

Mayors Look to Restore Energy Tax Revenues Held by State

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

AREA – New Jersey mayors are endorsing recently introduced legislation to have money generated from taxes on gas and electric utilities operating in municipalities returned to towns. The legislation would restore \$439 million over a five-year period, with \$87.8 million returned the first year the legislation is signed into law. The money used to be collected by towns before the state took it over in the 1980s.

The New Jersey State League of Municipalities has said over \$3.4 billion has been diverted from the Energy Tax Receipts Property Tax Relief program and the Consolidated Municipal Property Tax Relief Act

program (CMPTRA) over the past 10 years. Funding was cut \$26 million in 2008, \$32 million in 2009, and \$271 million in 2010.

Despite comments from lawmakers in the 1990s that the revenue stream to towns from the energy tax would not be touched, the “state budget makers have diverted funding from energy taxes to fund state programs,” according to a letter to state mayors from William Dressel, executive director of the New Jersey League of Municipalities.

Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr, who heads up the legislative services arm of the New Jersey Conference of Mayors, told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* during an interview last Friday that if the money had

stayed in the municipal coffers, Fanwood would have received an additional \$2.1 million in revenue over the last 10 years, including a million dollars the past two years. “In 2011 our tax levy would have been 10 percent less” if the borough had its full allotment of revenue from the energy tax, she said.

“We want to begin to restore to the local budgets the dollars that have been diverted for many years for state purposes,” Mayor Mahr said.

“This is a huge important fiscal issue for towns in New Jersey,” Mayor Mahr said, noting that the issue has been a “unifier” of mayors regardless of political party affiliation. “We want the money that is rightfully ours returned. We want to work with Trenton... on coming up with a better formula that will return more than what we are currently getting.”

“There is such a sense of entitlement to this money by the lawmakers in Trenton,” Mayor Mahr added. “To me it’s outrageous.”

The state legislation is sponsored by Senator Paul Sarlo (D-36, Wood-Ridge), who chairs the Senate Budget Committee and also serves as mayor of Wood-Ridge, and Assemblyman Troy Singleton (D-7, Mount Laurel).

“The legislation would restore \$385 million cut from 2009, 2010 and 2011 budgets while providing an additional \$54 million to support aid increases required under existing law,” according to a press release from the sponsors. “After the five-year run-up, the state would be mandated to distribute the full amount of energy tax revenues to municipalities.”

Based on a formula calculator for energy tax revenues held by the state (available on the LOM website), Westfield has lost \$9.5 million over the past 10 years, including \$2.9 million.

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GW Opts Not to Change Law for Crossing Guards

By CHRISTINA M. HINKE
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

GARWOOD – A borough council committee has opted not to recommend changing the borough ordinance regarding borough crossing guards to match provisions in state legislation introduced by two Trenton Republican lawmakers.

Republican Assemblypersons Amy Handlin and Jay Webber have talked of amending bill no. 132 they introduced in January concerning eligibility for unemployment insurance for certain seasonal workers. The amendment to the legislation would term part-time school and police workers and other departments as seasonal workers, thus making them unable to collect unemployment.

The borough council’s police committee, chaired by Councilman Timothy Hak, said the committee is not recommending changing the borough law right now to mirror the Assemblypersons’ intentions. The borough’s crossing guards, who are school part-time employees, came before the council previously, stating their objection to losing unemployment pay when they are off in the summer.

Currently, the borough pays unemployment to crossing guards, who are considered part-time workers. Councilwoman Sara Todisco, a member of the police committee, said the committee recommended waiting a year to see how things pan out in the state and review the outcomes of other municipalities that are changing labor laws.

“If we want to compensate our crossing guards differently, then let’s raise the pay,” said Councilman Jim Mathieu, who suggested having them not collect unemployment in lieu of a higher pay scale.

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MONEY TALKS...Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr stopped by the office of *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* last Friday to discuss the New Jersey Energy tax receipts refund from the state. She is pictured with Assignment Editor Paul Peyton.

Scotch Plains Board Reverses Decision of Zoning Bd. on Business

By SARA MAGNOLA-TANER
Specially Written for The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times

SCOTCH PLAINS – During its May 3 meeting, the Scotch Plains Board of Adjustment heard an application from a local business owner who had been informed by the zoning officer that his recently purchased property was not zoned for the type of business he currently is conducting.

“They thought when they bought the property they could do their business, but found out after that it’s not allowed,” stated attorney Daniel Bernstein, who was representing the

applicants, Brent and Laura Cheshire, owners of Triangle Communications.

The business was previously operating out of a rental space in Berkeley Heights, but was badly flooded last year.

According to Laura Cheshire, in addition to cleaning up the inside and outside of the new property, which is located at 2362 Waldheim Avenue, they were planning to install cubicles, so her husband contacted the township’s zoning department. At that point, Zoning Officer Robert LaCosta determined that their business was a motor vehicle service establishment, which was not a conforming use for the property.

In an effort to prove to the board that Triangle Communications is not a motor vehicle service establishment, Ms. Cheshire explained that they install lights, cameras, radios, computers and mapping devices in public safety vehicles, with the bulk of their client base consisting of area police departments. Based on last year’s figures, Ms. Cheshire determined that they do twice as much work each month off-site versus on-site, and that the garage is used for larger projects that take longer, so that cars can be protected while disassembled.

She answered “no” when asked by the board if there is any smoke, gas, chemicals, heat or glare created as a

result of the work they do.

“There’s not much noise,” Ms. Cheshire said. “We use all hand tools and have no lift. All of the work in Scotch Plains is done Monday through Friday, 8:30 to 5.”

Morris Township Police Chief Dennis Reilly testified as a long-standing client to the nature of Triangle Communications’ operations. When asked by board member Richard Duthie if he would go there if he needed body work, Mr. Reilly answered “no.”

After deliberation, the board voted to overrule Mr. LaCosta’s determination that Triangle Communications was an automotive service establishment. Board members agreed instead that the work the Cheshires perform is assembly and manufacture, which falls under industrial use, and is therefore conforming to the township’s zoning ordinance.

After the decision was made, the Cheshires told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* that they were “relieved and happy” by the board’s decision.

The board also heard an application from Kurt and Nadia Hartman of Unami Lane, who were applying for a variance to install a six-foot fence in their front yard.

“We want to use the space for backyard activities,” Kurt Hartman said.

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SPRINGFLING...Streets downtown were filled with area residents for the annual SpringFling held last Sunday. Booths featuring everything from food and crafts to facepainting offered something for people of all ages.

Workers Seek to Keep Jobs As County Eyes Privatization

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

COUNTY – As the last of 280 layoffs of Union County employees becomes effective June 1, the Board of Chosen Freeholders last Thursday approved several ordinances to refinance \$78 million in bonds to save money on debt service. In addition, the board approved a contract to look at the privatization of Watchung Stables, which is running a \$600,000 deficit. County officials have said the layoffs were necessary to close a \$35-million deficit in its \$484-million budget.

Freeholder Dan Sullivan, chairman of the freeholders’ fiscal affairs committee this year, said the ordinances would be the subject of a hearing before the state’s Local Finance Board on Wednesday, May 9, in Trenton. He said the amount of savings to the county through the refinancing would not be known until the Local Finance Board ren-

ders its decision.

“If we get these particular funds, there has been no determination made as to how those funds will be utilized and whether they would be allowed in the 2012 budget,” Mr. Sullivan told a packed freeholders’ meeting room full of workers and union representatives.

County Manager Al Faella told *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times* previously that the refinancing was expected to save the county between \$2 and \$4 million.

In commenting on the refinancing of the bonds, Bruce Paterson of Garwood said, “You are funneling money to your cronies,” a reference to John Hudak, an attorney handling the refinancing for the county and the father of second-year Freeholder Chris Hudak.

Freeholder Chairman Al Mirabella said the senior Mr. Hudak had worked for the county long before Chris Hudak became a free-

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BIRTHDAY PARTY...Attendees of the Scotch Plains Republican Committee’s roast in honor of former Mayor Marty Marks’ 50th birthday held Friday at The Westwood enjoy the night. Former Governor Donald DiFrancesco, left, speaks with Scotch Plains Police Chief Brian Mahoney as Scotch Plains Deputy Mayor Mary DePaola looks on.



BIRTHDAY ROAST...The Republican Committee of Scotch Plains held a roast in honor of former Mayor Marty Marks’ 50th birthday on Friday night at The Westwood. Mr. Marks took the friendly jabs in good humor.

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