

Fairfield reassessment opponents launch mayor, council recall drive

By MEG NUGENT

A Fairfield homeowners group has targeted this weekend to set the groundwork for a door-to-door campaign designed to oust the mayor and council members as part of a continuing protest against a township-wide property reassessment that has residents outraged.

"We want four out of the five (members) on the council to be changed because we do not feel they are serving the best interests of the town," Steven Berzak, spokesman for the Unite and Fight group, said yesterday.

Berzak said a dozen members of the group met Monday night and decided to move ahead with plans to launch a recall campaign against Mayor Theodore Nalesnik, serving the second year of a three-year term.

The group is also planning to submit a recall petition by 1988 to remove Councilman Thomas Morgan and will attempt to gain local support from voters in opposing the re-election bid this year of Councilmen Gerlando Graceffo and Louis Contaldi, the council president, said Berzak.

Nalesnik, Contaldi and Morgan said yesterday they have no intentions of resigning from office. Graceffo could

not be reached for comment yesterday.

Nalesnik, who is recuperating at home from an illness that left him hospitalized for about five months, said, "My physical progress is pretty good and I've worked 16 years in local government. If they want me to resign, I'll go to work" to retain his mayoral post.

Nalesnik also confirmed a statement by Berzak that he gave a "Bronx cheer" during a recent meeting of the local Republican club in rejecting a request from Unite and Fight to hand in his resignation.

"That's exactly right," he said.

Berzak said the group is not seeking to oust Councilwoman Anne-Marie Rotunda because she warned the council last winter that the reassessment would cause a nearly 5-percent shift in property values from the commercial and industrial sector onto residents.

Some 500 residents turned out at two recent Fairfield Council sessions to protest the reassessment, which they claim unfairly benefits the business sector at the expense of residents.

Homeowners contend the shift in property values is rooted in a plan to promote and subsidize industrial devel-

opment with a \$1.4 million increase in homeowners' property taxes.

Unite and Fight, formed two days after tax bills were sent out July 3, held a rally among some 400 residents to protest the reassessment. The group for the past month has been demanding a recall, a moratorium on commercial construction and a repeat of the reassessment.

The council responded by proposing a six-month moratorium on business construction the township attorney earlier said could be difficult to implement because of state law requirements.

The group also persuaded the council to appeal the reassessment, which was later denied by the Essex County Board of Taxation, and Contaldi had said the township was planning to conduct a township-wide reassessment.

Township Administrator Charles Burns said yesterday the reassessment would begin within the next week and township leaders will meet tomorrow to discuss additional plans to resolve the reassessment issue.

In a related matter, the township met Monday's deadline for submitting appeals of assessments with the county tax board, said Saul Wolfe, a Livingston attorney the council

hired to work with Garden State Appraisal Services Inc. in reviewing the reassessment. Township officials said they are appealing the assessments of four out of the approximately 500 commercial properties located in the township.

Contaldi earlier said Fairfield would appeal those business properties the appraisal firm targeted as being assessed "too low."

Noting he at one point heard the township was appealing 13 or 14 commercial property assessments, Berzak said, "That's only a drop in the bucket, they're throwing the people a bone again."

Contaldi assured residents the council agreed that assessments are too low in the business and commercial sector.

On the number of business property appeals, Contaldi said Garden State Appraisals is recommending appeals on those properties that stand a good chance of approval by the county tax board.

"It doesn't make sense to spend thousands of dollars in legal fees" on appeals that probably would not be approved, said Contaldi.

Amato praises task force study of Essex government operations

By DIANE CURCIO

Essex County Executive Nicholas Amato yesterday described a task force study on the county's government as "honest and straightforward" and implemented two of its recommendations, creating a separate department of finance and hiring an independent internal auditor.

A 45-page report was submitted to Amato by the task force Aug. 1. Amato promised to create the task force in his inaugural address in January and three months ago appointed its members.

"While some of the concepts will require several years to put in place, the majority can and should be part of our 1988 plans," said Amato, who expects to discuss the recommendations with the freeholders soon.

Saul K. Fenster, president of the New Jersey Institute of Technology, chaired the task force. High among the group's recommendations is a call to separate finance from the department of administration to foster a better system of checks and balances. An independent auditor was seen by the task force as a means of enhancing accountability.

County Treasurer Joseph Galluzzi was named by Amato as acting director of the budget and management after the former department chief, Alan Zalkind, was appointed director of citizen services. "We're going to run a cost-effective government," said Amato.

He said the new finance department auditor will "make sure we have a handle on every aspect of county government."

Economic development also was discussed by the task force as an area which the county has not fully explored.

The report suggests the county expand its revenue base by selling or developing its surplus real estate. The lands include holdings in Livingston and the 300 acres in Verona, North Caldwell and Cedar Grove commonly known as "Hill-top." Residents had quashed the previous administration's proposal for a multimillion-dollar development there, which would have included a conference center, hotel, townhouses and geriatric care facility.

Amato said that "the combination of releasing surplus county property for development and of increasing the clout of our development office can only improve our chances for success."

The task force also said the county should find a humane way to "phase out" its role as operator of the 600-bed Hospital Center for psychiatric patients in Cedar Grove and the 300-bed Geriatric Center in Belleville. Amato said it was "premature" to discuss any plans for the hospital center, although he could understand the argument that the county has no business operating hospitals.

"I'm not sure we're anything better than a warehouse for people. I'm not sure we have the staff and the finances to run a first-rate psychiatric hospital," said the county executive. He noted that this year \$9.7 million in federal revenue sharing funds, normally earmarked for the nursing staff at the Hospital Center, was eliminated. He said patient costs have escalated even though the number of patients has decreased.

"What we're going to stay in we should be the best at," said Amato, who maintained that although the county would never close the facility while there were patients there, perhaps the state should be approached to consider a takeover.



It's a plane Spectators gathered near a transport plane at Maguire Air Force Base in Burlington County watch a performance by the Blue Angels overhead

Photo by Jeff Huntley

Orange PBA denies involvement in black cop's disputed promotion

By KEVIN DILWORTH

A spokesman for the Orange Policemen's Benevolent Association (PBA) said yesterday that the union has had nothing to do with the controversy surrounding the promotion of a black police sergeant.

"The PBA categorically denies any wrongdoing whatever in what happened with the appointment of Officer Charles Whittle," said the spokesman, Detective John Roche.

"The PBA doesn't have any input into the hiring or promotional practices of the city of Orange," he said. "That is left up to the appointing authority, Mayor Paul Monacelli."

Roche's comments were in reference to statements made Aug. 11 by Lt. Charles Cobbert, president of the 16-member Orange Kinsmen, the city's black police officers' group.

Cobbert, along with the head of the NAACP of the Oranges and Maplewood and the leaders of two black police organizations, held a news conference to support making Whittle's promotion permanent.

Last spring, the state Department of Personnel in Newark invalidated Monacelli's Dec. 29, 1986, promotion of Whittle because it said the appointment was made late and on the day a Civil Service promotion list expired.

Said Cobbert, "I believe it was a cooked-up plan" by the mayor to wait until the last minute and make the appointment. "And I believe the PBA had something to do with it."

Roche said the PBA declined to comment on the questions surrounding Monacelli's last-minute appointment of Whittle.

"It's inappropriate to say anything about it at this time because the matter is being investigated by the Essex County Prosecutor's Office," Roche said.

"Concerning Lt. Cobbert's statements, however, the PBA feels the rapport situation between white and minority officers in the Orange Police Department is a good one," he said.

Roche added, "Any unsubstantiated racial comment made by anyone about anything in the police department, or our working relationship with each other, is at best counterproductive and smacks of racism itself."

Cobbert has been given "every opportunity to present his concerns to the PBA, and the appropriate committee in it which handles problems of this nature," Roche maintained.

But, he said, Cobbert has chosen not to do so. "It's unfortunate Lt. Cobbert felt it necessary to voice his concerns about Officer Whittle through the media as opposed to the proper established channels within our organization."

"The PBA feels Officer Whittle, a 23-year veteran of the police department, is a fine law enforcement officer and would make a good sergeant," Roche continued. "But that is not the issue we're addressing here."

"The problem remains that Officer Whittle's appointment was made late and it was made over the authorized table of organization for the number of sergeants in the police department," he said.

Livingston seeks a fiscal allowance for cleanup of sewage plant sludge

By MEG NUGENT

Livingston Township needs a contingency plan in this year's municipal budget to finance the costs of removing an unexpected accumulation of sludge in the local sewage treatment plant.

"We have more sludge than we know what to do with and we didn't know all that stuff would accumulate the way it did," Township Manager Charles Tahaney said yesterday.

Tahaney told the township council this week that officials two weeks ago discovered treatment of effluent at the plant is being hampered because two tanks, or "digestors" used to process waste enroute to the Parsippany-Troy Hills plant and the Passaic River are completely filled with sludge.

The township manager also said the sludge removal cannot be delayed until next year, explaining a delay would "severely hamper our processing of the effluent."

Tahaney said he questioned Township Engineer Art Carson on why the accumulation was unexpected, saying, "It seemed clear that if you have a digester full of sludge, there should be a way of knowing that's what you've got."

But the engineer said the extra sludge was an "opera-

tional problem" caused by the additional volume of sludge entering the plant for treatment.

"The warning signs didn't come when we were putting the budget together; in November there was no indication that the level of sludge in the digestors would accumulate this way," said Tahaney, in explaining why the township has no funds set aside for the removal.

The council next Monday will formally reject the only bid received for the project and will rebid it within the next few weeks.

Tahaney had recommended the council reject the bid of about \$246,000 on the grounds that Carson estimated it would cost \$100,000 to \$150,000 to clean out the digestors. He also said the township was prevented from receiving more bids on the project because contractors said two weeks would not give them enough time to prepare for application to take on the project.

Estimating the township will receive new bids by the first week of September, Tahaney said contractors' cost estimates will be determined, in part, on whether contractors will be able to haul the sludge out of state or to a New Jersey facility.

West Caldwell funds projects

Three bond ordinances were adopted and one contract was awarded by the West Caldwell council last night for street and water-related projects.

A \$125,000 bond ordinance will underwrite the regrading and repaving of Lombard, Highland and Brookwood drives, Pine Tree and Knoll places, Cedar Lane and Park Avenue. The project is expected to take a year to complete.

A \$40,000 bond ordinance will subsidize the installation of a water main

extension in Kramer Avenue. A corroded dead end in the pipe will be removed and the existing line will be connected to one in Jameson Avenue.

The ordinance also includes funds for the purchase of water meters and fire hydrants for various locations.

The council awarded a \$24,024 contract to the New ABC Paving Inc. of Orange for the installation of an 8 inch water main in Marshall Street. The new line, which will replace an aging 4 inch line, is expected to in-

crease the water pressure on the street. The council also adopted an \$18,000 bond ordinance for a drainage and ice-control project.

Smull, Park, Forest and Parkview avenues, Redman Terrace, Lincoln, Jameson, Nutting and Cavell places and Sylvan Way are targeted for the project, which will re-direct storm water runoff into catch basins to ease flooding and the formation of ice patches. The work is expected to start in the fall.

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