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SIXTY CENTS

Sierra Leone Releases Scotch Plains Resident; Chemidlin Returns to U.S.

By CHRISSY HAMWAY
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times



ENDORSEMENT...The Service Employee International Union (SEIU) endorsed Senator Robert Menendez on Monday, July 10, at the Westfield Community Center. When asked by *The Times* why he visited the town, Mr. Menendez said, "Tom Kean Jr. invited us here today to come to Westfield, so we did."

Fanwood Delays Tax Bills Awaiting State Aid Figures

By TED RITTER
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

FANWOOD - Mayor Colleen Mahr and the borough council held a public hearing on a proposed municipal budget Tuesday evening.

No action was taken on the nearly \$7.7 million spending plan, which was introduced in late March, because officials are still waiting for word from the state on the borough's application for extraordinary municipal aid, as well as other state funding.

Mayor Mahr said the borough decided to go ahead with Tuesday evening's previously scheduled (and legally-required) hearing, wait for the final numbers from the state on all state funding levels and then adjust the proposed budget as needed.

"I would rather the residents be patient...as we try our hardest to get property tax relief here," Mayor Mahr told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*.

"And if it means that the tax bills go out a little late, at the same time the municipality will extend the grace period so that we won't penalize anyone."

The mayor and council approved a resolution Tuesday night to formally extend the August 1 tax payments.

Chief Financial Officer Fred Tomkins said the borough had expected a final decision on its aid application and other municipal funding levels by now, but the state's recent budget controversy resulted in delays.

Mr. Tomkins said the borough would likely have the numbers it needs by the end of this week or early next week.

He suggested scheduling a budget amendment meeting for July 19, then a public hearing on the amended spending plan on July 25, at which time the budget could be formally adopted.

The state Department of Community Affairs' extraordinary municipal aid program is designed to provide local property tax relief; it provided \$250,000 for Fanwood's budget two years ago. Mayor Mahr said this year the borough hopes for more than \$500,000.

If any such aid materializes, it would "go a long way" toward reducing the impending property tax increase, the mayor said. The municipal portion of the property tax increase is estimated somewhere in the \$200 range for the average Fanwood homeowner. The municipal portion of the property tax comprises about

20 percent of the total tax assessment. "No one was comfortable with that increase," the mayor told *The Times*, referring back to a series of budget-crafting meetings held this past spring.

Mr. Tomkins estimated that for ev-



Katie Newingham for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SP Council Approves Jerseyland Expansion

By FRED T. ROSSI
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS - The township plans to purchase a parcel of private property adjacent to Jerseyland Park that will allow the park to be expanded.

At its meeting on Tuesday, the township council introduced a \$380,000 bond ordinance that, if approved next month, will finance the purchase of a home at 2377 Richmond Avenue. The dwelling would be demolished and converted to additional parkland. The transaction would be funded by township open space trust fund money, the first time since its establishment in 1999 that such funds have been used to purchase private property.

The council will soon send a letter to neighborhood residents explaining the decision, council members said. The Richmond Avenue property where the two-story house is situated juts out into the park, which lies between Richmond Avenue and Beryllium Road. Merging the lot into the existing parkland would help square off the Jerseyland property.

The council said it expects to stress in the letter to residents that the additional land would be utilized in the same manner as the rest of the park at present; the park is home to a baseball field, basketball courts and a large grassy field.

Township Manager Thomas Atkins said the purchase price for the property is \$365,000. The additional \$15,000 included in the bond ordinance will go to closing costs and other related expenses. According to Mr. Atkins, if the ordinance is approved at the council's August 8 public hearing, the closing could occur within 30 days.

In other business, the council, at a conference meeting earlier on

State Department of the United States provided his flights to London and then to New York JFK airport.

The missionary and former National Guard staff sergeant was arrested on April 29 for conspiracy while taking pictures of the United Nations court complex. Mr. Chemidlin was concluding a two-week tour of Liberia, Ghana and Sierra Leone when he took a picture of two Sierra Leoneans in front of the court, located in the nation's capital, Freetown.

During the more-than-two-month ordeal, Mr. Chemidlin was first arrested for conspiracy and released. Subsequently, he was rearrested for espionage. He encountered multiple court delays.

Mr. Chemidlin is a Vietnam veteran who spent last year in Iraq with the New Jersey Army National Guard.

Had he been convicted of the charges, he would have faced 15 years in jail. He spent 21 days in Pademba Road Prison and was then released but not allowed to leave Freetown. A judge ruled he was innocent on July 4, but it was not until July 7 that his passport was returned to him.

"We're thrilled that he's back on American soil and we can't wait to welcome him home the right way," Mr. Chemidlin's sister, Emmy Salerno, told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*.

FreeUncleMike.com reported on Monday that Mr. Chemidlin is currently staying with family in New York after an overnight stay with friends in London.

Tuesday, was informed that the communications tower at the south side firehouse should be fully operational by mid-September. Full completion of the tower, which was erected a year ago, has been delayed for "various reasons," but Township Attorney Brian Levine said most of the problems have been or soon will be resolved. The first of the four cellular telephone carriers began installing the necessary cables and antennas on the tower, and the equipment needed to enhance local emergency services communications will be in place within a few weeks.

Mayor Martin Marks described the council as "extremely displeased" with how the project has progressed since it was first approved in March of last year when a \$485,000 bid for construction was awarded to Procomm Systems Inc. In the intervening 15 months, the council has had to approve payment for several additional expenses associated with the project. The new tower replaces one that was more than 40 years old.

Multiple area residents attended a

Board OKs Permits For JCC And Limousine Service

By FRED T. ROSSI
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS - The zoning board of adjustment approved temporary operating permits for two applicants at its meeting last Thursday before recessing until September.

The board granted the Jewish Community Center (JCC) on Martine Avenue a three-year permit that will allow the organization to erect three tents during the summer months to be used by participants in its summer camps. Michael Goldstein from the JCC told the board the tents are used primarily to seat campers during lunch. About 500 campers participate, and in an effort to limit noise, lunch times are staggered so that no more than 100 campers eat lunch under the tents at once.

The three tents include two measuring 30 feet by 30 feet and one measuring 20 feet by 30 feet. The JCC's current permit was issued three years ago. Mr. Goldstein said there were occasional complaints from a nearby resident about the noise level, most recently during a June 11 staff training session being held in the tents. He said JCC personnel presented a responding police officer with copies of the use variance approval and the temporary operating permit.

Board member Ken Anderson said the operating permit "doesn't permit the operation of the camp; it permits



PAVING THE WAY...A crew works to repave a section of North Avenue. Total efforts will repave the street from the East Broad Street intersection in Westfield to Terrill Road in Scotch Plains. This work has caused traffic snarls for the past week.

Local Officials Respond to State Shutdown, Discuss Impact

By RACHEL LEOPOLD
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

UNION COUNTY - The New Jersey government is running again after an approximately weeklong shutdown that halted all nonessential state services. Local officials discussed the impact on area towns with *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*.

Westfield Administrator James Gildea said, "The state shutdown has had very little impact on Westfield," and officials from Scotch Plains, Fanwood and Mountainside echoed his sentiments about their respective towns.

A commonly cited problem was getting tax bills sent out on time, due to the fact that the amount of state aid being given to each town must be printed on the front of each bill. The towns have not yet received their state aid figures because of the shutdown and thus cannot yet print the tax bills. While the date that towns will be

notified is unknown, Mr. Gildea predicted that verification will come "within a day or two."

Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr said that because of the duration of the shutdown and the fact that it occurred over a holiday weekend in the summertime, its effects "didn't really trickle down" to municipalities like Fanwood. She said had it gone on longer, Fanwood could have experienced a "cash flow problem."

"We have no state parks or major road projects; we're a lucky municipality in that residents didn't really feel it in Fanwood," said Mayor Mahr.

Mountainside Mayor Robert Vigilanti said the brevity of the shutdown helped to mute its effects. He said Mountainside was feeling a "burden" of having its tax bills delayed and was set back about two weeks in the tax collecting department. Had the shutdown persisted, he said, the town would have run out of sufficient

monies around August and been forced to use its reserves.

While all the officials interviewed placed emphasis on tax bills, Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks also expressed concern about the impact of Governor Jon Corzine's resolution.

"The governor has crafted a budget that calls for an increase in the sales tax, where essentially half will go to property tax rebates...Ideally, what should have been done for true reform was to send the money back to municipal aid to lower everyone's property tax bills," Mayor Marks said. He said that with Governor Corzine's system, "a selected few" may have increased property tax rebates, but generally, "it is not really property tax reform and has done nothing."

Addressing the resolution, Assemblyman Jon Bramnick told *The Leader*, "I am unhappy with the resolution because the issue discussed was which taxes to raise as opposed to which cuts to make."

Scotch Plains Township Manager Thomas Atkins also posed questions about the future. While he said that a few Scotch Plains residents may have been affected by the shutdown of services like the Department of Motor Vehicles, he said, "I'm more concerned, long-range, with what these policy decisions mean and how they're going to be handled."

"I didn't get any details on how they're going to make up the \$550 million they're dedicating to property taxes," Mr. Atkins said. He noted that the details had not been worked out as of Friday, July 7, but said they may have been settled after press deadline.

According to Mr. Atkins, more important is "what the dedication of 50 percent of the budget to property taxes means" and how this will be enacted.

"Where are they getting the money to balance the rest of the budget; how is the money going to be applied to property taxes to help residents?" he asked.

Residents, Visitors Respond to Gov. Shutdown

AREA - In the wake of Governor Corzine's shutdown of nonessential state agencies in order to resolve the state budget, *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* interviewed people in our downtowns to gauge local reactions to the process. See page 10 for interviews.



CAMPAIGN PARTY...Ann and Larry Carey of Westfield hold a fundraiser at their home last Sunday evening for Assw. Linda Stender of Fanwood who is the Democrat Candidate for Congress (District 7) in this November's election. Pictured, left to right, are: Mrs. Carey, Mrs. Stender and Mr. Carey.



NEARING COMPLETION...A home on Robin Lane in Scotch Plains nears completion. The swimming pool remains to be constructed. Some neighbors said they were "surprised" as several trees were removed to make way for the work.

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