

Scotch Plains Budget

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much of the last year's record level of construction fees, as well as the levels of the preceding two years, was due to several "significant" construction projects, including Heather Glen and the Hovnanian development. No new revenue-generating projects of these types are planned, he said. "I am very concerned about construction code revenue" in the coming years.

Mr. Atkins asked the council to "use the surplus judiciously" so that financial problems can be avoided next year. He agreed that an eight-point tax increase was too high but said that "we don't want to go too low" by using too much of the surplus. He reminded the council that mandated costs such as state pension payments and sewerage authority fees, which rose "sharply" this year, will increase even further in 2008. In addition, municipalities will also be subject to a four-percent overall cap on property-tax increases starting next year, he added.

Mayor Marks said that "it's going to be tough to make a significant dent" in the relatively small portion of the budget where the council has some spending discretion. As a result, "we're going to have to be a little bit more aggressive on the revenue side."

In order to shave two points off the eight-point tax increase, the mayor proposed using an additional \$100,000 of surplus funds, from \$2.3 million to \$2.4 million; assuming an additional \$25,000 in investment income, from \$475,000 to \$500,000; an additional \$50,000 in construction code fees, from \$600,000 to \$650,000, and an extra \$25,000 in funds from delinquent taxes, from \$575,000 to \$600,000. These additional assumptions equaled \$200,000 more in revenue — or two fewer tax points.

Mr. Glover said he favored anticipating construction code revenues at \$700,000 and using the entire remainder of the proceeds from the sale of the Heather Glen property as a way to raise added revenue. Taken together, his proposal would result in another \$200,000 in revenue, or an additional two-point reduction in the tax rate for 2007.

However, Deputy Mayor Paulette Coronato expressed concerns about the general slowdown in housing nationwide and worried that if housing activity in Scotch Plains slowed similarly, construction fees would suffer. The mayor again said that a big part of the large construction code fees realized in recent years was due to the big projects that are completed or nearly finished. It would be "miraculous," he said, to see high fee levels again this year.

Mr. Glover then raised the possibility of freezing non-union municipal salaries for a year, but Mr. Atkins said such a move would, in his opinion, lead to one or two new collective bargaining units being formed among township employees.

"Governor Corzine may like to deal with unions," Mr. Atkins said, "but I don't."

Mr. Glover said he thought more of freezing the aforementioned attorneys' and judge's salaries, and possibly executive department heads. "I'm looking for any dollars that can be saved," he said.

Mr. Glover said he was optimistic that enough new cost-saving measures would be realized by next year — including a new telephone service being considered and the streamlining of operations via the revamped website — to offset any decreases in revenue sources.

The mayor then proposed increasing revenue assumptions by enough to reduce the tax increase to five points — by increasing the surplus being used from \$2.3 million to \$2.475 million, an additional \$175,000; adding an additional \$75,000 from the Heather Glen property sale proceeds, from \$162,000 to \$237,000, and increasing his earlier proposal to increase revenue projections from investment income by \$25,000 and delinquent tax funds by \$25,000. Added together, those four increases total \$300,000, or three tax points, shaved off the eight-point level from which the council was working.

"We're pushing it at five points," the mayor said.

Mr. Glover then asked Mr. Atkins whether "we can perform the impos-

sible" and "take a shot at a miracle" by somehow reducing the increase to four points. Mr. Atkins said doing so "would be a mistake."

Ms. Coronato said a four-point increase would be "asking for trouble." She warned against spending down the surplus, adding that she didn't want to see the township's bond rating get downgraded.

Councilwoman Nancy Malool said it was important to "remember what's coming, what we're going to get hit with next year. I don't think it's responsible to go to four points."

Councilman Jeffrey Strauss agreed, saying he was "very concerned about going below five points. We don't want to set up a lot of problems for next year." He said the five-point level was "prudent. It would be imprudent if we drop it too far."

Mr. Glover said it would be "a damn shame" if the council could not find another \$100,000, in either appropriation cuts or additional revenue, to get to a four-point level.

Mayor Marks, pointing to Mr. Glover's acknowledgment multiple times last Thursday of Mr. Atkins's 30 years of experience in municipal government, confirmed with the councilman that Mr. Glover would vote for a four- instead of a five-point tax increase "even though [Mr. Atkins] had called it a big mistake."

"I think the difference is I am optimistic about our future," Mr. Glover said.

The mayor, calling the formulation of the annual budget "the most important function" of the council, said it was "not OK" that the council "can't go to the public with a unified consensus" on this year's municipal spending plan.



Nordette N. Adams for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
BUDGET TALKS...Above, Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education President Thomas Russo calls the board's final school budget meeting to order Tuesday night at Evergreen Elementary School. Superintendent of Schools Margaret Hayes left, and board member Linda Nelson look on. Below, Anthony Gianacci, president of the Turf-It Foundation, addresses the board.



SP-F Board of Education

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retiring of district Public Information Coordinator Kathleen Meyer and a savings recouped through lower dental insurance premiums for staff all contributed to the administration being able to restore the ROTC, the SAC to full-time and the middle schools' competitive sports program to its current state.

As previously reported in *The*



Ted Ritter for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
TAKE ME OUT TO THE BALLFIELD...The Fanwood Recreation Commission discusses progress on the LaGrande Park ballfield project during Tuesday night's meeting at the park building. Seated, from left to right, are: commission members Willie Green, Robert Degnan, Jamie Tannenbaum, Fanwood Councilman David Valian, Russell Wells and Recreation Director Bob Budiansky.

Sen. Scutari Interview

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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 changing 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. And that was including all the teachers, public employees in the state, public employees of the cities, at the boards of [education] 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 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 would 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 re-election, 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 *Times* interview with Mr. Scutari at goleader.com/video.

FW Rec.

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Mr. Budiansky said final arrangements are being made for the borough's annual Easter egg hunt, scheduled for Saturday, April 7, at Forest Road Park.

After some discussion about whether to delay the start time to allow people more time to arrive, Mr. Budiansky asked residents not to arrive late. "Be prompt," he advised. "Kids are chomping at the bit [to start hunting for hidden eggs]...we can't hold them back too long."

At Tuesday's meeting, the commission also established a subcommittee to review options for holding a June 26 "kick-off" for the eight-week summer movie program at LaGrande Park. Ideas discussed so far include offering food, music or other activities.

Updated information about the recreation commission's classes, programs and special events is available at its website at visitfanwood.com/recreation.



POLICE BLOTTER

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 Valleyscent 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 for 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 for 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 for an outstanding Union County Sheriff's Department no-bail warrant.

Wednesday, March 21, Richard C. Myrick, 44, of Plainfield was arrested for 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 for 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 for 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, Zzykirrah M. Casado, 22, of Plainfield was arrested with 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.

Westfield

Monday, March 19, a Delaware Street resident reported that her au-

tomobile 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, police said.

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 Aucher of the Westfield Police Department.

He said the cash seized amounted to less than \$200. Captain Aucher 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 Place 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 Council

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way the meeting ended."

He said the four other council members "made every effort to accommodate Mr. Glover's feelings."

Mr. Glover said on Tuesday, he favored tapping further into reserves set aside for delinquent taxes, but Mr. Atkins said the government needed to be "cautious, reasonable and prudent" in this area because it is not always clear what that level will be each year.

Mr. Glover also said that, "until the last minute," the council had not been provided with a copy of last year's annual financial statement, which he claimed showed more-than-adequate levels of delinquent tax reserves and other revenue sources that could be safely tapped into.

Mr. Atkins said relevant information from that report had been pro-

vided to council members during their budget deliberations.

The mayor said when the council received the financial statement last Thursday, he had asked his colleagues whether any of them favored delaying the budget's introduction to give them time to study the report. "No one requested a delay," he said.

Mr. Glover, calling the budget introduced this week "a working, breathing, living document," urged the public to come forward with any ideas they have to reduce expenses or increase revenue assumptions before the April 24 public hearing.

When Mr. Glover repeated his feeling that "we can do better," Mayor Marks said that merely raising anticipated revenue levels "may not necessarily be better" if the following year's surplus declines as a result.



Wayne Baker for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times
MAYOR OF THE YEAR...Mountainside Mayor Robert Vigilanti accepts the Mayor of the Year Award from a representative of the Gateway Chamber of Commerce during Monday's Mayors' Gala in Elizabeth. Mr. Vigilanti has served as mayor for 19 years. View event photo gallery at goleader.com/photos.

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