

# Record-Press

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## Happy to share the crown

Defending champions Westfield and Scotch Plains tied for the girls' Union County championship Saturday after the Lady Raiders won the 400-yard freestyle — the day's last event. See Sports, Page C-1.



## Washington's birthday

Washington School in Westfield is in the midst of a 50th anniversary celebration. A display case in the school has been filled with historical items to mark the occasion. See the story on Page A-7.



## Tough to be the 'New Kid'

A free production of the play *New Kid*, which stresses an anti-bullying, inclusive message, will be offered this weekend at Cranford's Orange Avenue School. Residents from surrounding communities are welcome to attend. See more about the event in Community Life, Page B-1.

## REMINDER

## See 'Love Letters' in Fanwood

In a Valentine's Day event, a performance of the popular play *Love Letters* featuring Leslie and Ann Minski will be staged at the Fanwood Memorial Library at 3 p.m. Sunday. The show is free.

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# Draft budget calls for 8% spending hike

By BRAD BISHOP  
THE RECORD-PRESS

WESTFIELD — The tax bite from the town's 2005 operating budget will likely be smaller than last year, though municipal spending will continue to climb, officials said at the Town Council's conference meeting Tuesday.

In 2004, the council approved a budget calling for an 11-point increase on the municipal portion of town homeowners' property tax bills. That meant a hike of more than \$200 on the average homeowner — before accounting for tax increases from Union County and the school district, which by itself accounts for about 60 percent of the property tax bill.

This year's estimated \$32.4 million

budget will see a spending increase of about 7.9 percent, according to Town Administrator Jim Gildea. Total spending is expected to climb by about \$2.4 million. Information about the increase to the tax levy is not yet available, officials said.

Gildea said the town may allocate an additional \$500,000 from surplus to offset the tax levy in 2005. The aggressive step is possible because the town has received strong revenues from the building department, municipal court, and meter fees, he said. Also, the town collected 99.4 percent of taxes in 2004, higher than anticipated.

In the course of laying out the budget before the full council — the Finance Policy committee has been working on the budget for the last three weeks — Gildea broke expenses down to four categories.

Operating expenses are expected to rise by \$650,000, or 9.3 percent. Of that figure, health insurance is at the head of a class of big-ticket items, up 14.6 percent, though that figure could change when the town reaches an agreement with the firefighters' union. Other expenses in the category include legal costs, building department expenses, new health department expenses and rising utility costs.

The second category, expenses required by statute, will rise by \$773,000 (15.7 percent) if the budget is adopted as presented. This category includes an 11.2 percent spending increase for the library, contributions to the public retirement system, and payments to the Rahway Valley Sewerage Authority.

Municipal debt is expected to increase

by about \$192,000, which amounts to one tax point, Gildea said.

Salaries and wages are slated to increase by 4.4 percent, down from a 5.7 percent increase in 2004. The decrease was caused by several retirements and lower than anticipated costs for one of the town's union contracts. But that figure could climb substantially if the town adds three proposed full-time positions, a prospect that caused contentious disagreement among council members at Tuesday's meeting.

Gildea is requesting a full-time human resources director who would eventually assume the duties of an assistant town administrator. Currently, employee mat-

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BROOKS CRANDALL/CORRESPONDENT

## Weird science in Scotch Plains

Students Sarah Spitzer, Kimberly Spitzer, Sarah Barash and Rebecca Ames roll up their sleeves and whip up a batch of goo at the science fair on Saturday at the J. Ackerman Coles School in Scotch Plains.

# Skibitsky, Caruana vie for GOP nod

By BRAD BISHOP  
THE RECORD-PRESS

WESTFIELD — Although both November's general election and June's primary stand several months distant, two sitting councilmen have declared their interest in the Republican nomination for mayor. Four council seats will also be filled on Election Day.

Last week, councilmen Sal Caruana and Andy Skibitsky announced their intent to seek their party's endorsement for mayor. The Westfield Republican

Committee will hold a special meeting Wednesday night to select a candidate, party officials said.

Though Mayor Greg McDermott declined comment about his political future, party members indicated McDermott will not seek re-election.

The filing deadline for candidates is Monday, April 11. Both Caruana and Skibitsky's seats on the Town Council expire at the end of 2005.

Westfield Republican chairman and state Assemblyman Jon

Bramnick (R-21) said the party will be well represented with either candidate.

"Both of them have shown tremendous effort and commitment to public service," Bramnick said. "It's not an easy job, and I'm happy that anyone would want to stay involved."

Skibitsky, tapped by insiders as the frontrunner, was first elected to the Town Council from the Third Ward in 2002. The Schering-Plough executive currently serves as vice chairman of the Public Works committee.

"I looked at my past results on the council for two-plus years and I would like to take my accomplishments to another level," Skibitsky said. Improving traffic safety, more efficient government spending and smart growth are among Skibitsky's goals.

As did the majority of the council, Skibitsky supported the town's proposed redevelopment project at Prospect and Elm streets, which was overwhelm-

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# Reeve House work would cost millions

By BRAD BISHOP  
THE RECORD-PRESS

WESTFIELD — A report evaluating the historic Reeve House has found that it may cost up to \$3.3 million to fully restore the town-owned Victorian structure and convert it into a permanent home for the Historical Society.

The Italianate-style dwelling, constructed around 1870, stands at 314 Mountain Ave. The property has been host to several figures well-known to local historians, including Brig. Gen. John

## Historical Society undaunted by challenge

Myrick in the mid-1800s; William Stitt, proprietor of the Westfield Hotel; and William Edgar Reeve, who occupied the house for the first half of the 20th century.

The Historical Society hopes to restore the house and relocate its archives, offices, and museum to the property. Currently, the archives are housed at the Board of Education administration building on Elm Street and the museum is at the municipal

building on East Broad Street. The organization contracted aptly named architect Margaret Westfield to examine the feasibility of restoring the Reeve House.

According to society president Nancy Priest, the report found a baseline expense of \$1.3 million to meet the house's most pressing needs, with the potential for the project to cost up to \$3.3 million. But the report contains only estimates, Priest emphasized,

and her organization is currently examining ways to reduce the project's price tag.

"The report is a basic idea," she said. "We need to raise money, and we're working toward that goal."

The Historical Society and the town have entered into a temporary lease agreement that will expire in September. Priest said the agreement was necessary for the organization's fundraising efforts. To add to the Reeve

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# Owner of Dean Oil site eager to break ground

By BRAD BISHOP  
THE RECORD-PRESS

FANWOOD — With the Borough Council putting the finishing touches on the latest amendments to its redevelopment plan, early indications are that the council's property owner-driven approach is bearing fruit.

Raj Mukherji, who last month entered into a contract to purchase the former Dean Oil prop-

erty from Savers Shares, Inc., said he is crafting a 24-unit townhouse development for the 1.25-acre tract at Second Street and LaGrande Avenue.

Mukherji's property is the only designated residential zone in the redevelopment tract. It was also the site of a townhouse proposal that was rejected by the Planning Board in 1999 after neighbors protested against the plan. Though he hasn't finalized a site plan, Mukherji promised

his development will fit within the parameters established by the redevelopment plan.

"I think this will be doable within the density the borough has allocated for the project," Mukherji said.

The 20-year-old Mukherji is a prominent lobbyist with ties to statewide Democrats and has worked extensively for Internet and technology companies. At 16, he was named vice chairman of the Pablin Group, which owns

and operates the website PoliticsNJ.com, and he has worked with Fortune 500 companies and numerous government entities.

He also is a Fanwood resident, a fact Mukherji says has weighed heavily on his plans for the Dean Oil site.

"The looking at this from the standpoint of a property owner, as a taxpayer, and as a tenant,"

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# New St. developer files suit against Westfield

By BRAD BISHOP  
THE RECORD-PRESS

WESTFIELD — Negotiations between Newpointe Realty and the Town Council over a commercial development at the edge of downtown have apparently collapsed, as the developer has filed a lawsuit against the town.

And in a parallel move local officials say is unrelated to the lawsuit, the council last week terminated a contract of sale with the realty company.

The council had been holding closed-session negotiations with the developer throughout much of the second half of 2004 over an undisclosed building proposal on New Street, near the intersection of South and Central avenues. In order for Newpointe to proceed with its project, the town had entered into an agreement to sell the public right-of-way on New Street for \$330,000, subject to approval of the development by the Board of Adjustment.

In the lawsuit, the developer contests the actions the council has taken to pave the way for an age-restricted condominium development on Prospect Street to be built by the Ward and O'Donnell Property

Development Company. The suit claims that an amendment to the town's land use ordinance, approved by the council in December and tailored to the Ward/O'Donnell project, violates the equal protection rights of other property owners. The suit also alleges that the town exceeded its authority under New Jersey's Municipal Land Use Law.

Newpointe's lawsuit also names Ward/O'Donnell as a defendant and seeks to enjoin Westfield from implementing or enforcing the zoning amendment. Town officials arrived at the zoning amendment after spending much of 2004 attempting to craft language that would permit the proposed Ward/O'Donnell project but prevent other builders from suing for the same accommodation.

The amendment essentially allows Ward/O'Donnell to construct residential units on the ground floor of their building, a use otherwise not permitted in the central business district.

Town Attorney Robert Cokeren said he could not comment on pending litigation or discuss its potential impact on the Prospect Street project. Newpointe's attorney, Lori Grifa, also declined to comment on the lawsuit or the developer's negotiations with Westfield.

Ward/O'Donnell principal James Ward, contacted this week, said he wasn't aware of the lawsuit. He added that initial demolition on the Prospect Street site is scheduled to begin sometime next month.

"Everything is on schedule, as

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