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GOOD TIME...Craig, Maureen, Meghan, Russell and Derek Kobrin of Westfield enjoy *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* prior to attending Super Bowl XLVI on February 5.

GW Administrator Alleges Harassment In Lawsuit

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

GARWOOD – Borough Administrator/Clerk Christina Ariemma has filed a lawsuit against Councilman James Mathieu, the mayor and borough council and borough itself claiming she has been harassed and intimidated by Mr. Mathieu and was denied raises the last two years as retaliation for being a whistleblower.

"After being sworn in on January 2, 2011 as a sitting councilman, Councilman Mathieu began to realize that his campaign promise of a 'no tax increase' could not be met and therefore his promise to the citizens of Garwood would turn into a false one," the suit alleges. "Upon realizing his promise to get rid of Plaintiff Ariemma, Councilman Mathieu started a new campaign of harassing and intimidating Plaintiff Ariemma and other higher salaried employees in an effort to get them to resign."

Among the allegations are that Mr. Mathieu, as finance committee chairman in 2011, had Ms. Ariemma ejected from finance committee meeting after she and Chief Financial Officer Sandra Bruns gave the councilman documentation stating that, according to state statute, "it is a fourth degree crime to incur obligations" in excess of appropriations in a budget.

The suit alleges Mr. Mathieu threatened and harassed Ms. Ariemma, including moving the garbage cans on two occasions at her house from the curb to behind her residence.

"The evidence will show that the councilman moved the garbage cans," said Daniel Antonelli, Ms. Ariemma's attorney, when asked by *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* as to how it was known that Mr. Mathieu moved the garbage cans.

The lawsuit also alleges that Ms. Ariemma was denied a salary increase of 3.90 percent in 2011 and 3.75 percent in 2012 in violation of state statute after the borough's public works and police departments received salary increases those years.

Ms. Ariemma also alleges that she was denied from receiving future longevity increases. She currently receives longevity payments of 6 percent over her base salary of \$78,393 as she has completed 15 years of service with the borough. She is eligible, according to the lawsuit, to

receive 7 percent over her base as of 20 years of service to the borough and 8 percent over her base once she has 23 years with the borough.

Ms. Ariemma's suit also alleges that the borough violated state statute by failing to increase her salary by \$1,004.68 in 2011, the amount she paid per a new state law requiring government employees in New Jersey to contribute 1.5 percent of their salary towards their health-care coverage.

The suit alleges that former Police Chief William Legg did not have to pay 1.5 percent of his health insurance and also was given a 3.90-percent salary increase in 2011, which, according to the suit, violates state law that "prohibits sex discrimination in employment."

"It is our position that Councilman Mathieu and the borough have violated the law by failing to provide Ms. Ariemma with certain salary increases she is entitled to and have further violated the law by attempting to take away certain benefits that she is entitled," Mr. Antonelli told *The Times*.

Ms. Ariemma has charged in her lawsuit that denial of her benefits was done by the borough and Mr. Mathieu to "harass and intimidate" her following her "whistleblower activities."

Ms. Ariemma is seeking compensatory and punitive damages, reinstatement of her fringe benefits, assessment of a civil fine against the defendants, attorney fees and cost of the suit.

When reached Monday for comment, Mr. Mathieu said, "We've been advised by counsel not to directly comment on the lawsuit." He said he was served with the suit at his home on February 7 as he is being sued in both his official and individual capacity.

"This is the price you pay for moving forward with the Chris Christie agenda," Mr. Mathieu told *The Times*.

Mayor Patricia Quattrocchi, who was elected on the Republican line along with Mr. Mathieu in 2010, said she has been unable to talk to Borough Attorney Joseph Triarsi since the borough was served with the lawsuit on February 7. "I am not going to be making any comment now," Mayor Quattrocchi said.

Mr. Triarsi was away this week and could not be reached for comment.



IMPROMPTU BBQ...The Garwood ShopRite reopened Tuesday morning after a small fire in the meat department shut the North Avenue supermarket late Monday. The fire, thought to be electrical in nature, originated in the area of the meat department.

ShopRite Reopens After Fire in Meat Department

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

GARWOOD - The Garwood ShopRite reopened Tuesday morning after a small fire in the meat department shut the North Avenue supermarket late Monday.

According to Garwood Police Captain James Pipala, borough police officers responded to the store Monday on a 3:45 p.m. report of a smoke condition caused by an electrical fire in the area of the meat department. Upon police arrival, the fire was extinguished by employees with fire extinguishers. Captain Pipala reported that there was a heavy smoke condition in the store.

The Garwood Fire Department responded along with the first aid squad and Union County EMS. Officers on scene evacuated the store and se-

cured the area. One ShopRite employee was treated for difficulty breathing and released at the scene.

A Westfield Regional Board of Health representative responded to the scene and the business was closed for the remainder of the day. Liz Lobe, a spokesperson for Wakefern Corp., the distribution arm of ShopRite supermarkets, told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that the store was evacuated and closed as a precaution due to smoke conditions. She said the store was reopened following inspections by authorities including the health department after any exposed food was disposed of as ordered by the health inspector.

Westfield Health Officer Megan Avallone told *The Times* that the store was reopened at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday morning.

Freeholders

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we are simply asking is that you work with us to try to find some creative solutions to avoid layoffs. A layoff for an employee is the death penalty." He said the union is asking "for a seat at the table so we can work with you and your team directly" to discuss union members ideas concerning this year's county budget.

Mr. Bukosky said Council 8 workers do everything from road projects to repair furnaces to plowing snow.

He also advised the freeholders to be careful of the privatization of county services, which he described as the "same anti-government, no regulation, privatization that Wall Street sold to us."

On another matter, the freeholders approved a \$134,000 contract with an architect for plans to stabilize the Board of Elections building in Elizabeth. Joseph Graziano, director of engineering, public works and facilities, said the building's "whole facade has a problem," noting that an area between the first and second floors, originally designed to prevent water from getting

into the basement, "has rotted out." He estimated that repairs could range between \$1 and \$1.5 million.

The county installed netting to prevent parts of the building from falling on people walking on the sidewalk. Mr. Graziano said the North Broad Street building dates back to the 1920s.

During the public section of the meeting, several Summit council members addressed the board on county taxes. Councilman Robert Rubino said the city council is requesting that the county put on a referendum before voters to "permanently reduce the county's open space tax by 50 percent." He said Summit pays \$29 million in county taxes, \$1 million more than what the county collects for its own municipal taxes. Mr. Rubino also requested that the county pass an ordinance so that the county tax could not exceed the municipal tax in municipalities.

"At best we get about \$3 million in services from the county," Councilman Patrick Hurley added.

Mr. Buettner of Cranford commented that, "When the one percenters say they're hurting, I think maybe the revolution is coming."

Freeholder Deborah Scanlon commented that in the last few years the city has had "all of its main roads repaved" along with "multi-million-dollar" road projects. In addition, she said all traffic signals have been replaced along the Morris Avenue corridor.

"We are doing the things that need to be done in all 21 of our towns," said Freeholder Scanlon, a Union resident who grew up in Summit. "They (Summit council members) are being a little unreasonable I think... The fact of the matter is that they have already received more than they put in (to the open space tax)." She said "up until now" the city has received \$3 million more in open space funds for projects than the city paid into the fund.

CF Council

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Plungis, Norman Dreyer and Wayne Murray were honored for what Mayor Robinson said was "decades and decades of service," specifically "more than 130 years combined." Commissioner O'Malley presented certificates to two local businesses—State Farm Insurance and Think D'Sign Print—for their efforts at adopting environmentally-sustainable practices as part of the local Go Green initiative.

Several announcements were made during the meeting that the re-dedication of the Cranford First Aid Squad's headquarters, which was severely damaged during last summer's hurricane and flooding, will take place on Sunday, February 26, at 3 p.m.

Home Values Have Dropped: Shouldn't Property Taxes?

SCOTCH PLAINS – Is a property tax appeal right for you?

In the last five years, home values in Union County have dropped dramatically. As the real estate market is depreciating, your property taxes have been increasing. As a taxpayer, you have the right to appeal your property-tax assessment as a means to reduce your real estate tax obligations. As a taxpayer considering an appeal, you should understand that you must prove that your home's assessed value is legally "unreasonable." With a successful tax appeal, your lowered tax assessment will be set for three years, which can amount to considerable savings. The best way to succeed in appealing your taxes is to present your claim to the courts through expert tax and legal counsel with local knowledge.



James M. Foerst

Spector Foerst & Associates and has been assisting families with real estate and tax issues for more than a decade in our local community. Mr. Foerst brings with him his experience with local government and the municipal budget process.

Save money in this economy. Make the sale of your home more attractive. Reduce the long-term expenses associated with your home. Make it more affordable to stay in your house. All with lower property taxes.

Tax appeals must be filed by April 1. For more information about tax appeals, visit www.spectorfoerst.com and complete the complimentary assessment form to see if you can save money on your taxes, or get started with a free consultation by calling James M. Foerst at (908) 322-4886.

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SP-F Board of Education

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savings could reach \$50,000.

"It's almost the salary of a teacher," she said.

The dissenting voter, Mrs. Woerner, told her colleagues that she was still "very torn." She said attracting people to run for board positions was going to be "more daunting" now, with the prospect of taking part in the November ballot process. However, she said the process would not be more daunting for those with political agendas.

"I fear...that we are not going to have members who care about the kids," she said. "The board of education has to make some unpopular decisions, and I fear this will become a popularity contest. And that's unfortunate."

BOE Vice-President Nancy Bauer, who described herself as "undecided and concerned," said she has seen those with political aspirations use boards of education as "stepping stones" to that end.

However, she said "the reality is that I put my faith in the community to maintain a common commitment and not devolve into politics."

BOE member Jeanne Cleary, addressing the concern of politicizing the board-election process, said there was "no guarantee" that keeping the status quo, and leaving elections in April, would stop partisanship from arising in the future.

"It's incumbent on all of us to lure candidates who care about students," she said.

Board President Trip Whitehouse again noted that the pool of communities with whom Scotch Plains-Fanwood could share its election costs was dwindling to a precious few. He said at the time the board voted, 16 of 19 Union County school districts had

moved their elections to November, with Hillside and Berkeley Heights voting that night to do so as well.

He said his biggest "struggle" was removing a vote on the school budget. He said he "reconciled" his decision because the budget will still be shared openly with the public beforehand and must be approved by the county superintendent.

Board member Douglas Layne said the reference to a possible savings of \$50,000 "changed his vote." On principle, he opposed the change. He stated his fears of "losing the collegiality of the board." He also said that he hopes the board continues to "keep a vigorous discussion of the budget."

Before voting, Mrs. Woerner said the cost-savings figure was "not clear," adding, "I don't think all the facts are on the table...I can't rely on that for sole justification [of voting 'no']"

Mr. Whitehouse replied, "It's not mine (sole justification) either."

Mrs. Woerner also reminded the board that current budgets are subject to limitations of a 2-percent cap. She said that figure could change, and details of how that would affect future years have not been released.

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Mountainside Planning Bd.

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to play at," he said. "We have the biggest lacrosse communities around us... I think it's a great location, too, right off of (Route) 22, easy for people to get to."

In other business, Carol and Peter Goggi of 1125 Ridge Drive were approved to install solar panels on the roof of their home.

The Trilos Realty application for the Echo Park Restaurant and Grill, 1079 Route 22, was moved to the March 8 meeting. The restaurant is proposing a change of tenancy and renovations to the existing restaurant.

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VALENTINE THANK YOU... Approximately 50 local veterans enjoy a multi-course buffet dinner provided by local restaurants and organizations last Friday.