

Summit Council Members Seek Lower County Tax

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

COUNTY - Four members of the Summit council asked the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders last Thursday to do what it can to reduce the property tax burden on Summit residents, which they say is the highest in the county. Summit Common Council President Richard Madden said under the state's equalization formula for the calculation of property-tax rates, which is subsequently used to figure property taxes, Summit has been hit "pretty hard."

He said Summit school and municipal taxes are expected to either be flat or rise in 2012 up to 1.5 percent, while county taxes are expected to jump 8 percent in the city.

"We are going to get hit, it appears, about an extra two-and-a-half million dollars, which is heavy," Mr. Madden said. "Not everyone in Summit can afford increased taxes."

Mr. Madden said while Summit accounts for 4 percent of the total population of Union County, "we are getting hit with close to 11 percent of the county taxes." He asked the county to "help us out any way you can" by trying to control costs in the county budget.

Summit Councilman Dave Bomgaars, who is chairman of the council's Finance and Personnel Committee and a member of the Summit Board of School Estimate, which drafts the city's board of education budget, asked the county "to develop a budget which is as flat as possible."

He said under preliminary estimates, the city's budget rate for an average Summit homeowner will increase 1.44 percent, a decrease from last year's 1.9 percent. Mr. Madden said that while the city has controlled expenses, its revenues are down 2.8 percent.

Councilman Tom Getzendanner asked the county to declare a fiscal emergency and "issue a budget that is very, very tight."

Mr. Getzendanner asked the county "to at least honor the nominal 2-percent cap" on property taxes. He asked the county to "retain fewer full-time employees," noting that Summit has reduced its workforce 10 percent since 2009.

The councilman said decisions such as privatizing Runnells Specialized Hospital and discontinuing MusicFest "are going to have to be taken" by the county. In addition, he said he believes declaring a fiscal emergency would enable the county to reduce its open space tax assessments by half on towns in 2012. He said in Summit that action "would be a significant savings."

Garwood resident Bruce Paterson said an article in *The Star-Ledger* reported that the average county resident pays \$1,700 in county taxes, the highest county tax in central New Jersey. He said by comparison, Middlesex homeowners pay an average of \$1,100; Somerset, \$1,500; Morris, \$1,200; Essex and Hudson, \$1,600.

"Ask yourself, what is so special about Union County that it's got to pay the highest county taxes around here?" Mr. Paterson said.

Kenilworth resident John Bury asked if the county would be considering layoffs this year as part of the effort to cut county spending.

"Everything is on the table for this budget. We're going to discuss all those issues - county layoffs [or] any other way to get our budget in order. So it's not on the table, it's not off the table, but it is under consideration," Freeholder Chairman Al Mirabella replied.

County Manager Al Faella said he plans to release his executive budget within the next four to five weeks. Last year's \$482-million budget was supported by a tax levy of \$291.2 million, a \$13.8-million increase over 2010. Summit taxpayers paid an average of \$3,600 last year.

In other business, Freeholder Chairman Mirabella, in answering a question from Mr. Bury, said the county has not made any decision on whether MusicFest will continue to be held. A five-month investigation by the county prosecutor's office last year determined that while there were no criminal charges filed, the accounting of monies for the 2010 event was "poorly executed" by the county.

"I don't think any decisions have been made as far as MusicFest moving forward in 2012. I would imagine if we have a MusicFest, it will be dramatically scaled down, but that hasn't been decided by the board yet," Mr. Mirabella said.

On another matter, officials announced that the county would save \$330,000 over the next three years on

natural gas through a recently completed online public auction. The freeholders awarded the winning bid last Thursday to Hess Corporation of Woodbridge at \$690,000. The contract begins March 1, 2012 and ends February 28, 2015.

The board thanked Freeholder Clerk Nicole Dirado for her efforts over the past six years in the position. Ms. Dirado has moved to the county clerk's office where she has replaced Deputy County Clerk Al Falcone who retired. Ms. Dirado has been replaced as freeholder clerk by James Pelletiere, the county's former deputy director of public information.

Mr. Pelletiere will be paid \$80,000 as clerk, \$12,000 less than Ms. Dirado was making.



HEALTHY DONATION... ConocoPhillips Bayway Refinery has donated \$50,000 to the local chapter of the American Red Cross to support Red Cross disaster relief efforts associated with Hurricane Irene in New Jersey. Pictured, from left to right, are: Linden Fire Chief Joseph Rizzo; Jacqueline Cleary-Urbano, vice-chairwoman, Raritan Valley Chapter of the Red Cross Board of Directors; Linden Mayor Richard Gerbounka; Linden Police Chief Sal Bivona; Mary Phillips, ConocoPhillips community relations coordinator; Linden Police Captain Gene Braun; Raritan Valley Red Cross Chapter Executive Director Suzanne Lutz; Craig Nowlin, secretary/treasurer, and Vince Wilt, member, Red Cross Board of Directors; Brian Coffman, Bayway Refinery manager; Linden Police Sergeant Abdul Williams, and Michael Karlovich, Bayway strategic communication manager.



VET REVAMP... Architect Barbara Vincentsen shows the Westfield Zoning Board of Adjustment, at its meeting on January 24, a rendering of the new building the Westfield Veterinary Group would like to build on Springfield Avenue.

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Summit GOP Sponsors Red Cross Blood Drive

SUMMIT—The Summit Republican City Committee is sponsoring its' second annual blood drive with the American Red Cross of Summit this Saturday, February 4 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. For more information, visit the Red Cross at redcrossblood.org/make-donation-sponsor. Any additional medical questions can be answered by calling the American Red Cross at 1-866-236-3276.

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