

# MS BOE Elects to Raise Tax Levy Due to Bussing Costs

By DOMINIC A. LAGANO  
Specialty Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

**MOUNTAINSIDE** — The Mountainside Board of Education (BOE) held its bimonthly meeting Tuesday evening at which time the board decided to call for a higher tax levy from Mountainside residents.

The borough's school tax levy will be increased as a direct result of extra bus routes that could not be eliminated by the district.

During the 2012 budget process, the district has been requesting that parents sign transportation waiver forms for those students who do not use the district's busses.

Acting Business Administrator Daniel Saragnese has stated on a number of occasions that district's busses have only been filled to 50 percent capacity. If enough waiver forms were signed, the district would have been able to greatly reduce student transportation costs, thus saving the district significant resources.

Commenting that the district is "obviously wasting money," Mr. Saragnese stated expenditures had to be reduced to lessen the burden to Mountainside taxpayers. "We're recommending the elimination of late busses...we also had to make the difficult choice that involves staffing at the elementary level in special ed...By making those two adjustments, we were able to keep the net effect on the tax rate just under one cent (per \$100 of assessed valuation)."

Despite these cuts, Mr. Saragnese stated the tax burden to Mountainside residents would be increased. "The net effect of what we had to do is an \$11 increase in the tax burden for the owners of the 'average' home in town." The average assessed value for a residence in Mountainside is \$165,537.

Mr. Saragnese revealed that the district's business office had received 31 waivers from students attending the Beechwood and Deerfield Schools and 11 waivers from students attending Governor Livingston High School next year. The district needed approximately 50 waivers from each quarter to reduce expenditures.

Mr. Saragnese stated that for the purpose of the 2012 budget, the deadline for waiver transportation has expired. However, Mr. Saragnese further stated the district's business office would continue to accept transportation waivers until

June, when the final count for the Vogel Bus Company would be tallied. If enough waivers were received by June, the routes could still be eliminated.

Citing a lack of response from the public, board member Christopher Minks asked parents to come forward with any concerns regarding the waiver.

"There's still scuttlebutt going around about people being confused about exactly what the waivers mean and that the letters sent home were clear or not clear. If you have any questions please ask a board member or call the board office...it's not a fait accompli, when you sign the waiver it doesn't mean you're forever giving up bus service. It just means it's for that school year and there is the opportunity, if your financial circumstances or other circumstances change, such that they dictate that you need the bussing again...you can get into bussing," he said.

Mr. Minks continued, "It's probably the biggest single contribution a parent from Mountainside can make to try to help us with the budget crisis we're in."

Mr. Saragnese said he was concerned about the future of the Mountainside School District if its wasteful spending was not curtailed.

"It is absolutely essential that we continue to press forward on this, to eliminate any unnecessary dollars...or you will find yourself in a dilemma that I couldn't save you from, no matter how long I stayed here. There's no place else to go. If you want to survive as an independent school district, maintain your autonomy, you must understand as a community, there are adjustments that must be made here in order to continue to do that," he said. Mr. Saragnese was appointed to the district by the state.

In other news, the board announced the teacher and support staff member of the year for the two schools in the district. Deborah Weiss was named the Beechwood School teacher of the year while Nancy Kinney was named the equivalent in the Deerfield School.

Lynne Ciasulli was named the support staff member of the year at the Beechwood School while Stanislaw Sieczkowski was named the equivalent in the Deerfield School.

The next BOE meeting open to the public is scheduled for Tuesday, April 24, at 7:30 p.m. at Beechwood School's Susan O. Collier Media Center.

## Lautenberg's Bizarre And Uninformed Comments

Sen. Frank Lautenberg's uninformed and vengeful remarks concerning the proposed Rutgers-Rowan merger have done a serious disservice to students and parents across South Jersey. They are utterly false, as well as offensive to the many people giving their time and effort to an initiative that would greatly improve higher education in our region. Sen. Lautenberg's bizarre and misguided comments come at a time when New Jersey needs serious leadership on this issue.

Our state ranks a dismal 47th out of 50 in federal funding for higher education. That is unacceptable. Yet rather than fighting in Washington on our state's behalf, he engages in unseemly grandstanding back home in an attempt to settle old political scores. While Sen. Lautenberg has failed all of New Jersey on the issue of higher education, his callous disregard for South Jersey has been reprehensible. He seems to forget that he was elected to represent all the people of New Jersey, not just those who live north of Trenton.

On issue after issue, Sen. Lautenberg has been missing in action when it comes to the problems and concerns of his con-

stituents in this region. On this issue, Sen. Lautenberg ignores how South Jersey has been shortchanged in state funding for higher education. The reasons for the proposed merger of Rutgers Camden and Rowan have nothing to do with the funding of the medical school but everything to do with correcting this imbalance. In fact, Rutgers-Camden serves as a cash cow feeding Rutgers-New Brunswick. Each year, nearly half of every tuition dollar in Camden is siphoned off by Rutgers-New Brunswick. An equitable distribution of Rutgers State operating funds to Camden would add approximately \$40-\$50 million dollars annually to Rutgers-Camden.

For these and many more reasons, funding for higher education in South Jersey has to change. We deserve our fair share of higher education funding and the benefits of our own research university right here in South Jersey. Unfortunately, Sen. Lautenberg doesn't seem to understand these issues. Since his comments have no basis in fact, and that he took this deplorable action without even discussing the matter with those who know the facts, the only conclusion is that Sen. Lautenberg is

# Editor's Commentary School, Town and County Budget Unification

There are many budget presentation meetings, PowerPoint slides on the Internet and snapshots of data printed in newspapers. So why is it that the taxpayer and others of the public are confused? There's a prolific pool of data but little attention is given to unification of the complete picture into useful information.

It is next to impossible to get the whole story given the abounding conglomeration and complexity of government domains: expenditures, debt, maintenance, state aid, sewer charges, bond issues, authority initiatives, union contracts, fees, regulations, policy, insurances, benefits — the list goes on. Though OPRA, the Open Public Records Act, theoretically gives the public access to information, it's still like herding cats. The system defies being defined or measured.

Society would be well served if there were a central place where all the information is consolidated and published, even if continually evolving as the best compendium of the moment. This would help the many bailiwicks realize they are part of the world, not a sovereign apparatus. This would also help the public prioritize and temper their appetite; assisting present assessment.

Until the utopia of information unification can be brought about:

While school tax levies in Union County are no longer being voted on by the public, we were happy to see that the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education has opted to continue to hold budget presenta-

tions at schools for parents as well as the general public on the 2012-2013 school budget. Westfield stopped the community forums a number of years ago due to a lack of interest by the public, although the district has held six meetings on the budget to date this year that have been open to the public.

In Westfield, the PTOs asked the BOE to hold a few presentations in recent years at the schools at the invitation of the PTO presidents when budgets were at risk to voter decision. One forum was held at Washington School on March 15 and another had been scheduled for March 21, but was canceled due to the district's 19th annual Awareness Expo. The district, to its credit, has made summaries of the budget presentations available in its superintendent on-line Synopsis newsletter. In addition, meetings are taped and aired on TV36 and are now available at [www.westfieldnj12.org/video](http://www.westfieldnj12.org/video).

We believe that budget presentations, especially on the tax impact, should be unified in our communities. In fact, once the municipal and county budgets are completed, we encourage our local and county leaders to join forces to hold joint presentations on the overall tax impacts in the local towns. Filming these presentations and putting them on government websites and on local cable access channels would also help get this information out to the public.

Transparency must be more than data dilution. The public must have the opportunity (and undertake the responsibility) to know how their tax dollars are being spent. The public must pose cogent questions to their BOE, municipal and county representatives — and receive relevant responses.



**FIGHTING FRAUD...**The Fanwood Senior Club at the Fanwood Recreation Center on March 26th held a fraud prevention seminar presented by Dana Marsalisi from Valley National Bank's Corporate Security Department. They discussed prevention techniques specifically designed for senior citizens who have become the frequent targets of many fraud schemes today. Financial exploitation of the elderly is one of the fastest growing financial crimes in the United States. Pictured, from left to right, are: Asuncion Flores, Evelyn Bosch, Joseph Qutub, Dana Marsalisi, Joan Feller, and Robert McCarthy.

## Easter Bunny to Visit Westfield

The Lions Club of Westfield will hold its 77th annual Easter Egg Hunt in Mindowaskin Park on Saturday, April 7 at 1 p.m. for children up to age 7. Participants and their parents are asked to assemble in the park by 12:45 p.m. The hunt will start precisely at 1 p.m.

There will be three age group areas set aside for the children, toddler to 3, 4 to 5 year-olds, and 6 to 7 year-olds. More than 1,200 plastic eggs will be hidden in the area around the gazebo. Many of the Easter eggs will contain prize coupons for treats donated by town merchants.

Immediately after the hunt, complimentary bags containing jellybeans will be distributed to the children. The Easter Bunny will be available from noon on for pictures with the children.

Voluntary donations will be accepted to help defray the costs of the hunt. In the event of poor weather, there will not be a

rain date. Instead, the Lions will hand out jellybeans, plastic eggs and prizes under the gazebo, as well as having the Easter Bunny available there for photographs.

The Lions Club thanks Police Chief John Parizeau and to Town Administrator James Gilead for their assistance with the hunt. This year's hunt is under the aegis of Lions President Jeff Broadwell and Hunt chairwoman Alberta Ryan.

Lions Clubs International is the world's largest service club. It is dedicated to sight conservation and assistance to the sight and hearing impaired worldwide.

The Westfield Lions Club would like to hear from anyone who has pictures from the early years of the hunt, which started in 1936. The club may be contacted at P.O. Box 572, Westfield, 07091.

The Lions also ask participants to bring non-perishable items for the Westfield Food Pantry.

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