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Paul Peyton
ASSIGNMENT EDITOR
Suzette F. Stalker
COMMUNITY
Michael Pollack
EDUCATION & ARTS
Victoria McCabe
JOURNALIST

Horace R. Corbin
PUBLISHER
David B. Corbin
ASSISTANT PUBLISHER & SPORTS
Karen M. Hinds
OFFICE MANAGER

Fred K. Lecomte
MARKETING DIRECTOR
Michael L. Bartiromo
MARKETING PRODUCTION
Robert P. Connelly
OPERATIONS & LEGALS
Ben Corbin
SERVICES

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SP Residents and Freeholders Showed How Democracy Works

Last week the citizens of Scotch Plains as well as the county freeholders learned that democracy works. The residents packed the house at the February 13 Scotch Plains Planning Board meeting and again at the February 16 freeholder meeting to oppose plans by the county to build an interactive children's farm on the Sevell Ponderosa property on Cooper Road. Last Thursday, the freeholders listened to the people and scrapped their plans with Green Meadows to build this development.

The county has vowed to do something with the property, which was purchased for \$10 million from monies of the property-tax surcharge dedicated to the Union County Open Space, Recreation and Historical Trust Fund. The freeholders have vowed to work with community leaders to ensure Scotch Plains is consulted on the best use for this property.

We commend the board for listening to the residents. It was especially nice to hear Freeholder Rick Proctor, last year's freeholder chairman when the Green Meadows deal was announced, admit he had "dropped the ball" in that there was no public hearing on the proposal. It is never easy for a public official to admit a mistake. Mr. Proctor's apology was a statesman's like act.

The residents of Cooper Road deserve praise for their fight on this issue. They were well organized, well spoken, energized and ready for a fight if needed. When the freeholders reversed their plans, the residents applauded the board's decision and personally thanked them.

After coming off the fight to stop the construction of a home in the middle of an island on their street, the Cooper Road residents were not about to be deterred by the county. We encourage them to stay on

top of this issue as the county and township review the best use for the Ponderosa Farm.

We hope that the freeholders will make sure that all proposals on the table; i.e., privatizing county-owned golf courses or bringing the Jets training camp to Berkeley Heights, are fully disclosed to the public before being enacted. The county is not some autonomous, remote agency. They govern at the will of the people with issues that impact the lives of all county residents.

Another fight also appears on the horizon. Residents in the area of Brookside Park have formed a group called Scotch Plains Advocates for the Conservation of the Environment — or SPACE — to fight the township's plan to build a recreation center and artificial turf fields for soccer and baseball. In a letter to the editor this week, they argue that the park is the last "undisturbed" natural parkland owned by the township. We're sure that Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks and the township council will listen to the concerns of this group.

These recent affairs raise big questions — what is the vision for open space? If property-tax money is collected for these purposes, should it in fact be prohibited for use as development? If it's intended by leaders to be used for development, then would people who voted for it feel misdirected on the intent and demand that the tax be stopped? Exactly how do people envision that this tax money be used — for a passive park? Seems like now is the time to answer these questions or stop the tax.

Elected officials should view the Ponderosa Farm debate as lesson in democracy. In this day and age, it may sound trite, but government is "of the people, by the people and for the people."

State Needs to Regulate Towing Fees From Private Parking Lots

A few weeks ago, we reported that Citywide Towing of Hawthorne towed a handful of vehicles from the PNC Bank parking lot in Westfield at the directive of the landowner. The owners of the illegally parked cars were charged hundreds of dollars to retrieve their cars. The cars were deposited at Seville's Auto Body off of South Avenue and that's where the money (cash only) was collected.

A car owner on Friday night retrieved her vehicle on Saturday for \$385. Another was towed on Saturday, but could not retrieve the vehicle until Monday because Seville's was closed on Sunday. A charge of \$507 was levied in this case, which included the extra day of storage.

With the help of several readers, Westfield Town Clerk Claire Gray, Assemblyman Jon Bramnick's office and the State of New Jersey Office of Legislative Services (Ingrid Hernquist), we investigated the laws governing towing and allowable charges. We uncovered regulations from the state and from several nearby towns. However, these regulations exclude private towing actions. The regulations involving municipal government towing are very detailed and seem reasonable.

The Town of Westfield regulations require towers to be registered and to meet several standards. The laws fix the rates. If a vehicle is ordered removed by the police department from a municipal lot or the roadway, the maximum when towed by a "conventional wrecker" is \$55 on weekdays from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m.; \$65 on weekends and holidays until from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m. and \$75 when a flatbed truck is used. If towed out of town, there is an added charge of \$3 per mile.

Also, the vehicle owner would receive a ticket from the town if it were illegally parked. Perhaps there would not be a ticket, though, in cases of an accident or maintenance problem.

We have been unable to find any laws in the state that regulate how much a company can charge for towing vehicles from a private lot. Motorists who are towed from private lots are forced to pay whatever a tow company decides to charge — and it must be in cash.

As told to us by attorneys, the only recourse would be to sue the tow company in state superior court. In that rates are so much higher in

these unregulated cases, we are concerned about what could be likened to "usury."

Town Clerk Gray said that she did not believe the town has the authority to regulate private parking lots. However, we did check the regulation cited on the "bank parking only" signs, which involves the abandonment of vehicles on private property. The maximum summons for the offense is \$51.

We believe the landlord should have been a little more customer-friendly and prepared the way for the transition of common practice of parking there at night. Notices could have been placed on windshields in advance. The Westfield Area Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Westfield Corporation could have been advised to notify area restaurants and businesses.

It's wrong to illegally park on private property but a clearer sign or a simple chain could have solved it.

For the second time in recent weeks, we feel it necessary to ask our state legislature to put an end to another practice that harms the people. We previously asked our legislators to end retroactive pay raises by elected officials. Now we ask legislators to regulate how much tow companies can charge from private parking lots.

Publisher's View

The President's Decision on Port Security is a Paradox

On June 24, 2002, we were honored to meet President George W. Bush when he visited Port Elizabeth to speak on port security. The President said, "...we're winning and we're going to continue to win as we fight for our freedoms."

President Bush was visiting Port Elizabeth to "honor Port Authority heroes and to outline new security measures. This is a different kind of war, and it has placed many Americans on the front line of the war; American firefighters and police officers and postal workers and the folks who work here at the Port Authority, New York and New Jersey, to keep America safe."

Also, we published on September 25, 2003 a report regarding Homeland Security holding exercises on hypothetical attacks intended to — "[weigh] in on raising the national security threat level, closing the country's ports and strengthening border and port security."

Congressman Mike Ferguson said

"It was an eye-opening experience seeing firsthand how our government would respond to a series of terrorist attacks aimed at our ports. With the largest port on the East Coast, New Jersey faces unique threats and challenges. Exercises like this give lawmakers an important perspective on how our government would respond to a future terrorist attack and what we in Congress can do to ensure law enforcement has the resources it needs."

It is now February 23, 2006 and we learn that the President has approved the sale of the British company who runs our East Coast ports to a state-owned company of the United Arab Emirates. This is a stunning paradox. It is a grave mistake in our opinion.

We join Governors George Pataki, Jon Corzine and Robert Ehrlich in urging the President to reverse his decision on this matter. We thank Congressman Ferguson for relaying this view (see page 5).

Letters to the Editor

When Did Westfield Extend Meter Hours In Downtown to 7 p.m.?

It was a nice warm February weeknight and I thought I would take the family out to dinner and enjoy one of the great restaurants that our town has to offer. We jump in the car, park in a nice legal spot (a rare find!) and enjoy a great meal on Elm Street. We return to our car after dropping some well-earned bucks into our local economy and what do we find. A parking ticket! Hooray! How exciting to park your car at 6:55 p.m. and return at 7:55 and have an added \$35 to dish out. Is it just me or did I miss the memo that says the meters run to 7 p.m.! I know some of you are saying, 'Hey Slater, you got what you deserve. You should have loaded the meter at 6:55 p.m.'

Well that may be the case but it is hard

to believe that these meters run to 7 p.m. and that one of our finest police officers had nothing better to do than "Stick it to the man!" Actually they stuck it to all those parked on Elm Street. My point is pretty simple. The meters should only go to 5 or 6 (In NYC they only go to 6) and shame on the police officer who felt the need to make residents (who support the town not only with taxes but with endless fundraisers) pay an extra tab to tow hall. If you want residents to enjoy the town, give us a break.

Anyone for a parking deck? — Count me in!

Mitch Slater
Westfield

Cutting Trees for Rec. Ctr., Fields At Brookside Is 'Unconscionable'

SPACE (Scotch Plains Advocates for the Conservation of the Environment) is comprised of a large number of families concerned about the impact of the proposed development of a recreation complex replacing Brookside Park, the only remaining undisturbed natural setting owned by the township.

The Township of Scotch Plains is currently in the process of developing plans for the use of Brookside Park that will dramatically alter the natural beauty of the land and will have a significant impact on the surrounding neighborhood. Site plans and architectural renderings have been created which indicate that the entire park will be irrevocably changed to accommodate a brand new 40,000-square-foot recreation center, an artificial turf soccer field, a baseball field, lighting and a 2,160-space parking lot.

It is our understanding that the project will be funded through the use of the open space trust fund. This fund, financed through our tax dollars, was established in 1999 exclusively for the purposes of acquiring, developing, maintaining and administering land for preservation as open space.

It is the opinion of SPACE that it is disingenuous to use open space and land preservation monies to build structures, install artificial field surfaces and high intensity lighting. At the time of the referendum, it was clearly the intent of voters to use these funds to improve and preserve natural spaces within our ever-developing community. It is also our position that Brookside Park is the only remaining natural setting owned by the

town. The surrounding woods and pond provide a peaceful natural habitat that is home to a variety of species. The park's jungle gym, walking trails, sleighing hill and open grasslands provide a free and unstructured atmosphere for passive recreation by both the adults and children in the neighborhood and community-at-large. The clear cutting of hundreds of mature trees to install an artificial turf field, recreation center, and parking lot is unconscionable.

There are no indications that the township has addressed or even identified such significant issues as the environmental impact, tax impact, public health, water drainage, safety, security, traffic, usage issues and noise. However, there are indications that the township has already expended significant funds to support the project. This activity was undertaken without any efforts by the township to notify or consult with residents. SPACE believes that Brookside Park and Wildlife Preserve is an unsuitable location for the proposed recreation complex. Brookside Park is a valuable asset to the community and one that should be maintained and preserved for future generations. It should not be undermined by a development that irrevocably alters its natural qualities and the environment.

If any of your readers share our concerns about the proposed development at Brookside Park, I urge them to contact dminchello@vwlw.com for more information.

David Minchello and members
SPACE
Scotch Plains

Next Task Is Creating Committee For Best Use of Ponderosa Farm

Thanks to the determined efforts of Scotch Plains residents, the proposal to put a petting zoo on the old Ponderosa Farm on Cooper Road was rejected last Thursday. Thank you to all the people who came out en masse at Monday's and Thursday's meetings to voice their opinions.

To all of those who helped directly by providing your insight, energy, time and resources, I stand in simple awe of all of

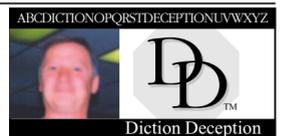
you. Thank you also to the Union County freeholders for listening to us and for making a wise decision that will reinforce the freeholders' far-sighted policy of saving open space in Union County. Lastly, thank you to the Scotch Plains mayor and council for standing with the residents in opposing this development.

However, while I share the joy of my fellow residents that we will not have a large petting zoo disrupting our quality of life, I believe we face a much harder task ahead. A committee must be created that represents Union County freeholders, township officials and residents of Scotch Plains. This committee must come up with a proposal for using the Ponderosa Farm land, a proposal that will be acceptable to all of the interested parties. This will not be easy, but it must be done with deliberate speed.

Unfortunately, history teaches us that promises made are sometimes promises broken. If no timely decision is made by the committee, I fear the Union County freeholders will again act unilaterally and make a proposal for using the land that could be to the detriment of Scotch Plains. I would hope my fears prove ill-founded, but let us not lose what we have fought so hard to gain.

I don't know what the best use of the land will be. I do know that many ideas will be presented, some good, some bad, some indifferent. I don't know if any one of them will make everyone happy. I do know if we act wisely and in the spirit of compromise, we will be able to find a use for the land that will balance the needs of Scotch Plains and Union County and will create a legacy that can be passed down from generation to generation. I know this will happen because I was given a rare glance into the heart of Scotch Plains over the past two weeks. I heard from people of different ages, races, socio-economic backgrounds and beliefs, yet all united by a few simple truths: we love our town, we will work to build it and we will fight to protect it.

Philip Melville
Scotch Plains



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 sarcane words.
1. Quiaich — A shallow cup or drinking vessel

2. Laminiferous — Consisting of layers
3. Zoopraxiscope — An early kind of moving-picture projector
4. Ophiolatry — The worship of snakes

PLEUROSTEON

1. The lateral element of a bird's sternum which joins onto the ribs
2. An extinct marine reptilian animal having had a long neck, paddlelike limbs and a length of 15 to 20 feet long
3. An air sac in the lungs of any animal
4. A thin, serous membrane which covers the inside of the thorax

LIMU

1. Rust-colored
2. Full of life; very lively
3. Hawaiian seaweed
4. A sperm whale

PLIOFILM

1. A plastic coating used to protect furniture
2. The meniscus or curved upper surface of water
3. A waterproof, transparent rubber sheeting used for raincoats
4. The protective, transparent membrane surrounding the eyes

URSON

1. Bristled; standing erect
2. Pertaining to the urinary tract
3. The Canada porcupine
4. Of or characteristic of a bear

SP Residents Won Due to Organizing

This past Monday more than 300 residents stormed a Scotch Plains Zoning Board meeting to protest the county's plans to lease the Ponderosa Farm property in their town to a children's petting zoo. The meeting room, which had a capacity for only 140 people, was inspected by the fire department who then determined that the overcrowding was creating an unsafe condition, and they shut down the meeting.

In 2003 Union County purchased the 20-acre Ponderosa Farms property on Cooper Road from the Sevell family for \$10 million using open space trust fund monies. The freeholders, none of whom reside in Scotch Plains, did not consult the residents when they decided to enter into a memorandum of understanding to allow a petting zoo with 140 animals, parking, portable toilets and animal waste receptacles to be built by Green Meadows for a mere \$50,000-per-year lease.

Scotch Plains organizers quickly laid out the impact the county's actions would have on their neighborhoods.

The county attorney was defending their right to do what ever they wanted with "the county's property." He was arrogant and trying to bully the large crowd. He insisted that the county was only making a presentation out of a courtesy to the residents and that the local zoning board had no jurisdiction. He warned that the town would have to file an expensive suit in superior court if they wanted to object to the plans.

The county failed miserably at trying to bully the people of Scotch Plains. Mayor Martin Marks as reported in *The Westfield Leader* and *Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* said that the township committee stood behind their residents and that they were pursuing a diplomatic resolution with the county. The mayor stated that town officials were surprised at the breadth and scope of the county's project and if their diplomatic efforts failed then they would take it beyond diplomacy.

After listening to residents last Thursday, the freeholders went into an executive session. They came out and dramatically announced to the packed room in what was surely meant to be a public relations coup "democracy worked! We listened to the people!" This resulted in a standing ovation from the crowd. The freeholders had scrapped their plans, for the time being, but still maintained that they had a right to "build on open space."

If democracy was working in Union County, then the people of Scotch Plains would have been consulted about plans for their town. I also wouldn't be surprised if Green Meadows didn't feel like a deer caught in headlights when addressing the zoning board, packed with more than 300 residents. It's evident that he didn't expect a problem since the Green Meadows website had been already listing Scotch Plains as a location.

Scotch Plains won this battle because a passionate and talented group of residents were successful at rallying their neighbors. They also won because the Scotch Plains township committee isn't a county powerbroker puppet.

The moral of the story is that balanced representation and active citizen participation works!

Tina Renna, President
Union Cty. Watchdog Assoc., Inc.
Cranford

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