

County Budget Under Review; Jail, Overtime, Golf Discussed By PAUL J. PEYTON

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader

ELIZABETH – The Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders' Fiscal Policy Committee continued hearings last week on a proposed \$436.8 million spending plan that is up \$22.4 million over 2007. The county tax levy is set to jump \$15.4 million to \$255.3 million. The meetings also focused on reduced overtime at the county jail and increasing the revenue stream at the county's three public golf courses.

Brian Riordan, the new administrator of the Union County jail, last Wednesday forecasted a savings of \$3.5 million in overtime savings this year and \$4.8 million next year as a result of a re-organization of jail management. The proposed budget includes \$7 million for correction officers' overtime, a hike of \$200,000 over last year, according to an executive budget presented by County Manager George Devanney in February. Correctional officers' salaries are \$21.4 million, up almost \$1.1 million over 2007.

The jail is part of an overall \$50.7 million public safety department budget, an increase of \$2.5 million over last year. The proposed budget for correctional services is \$40.7 million, an increase of \$1.6 million over 2007.

During budget talks before the freeholders' Fiscal Policy Committee, Public Safety Director Richard Childs said the county had witnessed "escalating" overtime costs the past two

years. He said under Mr. Riordan, overtime has “decreased every month for the first quarter” of 2008. The jail director said savings would be greater next year, once 51 new corrections officers are hired and have completed their mandatory training.

According to a budget proposal obtained by The Westfield Leader, the new officers are being added “in order to improve efficiency and to reduce overtime costs.” Another six current officers were promoted to sergeants.

Mr. Riordan said a corrections officer’s starting yearly salary of \$38,500 jumped to \$74,000 when overtime was added based on a \$54-per-hour fee.

Officials said in their written presentation that a personnel management system would be obtained to provide “more accurate tracking and recording of employee time balances, which will lead to better fiscal oversight.” Freeholder Al Mirabella, Fiscal Policy Committee chairman, said he was happy with the plans to reduce overtime costs at the jail. “This is a 180-degree difference from the conversation we had at this same time last year [under the previous administration],” Mr. Mirabella said.

During the discussion about golf courses on Saturday, Director of Parks and Community Renewal Al Faella said the courses had a deficit of \$435,000 last year. This year’s golf operations proposed budget is \$2,034,124, a reduction of \$10,000 from last year.

Among the long-term options under consideration is the issuance of identification cards to non-Union County residents, which would reduce the fee charged to out-of-county residents by \$10. He said golf advocates have said that offering a discount would produce an additional 5,000 rounds of golf a year or \$200,000 in added revenue. Last year, the county courses had 31,000 rounds of golf played, and rounds are down 8 percent over the last eight years. Mr. Faella said changing tee-times to nine, instead of 10 minutes apart, would generate another time slot every two and a half hours, allowing for an extra group producing \$1,800 per day in added revenue.

Officials also are considering a management contract to have a private company handle the day-day-to-County residents, which would reduce the fee charged to out-of-county residents by \$10. He said golf advocates have said that offering a discount would produce an additional 5,000 rounds of golf a year or \$200,000 in added revenue. Last year, the county had 31,000 rounds of golf played and rounds are down 8 percent over the last eight years. Mr. Faella said changing tee-times to nine, instead of 10 minutes, apart would generate another time slot every two and a half hours, allowing for an extra group producing \$1,800 per day in added revenue.

Officials also are considering a management contract to have a private company handle the day-day-to-operations at the golf courses. According to an outline obtained by The Times, officials estimated the cost to

the county at \$180,000 per year, plus a percentage of the gross revenues. Also under consideration is an operating lease. In this case a private operator would operate the courses and collect all revenues in exchange for a “fixed rent.” The company would pay all operating expenses and some of the capital costs. Officials estimate a lease would generate \$100,000 annually for the county in addition to a percentage of the profits. Jonathan Williams, who serves as counsel to the Union County Improvement Authority (UCIA), said the UCIA would be in charge of facilitating a procurement process to receive proposals from private companies, as well as handling the negotiations. He said the county could require that all employees of county golf operations be placed on the operator’s payroll thus enabling the employees to stay in the state’s pension system. Mr. Mirabella said he was pleased with the options presented to increase revenue, stating he is interested in doing “what’s best for the fiscal health of the county.”

In the area of human services, Director Frank Guzzo said he needs an increase of \$400,000 to maintain services offered through the county’s Paratransit system. The program provides rides to senior citizens and disabled passengers.

His department’s budget request, paid through county tax dollars, excluding salaries and overtime, is \$11.9 million — a 3 percent increase over 2007. The total department budget, including salaries for 744 positions, is \$46.2 million, an increase of \$4.1 million over last year. Mr. Guzzo said

115 of those positions are paid through county taxpayer dollars, with the rest funded fully or partially with federal and state grants.

Undersheriff Joe Cryan proposed a \$15.8 million sheriff's department budget, an increase of \$959,331 over last year, according to the executive budget, mostly due to an increase in salaries. He said through such programs as municipal prisoner transports to the county jail and the S.L.A.P. (Sheriff's Labor Assistance Program), the sheriff's office provided towns with \$3.9 million in "taxpayer savings."

Board of Elections Deputy Administrator Dennis Kobitz noted, per a May 18 hearing on a lawsuit brought by a voter advocacy group, that a judge will rule if the electronic machines used by Union County can be used in the General Election in November. If the judge says the machines cannot be used, voters might have to fill out paper ballots at the polls. Sequoia Voting Systems manufactured the voting machines in Union County, as well as most of the state.

Mr. Kobitz also said that State Assemblyman Jerry Green (LD-22, Plainfield) was asked by Assembly Speaker Joe Roberts to merge several pieces of legislation on moving school elections from April to November. He said the county would save money if the elections were moved to November.

The combined budget for the board of elections and the election division of the county clerk is \$4,049,563, an increase of \$845,857 over last year. Officials said the county and towns would be reimbursed by the state for costs from the Presidential Primary, one of the main reasons for the budget increase.

Union County Executive Superintendent of Schools Carmen Centuolo requested a meeting with the freeholders to discuss “consolidation” of some school districts. Her office’s budget request of \$299,528 is \$8,554 over last year. All but \$12,500 of that is for salaries. Part of her budget is supported by county taxes, however, Ms. Centuolo is a state employee appointed by the governor.