

SP-F BOE Opts to Fund German, Choral Dir., Hopes to Save ROTC

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — At its final budget workshop last Thursday night at Evergreen Elementary School, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education told about 80 parents and students that the administration has restored lower-middle-school German and one music teacher position

in the proposed school budget. Officials also said the administration hopes to restore ROTC.

"A lot has happened in the last seven days, and a lot can happen in the next 12 days," said BOE President Thomas Russo. "The next 12 days" refers to time between last Thursday's meeting and the upcoming Tuesday, March 27, public hearing on the school budget.

At that meeting, the board will vote to approve its final budget. On Tuesday, April 17, voters decide whether to approve the school budget.

According to the BOE website, the tentative budget's total is \$74.3 million, which includes debt service at \$2.4 million. The total tax levy is \$64.45 million. For Scotch Plains residents, the average tax increase would be \$22 per \$121,000 assessed home. Fanwood residents would see a decrease of \$89 per \$84,000 assessed home.

Business Administrator Anthony DeSordi and Superintendent of Schools Margaret Hayes said the tentative budget's total has not changed since the previous public meeting regarding the budget. The administration's restorations result from moving money around accounts, Mr. DeSordi and Ms. Hayes said.

"We will be able to continue to offer German to our fifth and sixth graders next year despite maintaining the reduction of one German teacher," Ms. Hayes said. "We will reassign teaching staff.... A few classes may experience larger class sizes, but this will save the program during this tight budget year."

She told listeners that having teaching supervisors teach one class each, seeking greater reductions in supply costs and postponing other expenditures makes the district "able to postpone the reduction of one music teacher."

However, some cuts remain on the table. "Reductions in media (library staff), clerical, a grounds person, classroom aides and the Substance Abuse Coordinator (SAC) position are still being looked at but have not been reinstated," she said.

Officials told the crowd that plans

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Atkins Favors 5-Percent Tax Hike for Municipal Budget

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Township Manager Thomas Atkins told the township council last week that, backed by the highest surplus since 1998, Scotch Plains could support a seven- or eight-point municipal tax increase and "still be in a good financial position for 2008."

A tax point in Scotch Plains equals more than \$99,000.

Such an increase would raise the tax rate for the municipal portion of local property tax bills from \$1.39 per \$100 of assessed value to \$1.46 or \$1.47 per \$100, or about 5 percent. Last year's municipal tax increase



Benjamin B. Corbin for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 CHANGING WEATHER...The greens of the Mini-Golf course at Scotch Hills Country Club in Scotch Plains emerge through the snow as the first days of spring arrive.

2 Westfield Divers Die in Scuba Diving Accident; 3rd Survives

By WAYNE BAKER
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WESTFIELD — Two Westfield residents died Friday in a scuba diving accident off Key Largo, Fla.; a Chatham man also perished and one Westfielder survived. Jonathan Walsweer and Scott Stanley drowned along with Kevin Coughlin of Chatham in the incident. Howard Spialter, also of Westfield, survived the accident.

The incident occurred while the four were diving inside the U.S.S.

Spiegel Grove, a 510-foot-long former Navy support ship. The vessel, a 1950s vintage designated as a dock-landing ship, used to launch smaller boats during an amphibious attack, according to several websites. The Spiegel Grove was sunk in 2002 to form an artificial reef and dive site.

Press releases from the Monroe County, Fla., Sheriff's Office said the four divers were performing a penetration dive. R.J. Hartman, owner of Treasure Cove Watersports, a dive shop on South Avenue in Westfield, said this type of dive involves entering a sunken ship and involves significantly more risk than an open-water dive.

People familiar with diving said silt inside the wreck had compromised the divers' visibility. Mr. Hartman said that, since ships are made of steel, "anytime you stick steel into a salt-water environment, it begins to rust...Bubbles (from your scuba gear) would normally float to the surface if they were not in an overhead environment...[they] dislodge the rust and it begins to rain down."

sister, Simone Muscarnera, told The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times that their parents were "best friends" and re-introduced the couple after college.

Robert Algarin, a local architect who had done work for the Walsweers, described him as "a really terrific guy."

Mr. Stanley, 55, was a part owner of The Carpet Mill in East Hanover. He also was certified as an instructor in both scuba diving and karate. Mr. Stanley came to the area at the end of high school. The Stanleys lived on Harrison Avenue for about two years, after living in Cranford for many years.

Marianne Stanley, Mr. Stanley's wife, said she met Mr. Stanley at Union College, now Union County College. The Stanleys have two adult children, Lauren and David.

Mr. Spialter, 52, the lone survivor of the dive, is a lawyer with his own practice in Union. He is a past president of Temple Beth O'r/Beth Torah in Clark and remains active on its board.

Westfield Mayor Andy Skibitsky



Wayne Baker for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 LOCAL ROOTS...Two Westfield residents who drowned in a weekend scuba diving accident off Key Largo, Fla., had been instructors at Treasure Cove Watersports, a dive shop on South Avenue in Westfield. A third Westfield resident is the only survivor among the four divers on that trip.

He said silt can take an hour or more to settle. The divers' decision to use strobes, rather than dive reels (a cord), to mark their route out has been identified as a likely contributor to their deaths. According to sheriff's department reports, they had brought reserve air tanks aboard the wreck, but those proved useless when they ran out of air before locating them.

Becky Herrin, a public information officer with the Monroe County Sheriff's Department, described the incident as the worst diving accident loss of life that she was aware of in that area. She said three other deaths had occurred on the wreck, but all were single fatalities.

Mr. Walsweer, 38, was a Westfield native and St. Marks Avenue resident. He lived with his wife, Regina, and two young sons. Mrs. Walsweer's

described the events as a "tragic accident." He said, "three young men lost their lives. Our hearts and prayers go out to their families. Westfield residents will be there to help them get through the difficult times ahead."

The wake for Mr. Walsweer will be held at Higgins and Bonner Echo Lake Funeral Home, located at 582 Springfield Avenue in Westfield, today, March 22, from 2 to 4 p.m. and 6 to 8 p.m. A Memorial Mass for him will be held on tomorrow, March 23, at 10 a.m. at St. Anne's Roman Catholic Church on North Avenue in Garwood. Burial will be at Fairview Cemetery in Westfield.

Visitation for Mr. Stanley will be held tomorrow at Higgins & Bonner from 7 to 9 p.m. A service will be held at the funeral home on Saturday at 10 a.m., with the burial following at 11:15 a.m. at Fairview Cemetery.



Ted Ritter for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 APPROVED...Fanwood Borough planning consultant Paul Ricci of T&M Associates (right) responds to a question from resident Donald Close (left) during a public hearing about a proposed zoning change at the March 13 council meeting. The governing body approved the measure.

Fanwood to Apply for 'Extraordinary Aid' Again

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

FANWOOD — Borough officials this week put the finishing touches on Fanwood's application for funding from the state Department of Community Affairs' Extraordinary Municipal Aid program. Mayor Colleen Mahr said the borough expected to meet the tomorrow's March 23 application deadline.

This year's earlier program application deadline, which was extended for two additional weeks, prompted Mayor Mahr and the council to introduce the municipal budget sooner than last year.

They introduced proposed budget, ringing up at about \$8.2 million, at a special meeting on March 6. Last year's budget totaled about \$7.9 million.

The proposed tax levy is so far about 7.1 percent, or \$750,000, more than last year, according to borough Chief Financial Officer Fred Tomkins.

This would translate to a tax increase of about \$600 for a typical homeowner; however, Mayor Mahr — noting the difference between and introduced and adopted budget — said this rate "will certainly not be what it is in the end" when the budget is finalized.

At the March 6 meeting, Mr. Tomkins said the borough decided to apply for extraordinary aid "because of its significance to the borough in terms of its tax levy."

Fanwood has received extraordinary aid, which can only be used to lower the municipal tax levy, in two of the past three years; last year's check totaled \$350,000.

Mr. Tomkins said such aid is not guaranteed and is not intended to be permanent; rather, he said it "gets us through" until the borough's tax rates base increases once various local redevelopment projects begin phasing in starting next year.

During a telephone interview with The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times, Mr. Tomkins said that, looking ahead, "we have also talked about the idea of possibly combining the [Fanwood and

Scotch Plains] libraries...that would have a big impact in a positive way."

At the governing body's March 13 meeting, Council President Katherine Mitchell said that, in addition to exploring shared services initiatives and other cost-saving measures, "we have to keep up the pressure on the State Legislature to ease our [property tax] burden."

Mr. Tomkins said the borough wouldn't hear whether it would receive extraordinary aid until the state budget is finalized in late June.

"I can't imagine the state allowing itself to go through (last year's delayed budget and state government shutdown) debacle again; that was an embarrassment to everybody," he said.

In the case of a similar delay, Mayor Mahr said estimated tax bills for the third quarter "are a possibility." Residents would be notified ahead of time should estimated bills be prepared for mailing, she said.

In developing the proposed budget, Mr. Tomkins said, "This year, we did something a little bit different."

Rather than holding a series of full borough-council budget meetings, he

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Council Urges SID Opponents To Take Part in SP Meetings

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — The township council wants to include time for discussions at forthcoming meetings to consider establishing a Special Improvement District (SID) for the downtown. The council said, at Tuesday night's meeting, that they want to hear comments from supporters and opponents of the concept.

Last month, the council agreed to revisit the matter, three years after it voted down an ordinance to create a SID in the face of vocal opposition from a group of property owners.

At Tuesday's meeting, Mayor Mar-

tin Marks said Councilwoman Nancy Malool, who is heading the effort but was absent that night, wanted to make certain her council colleagues fully supported a new effort to pursue a SID.

The mayor said Mrs. Malool specifically "wants to reach out to those who came out in opposition" at the June 2004 public hearings on the SID ordinance and "invite them to these opening meetings to hear them out on their opposition and see if there's any common ground."

Councilman Kevin Glover said, "Let's put it out there" so the council can hear from both supporters and opponents. He also favored meeting with representatives from nearby towns that have set up similar downtown improvement districts, such as Cranford and Westfield, to hear specifically about how initial opposition was overcome in their towns.

Mayor Marks told the council, as he did last month, that, if a new SID ordinance is ultimately put forward, officials should expect "vocal and vehement opposition" from downtown property owners at any public hearings, similar to what occurred in 2004.

The council plans to begin holding meetings on the SID proposal in the next few weeks.

In other business, the council agreed to cut in half a \$13,625 proposal from Mary Moody, the township planning board's professional planner, for her input in implementing some of the issues that were identified in the recently-completed Master Plan re-examination. Ms. Moody's cost-estimate proposal included providing

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Wayne Baker for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 REMEMBERING OUR TROOPS...Nearly 100 people attended a candlelight vigil at Mindowaskin Park Monday evening. The event marked the fourth anniversary of the U.S. action in Iraq. The ceremony consisted of readings from soldiers and family members of soldiers who served. It was one of almost 1,100 events nationally, coordinated by MoveOn.org. Warren Rorden and Nancy Boss organized the local event.

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