

The Westfield Leader

— Established 1890 —

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Letters to the Editor

Santa Claus Enjoyed His Visit to Scotch Plains Sunday Afternoon

I just wanted to take this opportunity to thank the children of all ages who came out to see me at the holiday celebration in Scotch Plains this past Sunday. Approximately 300 children came by to visit. Mrs. Claus and I had a lot of fun meeting so many great children and their families. The weather cooperated and it looked like everyone was having a great time.

I want to thank the many people who made my visit possible. Thanks to the Scotch Plains Fire Department, Department of Public Works and Recreation Department for helping to set up the event and also allowing it to run smoothly. Thank you to the Scotch Plains Police Department for keeping everyone safe. Thanks also to the volunteer elves for making it a fun day. A special thank you

goes to Mayor Marks for his help in lighting the beautiful Christmas tree in Alan Augustine Park.

A special thank you goes to SPBPA President Lisa Mohn of Apple Blossom Flower Shop and the volunteers of the Scotch Plains Business and Professional Association for planning the event and making it a wonderful success. Lisa's tireless efforts have made the event a great success for many years.

I want to wish everyone a happy, healthy and peaceful holiday season. Don't forget my cookies (I prefer chocolate chip) and milk on Christmas Eve! You might make it skim milk - I've put on some weight this year.

Santa Claus
North Pole

Community Asked to Help Raise Money for 'Gifts of Gold' Program

This holiday season, we ask you to help make a dream come true for the less fortunate families of our area. The YMCA of Newark is home to many foster, homeless and DYFS children. We are asking the Westfield community and the student body at Westfield High School to donate money (any amount is greatly appreciated) to the "Gifts of Gold." This money will be spent to fulfill their special holiday wish, and will be delivered to them on Christmas Eve. Remember, your gift could be the only gift a child receives this holiday.

We are reaching out to the Westfield and WHS community to help out the children in need who are currently out of a home. As the holidays get closer, we ask that you get into the spirit and reach into your hearts. Again, any donation will

make a difference. Please help put a smile on these children's faces. Our minimum goal is to raise over \$2,000 and hopefully we will exceed our expectations.

If you are a WHS student, all donations should be brought to Bonnie Underwood's room (252) or her mailbox in the Main Office, or in an envelope to Chris Franks, Brandon Heroux, Nick Livolsi or Danny Strauss. Checks can be made payable to Mary Jane Franks and mailed to 518 Clark Street, Westfield.

Thank you for helping to make Christmas brighter for these children.

Chris Franks, Brandon Heroux,
Nick Livolsi, Danny Strauss
Juniors, Westfield High School

Cavalier, Dismissive Attitude of MS Council on Audit Is Intolerable

According to Mountainside Mayor Robert Vigilanti, every recommendation by the auditors of the borough's financial records is considered to be nitpicking and not to be taken seriously. This is obvious by the fact that three of the four recommendations by the auditors were repeat violations from the prior year's audit.

Not reconciling bail money bank accounts and publicly advertising bids when estimated orders are expected to exceed statutory limits may be unimportant to the mayor and council but it certainly should be too many Mountainside taxpayers as it involves tens of thousands of dollars.

A prior year audit cited the Mountainside Borough for not having audited any of their capital equipment valued at millions of dollars. At the time this glaring error was not reported in any

newspaper. I read the annual audit in the library and brought it to the attention of Mayor Vigilanti and the council. The mayor quickly dispatched my concerns by saying that the audit of the capital equipment was an extremely minor issue and would eventually be conducted. When asked for a date of completion, he replied: "before next year's election."

The cavalier and dismissive attitude of the governing body of Mountainside to its financial records is intolerable. Your paper correctly passes judgment as to the profligacy and indifferent breach of the public trust by the state and county governments. Hopefully, you will publish similar criticisms of the Mountainside governing body.

John Shackelford
Mountainside

HSBC Thanked for Donation to Education Fund of Westfield

At the recent grand opening of HSBC Bank's Westfield branch, HSBC made a very generous donation to the Education Fund of Westfield. On behalf of the trustees of the Education Fund, I would like to thank HSBC for their support of our organization and continued excellence in education in Westfield.

The Ed Fund is a non-profit organization run by community volunteers that awards financial grants to Westfield teachers to compliment and augment the district's curriculum. In the past 14 years the Ed Fund has raised and distributed more than \$230,000 in grants to all grade levels for the purchase of new equipment, materials and programs to be used in the classroom. For instance, more than \$11,000 in grants to the district's Fine Arts program last year allowed the dis-

tribut to purchase new instruments for use at the high school and middle schools. A \$5,200 grant to the high school enabled the student-run television station to purchase three teleprompters. HSBC's significant donation will allow the Ed Fund to continue in its partnership with the schools to provide the best education possible for our children.

Readers can obtain more information about the Ed Fund and its fundraisers, including the upcoming Third Annual Wine Tasting and Auction to be held at Echo Lake Country Club on March 3, 2007, by going to our website at <http://www.westfieldnj.com/edfund/>.

Gretchen Ohlig, President
Board of Trustees
Education Fund of Westfield

School Security and Locks Are Unfortunate Necessities

I was happy to see that I had ruffled so many feathers with my last letter, that people involved in our school communities took the time to step back to contemplate the safety of our schools. The purpose of my letter was to get people talking and thinking about the situation - not to bash anyone or to put anyone on the spot. Awareness leads to communication and problem solving.

Everything that I wrote, I can back up. E-mails from school staff are important enough to save.

We should also take note of things on TV-36. Board of education meetings should be aired more often with the schedule time advertised. The meeting content would be especially helpful. I would like

to see in its entirety the meeting that features Dr. Petix's final address to the Westfield Board of Education. It would be even better to have the option of watching them online.

I don't understand why our school [doors] have to be open 24/7. Some schools in other towns close their doors once school commences. The doors can always be opened from the inside in the event of an emergency. Why don't we have that? Whatever it is, I am glad that there was a meeting of the minds with regard to school safety. It is a start. I'm elated that we are all thinking about it.

The reason given for the open-lunch policy is for kids to find "joy" in eating out seems a bit nuts to me. Many people eat out daily - is that "joy"? No, joy comes from family, friends and interactions with those that we love - outside of a school setting, not rushed and labored.

Dr. Petix was the principal when I attended WHS, and we didn't have an open lunch policy. My friends and I didn't care. Lunchtime was a time to socialize and to catch up with one another's lives. With computers, video games and cell phones, the happiness shared in one-on-one and face-to-face conversation has gone by the wayside. It's sad to see.

A commentary which appeared a few weekends ago on TV-36 suggests the same: kids are too inwardly focused - making school spirit non-existent. There is nothing to get excited about, because there is no true socialization within the school's student population.

My eldest daughter is now eighteen and a senior in high school. Since she began school, I have been involved with her academic career and with those of my two younger children. I demand that our town be diligent and do whatever possible to keep our children safe while at school - that is something that I feel all Westfield residents should demand!

Our residents need to be kept more informed on what goes on in our schools. The fact that drug raids have been conducted is wonderful, but that the students were informed beforehand is incomprehensible. Security and locks are unfortunate necessities and are products of the times that we live in; however, someone should be looking not only at the security threats presented from the outside the schools, but from within their walls as well.

Francesca Sabino
Westfield

Public Has Right to Know Details Of Government Executive Sessions

Local governments are sometimes faced with personnel and legal issues that are best discussed in private, not in front of members of the public and the press. The law provides a mechanism for officials to hold private discussions, but only in special circumstances. It's otherwise prohibited. However, for private meetings to be permitted, New Jersey's Open Public Meetings Act requires that matters need to be spelled out and read aloud in the form of a resolution.

Under this statute, a governing body may exclude the public from discussions that pertain to material deemed private such as personnel records and data, personal information including medical, health, custodial, child protection or rehabilitation; ongoing collective bargaining issues and contract negotiations.

Information on the purchase, lease or acquisition of property with public funds, the setting of banking rates or investment of public funds, "where it could adversely affect the public interest" if disclosed, also can be discussed in executive session. Pending or anticipated litigation or contract negotiations and matters "falling within the attorney-client privilege, to the extent that confidentiality is required in order for the attorney to exercise his ethical duties as a lawyer" is within the executive-session guidelines.

Private discussions can also include issues involving the "employment, appointment, termination of employment, terms and conditions of employment, evaluation of the performance of, promotion or disciplining of any specific prospective public officer or employee or current public officer or employee employed or appointed... unless all the individual employees or appointees... request in writing that such matter or matters be discussed at a public meeting," the statute states.

We covered the disciplinary hearings of Westfield police officer Greg Kasko (currently on paid suspension) and Detective Sandra Chambers, since both officers wanted their hearings to be conducted in view of the public.

In a decision by the Union County Prosecutor's Office, the county freeholder board has been instructed to make several changes in how it goes into executive session. Assistant Prosecutor Ann Rubin ruled that when litigation has been filed, the board should name the case in the motion for executive session when the matter is already in litigation. For instance for the April 14, 2005 meeting, the agenda listed "pending litigation and contract negotiations."

The question of course is who filed the litigation and what collective bargaining group is in negotiations? The public has the right to know.

We detailed contract talks between the Borough of Fanwood and the local Policeman's Benevolent Association after our reporter inquired as to what "contract negotiations" the borough had gone into executive session to discuss. Often, we see "personnel issues" as the sole reason listed for a private session. The law states that an explanation is to be provided.

It is the public's right to know with whom the town is in contract talks with and how much union members are paid, as well as the details of the settlement. We do not want government trying to hide things that are being discussed behind closed doors.

When a case is resolved, it is our view that elected officials should be proactive and fully disclose the nature of a lawsuit or negotiation. Of course, the public can always seek this information through the Open Public Records Act. But why wait? Taxpayers pay for the lawyers and therefore have the right to know how their money is being spent. Let's be open about what transpired in a court case, including the specifics of a settlement or court decision and total legal fees incurred. Stonewalling this information does not do anyone any good and certainly doesn't help elected officials. In our view, this is one reason that the public's opinion of government in New Jersey only gets worse by the day.

In addition, meeting agendas should be disclosed several days before a meeting. They should be placed on the government's website and distributed by e-mail to those who want it. The county freeholder board still will not release agendas until the night of the meeting and only by paper to those in attendance. Last Thursday, the board held both agenda and regular meetings and did not print the regular meeting agenda until the first meeting and the executive session were concluded. How can the public and press review what the board will vote on if the material is not available until the last minute?

We think being candid and straightforward with the public is a good idea. All of our elected municipal and county officials along with school boards should consider this to be the best policy. They should recognize that it is the law. Many towns and officials do so - we wish that those who do not would change their ways.

The public must pay attention, or lose its rights.

Running the Rat Race May Get One into Harvard But Not Across the Finish Line

After reading Kate McGee's thoughtfully disturbing account of the hyper-pressure facing high school students obsessed with getting into elite colleges (*The Student View*, Nov 30), the last thing I want to do is offer her another layer of angst. But she missed an extra menace that lurks behind this Harvard or bust madness. Not only is it emotionally, mentally and, with the add drug Adderall increasingly becoming a study aid, physically dangerous, but it's all patently misguided.

Somehow, we've brainwashed ourselves into thinking Ivy-caliber schools are the only path to success, the Golden Ticket guaranteeing you'll live happily ever after. We've then embraced this

notion as the end that justifies the stress-ridden, adolescent-robbing means. The problem is, the premise is nonsense. In my two decades in the workforce, I've encountered some of America's best and brightest. Sure, some of them went to Harvard, but a whole lot more of them didn't. And while, yes, several employers like to boast that non-Ivy grads need not apply, other businesses discriminate the other way. I know of companies who intentionally avoid the spawn of America's sacred institutions of higher learning, wary of the dark side of an Ivy League pedigree: a general lack of resourcefulness and street smarts exacerbated by a false sense of entitlement.

If you want to be successful, Kate,

Harvard's a great place to go. But it's not the only place. Many have lived lives of great achievement, wealth and fame after graduating from colleges whose names your parents will dare not even whisper. So relax, take a deep breath and enjoy the journey. Continue to take those AP classes, play a sport and participate in every extracurricular you can. But don't try to sweeten your college application; instead, do it to become a confident, versatile, independent thinker. Otherwise, running the rat race may get you into Harvard but it won't get you to the finish line.

Matt Maranz
Westfield



WF Land Use Task Force Invites Input

As the chairman of the Westfield Land Use Task Force, I would like to extend a thank you on behalf of the entire committee to the members of the Westfield realtor community who recently took the time to meet with us to provide their own unique perspective on the issues we are currently addressing.

The individuals who attended our working group session offered valuable insights on some of the most emergent issues we have identified, such as the factors that make Westfield a favored community; the importance of maintaining the character of our community; the preferences and expectations of today's homebuyers; and the types of properties targeted for redevelopment.

As the Land Use Task Force continues its work in the weeks ahead, we look forward to meeting with other stakeholders. Next on our agenda is to sit down with representatives of the building industry to gain an understanding of their perspectives on the issues. I invite any Westfield-based builder interested in addressing the committee to attend a working session to be held on December 12 at 7 p.m. in the administrator's conference room in the (Westfield) Municipal Building.

We are very pleased with the input we have gathered thus far, and encourage all interested residents to share their thoughts, concerns or ideas to the committee through our web mailbox at landuse@westfieldnj.gov.

William Heinbokel, Chairman
Westfield Land Use Task Force



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. Culpon - A shred or splinter
2. Sapient - Wise; knowing
3. Rectirostral - Having a straight bill or beak
4. Chukker - One of the periods into which a polo game is divided

TEFF

1. To make or look smart; to dress up
2. A mild, friendly slap on the back or shoulder
3. A grain plant of Abyssinia from which flour is made
4. Excessive grief; very sad

TEREBINTH

1. A translucent quartz of leek-green color
2. A medieval catapult for hurling stones
3. A small European tree of the sumac family. Turpentine tree.
4. A German helmet with a sharp metal spike

DEAVE

1. To confuse or stun with noise
2. To understand or perceive
3. To belittle or humble
4. To run abandon; decamp

DICHOSTASIS

1. Spontaneous subdivision
2. In biology, the cessation of natural selection in generation
3. State of exhaustion; worn out
4. Motionless; inert

Vote 'Yes' for Bond on Jan. 23 for WF Schools

As many of you are aware, there is an important school bond referendum coming up for vote on January 23, 2007. This vote is the culmination of almost two years of dedicated work on the part of the board of education, the Citizen's Advisory Committee on Enrollment (CACE) and many of our neighbors who have devoted long hours to the task of developing a viable solution to the overcrowded and poor physical state of many of our schools.

I am writing this letter to announce the formation of a new citizens group now actively supporting the efforts of the board of education to inform parents about the pervasive positive solutions for education that the bond offers. This committee - Citizens for Education (CFE) - will be actively involved in publicizing the bond and ensuring that reliable information is available to all residents of Westfield. The committee is peopled by 20 concerned parents and citizens at large representing all of our schools, and has already raised \$1,600 to help provide timely and insightful information to our community.

I am also writing to inform you of some great work being spearheaded by the board of education, and being supported by CFE. Every week in the *Emphasis on Education* section of *The Westfield Leader*, a column will be dedicated to a topic related to the bond; in addition to reading the letters to the editor, please check out these articles.

Members of our community (individuals, schools, interest groups, etc.) are hosting "coffees" for their fellow constituents, neighbors and friends. These coffees will be fun and informational forums where you can ask questions of BOE members as well as Citizens for Education members. Whether you are a parent, business owner or property owner, I encourage you to come and learn about the bond as an investment in our town's future.

The website www.westfieldnj12.org/ bond contains links to a fabulous power point presentation covering all topics related to the bond, and will soon feature an informative set of FAQs. Please take some time to check it out.

In my opinion, a very rational conclusion was reached by the board of education, based on the CACE's recommendations, and the bond referendum recommended offers an opportunity to implement a broad-based solution. If passed, the bond will not only solve many of the problems with our school's physical plant but also offer many other long-term advantages, such as a chance to bring music and art rooms back into our elementary schools and the creation of an early childhood learning center geared specifically to the needs of our pre-school handicapped and kindergarten aged children. The challenges presented by our ever-growing population of school-aged children impact every school. Every school plays a part in the quality of education that Westfield offers... and the quality of our educational system impacts the attractiveness of our town to homebuyers and prospective businesses.

You'll be seeing our pamphlets, buttons and banners around town soon. Please contact us if you'd like to help and vote "yes" for our town, our schools and our future on January 23.

Linda Habgood
Citizens for Education, Westfield

Summit Assoc. Calls for School Budget Freeze

I proposed that the school board budget for 2006 be capped at the 2005 level [in Summit]. The increase in taxes for 2006 over 2005 is \$3,771,149. It appears a "share the hurt" approach is the only method to get the budget in shape. An analysis shows the average school board employee is paid \$59,703. We need to reduce the people in the budget by sixty-three people. Am I happy with proposing that we cut 63 people? No; but we have to start somewhere. This will be an 11 percent reduction in personnel.

Then in 2007 at budget time, we can instruct each department head to come to the school board with proposals that cut 5 percent, 10 percent and 20 percent from last year's actual spending, which incidentally will be the 2005 actual figure of \$46,243,868.

For more information, please see www.summittaxpayers.org.

Ed Vant, Jr.
Summit