

SP-F BOE Restores ROTC, SAC, Middle-School Sports to Budget

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — During its final public hearing on the district school budget Tuesday night, the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education told about 50 parents and other concerned citizens at Evergreen Elementary School that the administration saved the high school ROTC program, left the middle schools'

sports program intact and restored the Substance Abuse Counselor (SAC) position to full-time.

Following the public comment period, the board unanimously passed the budget with one member, Trip Whitehouse, absent.

Residents of Scotch Plains and Fanwood vote Tuesday, April 17, on the proposed budget that has a current expense tax levy of \$64.45

million, approximately \$2.3 million more than last year's tax levy. For Scotch Plains residents, the increase means \$328 per \$121,000 assessed home, an increase of \$22 over last year's \$306 per assessed home.

Last year, Fanwood residents paid \$287 for a home assessed at \$84,000, but this year the average homeowner will pay \$198, a decrease of \$89. Figures cited are available at the Scotch Plains-Fanwood BOE website.

Board member Linda Nelson presented the budget. She said the total budget — including the tax levy, debt service of \$2.4 million and a special-revenue fund of \$1.5 million — is \$74.3 million. Voters decide the tax levy portion only, since debt service has already been approved through earlier bond referendums.

In April, voters also will consider a new \$2 million bond referendum to fund improvements to the high school track field and cover other high school athletic fields with artificial turf.

Mrs. Nelson said some people question the bond referendum, asking, "Why would you do this now when you have these cuts over here?" "The two are totally unrelated," she said. "The bond falls outside the cap."

The cap is the 4-percent property tax levy cap imposed by the state legislature on municipalities.

While commending district Business Administrator Anthony Del Sordi for his work on the budget, board President Thomas Russo said the cap is part of "alleged property-tax reform."

Mr. Russo, Mrs. Nelson and Superintendent of Schools Margaret Hayes all cited the tax-levy cap and funding formula changes from Trenton as the screw turning on the school budget's back. "We had to make substantial cuts to get below cap," Mr. Russo said.

Mrs. Hayes said successful negotiations with the Air Force to waive its requirement that the district have two ROTC staff members next year, the

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Wayne Baker for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 GOLF ANYONE?...Scotch Plains' Mayor Martin Marks tells a crowd at Monday's Gateway Chamber of Commerce event that his town has become "a mecca for golf."

LaGrande Ballfield to Be 'Playable' on Opening Day

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

FANWOOD — The borough's recreation commission met Tuesday night and discussed, among other topics, the LaGrande Park ballfield project.

Recreation Director Bob Budiansky, borough councilmen Joseph Higgins and David Valian and other borough officials met with the project contractor (Dumor Contracting) this week.

Mr. Budiansky said the contractor is "real close" to having the field ready for the spring sports season. The delayed project was originally scheduled to conclude last fall.

Mr. Valian said the ballfield "looks good for April 1," adding that the field "won't be complete, but will be playable" by then.

Work remains on player dugouts, foul poles and possibly installing safety caps on electrical outlets. Some field "leveling" also needs to be finished, officials said.

In addition, Mr. Budiansky said new bleachers, bases and player benches have been ordered and should be installed in time for the start of the season.

The totally renovated ballfield will be named in honor of former recreation commission member (and long-time men's softball spectator) Dorris Terry. Mayor Colleen Mahr and other officials plan to hold a dedication ceremony on April 14.

The commission also discussed the borough's annual summer playground program, traditionally known as "summer camp."

In light of declining participation in recent years, Assistant Recreation Director Mary Pembroke said the commission has decided to divide children up into three age groups: 5 to 6, 7 to 8, 9 to 10. She said the schools hired two certified teachers to pro-

vide "more structured programs," as opposed to the "drop-in" playground approach of years past.

Officials plan to offer the program from 9 a.m. until noon on weekdays at a cost of \$5 per day, compared to the previous cost of \$5 for the entire summer.

"It's a major change, but it's still dirt cheap," Mr. Budiansky said.

Commission member Phyllis Mirabella suggested the possibility of phasing in the increase, noting the "drastic change" in cost. However, Mr. Budiansky said a phased approach would not allow the commission to hire experienced staff or offer the type of programs it plans to provide.

"We can't compete with the [sports or special-interest] camps unless we charge camp money; this [program] is sort of a hybrid," added commission member Russell Wells.

In other business, Ms. Pembroke said the borough surveyed senior citizens to determine options for the possibility of adding more bus trips.

Mr. Budiansky said, "One of the things we need to do is find some of the other things [seniors] want to do."

Commission member Joan Feller, assessor-committee liaison, said while the local senior committee becomes more active on its own, the group welcomes the borough's assistance. "Classes and programs... that's where we need the help," she said.

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

By PAUL J. PEYTON
 Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

WESTFIELD — Senator Nicholas Scutari (LD 22, Linden) told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* 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

SP-F BOE to Present Budget at Libraries

SCOTCH PLAINS — Members of the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Public Schools announced that two special budget presentations will be held at the local municipal libraries.

Board members will review the 2007-2008 school budget at the Scotch Plains Library on Monday, April 9, at 10 a.m. They will give a second budget presentation on Saturday, April 14, at 10 a.m. at the Fanwood Memorial Library. The BOE invites all residents to attend.

The annual school budget election will be held on Tuesday, April 17.



Wayne Baker for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 WELL-ATTENDED AFFAIR...Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr, center, and Borough Administrator Eleanor McGovern, right, attend Monday night's Gateway Chamber of Commerce Mayors' Gala in Elizabeth. Most of Union County's 21 mayors attended. See story on page 2 and view event photo gallery at goleader.com/photos.

Scotch Plains to Fund Township Budget with 3.6-Percent Tax Increase

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Relying on higher revenue assumptions, four of the five township council members agreed last week to finance the \$23.3 million municipal budget introduced on Tuesday with a five-point, or 3.6 percent, increase in the local property-tax rate, from \$1.39 per \$100 of assessed valuation to \$1.44 per \$100. The mayor and council will vote on the budget after a public hearing on April 24.

Councilman Kevin Glover, who last week backed a four-point increase, said he would not vote for a five-point hike despite Mayor Martin Marks saying it was "a darn shame" that the one-point difference prevented a unanimous council vote for the budget.

If the budget is passed, the five-point increase in the municipal portion of township property-tax bills will mean a \$61 increase for the average assessed home of \$121,000, a level that translates into a market value of \$450,000 to \$550,000. Last year's municipal-tax increase was six points, or about \$73 for the average homeowner.

At last Thursday's eighth and final budget meeting, the council looked to reduce the tax increase from the seven or eight points initially put forth by Township Manager Thomas Atkins.

With each tax point equal to \$99,413, council members sought to find appropriations cuts or revenue increases equal to multiples of that \$99,413 figure to lower the 2007 tax rate from eight points.

Mr. Glover received no verbal support for a freeze in the salaries of the township attorney, assistant township attorney and the municipi-

pal court judge for one year, a possible boost in fees at Scotch Hills Country Club or a request for organizations to pay fees to use township ballfields.

With a variety of revenue sources contributing to the township's nearly \$3.5-million surplus, Mr. Glover favored dedicating to this year's budget more of the proceeds remaining from the township's sale of the Heather Glen housing-development property.

Mr. Atkins had proposed devoting half of the remaining \$324,000 to this year's revenue stream and devoting the remaining \$162,000 to next year's. Mr. Glover said he sought "to move more of our surplus to lessen the blow to our citizens." He also favored increasing the anticipated amount of construction code fees this year from \$600,000 to \$700,000.

Mr. Atkins told the council that

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Wayne Baker for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 MANY OPPORTUNITIES...Garwood's Patricia Quattrocchi speaks during last Thursday's forum presented by the Women's Political Caucus of Union County. The event focused on the opportunities for women to serve on the Union County political committees for both major political parties. See story on page 2.

Marks, Glover Clash Over Proposed Tax Increase for SP

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

SCOTCH PLAINS — Mayor Martin Marks and Councilman Kevin Glover clashed Tuesday night over the property-tax rate that will finance the proposed municipal budget.

The mayor said the motive behind Mr. Glover's challenge made during the budget's introduction, in which he called for the council to work toward an even lower tax increase than the proposed five points, was "as transparent as a freshly Windexed glass pane."

The \$23.3-million spending plan for 2007 will be voted on after an April 24 public hearing, but Mr. Glover, in remarks made on Tuesday, said he was "not willing to go along with" a five-point municipal-tax increase.

"I believe there are areas where we can get another three points" shaved off the proposed increase in the tax rate, which is set to rise from \$1.39 per \$100 of assessed value to \$1.44 per \$100," he added. He also said the council should "work together this year toward a zero tax increase" in 2008.

Much of the hour-long discussion about the budget centered around a recounting of last Thursday's final budget meeting, when the council adjusted some revenue assumptions and set this year's tax rate.

Mayor Marks said except for Mr.

Glover, the council had agreed that a five-point increase was as low as fiscally prudent, noting that Township Manager Thomas Atkins said anything lower would be "a big mistake," given the "big" mandated increases in sewerage authority fees and pension contributions coming in 2008.

The mayor said Mr. Glover, in pressing last week for the council to reduce the eight-point increase informally put forth by Mr. Atkins, had asked the municipal manager whether, given Mr. Atkins' 30 years of experience in municipal budgeting, he could see "any way we can do better."

"In the interest of compromise," the mayor said, the council agreed to Mr. Glover's request to shift additional revenues slated to be utilized next year into this year's revenue stream "to get down to five points. I thought we had an agreement," the mayor said.

"At this point, Mr. Glover then asked for four points. It was quite apparent we were never going to get [a unanimous] agreement on the budget," Mayor Marks added.

The mayor, recalling that Mr. Glover had "extolled" Mr. Atkins' long career and expertise in municipal government at the start of last Thursday's meeting and then "chose to ignore him at the end," said that it "was interesting the way the meeting [last week] began and interesting the

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Junior Women to Host Egg Hunt Saturday

SCOTCH PLAINS — The Scotch Plains Junior Woman's Club will hold its annual egg hunt for children ages 9 and younger this Saturday, March 31, at 10 a.m. on the Village Green adjacent to the Scotch Plains Municipal Building at 430 Park Avenue.

All children are welcome, including those with physical and developmental disabilities. Besides the egg hunt, the festivities will include a visit from the Easter Bunny, a jellybean guess, face painting, tattoos and a bake sale. The rain date is Sunday, April 1, at noon.

All proceeds from the event will support the Junior Woman's Club and the work it does for the local community throughout the year. For more information, e-mail scotchplainsjrwomen@comcast.net or call Odette at (908) 889-4849.



Wayne Baker for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
 REFORM THOUGHTS...State Senator Nicholas Scutari (LD 22, Linden), right, speaks with Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times Assignment Editor Paul Peyton in the Times office in Westfield last Friday. See the full interview at goleader.com/video.

of recommendations that we used in the process of his ongoing negotiations.

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