

State DMV Needs Overhaul To Better Serve Community

By KIM KINTER

Kim Kinter, a Westfield resident, is a hard news reporter and member of the Leader/Times Staff editorial staff.

There are not many places where you can get such service.

An hour's wait - if you are among the lucky - only to be told to step to the back of the room for another hour - again, if luck is with you - until your number is called. And all this served with a disinterested attitude and nary a smile.

Welcome to the local office of the New Jersey Division of Motor Vehicles-Motor Vehicles Services.

At a time when most organizations have realized that service is a core value, it is time for Garden State officials to overhaul one of the last bastions of incompetence and inefficiency.

Perhaps it is because most New Jersey citizens only occasionally have to deal with the department - to change a title or renew a driver's license - that the department has continued to get away with its "government with an attitude" approach to dealing with the public.

If state residents had to visit the local offices more frequently, constituents would be breaking down the doors of their representatives to demand a change. But for those who do have to visit an office even occasionally and, especially, for those new to the state, it remains a most unpleasant and dreaded experience.

Perhaps state officials, both elected and appointed, should spend a few hours themselves unannounced inside one of the offices. Watch or talk with the others in what is often a standing room only crowd.

Get an eyeeful and earful from citizens who give up hours of their busy workdays, only to be mishandled by people whose salaries they help pay.

Talk to anyone dejectedly standing in line, or just watch them shake their heads and roll their eyes. As they wait for today's surprise, many have Division of Motor Vehicle horror stories of their last visit, or a recent stop where the line was so long they decided to come back a week later.

The employees aren't the only ones to blame. The system, if one can call it that, appears built to break down. To get a new driver's license, one has to go through a series of steps - and lines - including one to buy a permit that will never be used. The offices seem to be run haphazardly, with little cross-training for various

job responsibilities. Supervision isn't apparent. One person can be handling a line of 20 people as others stand around and talk to one another or to friends on the phone.

And, just when lines become the most unmanageable, it seems that employees head off for lunch. Those who come in with the wrong paperwork and are quickly turned away, must come back to suffer another day.

But don't try calling the Division of Motor Vehicles for help before stopping at a local office. There are no local numbers and directions to be had through the telephone book. Information has to come from the department's main offices in Trenton - where the telephone wait can also be long - or through the driver's manual.

The department does have a Web site now, but many who need the services of the local offices do not have access to computers.

It seems that Governor Christine Todd Whitman is aware that there may be some problems with the department. On September 30, the governor announced that the New Jersey Department of Transportation entered into an agreement with IBM for a project that will make it possible for New Jerseyans to renew motor vehicle registrations by telephone and over the Internet, beginning next year.

"This project is a response to the public's demand for more efficient and convenient motor vehicle services. Thanks to the Public-Private Partnership Act, we can bring together the respective strengths of the public and private sectors to implement programs that benefit the public and at the same time reduce costs," said Transportation Commissioner James Weinstein when the program was announced.

Privatization is not new to the state. More than a year ago, New Jersey privatized the state's vehicle inspection stations. Maybe that is what should be considered for the Division of Motor Vehicles. What is clear from visiting the offices and seeing them in action is that starting over is the only way to go.

It doesn't take a high-paid management consultant to discover that the DMV still has not figured out that they are serving the public. Ask anyone who has had to make a recent trip to one of the offices - or head in for a visit yourself. And bring lots of reading material.



Kim Kinter

Staff Columns Forget Sitcoms, Melodramas: BOE Is Entertaining Enough

By MICHELLE H. LEPOIDEVIN

Michelle H. LePoidevin is the Arts & Entertainment Editor of The Westfield Leader and The Times of Scotch Plains-Fanwood. She also covers the Westfield Board of Education. She joined the newspaper's staff in 1998.

When I was assigned to cover the Westfield Board of Education, I realized I would have to sacrifice some of my favorite Tuesday night television programs in order to cover the meetings. No more curling up on the couch with a pint of Chocolate Chip Haagen Dazs and a healthy dose of "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

One year later, I've realized that the rocket-paced, high drama of a board of education meeting has the same components as a good episode of "ER" or "NYPD Blue," without the flashing red and blue lights, stretchers and cardiac arrest.

The school board itself is a cast of characters - each member has its own personality and purpose. Their unpredictable interaction cannot be found in any movie or television script.

And, the most gifted fortuneteller at a Psychic Convention, cannot even attempt to predict the dead-on, blunt, whether-you-want-the-truth-or-not comments and evaluations of Superintendent of Schools, Dr. William J. Foley. Nor the comical court jesters antics of Board Member Thomas Taylor, who always brings comic relief to meetings and drives the punchlines home.

One episode of "Westfield BOE," which can include props ranging from a beaten up bookbag to a squeaky black

rubber rat (don't ask) and can feature anything from evaluating test scores to tripping sprinklers at the football field during a water emergency. But, one constant at meetings which is as certain as rolling the credits, includes the "Good News."

I lovingly refer to this portion as "Good Snooze." Before we get to the meat of the matter or the actual plot of our meetings, we spend about 10 minutes discussing the "smiley faces" of the school district. "Susie did a great job in the school play." "Jack and Jill are going to the leadership conference" or "Referendum Road will be closed due to renovations which means students will be bused within the district until further notice."

What was that? Oh, sorry, someone just splashed some cold water on me to wake me up! Okay, on to the real part of the meeting. With my pen poised at my notepad, I can feel the adrenaline pumping as we are on the cusp of the Superintendent's Report. Here come the hard-hitting issues. The twists, the turns and the tumult.

Learning that students are undergoing high-stakes state testing which is unfamiliar to them and yielding questionable results is enough to make the comatose sit up and take notice. Concerned comments bounce back and forth between board members. I find my eyes darting between speakers as if I'm watching a tennis match.

Dr. Foley slouches down in his chair, leaning his face on his hand and mumbles, "I don't know." Board members pull papers out of their big brown envelopes and strain their eyes with concern and query.

If it sounds like high drama, that's because it is. The Westfield Board of Education takes each topic on its agenda and turns it into an episode which always keeps a neon "To Be Continued" sign flashing across the transoms of our minds. There is always a loose end to tie up or something that needs to be looked into further.

However, if we checked the Nielsen Ratings on "Westfield BOE," would we find them skyrocketing next to "Ally McBeal" and "The Practice?" Chances are, the answer is no. But, it should be yes - and for one simple reason.

This cast of characters discusses issues that are crucial to the formation of young minds and the district as a whole. And yet, the absence of an audience at board meetings is reminiscent of a ghost town in an old John Wayne movie. Where are all the parents? Are they watching the taping by TV-36 at home? After an \$11.7 million bond referendum and a multi-million budget - they owe it to themselves to tune in.

Come join the cast of "Westfield BOE" as a supporting character on Tuesday nights at 8 p.m. in the Administration Building on Elm Street. You won't be nominated for an Emmy, but it will keep you informed...and entertained.



Michelle H. LePoidevin

Dr. Foley

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College application procedures and information are electronic. Many advanced tests such as the graduate record examination are completed online. The ability to search the net has become crucial in high school and college research papers.

More of our graduates are reporting that colleges are assessing both their academic skills and computer proficiency. Finally and most importantly, the jobs of the 21st century will require technological literacy.

As the Educational Studies' report so aptly noted, our district must work to put more computers in the hands of teachers, especially at the high school level.

This will be my priority as we prepare a budget for the 2000-2001 school year. There are exciting and efficient uses of technology in the classroom already underway in Westfield. Our goal is to ensure computer literacy for all our teachers and students and to continue excellence in education well into the next century.

Back to School Night Offers Valuable Resources for Parents

By SUSAN M. DYCKMAN

Susan M. Dyckman, of Fanwood, has covered the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Board of Education for The Times of Scotch Plains-Fanwood since 1997.

It felt good to go to Back to School Night this year. It seemed there wasn't an open parking spot within a half mile of Coles School in Scotch Plains - a good sign, albeit inconvenient.

Student projects and artwork brightened the corridors, and classrooms were crowded with enthusiastic teachers and interested parents. It was standing room only in the multi-purpose room.

I went to Back to School Night with some questions and went home with answers. I went wanting to understand what my kids' teachers expected from their students. Now I know. I went to Back to School Night looking for examples of class work. I saw them, in abundance. I listened to the person and the professional standing at the head of the class, and liked what I heard.

There is no substitute for Back to School Night. The event eliminates a lot of back-to-school guesswork. At the very least, it gives us a sense of what, when, and how we can expect our children to learn during the school year. Better still, we have the chance to make a personal connection with individual teachers - our partners in educating our children.

Teachers have a unique opportunity to address parents as a group, to give us the same information at the same time, to answer those back-to-school questions right up front. The night is special for the kids, too. For two weeks, my daughters dropped hints of what my husband and I could expect to find on their desks that night.

Textbooks, notebooks and journals sat alongside carefully-written welcome notes that directed us to must-see spots around the classroom.

But, just one year ago, when negotia-

tions between the Board of Education and the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Education Association were stalled (and a job action was in place), Back to School Night was a sham.

As part of the job action, untenured teachers briefly stood at the rear of the multi-purpose room, only to be seen, not spoken to. Tenured (veteran) teachers were conspicuously absent. Parents were offered an unremarkable curricular presentation by district administrators.

In some classrooms, chairs sat atop desks and doors were closed. Hallways were barren of both decoration and student work. The evening was a dud.

Done properly, Back to School Night is an invaluable program for parents that should never be denied us.

It's time for the Scotch Plains-Fanwood Education Association (SPFEA) and Board of Education to make Back to School Night a non-

negotiable event that parents can count on every fall - regardless of the status of the teachers' contract. In fact, it's past time.

Every three years, when contract talks invariably come to a standstill, the SPFEA job action does deny us this window to our children's world.

The parties are already 15 months into the latest three-year contract.

Board and union representatives are meeting informally over dinner every month to talk. They appear to want to work out the kinks in their relationship before it's time to sit down at the bargaining table again.

By securing Back to School Night's place as a program guaranteed to parents during the school year, the board and SPFEA would lend credibility to their oft-spoken credo that parental involvement is essential to student success.

It would demonstrate an honorable effort to put the interests of our children first, and the entire school community would be the better for it.



Susan M. Dyckman

Politicians With Funny Bone Make Cartooning Worthwhile

By DALE NESSEMAN

Dale Neseman, a resident of Ham-burg, N.Y., has been the editorial cartoonist for The Westfield Leader and The Times of Scotch Plains-Fanwood for the past year.

I've always been interested in politics. Not interested enough to run for anything, mind you, that would take guts.

Putting your ideas out there for everybody to dissect, pull apart, put down, laugh at and ridicule, can be down-right depressing. That's why I like the idea of being a political cartoonist.

If somebody calls me a Bill Bradley commie pinko or mind-numbed Buchanan Brigadier, I can just laugh it off with, "It was a joke! C'mon! You didn't take that seriously, did you? Heh, heh."

Fortunately, critics are few and not usually heard from unless they disagree with what you've drawn. On the other hand, there is very little chance of a cartoon groupie approaching me at Walmart and grabbing my cufflinks, tearing off my shirt or asking for a lock of my hair.

Jack Ohman, a very successful syn-



Dale Neseman

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Assemblyman Bagger

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The spending plan crafted by the Appropriations Committee includes the necessary funding to implement the New Jersey School Assessment Valuation Exemption Relief (NJ SAVER) program. Homeowners received an average rebate check of \$120 this year.

While the Appropriations Committee funded this innovative property tax relief plan and other spending priorities, we also made certain to set aside a healthy reserve fund for future emergencies, such as the extraordinary damage caused throughout New Jersey by Hurricane Floyd.

Although New Jersey's revenue growth continues to exceed most projections, we must realize that this does not give the state a blank check to increase spending. On the contrary, it is imperative that even in good economic times we continue to maintain a healthy level of surplus.

Maintaining a strong surplus today will help prevent program cuts or tax increases when the economy slows and state revenues lag.

New Jersey's \$19.5 billion State Budget includes a \$800 million reserve. While this \$800 million surplus may seem like a large amount and tempt some individuals to spend more of it, the surplus represents only four percent of total spending and is actually low in comparison to other states. In fact, 35 states have a larger percentage surplus than New Jersey.

In fashioning this year's budget, we did not dip into the surplus to create new spending initiatives. Instead, we made selective investments to strengthen existing programs and address compelling human services needs.

For example, we strengthened our state's commitment to the non-profit social service agencies which contract with the state to serve individuals with developmental disabilities, mental health problems and children with an unacceptable home life.

These caregivers provide a difficult service and endure high levels of emotional stress - yet they perform these services for a salary barely above minimum wage.

We increased funding for direct caregivers who work for non-profit groups that provide services which the state cannot provide with the same high quality and low cost.

The final budget adopted by the Legislature met our state's spending obligations - from education to health care to open space - while providing significant property tax relief to homeowners and maintaining a healthy surplus.

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