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## 22nd District News

### We Are all New Jerseyans Who Care Deeply

Senator Nicholas Scutari, Linden

This past July, Governor Corzine, Senate President Codey, and Assembly Speaker Roberts convened an unprecedented special session of the state legislature to address New Jersey' property tax crisis. As part of this effort, our committee was charged with reevaluating a system of public employee benefits that has been evolving through legislation and negotiation for over eight decades, with an eye towards proposing sweeping, substantive reforms. We wanted to produce a system that was affordable for the taxpayers, free from abuse, and still maintained our ability to attract and retain a talented workforce to serve the people of New Jersey. Two weeks ago we issued a report that I believe fulfills these goals.

All told, we made 41 recommendations, each one a building block towards restoring the public trust and protecting the financial integrity of the system. While I don't think it's necessary to recite each item, I would like to touch upon some of the reforms that are most indicative of this committee's robust approach:

Such as the elimination of so-called pension holidays; in order to keep our promises to current public workers and retirees, the state must make annual, actuarially sound payments into the pension system.

Abuses such as "tacking" and "boosting" must end. Employees should be forced to designate one job for one pension. Furthermore part-time employees, elected officials, and political appointees should be placed in a separate defined contribution system, reserving pensions for full time employees only. Vendors and contractors should be out of the retirement system altogether.

While we respect the collective bargaining process, we must urge Governor Corzine, as part of any new contract, to require state employees to share in the cost of their health insurance premiums. Furthermore, we must give local employers participating in the state health benefits program the flexibility to negotiate premium sharing and plan features with their employees in the first place.

This committee is unequivocal about

the need to honor our pension obligations to current public workers and retirees. However, we must adopt a pension benefit for future employees that is reasonable and affordable. The N/55 multiple adopted in 2001 should be decreased to the original N/60, and the retirement age should be raised to 62.

Make no mistake, while there is certainly some low-hanging fruit amongst our recommendations, for the most part these are long-term solutions to long-term problems. But ten, twenty, and thirty years from now, New Jerseyans will continue to reap the benefits of these reforms as the costs to the taxpayer are reduced and the current public workforce enjoys a reliable, stable source of retirement income.

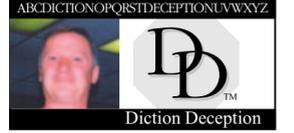
I want to thank everyone who participated in this process for their hard work and input, including fellow legislators, union representative, and members of the business community. I especially want to recognize those members of the public who took the time to contact the committee with their views. Your letters and e-mails served as a ceaseless reminder that regardless of differing opinions, we are all New Jerseyans who care deeply about the future prosperity of our communities and our state.

I would also like to thank Philip Murphy, chairman of the benefits review task force, Fred Beaver, director of the Division of Pensions and Benefits, and the Office of Legislative Services for their time and tireless efforts.

Finally, I would be completely remiss if I did not acknowledge the hard work of the committee members themselves, especially my co-chair, Assemblywoman Pou. It is a testament to their commitment to the general welfare of the State of New Jersey that we were able to achieve such a high degree of consensus about what needs to be done.

With that, I look forward the comments of my fellow committee members.

*Editor's Note: Senator Scutari, co-chair of the legislative committee on public employee benefits reform, made the above statement last Monday.*



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. Zokor - A burrowing rodent that looks like a mole rat
  2. Tergiversate - To desert a cause
  3. Reliccion - Land left uncovered by the recession of the sea
  4. Churrus - A gum resin which oozes from the Indian hemp

- CULPON**
1. A roof prop used in a coal mine
  2. A heavy javelin used by the Roman infantry
  3. A shred or splinter
  4. An arrow or arrowhead
- SAPIENT**
1. Restless; nervous
  2. Wise; knowing
  3. Dewy; moist
  4. Not subject to corruption
- RECTIROSTRAL**
1. Having the breadth of the cranium greater than the length
  2. Having the back below in swimming, as certain insects
  3. Having a straight bill or beak
  4. A leaning to the right
- CHUCKER**
1. Second-class; something of lesser value
  2. One of the periods into which a polo game is divided
  3. A gopher
  4. A concealed dungeon with a trap door at the top

### Letters to the Editor

#### Other Cell Tower Sites Should Be Considered

It is understandable that based on *The Westfield Leader's* November 23 article that the Westfield Town Council will very possibly reject the two town locations for the cell tower.

At the turn of the century when technology changed with electricity and telephones becoming necessary, did everyone say they did not want telephone poles on their street?

Cell phones are an everyday necessity to many people, and we are just catching up to what is being done in Europe.

There are so many other alternative sites that should be considered in line with Verizon's technical recommendation based on a layman's opinion that would be less offensive than seem obvious. They are:

1. Consideration of locating on other than Westfield property such as commercial properties along the railroad tracks. The town of course would need to consider a reduction in that commercial property's real estate taxes by purchasing that portion needed for the tower to receive the revenue from cell tower lease. I am sure there are many other negotiable alternatives.
  2. Technical feasibility of locating the tower on one of tallest buildings in town, the Union County forensic building which possibly should have been considered when built.
  3. Some other sites, which appear obvious include Lord & Taylor's, the town's south side parking lot, Westfield Lumber and lastly,
- It is very hard for me to understand why a necessity such as this is being subject to such an unnecessary confrontation in undesirable sites when there are obvious alternatives.

Louis Capuano  
Westfield

#### Wonderful Woman Helped My Dog and Me

I wish to thank the wonderful Good Samaritan who stopped on New Street on Monday evening, November 27, at approximately 6 p.m. to assist my six-pound Maltese, Cody and me. Cody and I were waiting for the light to change on the northeast corner of South and Central Avenues, when a large brown dog with an E-collar (possibly a pit bull with a plastic cone around its head) came charging out of nowhere and viciously attacked my dog.

This wonderful woman and her daughter saw what was happening from a distance and stopped their car as soon as they were able. They called the police and waited with me until they were assured I was all right and would get a ride home.

I was too upset to get her name, so I would like to take this opportunity to extend my thanks, once again. Her kindness and concern helped me through a difficult situation. Thank you also to the police officer on scene for his assistance in seeing us safely home.

Unfortunately, there are too few people like this woman and her daughter. As I was struggling to save my dog, trying to fend off the attack, and screaming for help at a busy corner at rush hour, no one else came to my assistance. No one even bothered to open a car window to ask if I was ok.

I have a difficult time understanding how people can drive by and ignore someone so obviously in trouble. I certainly wouldn't have expected anyone to risk their personal safety, but how much danger are you in while sitting in a car? Where was everyone else who was passing by as my little dog was running in the street (on his leash) to try to avoid the attacker?

As it was, my dog was bitten and needed treatment by the vet. Fortunately, I was only nipped, and luckily, there were no small children around. However, the dog has not been found. If anyone knows to whom this dog might belong, please notify the Westfield Police Department.

And if you are the owner, please let the police know so that I can be reassured that the dog is healthy. And finally, if you are a dog owner, please keep your dog on a leash and report missing animals to the police. Your neighbors will thank you.

Karen Simon  
Westfield

### Letters to the Editor

#### Trenton's Legislators Should Either Lead on Prop. Tax Issue or Resign

We have been treated to the results of four months of work by four committees regarding property tax reform. The end result is a promise of 20 percent savings for some home owners, which falls way short of the 30 to 40 percent we should receive. There were 98 recommendations to be acted upon, along with increases in sale taxes and the potential sale or leasing of New Jersey assets.

There were several aspects related to this tax savings promise that will prove to be only a short-term benefit. I fear that many of us will be excluded in part or in total. In fact, just four days after the conclusion of the committee, it was noted that only those that make \$50,000 will get the full 20 percent savings. What will the savings be in a month?

First let's look at how these committees conducted their business. There were numerous meetings, most consisted of private interest groups (CWA, NJEA, etc.) that benefit from the present situation and do not want their turf to be stepped on. The committee's decisions were made without including the minority party. This is despite the statement by Assembly Leader Roberts a few weeks ago in front of the state's mayors that there were numerous conference calls. Well, the Republicans present did not appear to have been given the phone number.

Assemblyman Roberts, do you really think that we are that stupid? You Democrats created most of the problem, carried it to the n-th degree and now you have excluded the Republicans on the fix. Does this sound like the fox guarding the chicken coop? I was accepted on the Republican Joint Legislative Committee on Constitutional Reform and Citizens Property Tax Constitutional Convention as a civilian contributor. We only had one meeting. Why bother having more if the Republicans were not being included in the decision-making?

One thing that was obvious was the lack of addressing the spending side of the problem.

The 20 percent savings is only funded for one year. Where is the money coming from the following years? Perhaps the sale of state assets is the answer. There is talk of the Turnpike, Parkway and the like. I propose that we sell the State House including the dome. It is obvious that it is only being used for private interest and personnel gain. Its sale would not affect most of us; in fact it may even help.

There is a belief that the rich do not need this benefit. This country was founded on equality, for rich and poor alike. Should the taxes be wrong, it is then wrong for all. Therefore both rich and poor should be treated equally. The Democrats must think that they are Robin Hood, taking from the rich and giving to the poor. We should be very wary of this, since the title of "rich" could extend to those of us that pay the majority of the taxes. This of course assumes that we don't join the 57,000 residents that left this state last year. I have heard it mentioned those that will receive the majority of the money are those that typically vote for the Democrats. Is it not good timing, that the savings will be received just before next year's election. The Democrats have a habit of pushing money into their districts. Less than a year ago, resulting from a suit by a Cranford resident, the governor was forced to remove millions of dollars destined to be "given away" by the Democrats.

The limiting of increase of property taxes to that of the cost of living or the like is good idea. But in the past two years, bill S-1701 has limited growth in school budgets to 2 1/2 percent, during that time period my tax levy for the Scotch Plains-Fanwood school system has increased

4.02 and 5.51 percent. Thanks elected officials for proposing increasing my taxes. We need to limit the increase of the tax levy to the taxpayers, not the budget.

The creation of "super" county school superintendents sounds good, but let's keep in mind that Union County's superintendent receives in excess of \$105,000 a year for what ever she does and the Scotch Plains-Fanwood superintendent receives a reported \$174,000 a year. Will the "super" superintendent mean we will save \$174,000? Not likely. We will wind up paying almost \$300,000 a year for both. Somehow, the cost savings you promise escapes me unless we cut staff.

I can go on and on, but the media limits the amount of space per letter.

There are a couple of things that could easily be done to show leadership and fairness.

Fairness would be addressed, if we would act to not force our senior citizens out of their homes due to the runaway taxes. These people have "paid their dues," many are on fixed income, saving for retirement, or receive no benefit from the majority of their tax dollars. I propose that we exempt all citizens over the age of 55, who do not have children in the public schools, from that portion of their property tax that would go to the schools. This will assure seniors can stay in their home. Stop "slapping the face" of seniors on social security or trying to be independent in retirement, with a tax bill of more than \$6,000 - which about two-thirds goes to pay \$200,000 or more for a superintendent, install lights and artificial grass on fields, provide pre-k school services, pads school payrolls and funds educational courses that are neither mandated by government nor desired by industry.

I urge all seniors to contact their elected officials, the AARP, the media, other organizations and ask their adult children and the other young families to support this fairness in taxes.

When it comes to leadership, all elected officials should immediately decline any payment from the state for their failed leadership in allowing the property tax situation to get to the sorry state they have achieved. In addition, all pension benefits and medical coverage should also be declined. Ladies and gentlemen of Trenton, we elected you to lead. Therefore, do it for a change. If you can't provide this leadership, then resign your state position only after you give us initiative and referendum. We will fix the mess that you created and continue to do nothing about.

Albert Muller  
Scotch Plains

#### Food Drive Response Was Overwhelming

During the first two weekends in November, the Westfield area Boy Scouts held their annual Scouting for Food drive. As usual, our community's response was overwhelming with food collection amounts surpassing anything we have seen in recent years. There were enough donations received to stock the Holy Trinity Food Pantry to capacity and enough left over to restock it after the holidays. This pantry serves those in need throughout Union County, helping up to 100 families or 225 people a month.

Many thanks to all the scouts from Tiger Cubs to teenage Boy Scouts who gave their time over the two weekends and to the many volunteers at Holy Trinity Food Pantry, especially pantry coordinator, Rose O'Hare, and Deacon Keith Gibbons, who helped sort the donations and stock the pantry. A special thanks to the Westfield community who, despite being asked continually to donate to different drives and charities, once again opened their hearts to those less fortunate.

Kris Mench  
Coordinator, Scouting for Food  
Westfield

## Sign Pollution Is Masking The Beauty of Our Towns

If you like photography, there are many beautiful scenes to capture in our area. We examine hundreds of photographs a week, but what do we see? - Sign pollution. It's becoming unbearable on our streets.

Judge this for yourself. Take a series of photographs of the picturesque Fanwood train station and the borough clock. Can you do this without obnoxious signs spoiling the view? Walk down East Broad Street by Mindowaskin Park and count the signs. Try to take a pleasant photograph of Park Avenue in Scotch Plains.

Do you notice all the signs now? By being everywhere, signs have become invisible by being in plain sight.

We think the hundreds of road signs are ugly. Many of them are unnecessary, meaningless or confusing. Some are rusted, bent or smeared with graffiti.

It seems that every road project or parking ordinance includes adding signs. But no ordinance or maintenance program includes removing outdated signs or fixing those in disrepair.

Sign pollution is so commonplace that it disappears

from view. Observe the fallen double rung sign laying flat on the sidewalk at North Avenue and Elm Street in Westfield. It has been there so long now that no one sees it. People merely walk around it. We believe that the sign was put there by a state contractor. It was scraped by a truck that knocked it down. Okay, it's not the responsibility of the town, but it is polluting - can anything be done?

We believe unmasking the natural beauty of our streets could substantially enhance the attractiveness of our towns. Get rid of the unsightly signs.

This wouldn't take government grants or state aid to do it. Community groups, business associations, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts could look and see. Then town employees could remove them.

Of course, this involves a sizable bureaucracy in that some signs are state, others are county, still more are municipal; there's NJ Transit and some are SID or advertisers. Even so, we believe more than half of them should be jettisoned, and it would be well worth the effort. Let's clean up the mess - it would be gratifying.

## Reputable Medical School Needs to Take Over UMDNJ

Over the past several months, the office of U.S. Attorney Chris Christie and federal agents have been busy investigating corrupt practices of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey (UMDNJ). Whether it be a no-show job for a state senator or illegal six-figure stipends for surgeons to refer patients to UMDNJ's troubled cardiology center, the reputation of the medical center has been crushed while the public coffers were plundered.

What started as a Medicare and Medicaid fraud investigation has become more bizarre each passing day. Former Chief Financial Officer James Lawler refused to sign federal documents to certify the accuracy of the medical center's Medicare and Medicaid bills. Senator Wayne Bryant was paid \$35,000 for what staffers said was a one-day-a-week job during which he read newspapers. He used that position and his chairmanship on the senate's powerful appropriations committee to funnel millions of dollars through UMDNJ. He used his part-time job, along with other taxpayer-funded posts he held, to boost his state pension. It was also recently disclosed that 18 cardiologists were paid \$150,000 for simply referring patients to the cardiac program - another crime.

The UMDNJ's Board of Trustees were told by Mr. Christie to either agree to a federally appointed monitor - retired judge Herbert Stern - or face indictments for fraud and conspiracy.

Federal investigators need to ensure that all those who were involved in the corrupt and criminal practices face justice. Those who are convicted must be stripped of their

lucrative state pensions and never be permitted again to hold public jobs - in this or any other state.

Cleaning up and bringing UMDNJ to respectability should be put on the front burner. Plans to merge Rutgers, NJIT and UMDNJ should be shelved. Why damage the reputation of Rutgers and NJIT by linking them with UMDNJ? After all, Mr. Bryant already infiltrated the system. He was listed as a professor with Rutgers in addition to his UMDNJ "job." Why make matters worse?

After a year into this investigation, it is obvious that UMDNJ needs major surgery. Another medical school outside of New Jersey needs to take over. There are several good possibilities - perhaps New York-Presbyterian University Hospital of Columbia and Cornell, New York University School of Medicine, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine or Drexel University College of Medicine. A school with a national reputation needs to help save UMDNJ as it's clear we can't do it by ourselves.

The medical staff, students and patients need to know that they will not be harmed by the damage this corruption has caused. Forming an affiliation between UMDNJ and one of these other schools seems necessary. Medical centers have joined together over the past few years to save their institutions, such as Rahway Hospital linking with Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital in New Brunswick.

Let's take UMDNJ off life support and end the crime. Will someone help us, please?

#### Thank You Westfield, One Heck of a Town

On November 17, my husband took a nasty fall in the parking lot behind the Westfield Imaging Center. After two pedestrians ignored his plea for assistance, a third individual finally helped him into the Imaging Center. The personnel there took extraordinary speed in applying first aid and in notifying the Westfield Rescue Squad and the police who, in turn, notified me immediately.

The squad transported him to Overlook Hospital where emergency room professionals saw to his needs in rapid-fire time, thereby minimizing the bleeding and pain.

I am so very grateful to all the people involved and in their quick and professional treatment. Thank you all; thank you Westfield for your overall caring and diligence.

Once more, this is a heck of a town.

Marilyn Gulotta  
Westfield

Kathleen Harrington  
Scotch Plains

#### Mental Illness Spares No Community; Is More Common Than We Realize

Many of us in Westfield and the surrounding communities were saddened to read about the tragedy of Robert Villane's death. Our hearts and prayers go out to his family as they face the holiday with their grief and bewilderment about the events leading to this young man's traumatic final day.

It did not go unnoticed to me that Robert graduated from Westfield High School in 1989 because our family suffered the loss of our daughter from mental illness, having graduated from WHS in 1988. The cause of death was suicide at the age of 25.

That year she was one of four suicides in our community including a young, engaged WHS teacher.

Our son, who graduated from WHS in 1990, continues to suffer (and we with him) from a mental illness that renders him unable to live the life he still dreams of having. He has been in and out of most

of the psychiatric units in New Jersey and now lives in a boarding home in California. A fellow graduate and a childhood friend of his died from suicide in his dorm room during his second year of college.

Mental illness spares no community from its awful ravages and is far more common than we realize. Its stigma contributes to fear, to shame, and an added dimension of pain to those suffering and their families. Being a nurse on a psychiatric unit in a large hospital does not spare me or my loved ones from the disaster of this illness.

Let's keep this family and our community in our prayers as we observe this holiday season.

May next year, 2007, be a year of education and understanding of the treatment of this brain disease.



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