



Happy St. Patrick's Day!



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SIXTY CENTS



PARADE O' THE IRISH...Union Township hosted Union County's annual St. Patrick's Day Parade, one of the largest parades in the state of New Jersey, last Saturday. The parade has been an area institution since 1997. Thousands of marchers and spectators participated and viewed the parade. At left, a member of the Union County Police and Fire Pipes and Drums keeps rhythm, as he marches. At right, students of Union Catholic High School in Scotch Plains carry flags representing the 32 counties of Ireland. See additional photos at goleader.com/photos.

Parents, Students Ask BOE to Save Staff

By NORDETTE N. ADAMS
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — Tears, fears and anger coursed through last Thursday night's four-hour Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education meeting, as nearly 200 parents, students, teachers, residents and district alumni filled the Evergreen Elementary multipurpose room to discuss next year's tentative school budget.

Superintendent of Schools Margaret Hayes addressed the crowd, saying new state formulas and legislation designed to reduce property taxes pummel district revenue, causing the budget to be "\$1.4 million over what the state permits us to spend."

State regulations required the board pass the tentative \$74.3-million budget Thursday. They passed it unanimously and reminded the public that until the Tuesday, March 27, final budget vote, some figures were subject to change.

Business Administrator Anthony DelSordi said the special-revenue fund and debt-service expenses send the budget over the previously reported \$72 million total, but the tax levy would remain the same at \$65.45 million.

He said the budget recommends a reduction-in-force by seven staff positions and cuts another position, that of substance abuse coordinator (SAC), to part time. Cuts also mean no German for fifth and sixth graders, no high-school ROTC program, no dedicated choral director position at the high school and fewer individual music lessons for students throughout the district.

In addition, Park and Terrill Middle Schools' sports teams would be consolidated. With the exception of track, all the schools' competitive athletics teams would be combined to one team per sport.

Previously, school officials had recommended eliminating the high school's freshman-sports program, but through adjustments such as adding five new staff members instead of six, the board spared the program.

During public comments, more than 35 people spoke, objecting to different cuts, but the majority spoke on behalf of the music department and

one teacher in particular—high-school choral director John Brzozowski.

The proposed budget also cuts one music staff member, and he does not have to be tenured, officials said.

Kate O'Connell Reilly of Scotch Plains said students call the choral director "Mr. B." and "we cannot afford to lose" him. The co-president of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Music Boosters Association, she recounted the "many" awards and honors the district has earned not only through the chorus and repertoire theater programs led by Mr. Brzozowski, but also through its many bands such as the Moonglowers jazz band, the orchestra and the school's marching band.

"Just at the point where they (students) need music and sports the most, the spark will be diminished," she said in a prepared speech that evoked a standing ovation.

Board President Thomas Russo sympathized. "Scotch Plains is a music town," he said.

Amidst multiple pleas to save Mr. Brzozowski, requests to not reduce the SAC position to part time, cases for keeping the ROTC program, questions about the middle-school sports program and dismay about German's reduction, another controversy swelled.

Debbie Brody of Scotch Plains asked board member Donald Parisi about his suggestions for the teaching staff's health-benefits program.

Mr. Parisi, a member of the BOE's finance committee, called the staff's use of the traditional-health benefits plan "the biggest single waste of money" in the budget. He said "the traditional plan is enormously more expensive than the Preferred Provider Organization (PPO) plan." He said that costs for the PPO plan would go up by 5 percent, compared to the traditional plan's costs, which will escalate by 18 percent.

"The difference between the amount of money we would spend if the traditional plan did not exist and the amount of money we expect to spend next year on current members in that plan is almost exactly the same dollar amount that's in this staff budget for how many

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Scotch Plains Officials Blame Mandated Costs For 10 Percent of Municipal Budget Hike

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Mandated costs in four separate areas account for about 10 percent of the proposed municipal budget in Scotch Plains this year, and township officials said appropriations will increase—“sharply” in some cases—in the coming years.

At a recent meeting to discuss the \$23.3-million municipal spending

recommendations he proposed in late January, Township Manager Thomas Atkins reviewed with the township council the 2007 appropriations for the two sewerage authorities serving Scotch Plains and the two state retirement systems serving township employees. The township's payments to all four entities are mandated, he told the council.

Fees paid to the Rahway Valley

Sewerage Authority (RVSA), which serves most of Scotch Plains, will total \$1.109 million this year, an increase of nearly 15 percent that continues the string of double-digit increases of recent years. The increased fees are to finance improvements to RVSA's facility in Rahway that were made necessary by various federal, state and court-ordered mandates, totaling \$137 million. Mr. Atkins said he expects next year's RVSA fee to increase to around \$1.4 million—double the 2005 level—before leveling off after 2009.

RVSA officials have discussed the possibility of privatizing the utility's management, but Scotch Plains Mayor Martin Marks said talk in that regard has slowed recently. He said he believes RVSA management would like to finish the capital-improvement project before seriously considering any privatization option.

Fees paid to the Plainfield Area Regional Sewerage Authority (PARSA) will decrease this year, from \$430,000 to \$385,000. Mr. Atkins said the reduction is because "South Plainfield's percentage of what they pay [to PARSAs] has increased substantially" due to the increased number of industrial and commercial properties in the community.

In the late 1990s and early this decade, the state government did not require municipalities to make contributions to the state pension systems, but now, local governments must contribute. Contributions to the Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) will nearly double, from \$83,000 last year to \$150,605 in 2007. The township was not required to make any contributions from 1999 through 2004. Mr. Atkins warned that more "large increases" are coming in the next two years.

Contributions to the Police and Fire Retirement System (PFRS), which were zero in 2002 and 2003, will

amount to \$590,000 this year, versus nearly \$375,000 in 2006, and could be as much as \$825,000 next year, Mr. Atkins estimated.

Mr. Atkins said, "without question, things got screwed up" in the late 1990s, when the state government stopped requiring local governments to make pension contributions. Mr. Atkins called it "gamesmanship" at the state level, saying Trenton wanted to "make things look better than they were."

Another problem with the pension systems, he said, is that "we're all living longer while the retirement age hasn't been adjusted," meaning more years of payments to retirees, in general, from the pension funds than was the case in earlier years.

The council has scheduled two more budget meetings this month before it introduces the 2007 municipal spending plan either late this month or early in April.

Fanwood Council OKs Master Plan Zoning Changes, Business-License Ordinance

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

FANWOOD — Mayor Colleen Mahr and the borough council at their regular monthly meeting Tuesday night adopted two ordinances following public hearings.

One of the approved ordinances amends the borough's 1998 Master Plan to change residential zoning regulations (from R-75 to R-150) in the neighborhood bordered by Madison and Martine Avenues and Russell and Paterson Roads.

The borough's consultant, Paul Ricci of T&M Associates, said the measure follows last year's North Martine Land Use Study, which "analyzed existing land use" and determined that a zoning change was "more appropriate based on existing conditions."

Mr. Ricci explained that the master plan's zoning map and text "did not correspond."

The map called for a zoning change with an eye toward preserving the neighborhood's existing larger lot sizes and discouraging future lot subdivisions; the master plan's text did not clearly indicate this, officials said.

About two dozen residents showed up for Tuesday night's public hearing on the ordinance; only one resident spoke out against it.

Donald Close of Midway Avenue suggested the zoning change was not "a plan that's best for the town."

Mr. Close asked, "If it's not broken, why are we trying to fix it?" He added that adoption of the ordinance would likely mean he is "going to lose the right" to renovate his two residential properties.

"It just doesn't feel right," he said. Multiple neighbors of Mr. Close disagreed.

Walter Reinhard of Midway Avenue said adopting the zoning change

"is the right thing to do." Pointing to Mr. Close's renovation plans, Mr. Reinhard said, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder."

He said the measure will "prevent something that will be a radical change for the neighborhood."

Tom Gordon of Russell Road said the R-150 zoning change "just keeps the integrity of the neighborhood we have."

A woman who lives on Midway Avenue spoke about increased traffic in the neighborhood. "If more houses are built, I'm afraid for the safety of the children," she said.

All members of the borough council supported the ordinance but recognized the issues raised by Mr. Close.

"There are pros and cons to everything," Councilman David Valian said.

Councilwoman Donna Dolce noted that the borough "also has to look at the possibility of where [zoning] change may exist in other parts of town."

Councilwoman Joan Wheeler said,

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SP Residents: BOE Should Solve HS Parking Problem

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Mayor Martin Marks told multiple Carol Place residents on Tuesday that reinstating unrestricted parking for high-school students on their street and Monica Place would not be part of any eventual solution to the neighborhood's parking problem.

Following a three-hour public hearing two weeks ago, the township council passed an ordinance that will restrict parking on additional streets surrounding Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School, but said it did so in an effort to spur serious discussions about the parking situation with officials from the high school, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education and Fanwood.

During the public hearing on February 27, the mayor said one possible solution could be to provide a limited number of parking permits on the affected streets to students. He added that distribution of those permits would have to be prioritized in some way for those students who "need" to drive to school.

At Tuesday's council meeting, Carol Place resident Dan Catullo read a statement in which he said, "the parking problem rests squarely on the shoulders of the board of education." He stated his opposition to any proposal to provide parking permits to high-school students, saying they should park at the campus.

Mr. Catullo noted that the board allows the township police department-sponsored youth football league to use the high-school fields and said this arrangement causes the police

department to not strictly enforce existing parking regulations around the high school.

He accused the police department of "failing us" by not issuing tickets, and said the department "has no credibility" concerning the board of education.

Mayor Marks — noting the presence at Tuesday's meeting of the high school's DECA program student representatives, who ran the council's meeting — called it "ironic" that Mr. Catullo made his statements while the students were present.

The mayor called some of Mr. Catullo's remarks "outlandish, outrageous and misrepresentations. I'm tempted to turn our students loose on you."

The mayor said two extreme points of view had emerged on the parking issue — those of Mr. Catullo and those of some parents, who, two weeks ago, expressed their belief that students should have unrestricted access to park wherever they choose. Anyone expressing either of those two viewpoints, the mayor said, "in my mind, will be deemed to be unreasonable."

He said he has already met with students, BOE officials and school administrators in an effort to find "an amicable solution" to the parking problem.

Carol Place resident Ray Hoover said the board "has a responsibility" to solve the problem. "To shun it and dump it on our streets is not fair."

Multiple times, in response to Mr. Hoover and fellow Carol Place resident Kevin McSherry, the mayor said

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Rec. Commission Addresses Southside Field Concerns

By MARIA WOEHRE
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS — The Scotch Plains Recreation Commission Monday night addressed residents' concerns from a hearing last week by adding another option to the proposed soccer-field renovations to Southside Park.

The new plan would call for 50 parking spots, instead of the 65 in the original plan, to add a buffer to residential properties located next to the field, Recreation Director Ray Poerio said.

"This was our largest public meeting ever. I would estimate that at least 450 people were there. There were many people in favor and many that expressed concerns. We have the ability to adequately address the concern about parking by eliminating a row of spaces," Mr. Poerio said.

Currently, Southside Park has 15 parking spaces, he said.

The recreation commission's original proposal enhancements for the field include building a soccer complex with turf field to prevent

injury and allowing more games and practices, lighting for additional games and practices, extending parking, building restrooms and a storage area and adding a playground for children. The plan is estimated to cost between \$1.3 and \$1.5 million, the recreation director said.

The new plan would pull the parking lot back 30 to 40 feet from residents' homes, according to Ed Zazzali, recreation commission chairman.

"We are cognizant of residents' concerns. We don't have to do this, but we are sensitive and civil, and we are already doubling the parking at this facility," he said.

Although the games would be spaced appropriately — allowing for a half an hour between games to clear the parking lot — additional parking alternatives for overflow include a church across the street, the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools and Union Catholic High School.

"This would address the needs unless there was a tournament," Mr.

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COUNCIL FOR A DAY...Students from Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School's DECA program ran the Scotch Plains township council's meeting on Tuesday. Pictured, from left to right, are: back row, Jason Giamboni, Grant Darwin, Mike Goland, Jon Birnbaum and Johnny Gutierrez; and front row, Angela Smith, Brittany Fusillo and Lauren Wright.



ST. PATRICK'S DAY GREETINGS...New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine participates in Union County's St. Patrick's Day Parade last Saturday, taking time out to greet spectators along the route.

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