

Coalition Seeks Long-Term Solution to Trans. Fund

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD – The head of the Raritan Valley Rail Coalition (RVRC) urged officials on February 27 to contact their legislators to ensure that the state's Transportation Trust Fund (TTF) is restored by this summer. The fund will retire on June 30, unless new funding is created.

Although officials said at the meeting, held in Westfield Town Council chambers, they were pleased to see the fund would still be sufficient enough to support projects come this summer, they noted a long-term solution is needed before 2011 when the fund once again will face insolvency.

Governor Jon Corzine unveiled a plan last Friday to restructure a quarter of the state's \$1.8 billion in transportation bonds. New revenue would be generated from dedicated 1.5 cents of the existing 10.5-cent gasoline tax, which would generate another \$78 million in revenue per year. Another \$12 million would come from "redirecting half of the unrealized, but already dedicated, toll road revenue" from the New Jersey Turnpike Authority, according to a press release from the governor's office.

At Monday's meeting, Martin Robbins of Westfield, director of the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, said the governor's plan would increase funding by \$400 million annually to \$1.6 billion over the next five years.

Keeping the program solvent would also mean the state would continue to receive some \$1.3 billion annually in federal funding, according to a report from Regional Plan Association of New Jersey. New York and Connecticut that was released at the meeting.

Mr. Robbins said the governor's plan lowers annual debt payments from \$805 million to \$700 million through the year 2021. However, in the last few years of the bonds, "the new revenue source will be totally absorbed in debt service." Mr. Robbins said the legislature would be required to restructure from 20 to 30 years.

"There are a great many positives here in terms of programs. But the thing that we all have to remember is that the key element of the Transportation Trust Fund... was that we need stable funding; funding that didn't have a crisis every five years," Mr. Robbins said.

He said it is "very important" that a permanent plan is developed within two years. Mr. Robbins said Governor Corzine has indicated he would be open to amending his plan to enhance the life of the fund.

RVRC Chairman Peter Palmer said

if the trust fund is not renewed, all municipal and county projects would face a lack of funding. "If the Transportation Trust Fund isn't renewed, bridges, roads, all the county and local projects are at risk, period," he said.

According to RVRC, counties and municipalities in New Jersey receive \$180 million annually from the TTF.

"The governor and the legislature have several very big issues that they have to deal with. I'm glad to see that the Transportation Trust Fund has been put on the front burner. It is now up to the legislature to deal with it," said Mr. Palmer, who serves as a Somerset County freeholder.

He urged members of the coalition and others attending Monday's meeting to contact their state legislators to ensure legislation intended to extend the fund is adopted by July 1.

Lisa Bets, representing Union County, told *The Leader/Times* that a "sound, stable" fund needs to be created for transportation projects.

Cranford RVRC representative Bill Wright said only 5 percent of the state's real-estate tax subsidizes road improvements. He said this tax must be considered for future revenue for the TTF, along with raising the gas tax. He said another transit-fee hike absent of a gas-tax increase would be unfair to commuters.

Mr. Robbins said he heard the governor was told that the legislature would not support raising the gas tax at this time.

Goodwill to Open New Springfield Store

SPRINGFIELD – Goodwill Industries' first Union County store is now open in Springfield. The new superstore and donation center is located at 126 Route 22 West near Stern Avenue. Hours are Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

The store sells a variety of new and "gently used" clothing, shoes, accessories, household goods and toys. Proceeds from sales fund the programs of Goodwill Industries of Greater New York and Northern New Jersey, which serves more than 75,000 persons a year. The non-profit human services organization offers programs for persons with disabilities, youth, seniors, the homeless and people struggling to overcome addiction, lack of education and/or work experience.

"Goodwill donations are tax-deductible," said Sr. Vice President Mauricio Hernandez. Donations can be dropped off at any Goodwill store or bin. Please visit goodwillny.org for a complete list or visit Goodwill's auction website shopgoodwill.com.



GRAND PARADE...Union Mayor Peter Capodice, center, honors Kathleen McGinnis-DiChiara of Summit, the 2006 Grand Marshal of Union County St. Patrick's Day Parade, and Parade Chairman Peter Tierney of Cranford during a recent township council meeting. The 10th Annual Parade steps off Saturday, March 11, at 1 p.m. on Morris Avenue in Union.

NJ Transit Directors OK Raritan Line Improvements

NEWARK — The NJ Transit Board of Directors approved two items on March 2 to improve service and ease transfers at Newark Penn Station for customers on the Raritan Valley Line (RVL).

The construction of a quarter-mile-long passing track in Readington Township near White House Station along the RVL will enable NJ Transit to increase service by 60 percent at stations west of Raritan, including North Branch, White House, Lebanon, Annandale and High Bridge. Once the passing track is constructed, weekday service west of Raritan Station will increase by eight trains — four in each direction — including two new morning peak-period departures from High Bridge Station, two midday roundtrips and two new evening trains to High Bridge Station.

"Today's action by our board of directors will enable us to deliver consistent, same-platform transfers for our Raritan Valley Line customers, while significantly increasing weekday service between Raritan and High Bridge," said NJ Transit Executive Director George Warrington.

West of Raritan, the RVL is a single-track railroad, limiting trains to operating in one direction at a time. In the morning, most RVL trains operate east and most evening trains operate west due to the limitations of a single track. The White House passing track will allow trains to pass each other on a short stretch of double track to support bi-directional traffic.

A \$1.54 million civil construction contract was awarded to Holmdel-based EE Cruz & Company for right-of-way improvements. The EE Cruz work is expected to be complete by October 2006, when NJ Transit crews

will begin installing the track, signals and switches. The total project is expected to cost \$13 million.

Customers west of Raritan Station can expect to see additional service in mid-2007, according to NJ Transit spokesman Dan Stessel.

The board also approved the redesign of an interlocking near Newark Penn Station that will enable all RVL trains to use the same platforms as New York-bound trains, providing customers with consistent same-platform transfer opportunities. Currently, many Raritan Valley customers must navigate two sets of stairs and the concourse level to reach New York connecting service. (RVL customers currently enjoy same-platform transfers at Newark Penn Station on weekend, off-peak and selected peak-period arrivals). RVL customers can expect regular, same-platform transfers by mid-2008, according to Mr. Stessel.

The board amended its contract with SYSTRA Consulting Inc. of Bloomfield to complete final design for Amtrak's Hudson Interlocking, located on the Northeast Corridor east of Newark Penn Station, for \$525,000.

The Hudson Interlocking project will realign track to increase operating speeds, replace slow-speed interlocking switches and upgrade the existing signal system.



County Moves Forward On Purchase of Cemetery

By PAUL J. PEYTON
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ELIZABETH – The county freeholders board is expected to introduce an ordinance tonight, March 9, to move ahead with the \$6.25 million purchase of the Hazelwood Cemetery in Clark. County officials have said the purchase would prevent the land from being developed into a residential subdivision site of 30 single-family houses.

The acquisition of the 14-acre cemetery, which was announced last month, is being funded through the Union County Open Space, Recreation and Historic Trust Fund. The property is located on Madison Hill Road at Beechwood Road and links Milton Lake Pond and Esposito Park, the latter of which was acquired by the county in 2003. The county is building a ball field, play area, tennis courts and skate park at Esposito Park.

The freeholders will vote to go on the record tonight in opposing the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) metro airspace redesign. The board received a report from the Union County Noise Committee last month. Jerome Feder of Westfield, chairman of the panel, said the proposed redesign would significantly impact residential areas of Elizabeth and surrounding communities. The FAA is seeking to increase aviation capacity while reducing delays at the airports, he said.

Mr. Feder reported that one of the proposals under consideration would impact some 300,000 county residents in Elizabeth, Linden, Hillside, Roselle, Roselle Park and Union. The local FAA hearing is scheduled for Tuesday, March 21 from 6:30 to 9 p.m. at the Holiday Inn on Route 22 in Springfield.

During Thursday's meeting, Director of Administrative Services Elizabeth Genievich told the board that the county is facing a significant increase in its worker's compensation insurance policy due to a domestic terrorism surcharge. The \$555,573 cost of the policy represents a 13-percent increase over last year.

"So there is a premium to be paid because of where we are?" Freeholder Dan Sullivan questioned. Ms. Genievich said others policyholders in the area are facing the same increases.

The auto insurance policy on the county's fleet of vehicles is increasing 1 percent to \$899,618. The board will vote to renew both policies with the PMA Insurance Group of Mount Laurel at tonight's meeting along with a \$507,122 excess liability policy with the Insurance Company of the State of Pennsylvania (AIG). The policy is up under \$3,000 from last year.

The board is also set to enter in a

\$200,000 contract with Edwards & Kecey of Morristown to provide professional services for the county's transportation planning study entitled "Union County Freight Access Study Between Port Elizabeth and Tremeley Point."

County Engineer Jeff Sias said the county would take the lead on an inter-local agreement with Morris County to replace the Central Avenue Bridge over the Passaic River in New Providence and Chatham Township. Officials said the expansion is "structurally deficient" and needs to be replaced. The cost of the project will be split evenly between the two counties.

A resolution will also be on the agenda tonight approving a contract with the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Youth and Family Services. The contract is for funding for the 2006 Human Services Advisory Council and Commission on Missing and Abused Children. The state will provide \$66,000 with the county match at \$16,000.

Resolutions will also be acted on to proclaim March as National Professional Social Workers Month and National Nutrition Month and March 30 and National Doctors Day in the county.

At the start of the meeting, members of the Union County St. Patrick's Parade Committee marched into the freeholders meeting room led by bagpipes played by the Union County Pipe and Drum Band. Members of the parade committee were presented with resolutions for their efforts in planning the Saturday, March 11 parade, which will be held for the 10th consecutive year in Union Center. Festivities start at noon followed by the parade at 1 p.m.

"You do a great job with the parade and we thank you for it," said Freeholder Deborah Scanlon, whose husband, Patrick, serves as the committee's treasurer.

The freeholders approved a \$4,000 check to the committee in January to help defray costs for the event.

SPFHS Alumni Set Meeting Date

SCOTCH PLAINS — The Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School Alumni Association will meet on Tuesday, March 21 at 7:30 p.m. in Room 101 at the high school. The program will feature the director and student actors of the SPFHS Repertory Theatre as guest speakers. They will be presenting the play *42nd Street* at the high school on Westfield Avenue on March 17 through 19 and March 23 through 26.

All are welcome to attend the alumni meeting. Refreshments will be served. For more information, call Bernice Montagna at (908) 232-1468.

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