numbers of these press releases per freeholder.

Freeholder Sullivan, always the one to be nastily attacking anyone who dares to challenge his 'team' by participating in the democratic process, or whatever is left of that in Union County, brings up that no GOP candidates ever attended budget hearings. He doesn't mention that there is no input allowed from the public at these hearings. Also, it is true at freeholder meetings that the public would not be able to have questions answered.

I attended several freeholder meetings last year and I never saw the freeholders who were appointed at various times for various reasons: John Wohlrab, Bette Jane Kowalski, Adrian Mapp or Nancy Ward, at any of the meetings.

My husband also ran for office the year before and I can't say I ever knew who these people were or what their visions were for Union County before they were appointed to their seats by the Union County Democratic Committee.

Tina Renna, President  
UC Watchdog Assoc., Inc.

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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. Jadish — Tired, mean or worn out  
2. Posnet — A little basin or saucepan  
3. Pathetist — A hypnotist  
4. Peba — A small armadillo found from Texas to South America

### SAKEEN

1. A nectarine
2. A grain plant of Abyssinia from which flour is made
3. A wild goat of the Himalayas
4. Discolored or blackened

### TENTATION

1. Experimental adjustment
2. The shattering effect of a sudden burst of energy, as in an explosion
3. Spontaneous subdivision
4. Temporary loss of memory

### TEMULENTIVE

1. Somewhat intoxicated
2. Distressing; perplexing
3. Stern; grim
4. Tentative; timid

### MIFF

1. To take offense or quarrel
2. Utter dismay; astonishment
3. To beat or slap
4. To ignore or overlook

## Letters to the Editor

### FMBA Looks For Contract Settlement

The Westfield Firemen's Mutual Benevolent Association (FMBA) Local No. 30 and the Town of Westfield are awaiting the decision from an arbitrator regarding the settlement of our 2005 contract.

As president of the Westfield FMBA, I am hopeful that an amicable outcome will be achieved. I would like to thank the Town of Westfield for acknowledging our needs and concerns.

Firefighter Robert Tarantino  
President,  
Westfield FMBA

### Why Is Jefferson School Treated Differently?

Editor's Note: Copies of this letter were sent to Superintendent of Schools Dr. William Foley, Mayor Andrew Skibitsky, the Westfield Board of Education, Jefferson PTA, and Councilman Mark Ciarracca.

I write to inform Westfield taxpayers and the parents of Westfield students of a situation that belies the good reputation of our school system. The stated policy of the school system is "1) The Class Size Range should be between 18 and 25. 2) The lower range should be in the primary grades and the higher range should be in the upper grades" (quoted from Superintendent Foley's website).

As of August 30, Jefferson, Tamaques, and Wilson are projected to have essentially identical numbers of kindergarten students (69 to 71); however, both Tamaques and Wilson have been assigned four classes but Jefferson has three. Consequently, all three Jefferson classes have 23 students. Only a couple of higher-grade classes have 23 students. Why are children in the three different schools not treated equally?

Expecting one teacher to deliver a quality education to 23 five-year-olds is ludicrous and is against the stated policy. Parents objected to this situation to Superintendent Foley and the school board in writing and at the August 24 meeting to no avail.

Dr. Foley offered to allow parents the option of sending their children to Tamaques or McKinley for kindergarten providing that the class size does not exceed 19 students in these schools, but will not allow them the option of continuing on in that school. This option is discriminatory and clearly undesirable for many reasons.

Dr. Foley agreed that Jefferson has a room and a willing teacher for another session, and said that this class would cost \$35,000 and that the money is in the budget. Although Dr. Foley and the school board admitted that the size of the classes is a problem, they rejected this option.

In the school board meeting, it was maddening to hear the administration enthusiastically describe the beautiful new high school enhancements, such as the new synthetic turf field and running track. These non-academic expenditures will be paid for by the \$1,381,839 bond that Dr. Foley and the board asked for and received last year.

So why, in a school system with a budget of \$70 million and the taste for fancy athletic facilities, are Jefferson's kindergartners and teachers asked to endure such large classes? Because, to quote Dr. Foley, the school budget was rejected "due to the apathy and foolishness of parents."

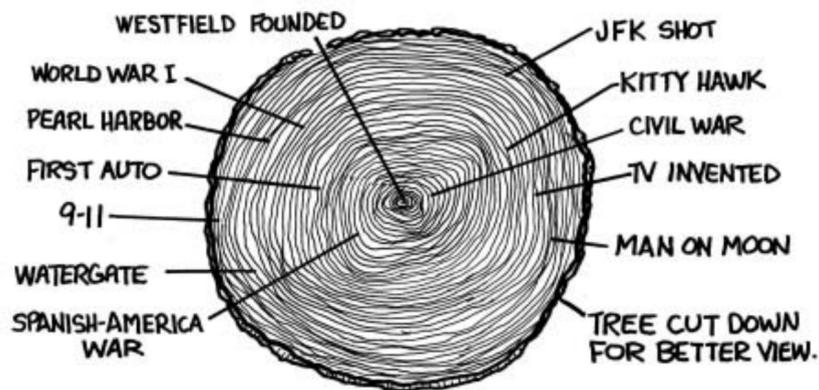
Indeed, the attitude of the entire board appeared to be that parents are getting "what they deserve" for turning down the school budget. Note that the school board chose to request the \$1.3 million bond immediately prior to a request for a 5.12 percent increase in the school levy.

Denying 69 kindergartners an adequate education to punish parents for the town's democratic decision to turn down a significant increase in the school budget is outrageous. Dr. Foley and the board should be ashamed.

People of Westfield, it is patently unfair to these children when the school system's written policy is to have small classes in the early grades. Please contact Dr. Foley at (908) 789-4420 or [wfoley@westfieldnj12.com](mailto:wfoley@westfieldnj12.com) to urge him to rectify this situation.

Melissa Rogers  
Westfield

## TALL TREE TALES



NEEMANOW'S  
THE LEADER/TIMES