

Gov. Christie Supports CF Mayor's Stance on Birchwood Development

By FRED T. ROSSI

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

CRANFORD – Mayor David Robinson expressed appreciation for Governor Chris Christie's seemingly supportive comments about the township's stance on the proposed Birchwood Avenue development.

At the township committee's meeting on Tuesday evening, a resident played an audio tape of the governor's remarks – made recently on a radio call-in program – in which Governor Christie, when questioned by a Cranford resident, said the state Department of Community Affairs had met with local officials and was "working on resolving the matter."

The governor went on to say that he was "concerned about [the proposed development] from a flooding perspective," adding that "it doesn't sound to me like it's a very wise idea." The governor, who told the caller that he had lived in Cranford in the late 1980s, said that the proposed 360 housing units would worsen the effects from the next severe flood.

Earlier in the meeting, township attorney Phil Morin briefly recounted last month's denial of a motion for reconsideration in the township's lawsuit against Cranford Development Associates LLC, the Birchwood Avenue developer. Superior Court Judge Lisa Chrystal issued her denial on January 26, after the township had included additional evidence regarding the deleterious effects of flooding on the area if the development were permitted to go forward. The denial will allow the soil conservation permits to be issued by the township.

Furthermore, the ruling added

that any delays by the municipal government in issuing any future permits will be adjudicated by a court-appointed Special Master, Mr. Morin said.

In other business, deputy mayor Andis Kalnins said the 2012 township budget will be introduced in early March but a formal vote will not occur until later in June after state aid figures are finalized. He said it will be a "challenging year" as the governing body "balances the services we want versus what we're willing to pay" for those services, all while staying within the state-mandated 2-percent cap. In a related matter, Commissioner Edward O'Malley said that Moody's had recently reviewed the municipality's finances and maintained Cranford's credit rating at "AA2."

The committee also introduced an ordinance to raise the height limit on buildings in the R1 through R7 zones from 30 feet to 32 feet, a move that will allow homeowners in flood zones to raise their homes, as one has already done, in an effort to avoid severe flood damage. Commissioner Kevin Campbell said the ordinance will negate the need for homeowners wishing to raise their houses to apply to the zoning board for variances. A public hearing on the ordinance will be held on March 13.

At the start of the meeting, the township committee honored four retiring department of public works employees. Wayne Rozman, Stephen 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 rededication 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.

GW Administrator Alleges Harassment In Lawsuit

By PAUL J. PEYTON

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

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 Westfield Leader* 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 Leader*.

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 Leader*.

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.