

Westfield Introduces \$48.2 Mill. 2018 Municipal Budget

By CHRISTINA M. HINKE
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — The town council on Tuesday introduced its 2018 budget of \$48,211,227, by a 8-to-1 vote, with a municipal tax levy increase of 1.13 percent for a total tax levy of \$27,975,496 with a separate library tax of \$2,571,941. The tax levy increase is \$313,000 over last year. Finance committee member JoAnn Neylan was the sole dissenter. A final vote on the budget will take place on Tuesday, April 24.

According to the presentation, Westfielders will see a tax rate in-

crease of 0.52 percent. The increase equates to approximately \$30 on the average assessed homeowner. The budget and the presentation can be found on the town's website westfieldnj.gov.

The Special Improvement District (SID) budget was also introduced by the council, with a \$6,000 increase, totaling \$416,347 in general appropriations. The SID funds the Downtown Westfield Corporation and has not increased its budget in seven years, Town Administrator Jim Gildea said.

The municipal budget's largest increases over last year were pensions

for the police and fire departments, up almost 15 percent. The total increase in non-discretionary costs, which includes, pensions, salaries, healthcare, sewerage, and more, was about 3.5 percent.

Councilwoman Neylan gave a list of reasons why she wouldn't support the budget as presented. "Firstly, we are spending over 30 percent of the town's surplus for this year's budget," she said. She said unknown expenses such as the removal of the cap on salary increases for police and fire and tax appeals after the tax revaluation is complete could impact future budgets that would need to utilize the surplus.

"We had an unusual bump in surplus" due to taxpayers filing taxes early in 2017, Ms. Neylan also noted. Surplus this year is about \$14.5 million, \$4.5 million is to be used to pay for budgetary items.

The town collected \$27 million in pre-paid taxes at the end of 2017, Mr. Gildea said.

The budget allocates \$250,000 in consulting fees, "many of which are redundant," Councilwoman Neylan said. She called the current administration a "government that spends."

The budget calls for spending over \$4 million in surplus to cover expenses such as investing in the Department of Public Works aging fleet of equipment. Finance Chairwoman Linda Habgood had said the budget includes two years of investment in DPW's six-year plan, which she said is the right decision rather than having the surplus sit in the bank collecting less than 1 percent interest.

"You are in a safe area," Warren Korecky, the town's budgeting consultant, said of keeping the surplus level at about \$10,000,000, a number that Ms. Habgood said the council agreed is a figure that would maintain

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BUDGET TALKS...Westfield Mayor Shelley Brindle explains the 2018 municipal budget as Town Administrator Jim Gildea looks on.



SIGNS TELL ALL... "Thoughts and prayers are not enough," "We hope the tide is turning," the signs read at the March for Our Lives event in Mindowaskin Park on Saturday. Hundreds of people from all ages were on hand to add their opinion.

Westfield BOE Hears Presentation On Upcoming New Website

By SARAH McGRAIL
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

WESTFIELD — Parents will be able to create a customized calendar for their own family on the new board of education website that will be launched on Wednesday, August 1, it was revealed during Tuesday's meeting of the Westfield Board of Education.

Chief Technology Officer Brian Auken said the district had consulted extensively with the people who would use the website and noted it would be better and more interactive than the existing website in

many ways.

"We realized our website is an invaluable communications tool that is used by many, many individuals in the community," he said.

The new website, powered by Edlio, will be more accessible for people with a handicap, such as impaired vision, Mr. Auken told attendees at the board meeting.

There will be links to social media but parents also will be able to read the board's Facebook and Twitter pages on the website.

In response to parental demand, there will be buttons at the top of the website that give easy access to Genesis and the district calendar.

The existing website will be removed on June 30 and a temporary website will take its place until the new website is in place on August 1.

The board was shown a test version of the new website and Board President Gretchen Ohlig said, "I haven't seen it before but it looks

wonderful, and I know you have made an extraordinary effort to talk to all the stakeholders."

Business Manager Dana Sullivan presented some of the bigger projects planned for the rest of 2018 and into 2019.

More than 800 doors and fire doors are to be replaced throughout the district's schools, at a cost of \$4.1 million, as part of the district's ongoing security initiative.

Ms. Sullivan pointed out that the replacement of fire doors, which were required to incorporate a system that closed them in the event of a fire, added significantly to the expense.

Another security procedure has been the introduction of identification cards for teachers that enable them to gain admission to the school without the need to input a code that can be observed and used by others to get into the school.

Other major expenses within the district's aging schools included the replacement of boilers at a cost of \$900,000.

The district has around one million square feet of building space and more than 80 acres of land to maintain, with schools ranging in age from McKinley Elementary School, built in 1908, to Tamaques Elementary School, built in 1963.

Cranford Defers Vote On Bond Ord. Until April 10

By KIMBERLY A. BROADWELL
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

CRANFORD — The township committee on Tuesday night deferred a second and final motion to approve reading of an ordinance to refund monies from a 2006 bond to an April meeting. Commissioners voted to move the second reading of the ordinance until the committee's Tuesday, April 10 meeting.

According to Commissioner Mary O'Connor, the ordinance is structured to save the township more than \$500,000 in bond payments over a period of 20 years. She stated, "Hopefully this ordinance will go forward."

Resolutions that were heard and passed included: approving a leave of absence for an employee of the police department, pursuant to the federal Family Medical Leave Act, authorizing an award contract to Harbor Consultants, Inc. for planning services, authorizing an amendment to the contract awarded to Community Grants, Planning and Housing

(CGP and H) for administrative agent services, authorizing a contract to Best Cleaning Building Services, Inc. for custodial services for the municipal building and grounds, authorizing to award a contract to Bagel Giant for 2018 Concession Rights for the Centennial Avenue and Orange Avenue Pools, and authorizing tax refunds and complying with the United States Equal Opportunity Employment Commission's "Enforcement Guidance on the Consideration of Arrest and Conviction Records in Employment Decisions Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964."

In other business, it was announced that today, March 29, would be the last tree debris collection from the recent storms by the Department of

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REMEMBERING THE 17 LOST LIVES... Students and adults, including Westfield Mayor Shelley Brindle, far left, stand in solidarity at Saturday's March for Our Lives in Mindowaskin Park in Westfield. They did a symbolic lighting of candles for the people who lost their lives in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting on February 14 in Parkland, Fla.

Garwood, Fanwood Mayors To Review Shared Services

By MICHAEL BONACCORSO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

GARWOOD — Mayor Charles Lombardo on Tuesday night stated he would meet with Fanwood Mayor Colleen Mahr sometime this week to discuss the shared-service agreement moving forward. Mayor Lombardo said he values the relationship Garwood has with Fanwood regarding shared services and expects the relationship to continue in the future.

Councilman Joseph Sarno proposed at the last borough council meeting that the borough should investigate what other "deals" can be arranged with other municipalities regarding shared services. Mr. Sarno stated that "it would not hurt" the borough's working relationship with Fanwood "to see" if there is a "better deal out there" for Garwood.

Mr. Sarno said a closed-session discussion could be used to weigh the pros and cons of each service agreement to find the best terms for Garwood. The councilman stated that he did not want to end the shared-service relationship with Fanwood unless there are "better" alternatives.

Councilwoman Ileen Cuccaro, who chairs the Laws and License Committee, said an amendment is being proposed to charge a fee for abandoned homes.

"It is a good way to keep an eye on them, make the banks liable for their upkeep. Fees will assure this will happen," said Ms. Cuccaro.

Ms. Cuccaro stated that a \$500 fee will be enacted to register the home for the first year. The fee on the second anniversary will be \$1,500. A second annual renewal fee will be \$3,000. The fee for any renewal past the second year will be \$5,000, stated Ms. Cuccaro.

"This will encourage the banks or owners of abandoned or vacant properties to move in a reasonable manner," said Ms. Cuccaro.

The planning board will review any existing fence ordinances regarding corner properties.

"We hope for a unanimous approval. We hope to repeal this onerous revision that was done three years ago to the dismay of many corner property owners," said Ms. Cuccaro.

Councilman Richard McCormack said as a corner property owner himself, he does not feel it is "fair" to collect corner property owner's taxes "like everyone else." Yet, corner properties are entitled to less privacy than other borough residents.

Planning board member Bill Nierstedt said that he could not provide commentary until the ordinance is reviewed by the planning board or "in front of him." Planning board commentary will be provided before the next council meeting addressing the matter, Councilwoman Sara Todisco said.

The New Jersey Department of Transportation has awarded Garwood \$216,000 to "repair various borough streets" in the 2018 calendar year, stated Mayor Lombardo.

Mayor Lombardo said through the Union County Open Space, Recreation and Historic Preservation Trust Fund, Garwood has been awarded a \$25,470 Level The Playing Field playground grant.

The Mayor appointed planning board member Kathy Villaggio to the recreation commission and celebrations committee.

"I am excited to help our community and give back. Both the recreation commission and the celebra-

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THIS IS A MOVEMENT, NOT A MOMENT...Saturday's March for Our Lives rally filled Mindowaskin Park in Westfield, as attendees heard impassioned speeches on the effort to end mass shootings by reforming the nation's gun laws.

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