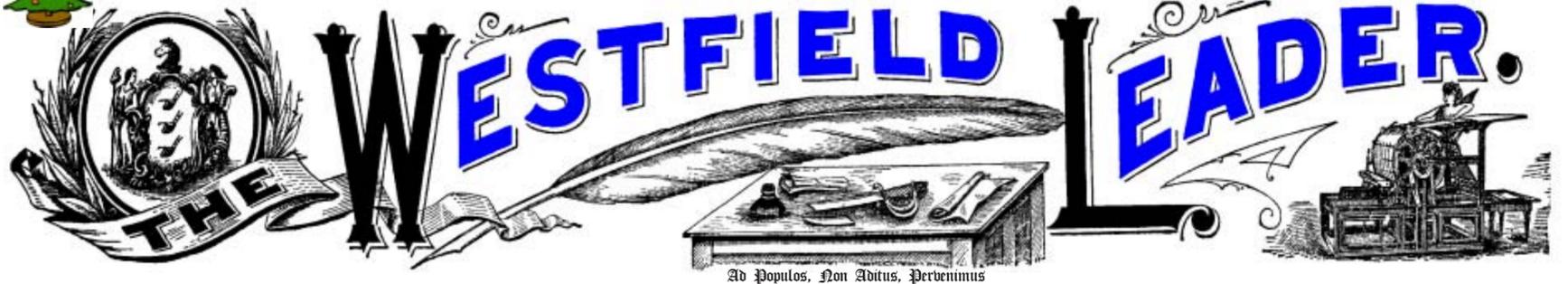




Merry Christmas!



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SIXTY CENTS

WF Would See 2-Percent Ed.-Aid Hike; SP-F Would See 10 Percent

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

AREA - The Scotch Plains-Fanwood school district would see a jump in state education aid in 2008-2009 of \$451,000, or 10 percent, while Westfield would see the minimum hike of 2 percent, or \$100,000, under a new school-aid formula Governor Jon Corzine unveiled last Thursday. The Mountainside school district would receive an increase of \$148,000; Garwood's aid would jump up \$112,000. Neighboring Cranford would see an increase of \$604,000 in aid. Mountainside, Garwood and Cranford's increases would all be 20 percent.

Under the new formula, outlined in the Governor's report called "A New Formula for Success: All Children,

All Communities," \$7.8 billion would be distributed for kindergarten-to-grade-12 education for the Fiscal Year 2009, an increase of approximately \$530 million, according to the Governor's office.

The Union County Vocational-Technical School's state aid would jump \$745,000, or 20 percent. Union County as a whole will see an increase of \$34.3 million to \$530.1 million, the fifth-biggest county increase behind Middlesex, \$64.1 million; Hudson, \$57.7 million; Camden, \$52.8 million, and Essex, \$37.8 million.

Under the aid numbers revealed last week, Westfield's aid next year would be \$5,051,000; Scotch Plains-Fanwood's aid would be \$4,956,000; Cranford would see \$3,626,000; Vo-

Tech would receive \$4,470,000; Mountainside would see \$888,000 and Garwood would receive \$668,000.

Among statistics state officials reviewed were student enrollment, housing values and family income from 2000 through 2007. "The calculation of each district's local share is based on the wealth of each community as measured by aggregate income and property value," according to Governor's press release.

The report showed that Westfield's student population rose by 806 from 2000 to 2007 to a current total of 6,250, while Scotch Plains-Fanwood saw a 738-student hike to 6,250 and Cranford witnessed a spike of 386 children to 3,658. While Garwood's number of students went up 22 students to 576, Mountainside saw a 138-student jump to 1,002.

Westfield Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dolan said the district has been analyzing why it received the minimum increase. "[Aid] hasn't increased much since 2001-2002," she said.

While agreeing with Governor Jon Corzine's efforts to help lower property taxes, she said the new formula "is certainly not going to help the taxpayers in Westfield."

She said the district has witnessed a 15-percent increase in enrollment over the past seven years, "which is higher than the state average."

The superintendent said Westfield "has taken a lot of steps to keep costs down" including negotiations with employee unions, insurance and energy rates and shared-services agreements with the town and county.

"And then you get 2 percent and you don't know why," she said.

Ms. Dolan said the new aid formula provides no money for the district's 700-plus special-education students. "[Special education student percentage is] the same as it was seven years ago."

According to a press release from the Governor's office, special-education

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ON THE RUN...Otis Blunt, 32, left, of Toms River and Jose Espinosa, 20, of Elizabeth escaped from the Union County jail in Elizabeth on Saturday. Espinosa, a member of Bloods gang, was to have been sentenced next month to 17 years in jail for a drive-by shooting in January 2005, while Blunt was awaiting trial for robbery and weapons charges. Anyone with information is asked to call Detective Scott Pence of the Union County Police at (908) 654-9800 or Crimestoppers at (908) 654-TIPS. Crimestoppers is offering a reward of up to \$5,000 for the arrest and conviction of the two prisoners.

Manhunt Continues for Union County Jail Escapees

ELIZABETH - Two inmates escaped from the Union County jail in Elizabeth at around 5 p.m. Saturday night by removing two cinder blocks in a jail wall and then jumping 25 feet from a rooftop over a barbed wired fence, according to Union County Prosecutor Ted Romankow.

According to the prosecutor's office, Jose Espinosa, 20, of Elizabeth and Otis Blunt, 32, of Toms River "apparently jumped from a third floor roof."

Espinosa pled guilty on January 30 to aggravated manslaughter and was to be sentenced on January 25 to 17 years in prison for an August 2005 drive-by shooting in Elizabeth.

Espinosa, a confirmed member of the Bloods gang, was being housed in cell B311 while Blunt was in the next cell, B310, according to authorities.

Blunt was being held on \$75,000 bail while awaiting trial for robbery and weapons offenses. He had previously attempted to escape from the prison in September using similar methods, according to cnn.com.

The prosecutor's office described Espinosa as a Hispanic male, five feet, five inches tall, weighing 155 pounds, while Blunt is a black male, five feet, nine inches tall, weighing 160 pounds.

According to Mr. Romankow, a cement cinder block - about eight inches high and 16 inches long - had

been removed in the wall separating the two cells. Magazine photos of bikini-clad women had hidden the holes in the walls.

"Blunt evidently squeezed through that small opening into Espinosa's cell," Mr. Romankow said. "Espinosa, meanwhile had removed a similarly-sized block and the surrounding mortar on the outside wall, next to a window. It is believed that the two men squeezed through the outside wall and jumped to a rooftop just below. From there they jumped over a metal fence topped with razor wire, which was about 25 feet from the roof's edge. The fence top was approximately 25 feet high."

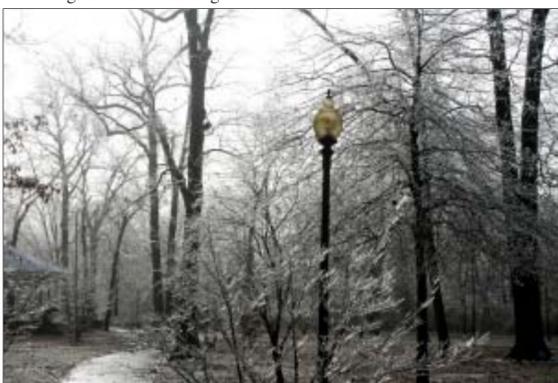
Mr. Romankow said at a press conference Monday that the two men used a long metal wire to scrape away mortar to remove the cinder block between their cells.

He also said one of the escapees left a note suggesting a jail guard had helped with the escape, saying, "Thank you officer [name redacted] for the tools needed, you're a real pal, Happy Holidays."

Mr. Romankow said at the news conference that the note represented the "arrogance of these two men."

Before making good their escape, the men fashioned dummies on their beds and covered them with blankets, authorities said.

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ICE ICE BABY...Mindowaskin Park wears a layer of ice after last Thursday's stormy weather. Westfield Fire Chief Dan Kelly told The Westfield Leader that the fire department responded to 30 storm-related calls, mostly related to fallen trees and power lines, on Thursday.

Benjamin B. Corbin for The Westfield Leader



A GAME TO REMEMBER...Jubilant PAL players from Irvington perform at halftime of the Giants-Redskins football game last Sunday night. The Westfield PAL, Irvington PAL and the Giants public relations department arranged the event. See story on page 12.

David Samksy for The Westfield Leader

Fire Chief: Storm Causes 'Significant' Damage in WF

By MICHAEL J. POLLACK
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - Westfield Fire Chief Dan Kelly, who spoke to The Westfield Leader on Friday morning, said the fire department responded to 30 storm-related calls, mostly dealing with fallen trees and power lines, between 3 and 7:30 p.m. last Thursday.

The first storm-related calls began occurring after 3 p.m. The department first responded to an incident on West Dudley Avenue after a tree fell on a car heading west on the road. Chief Kelly said the driver was not injured.

At about 4:45 p.m., a driver heading east on North Avenue West "left the roadway" and struck two homes, 719 and 715 North Avenue. 715 sustained structural damage, including some to the front porch. The driver was not injured.

On South Chestnut Street, tree limbs fell down on a moving car, but the driver "escaped serious injury," the chief said.

While isolated power outages occurred on both ends of Westfield, PSE&G continued to work Friday morning to address special outages on South Chestnut and Fourth Av-

enue. The Wychwood section of town and the business district also lost power at points.

A tree came down at the rear of 937 Woodmere Drive shortly after 10 p.m. Thursday night, causing structural damage to the roof and "crushing" a car. No residents were injured. The chief said the tree crashed "through the left side of the residence...from the roof to the front."

The chief said Westfield "suffered significant damage from ice during the first winter storm [of the 2007-2008 winter season]."

The department had to bring in off-duty personnel to answer the "large volume" of calls. Westfield responded to all scenes without mutual aid.

One firefighter fell on the ice, suffering "minor injuries."

The chief said because of the storm's timing, he was concerned with the safety of schoolchildren returning home.

The chief noted that the town was "fortunate" that no school-aged children were hurt.

The chief added that the FOX, NBC and CBS networks took notice of the department's efforts, "plastering Westfield all over the news."



Benjamin B. Corbin for The Westfield Leader

THE OLD RUGGED CROSS...Til my trophies at last I lay down...And exchange it someday for a crown." People locally and from around the country pay tribute to legendary Westfield football coach, mentor and friend Gary Kehler during services at the Presbyterian Church last Friday, December 14. Coach Kehler passed away December 7 and was interred at the Revolutionary Cemetery in Westfield.

Bramnick: New School-Aid Formula 'Punishes' Westfield for 'Success'

By CAROLINE KOELLHOFFER
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD - State Assemblyman Jon Bramnick (LD-21, Westfield) spoke to board members and the public on Tuesday regarding the proposed 2-percent increase in state funding for Westfield schools.

"We are being punished because of the success of the town," Mr. Bramnick said. He attended the meeting to answer questions about the school-funding formula Governor Jon Corzine has proposed.

Under this formula, Superintendent of Schools Margaret Dolan said, Westfield will receive a 2-percent increase in aid, while Cranford, Mountainside and Bernards Town-

ship will receive 20-percent increases.

"We have been searching the numbers and trying to determine what makes us so different. We can't, however, come up with any answers," Ms. Dolan said.

"Bernards Township is considered by the state to be more wealthy than Westfield, yet they are receiving a 20-percent increase," she said.

"We looked into the possibility that our enrollment was too low. However, our enrollment increase is 15 percent; Cranford's is listed at 12 percent," Ms. Dolan said, noting that the state's average enrollment increase is 4 percent.

The superintendent asked Mr. Bramnick to explain the reasons for the discrepancy from district to district in the proposed funding.

"I am here to explain a formula that doesn't really exist yet," Mr. Bramnick said. He said the Legislature would most likely vote on the formula before January 8, the end of the current legislative session. The current time period serves as the Legislature's "lame-duck" session, when some officials are finishing their final terms.

Mr. Bramnick attributed Westfield's minimal increase to the success of the town. He said that, over the last seven years in Westfield, there has been a 62-percent increase in wealth or personal income compared to the state average of 8 percent.

Mr. Bramnick said that the town's "substantial" increase in property value has also contributed to the

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MS Grants 4Connections Right of Way to End Suit

By EBONY MCQUEEN
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

MOUNTAINSIDE - During Tuesday night's meeting, council members agreed to allow 4Connections, LLC, a Parsippany-based telecommunications company, access to the borough's right-of-way for the installation of fiber-optic cables. The resolution came shortly after the borough filed a lawsuit against the borough, charging the borough violated the Telecommunications Act of 1996 by failing to give it access to the right-of-way.

4Connections began asking permission for the borough's right-of-way via utility poles in 2005 as part of 50-mile fiber-optic network the company is constructing. The company, which has received consent from more than 50 municipalities, said no other municipality in New Jersey had objected to any of its proposed routes.

The borough said consent would only be officially granted if the litigation were dismissed. Borough Attorney John Post said that should happen by early January. "I am pleased to advise that we have resolved all the issues," he told the governing body.

Permission to use the borough's right-of-way will be conditioned upon 4Connections entering into a written agreement with the borough, which

the borough attorney must approve. The borough may also terminate the agreement within 30 days if 4Connections does not adhere to any condition or term outlined in the agreement, according to a resolution the governing body approved.

Under the agreement, 4Connections would be required to adhere to the proposed route Mr. Post sent them on September 10. That route includes Mountain Avenue, Cedar Avenue and Birch Hill Road.

The borough is granting permission for a period of 20 years, as opposed to the maximum 50 years to which most municipalities have consented.

"The applicant recognized 50 years was outside the limit and was satisfied 20 years was appropriate for our consent," Mr. Post said.

In other business, the borough will enter a two-year lease contract with Winner Ford of Cherry Hill for the attainment of a new police vehicle, a 2008 Ford Crown Victoria.

The board heard on second reading an ordinance regarding membership fees for the community pool. The council authorized the borough clerk to begin advertising for bids for the janitorial contract, as well as bids for an emergency generator, at the borough firehouse on New Providence Road.



Horace Corbin for The Westfield Leader

SADLY SANTA IS GONE...Helen Rentoulis of Vicki's Diner in Westfield stands next to her remaining Santa Claus in the lobby, who sings to her patrons. Last week, vandals stole her other prized Santa that greeted passersby outside of the restaurant on East Broad Street. As her Christmas present, she said she hopes Santa will be returned in the true spirit of the season. See related letter on page 5.

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