

Council lowers projected tax hike

By BRAD BISHOP
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SCOTCH PLAINS — The Township Council is set to introduce a 2005 budget that will require an average \$72 increase in the municipal portion of the property tax bill, down from an earlier estimate of \$96.

At its regular meeting Tuesday, the council will introduce the \$20.5 million spending plan, which grew by about 4 percent over 2004. The tax rate is projected to increase by about 4.7 percent.

A model introduced last month by Township Manager Tom Atkins called for a 6.3 percent tax increase, or \$96 to the average homeowner. Mayor Martin Marks said the council chose to

allocate additional funds from surplus and the capital improvement account to lower the tax rate.

The council will be spending additional money not previously anticipated to cover health benefits and snow removal costs, Marks said. He said noted the anticipated \$320 increase in the school portion of the property tax bill and \$132 in the county portion.

"There are still a lot of people that think the entire property tax bill comes from the mayor and council," Marks said. "But what we're doing with a \$72 increase (amounts to) less than 1 percent of a total property tax bill that is now averaging over \$8,000."

The spending plan is on schedule for a public hearing and adoption on April 26.

Council reviews townhouse proposal

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the interior of a landscaped, private courtyard. Units will be have either two and three bedrooms and could sell for up to \$500,000 each, he added.

The units would likely be purchased by young professionals without children or older couples looking to downsize maintenance responsibilities but interested in upscale living, Mukherji said.

"These are high-end luxury units that are not going to attract school children," Mukherji said.

The project includes 48 on-site parking spaces, and as many as 10 off-site spaces would be striped on LaGrande Avenue and Second Street, Mukherji said. A waiver for parking

spaces could be necessary as part of the site plan evaluation by the Planning Board.

The interior of the development includes a park-like, landscaped open area that could include a gazebo. Walkways linking the tract with the rest of the downtown and guiding pedestrians safely to the train station are also planned, Mukherji said.

The site was formerly occupied by Dean Oil, and has long been rumored to require environmental remediation before the tract can be developed, Mukherji said the site has already been cleared by the DEP for use as a commercial development, and added that his group is in the process of determining the extent of necessary remediation for use as a residential development.

Mukherji said his group has determined that some groundwater contamination exists on the site, but it originates off-site. The DEP has determined no further action is necessary to clean up the groundwater, though the developers may have to ensure that future wells aren't created on the property.

The condition of the soil has yet to be determined, though a preliminary soil boring did reveal some contamination, Mukherji said. But the cleanup is unlikely to carry a prohibi-

tively large cost and the development group doesn't expect assistance from the borough or state to do it, he said. Officials from Landmark added that they have experience with environmental cleanups at the meeting.

"The soil remediation won't impact our ability to proceed," Mukherji said.

The council informally and unanimously endorsed the concept plan, with Mayor Colleen Mahr also expressing support.

Councilman Jack Molenaar said the project achieves low density, allows for open space, and confines most parking to the interior of the development. "I think this is pretty close to what we've talked about in the redevelopment plan," Molenaar said.

"I'm very excited about this," Mahr said. "It's nice to see a local resident taking the lead and having Landmark involved with this completes a nice circle."

If the council officially designates Mukherji-Landmark on Tuesday, the project would proceed to the Planning Board for site plan approval while the borough and developer negotiate a redevelopment agreement.

Mukherji said if the DEP process proceeds as expected, the group could construct the townhouses and sell the units on an 18-month schedule.

SP councilwoman will seek state seat

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Democratic Chairwoman Charlotte DiFilippo did not return a call seeking comment about whether the party will have a primary race this year. Malool will be joined by former Rahway Councilwoman Elise Medved on the GOP ticket.

Malool has distinguished herself as an independent voice on the council. She worked for more than a year to develop the parameters of a Special Improvement District to revitalize the downtown, though that project floundered due to indifferent support from the local business community. She also has been at times a voice of dissent on the all-Republican council, opposing deer hunts and expressing reservations about constructing a recreation and senior center in the township.

"Nancy has an incredible amount of experience and is an excellent fit to be in the state legislature," said county Republican Chairman Phil Morin. "She understands the policy issues and workings of Trenton."

Though she has yet to develop a

platform or bring on campaign staff, Malool said her campaign will probably focus on the state's property tax crisis and eliminating wasteful statewide spending.

"I think if you asked 100 people, 99 would say the biggest problem we have in New Jersey is property taxes," Malool said. "The system is unfair...and fraud, corruption, and wasteful spending are half of the cause of the property tax problem."

Greater legislative oversight is needed to ensure that allocated money is spent as intended, Malool said. She noted that school construction costs in some urban schools double the amount spent for comparable facilities in suburban areas.

"In spite of Gov. Codey's speech, Democrats just can't keep spending under control, so they can't keep taxes under control," Malool said.

She added that Democrats are considering making cuts in the wrong place — NJ Saver rebates, which could have a direct impact on property taxes.

"This is a huge issue," she said. "Will Democrats put rebates back into the budget? Will they make cuts or will they have to increase taxes to pay for it?"

A Republican that hopes to win in District 22 will require votes from Democrats, but Malool said her political worldview fits comfortably within the district's ideological center.

"While I am a Republican and I do believe in Republican values, I consider myself a moderate," Malool said. "I'm not so much a politician as I am interested in policy and good government."

Malool's first term on the council runs out at the end of 2006, and she said her energy will continue to be dedicated toward service in municipal government.

"The people of Scotch Plains elected me and deserve my full attention," Malool said. "I think I can put 100 percent into both (roles). I work better under pressure and I get more done when I have too much to do."

Merits of car wash debated at hearing

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Tobia said.

The project has the support of several business leaders and town officials. Over the two meetings, Downtown Westfield Corporation (DWC) officials Joe Spector and Sherry Cronin urged the board to approve the plan; former mayor Bud Boothe also testified on behalf of the Faris brothers.

Nearby property owner and former Councilman James Hely opposes the project, fearing that a car wash will reverse positive economic momentum on the eastern South Avenue corridor.

At the meeting, Hely said he designed his own office building to meet the town's zoning rules. Allowing a car wash to be estab-

lished in violation of local ordinances will undermine the town's planning for the area, he said.

"The zoning plan was adopted with a lot of thought, and every time you vary from it you take away from that," Hely said. "The potential for the neighborhood is great...and I think this would be a deterrent to growth."

Hely contended that residential, office, or retail use would be preferable for the site, but Tobia countered that the lot's parking deficiency would make other uses logistically impossible. Retail use for the property could require 30 to 40 spaces, he said.

"I don't know how this could be retrofitted for the permitted uses in the zone given the parking require-

ments," Tobia said.

Board member Francis Smith said he was worried about potential noise and other detrimental effects from a car wash in the zone, a concern shared to some degree by board Chairman William Heinbockel. But the majority of the board appeared comfortable with the prospect of converting a building that has been vacant for more than two years into active use.

At first blush, the idea of a car wash on the property was problematic, said board member Lori Duffy. "But after hearing the (traffic) testimony those fears have been alleviated," she said.

The board will revisit the project at its regular meeting on May 9.

Wf. board candidates square off in forum

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with parents by e-mail, an easy and effective step to keep parents actively involved with their child's education. The purpose of sending a child to school, she said, is to prepare them for the workplace.

"What we're all working toward is to create productive members of society and that they're able to enter the world of work," Cary said.

The board should craft new policies governing appropriate use of e-mail, provide more opportunities for job sampling and intern-

ships, and consider new health and wellness policy, said Hunnicut. Like her opponents, she said the district should strive to retain special education students within the district both to save costs and to provide better exposure to their peers.

"Special education is not a placement," Hunnicut said. "...It is specially designed instruction to meet the needs of an individual child."

McCready said the district should provide healthier nutritional options for students and

improve safety by increasing routine monitoring at schools. The district's new website should also be kept current, and the board should solicit information about Westfield schools from the students they serve, he said.

"We should be asking recent graduates — how did Westfield High School prepare you for college?" McCready said.

During the debate, candidates also responded to questions concerning equity between parent-teacher organizations, special education, and services for non-college bound students.

The candidates' night will be televised on TV-36 following a 15-minute budget presentation on the following dates: April 7 and 14 at noon and 4 p.m.; April 12 and 19 at 1 and 9 p.m.; April 9 and 16 at noon and 9 p.m.; and April 10 and 17 at 2 p.m.

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