

State Senator Scutari: NJ State, Local Workers Need Pension, Benefits Reform

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD – Senator Nicholas Scutari (LD 22, Linden) told *The Westfield Leader* last Friday that he still feels the Corzine Administration was wrong in not supporting the bulk of 41 recommendations from the Special Joint Legislative Committee on Public Employee Benefits Reform, which the senator co-chaired last summer.

“(The committee) was set up to review and, hopefully to some degree, reform and make certain recommendations to our general houses on public employees’ pensions and benefits that they (employees) are entitled to,” he said.

The senator said the panel reviewed “how they (pensions and benefits) affect our budget system, how much they cost, how much we’re going to be saddled with in the future and whether or not what we are doing is correct.”

Despite the efforts of the committee, Mr. Scutari said, “very little of the recommendations that our committee recommended” were adopted. “But we did bring a lot of the topics to the forefront. I think that the Governor utilized a lot of the report and a lot of recommendations that we used in the process of his ongoing negotiations.”

Noting that only “a few” of the recommendations have moved forward, the senator said he could no longer support the legislation.

“I refused sponsorship of the bills. I really felt it was disingenuous for us to tell the public that we were doing a great reform service to pensions and benefits when we really weren’t,” Mr. Scutari said.

He said he thought the committee had “full support to move forward.”

“This effort was intended to help the public. You cannot control property taxes if you can’t control spending,” he said.

He said the panel considered chang-



REFORM THOUGHTS...State Senator Nicholas Scutari (LD 22, Linden), right, speaks with *Westfield Leader* Assignment Editor Paul Peyton in the *Leader* office in Westfield last Friday. See the full interview at goleader.com/video.

ing benefits for employees of less than five years, but the committee opted not to proceed.

“In the course of our consideration for our adoption of the report as a bill, the Governor’s office stepped in and said ‘no, we don’t believe this is the way to go. We’re not going to sign a bill that has all this wide-ranging, over the top (legislation)... We’re going to do it during the negotiations phase,’” Mr. Scutari explained. “I don’t believe that was the right way to go. I still don’t believe that was the right way to go. But I will credit the Governor for recommending... a state contract with the state workers unions that does adopt some of the recommendations that our committee did.”

“If the system is not fiscally sound, at some point in time, if we don’t have

enough money to pay out the benefits we’ve promised, we’re going to have a major, major problem,” he said.

The senator said the committee “found out very early on in the process that there was very little that we could do to change the pension benefits that the public employees were entitled to after they had been with public employment for an excess of five years.” This was the result of legal opinions from the attorney general and the counsel of the Office of Legislative Services.

“So we started off with that premise. That any of the changes that we were going to be doing, for the most part, going forward or at the most people with less than five years in whatever system they were in. And that was including all the teachers, public employees in the state, public employees of the cities, at the boards of ed. or at the counties,” he said. He said this amounts to “thousands” of employees.

In terms of health benefits, Mr. Scutari said the state has some “\$50 to \$100 billion in promised benefits” for health and pension benefits for employees.

“I call it a ticking time bomb if it is not addressed,” Mr. Scutari said. He said committee members of both parties adopted the committee’s recommendations unanimously.

He said the committee looked at employees with larger pensions than they should have, dual office holdings, padding of pensions, etc. “That really doesn’t cost a lot of money in the scheme of things,” he said. He said the system needs changes to stop abuses and “restore integrity to the system.”

“My position was that we should change it for everyone. That was the only fair way to go forward in my estimation,” Mr. Scutari said.

He said retirement-system benefit contributions by the state and local governments are going to continue to increase over the years.

Mr. Scutari said legislators “are looking to a good budget year this year; (but are) worried about next year.”

“We are not going to see the same kind of turmoil that we had the year before. I will predict,” he said, referencing last summer’s state government shutdown, which included Atlantic City casinos and the state lottery.

When asked whether he would seek reelection, Mr. Scutari said, “I think we will probably be seeing something pretty shortly.”

The filing deadline for the June Primary is Monday, April 9, at 4 p.m.

Watch the complete *Leader* interview with Mr. Scutari at goleader.com/video.

WF to Hold School Budget Meetings

WESTFIELD—Superintendent William Foley and the Board of Education have scheduled the following presentations on the 2007-2008 school district budget:

Today – Tamaques PTO meeting, 11:30 a.m.

Today – Jefferson PTO meeting, 7 p.m.

April 10 – BOE meeting, 302 Elm Street, 8 p.m.

April 11 – Franklin PTO meeting, 7:30 p.m.

April 11 – Westfield High School, Roosevelt and Washington PTOs at WHS, 7:30 p.m.

April 12 – Wilson PTO meeting, 8 p.m.

Residents will vote on the school budget on Tuesday, April 17, from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

BOE Budget

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year. The industry average is 14 percent.

Westfield spends \$6,307 per pupil, below the \$6,878 state average. Mr. Foley said, Ninety-nine percent of WHS seniors graduate on time, and 95 percent of those go on to college.

Mr. Foley said the district is looking to cut the cost of sending special-needs students to out-of-district facilities.

“Sixteen percent of our students are classified as needing special services,” Mr. Foley said. “These services are expensive.”

He said it costs the district \$65,000 in tuition to send a child classified with autism to an out-of-district school. The BOE proposes new autistic classes on an elementary school level while increasing the services already in place in the high school. Currently, 20 students receive the services in Westfield schools.

In other cost-cutting initiatives, the superintendent said the district looks to cut maintenance and operation costs with new efficiency technology. The district hopes to hire the firm Energy Education Co. to study and propose ways to save utility costs in the district’s buildings. These costs are proposed to reach up to \$300,000 a year.

“We are looking to help our staff members be better stewards of the buildings,” Mr. Foley said. “Custodian crews turning off lights at night while working can add up over the long run.”

Caroline Koellhoffer contributed to this story.

a picture’s worth a thousand words.
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WF Council

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to bring up these issues appropriately at the proper forum.”

He also said Westfield, to his knowledge, “exceeds many surrounding communities” in terms of staffing levels. He noted that “fire work is dangerous; people get hurt,” and told *The Westfield Leader* after the meeting that “insinuate” that Westfield’s minimum manning levels caused the injuries is “irresponsible.”

Prior to the budget presentation, the council honored Assistant Recreation Director Dee MacKay, who was named the New Jersey Recreation and Parks Association Professional of the Year.



A TRUE PROFESSIONAL...Westfield Mayor Andy Skibitsky presents Assistant Recreation Director Dee MacKay with a plaque at the town council meeting on Tuesday night. The council honored Ms. MacKay, who was named the New Jersey Recreation and Parks Association Professional of the Year.



WESTFIELD ARCHIVES...Noel Baxter, center, of the Westfield BOE and archive members Lee Perry and Barbara Burton enjoy lunch with third-grade teachers while reviewing the Westfield Historical Society archives for teaching local history. For more information about the archives, call (908) 654-1794.



EVERYDAY HEROES...Melissa Bryan’s second grade class at McKinley School recently celebrated Hero Day, a culmination of a language arts unit. Students chose and studied a famous hero and later wrote about a day-to-day hero in their own lives. At Hero Day, they shared their personal paragraphs with invited guests. Mrs. Bryan dedicated this year’s day to American soldiers serving in Iraq. The children wrote personal letters of admiration to the soldiers; Mrs. Bryan plans to publish the letters and donate all the proceeds to soldiers. They honored two soldiers from the Iraq conflict as special guests. Above, Victor Cruz’s personal hero, his dad Fred, gives his son a big hug after hearing what was written about him.

POLICE BLOTTER

Westfield

Monday, March 19, a Delaware Street resident reported that her automobile was damaged while parked in her driveway. The passenger side of the car was scratched, and an obscenity was scratched on the driver’s door.

Monday, March 19, a Summit Avenue resident reported the theft of \$500 cash from her kitchen counter. There were no signs of forced entry.

Monday, March 19, Philip Slevin, 42, of Westfield was arrested at Westfield police headquarters on an outstanding parking warrant from Jersey City. He was released after posting \$200 bail.

Monday, March 19, Michael O’Connor, 20, of Westfield was arrested at Westfield police headquarters on an outstanding Westfield traffic warrant. He was released after posting \$500 bail.

Tuesday, March 20, Brandon Martin, 26, of Edison was arrested at Westfield police headquarters on a Piscataway Municipal Court traffic warrant. He was released after posting \$300 bail.

Tuesday, March 20, Horacio Pelaez, 20, of Elizabeth was arrested at the Roselle Police Department on an outstanding Westfield criminal warrant. He was released after posting \$200 bail.

Tuesday, March 20, following execution of a search warrant by police, Ying Shen, 44, of Brooklyn, N.Y., was arrested at an office on the 400 block of Central Avenue and charged with promoting prostitution. The arrest came after a police surveillance operation.

Authorities also took possession of computers, ledgers and cash from the office, according to Captain Clifford Auchter of the Westfield Police Department.

He said the cash seized amounted to less than \$200. Captain Auchter also noted the ledgers, written in Chinese, would have to be translated and the computers also would be reviewed. Shen was released with a summons, and an investigation is continuing.

Friday, March 23, a women’s clothing store on the 200 block of East Broad Street reported the theft of \$2,875 worth of underwear that was on display on a table in the rear of the store near the back door. The theft reportedly occurred during afternoon business hours on March 22.

Friday, March 23, a student at Westfield High School, on the 500 block of Dorian Road, reported the theft of her purse from a bathroom. The purse contained an iPod, a cellular telephone and \$10 in cash. The total value of the theft is \$315.

Friday, March 23, subsequent to a police investigation, Valentina Failla, 28, of Roselle was arrested at Westfield police headquarters and charged with theft by deception. Failla allegedly paid herself twice her salary on 10 occasions, in excess of \$5,000, and allegedly removed \$10,000 in cash from the office where she worked. She was released with a summons.

Friday, March 23, Howard Candia, 41, of Westfield was arrested on Cacciola Park on criminal warrants out of Newark, for \$250, and Roselle, for \$468. He was released on his own recognizance on both warrants.

Saturday, March 24, Marquis Relf, 22, of Plainfield was arrested at the north side Westfield train station on an outstanding Westfield criminal warrant. He was released after posting \$300 bail.

Scotch Plains

Tuesday, March 20, Kile Galasso, 21, of Manville was arrested and charged with possession of a controlled dangerous substance. According to police, the suspect was pulled over for a motor vehicle violation and the narcotics were observed inside the vehicle.

Friday, March 23, a resident of Valleysent Avenue reported that someone smashed the windshield of his vehicle while it was parked in front of his house.

Friday, March 23, William Beachum, 39, of Newark was arrested on an outstanding Essex County warrant following a motor vehicle stop.

Saturday, March 24, Galen Wright, 35, of Plainfield was arrested and charged with possession of a CDS. According to police, the suspect was stopped for a motor vehicle violation, at which time the narcotics were observed inside the vehicle.

Saturday, March 24, a resident of White Oak Road reported that someone removed a lawn ornament from his front lawn. The ornament is valued at \$300, police said.

Sunday, March 25, Lachonda Johnson, 32, of Westfield was arrested on an outstanding warrant out of Scotch Plains following a motor vehicle stop.

Fanwood

Wednesday, March 21, Gregory T. Brown, 30, of Scotch Plains was arrested following a motor vehicle stop on South Avenue on an outstanding Union County Sheriff’s Department no-bail warrant.

Wednesday, March 21, Richard C. Myrick, 44, of Plainfield was arrested on outstanding warrants out of Watchung and Elizabeth following a motor vehicle stop on South Avenue.

Thursday, March 22, Carol A. Ganczewski, 42, of Scotch Plains was arrested on an outstanding Scotch Plains warrant after a field investigation. She was also charged with possession of drug paraphernalia.

Friday, March 23, Nadir Roberts, 27, of Irvington was arrested following a motor vehicle stop on LaGrande Avenue on outstanding warrants out of Elizabeth and Newark.

Friday, March 23, Alethea L. Swan, 28, of Hillside was arrested on outstanding Elizabeth warrants after a motor vehicle stop on Terrill Road.

Friday, March 23, Darnell Davis, 35, of Plainfield was arrested on outstanding New Rochelle warrants after a motor vehicle stop on Terrill Road.

Monday, March 26, Leonard P. Linardakis, 37, of Brick was arrested on an outstanding warrant out of Seaside Heights following a motor vehicle stop on Martine Avenue.

Monday, March 26, Zyykirrah M. Casado, 22, of Plainfield was arrested on an outstanding Watchung warrant following a motor vehicle stop on South Avenue.

Mountainside

Wednesday, March 21, Jose Leiva, 27, of Plainfield was arrested and charged with driving with a suspended license following a motor vehicle stop for having a tail light out.

Wednesday, March 21, Dennis Freeman, 60, of Brick Township was arrested for contempt of court at the Lakewood Police Department. He was processed and held pending a court appearance, police said.

Mountainside School Budget

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or \$3.4 million, is dedicated to GLHS tuition. Another 11 percent, (\$1.6 million) covers employee benefits.

Special education, transportation, utilities, instructional support and services, insurance and telecommunication, facilities and tuition for vocational technology (vo-tech) education comprise the remaining appropriations.

Mr. McLaughlin said the current administration is correcting budget challenges from 2005. He said the administration in 2005 used dissolution monies to “pay the bills” at the time, which caused a “gap in funding current operations.” He said the administration is working to resolve the issue, noting that through 2007-2008, the district will have “closed the gap” by 37 percent.

“We’ve given some very hard and long looks forward in terms of how to remedy this,” he said.

Officials estimated that dissolution funds will have saved the average Mountainside homeowner \$2,399 in taxes from June 2004 to 2008.

Another roadblock, according to Mr. McLaughlin, was a \$750,000 shortfall in the 2005-2006 budget, “prepared by the prior administration,” which also increased the funding gap. That budget under-appropriated the number of special education students in the district.

While there was a 3-percent (\$19,201) total increase in state aid to the district for 2007-2008, Mr. McLaughlin said in five years, the

borough has received about \$51,000 less per year than it felt it should have. The average increase in aid over that time period is 2.6 percent.

Total district enrollment for the proposed budget is 1,007 students, from pre-kindergarten to grade 12.

Mr. McLaughlin said a “major objective” is to “maintain the small class size Mountainside is known for.” The budget proposes one additional kindergarten section.

Board President John Perrin multiple times encouraged residents to vote on Tuesday, April 17. Voting will take place at Deerfield School on Central Avenue, Mountainside Borough Hall on Route 22 and the Community Presbyterian Church at Meeting House Lane and DeerPath. Polls will be open from 2 to 9 p.m.

In other business, the board awarded the 2007 Teachers of the Year. Beechwood School kindergarten teacher Jana MacMillan received the award for the second time. “To have it twice is really fabulous for me,” said the teacher, who first received the award nine years ago.

Deerfield School third-grade teacher Julie Cennamo is a first-time recipient. “I’m just really honored,” said the teacher, who is in her fourth year in the district.

The BOE has cancelled the public portion of its Tuesday, April 10 meeting. The next meeting is Tuesday, April 24, at 7:30 p.m. in the Beechwood School Media Center.



LIFETIME OF ACHIEVEMENT...Garwood resident Anne Leonard was honored, Tuesday, by the Garwood Borough Council in recognition of her receiving Union County’s Women of Excellence 2007 Lifetime Achievement Award.

Garwood Council

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“In 2001, Clark’s assessments were \$1.7 million and are projected to go to \$3.2 million next year. In Clark, one tax point is approximately \$75,000 and, to date, the sewer increases amount to almost 40 tax points. There’s no way that Clark can stay within the tax base,” Mr. O’Connor said.

He said Clark set up a user-fee



Wayne Baker for *The Westfield Leader* MAKING A POINT(E)...Garwood Mayor Dennis McCarthy speaks to attendees at Monday’s Gateway Chamber of Commerce Mayors’ Gala. Mayor McCarthy said the borough anticipates adding The Pointe (formerly The Mews) to the tax rolls. He also mentioned improvements being made in recreation and senior programs.

system to raise the necessary money to pay the sewer bill.

In 2006, Garwood’s assessments were \$671,000 and were projected to increase to \$1.1 million, officials said. One tax point equals approximately \$18,200, equating to \$411 for a household assessed at \$100,000, officials said.

Last year, Clark residents paid 38 percent of the township’s sewer bill, with industries paying 41 percent. Residents produced an estimated 77 percent of sewage, with commercial locations producing 15 percent.

In Clark, 52 percent of residents received a minimum charge of \$125, which Grotto Engineering established at 60,000 gallons. “Clark’s ‘user pay system’ is fair since it’s billed on water usage. A senior citizen couple living alone in a \$300,000 house shouldn’t have to pay the same as a family with six kids,” Mr. O’Connor said.

In other business, Councilwoman Kathleen Villaggio recommended an ordinance that would allow the borough’s board of education to use and store mats that the borough owns. The mats would be used in the Lincoln School gymnasium to protect the students from being injured.

On another matter, the borough’s Easter Egg Hunt will be held this Saturday, March 31, at 1 p.m. (a change from the original noon time) at the Little League field.

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