



Candidate Forums

Mr. Wiener, Mr. Rossi Square Off on Taxes, Elected Mayor Question at Scotch Plains Forum

By FRED ROSSI
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times
 SCOTCH PLAINS — Two Scotch Plains Township council candidates had a chance to discuss their platforms and answer questions during a special forum co-sponsored by *The Times of Scotch Plains-Fanwood* and the Westfield Area League of Women Voters October 18 in the municipal building's Scotch Plains Township Council Chambers.

Republican Frank Rossi faced off against his Democratic challenger Phillip Wiener for a seat, left vacant by the death of Democrat Franklin P. Donatelli in May, in the November election.

The debate questions, which were not available to the candidates prior to the forum, were crafted by members of the public, *The Times* staff and the League.

Questions were asked, with each candidate given an opportunity to respond. Each candidate also was given the opportunity to supply a closing statement. Due to space considerations the closing were not included in this summary.

Fred Rossi, a freelance reporter for *The Times* was the moderator for the event, while Westfield resident Merry Wisler of the League of Women Voters timed the candidates' responses.

What follows are the questions and answers, in direct quotations, to issues voters will consider before going to the polls next Tuesday, Election Day.

Times: Regarding the controversial 5.4 percent tax increase approved in May, if you were a member of the Township Council this year, what would you have recommended doing?

Mr. Rossi: "Clearly, I would not have proposed or approved a 5.4 percent tax rate. In times of low inflation, and where we have a record rate of taxes collected of 98.5 percent, to propose a 5.4 percent tax rate increase is not responsible management."

The proposal was originally 6.4 percent, but ultimately it was cut down by 1 percent and approved at 5.4 percent. There was a record surplus this year and to pass on a tax increase at that level — particularly when the majority came in under a commitment to hold the line on taxes and during their campaign had represented the Republican majority over the past had not, a claim which ultimately was not accurate — I don't think was fiscally responsible."

Mr. Wiener: "In reality, the surplus for (1998) was actually higher than the surplus for 1999. With that extra surplus, which (the Republicans) separated into two accounts, they raised taxes (and) they only put \$25,000 into the recreation budget, meaning we only got a \$25,000 grant instead of a \$100,000 grant, leaving \$75,000 on the table."

"And then we had the (Labor Day) storm, which instead of paying for, they passed on to the next administration. This is not responsible government. All the professionals in Scotch Plains' government supported the Democratic plan for taxes. In the 24 previous years, the Republican Party never proposed a zero tax increase."

Times: What is your position when it comes to taxes next year?

Mr. Wiener: "To be fiscally responsible, the Republicans on the Council, when they proposed their zero tax increase, said they were pretty sure there wouldn't be a storm. We had the storm — it was Hurricane Floyd. Fortunately, the Democratic Party got their proposal through, so

as a result, there's a very good chance we will be able to pay for Hurricane Floyd."

"In addition, we put \$100,000 in for recreation, so we were able to get the \$100,000 pocket park grant that the Republican Party left \$75,000 on the table for. It's just not fiscally responsible to do what they did. Because what they're doing is lowering the surplus, which was \$3.05 million, to \$1.8 million — losing 40 percent of your savings."

Mr. Rossi: "The '98 tax increase was 2.2 percent; three times that was proposed in 1999. And there was \$590,000 in the recreation budget in 1998. I will look to hold the line at a very low tax rate. We're also fortunate with the storm of this year that, with FEMA and insurance, the cost of that storm is going to be less than \$100,000 to the community."

Times: What should the surplus be used for?

Mr. Rossi: "Historically, a portion of the surplus is used to offset tax increases. The issue is: what portion is reasonable. The historic average for the last nine years is approximately \$2 million. Generally, it comes in a little more than estimated. This year, under the Republican proposal, the surplus would have gone into the year at \$1.8 million."

"If it came a little above, it would have been right in line—\$2 million — and consistent with the last nine years."

Mr. Wiener: "The Republican proposal for 1999 was to put in \$2.9 million into the budget, using up almost all of the surplus. Next year, if you want to pay the same bills, they would only have \$1.8 million left. My question is, where are they going to find the extra \$1.1 million? There are a couple of ways to do it: you can raise taxes 12 percent...you can make cuts. But, the Republicans supported all this year's expenditures. When Mr. Rossi was on the Fanwood Council, he never supported a zero percent tax increase."

"The Republican Party, in the previous 24 years, never supported a zero percent tax increase."

Times: Can the township have any influence on controlling the expenses of the school board?

Mr. Rossi: "I made a proposal that a joint committee be formed with representatives from the Board of Education, Fanwood and Scotch Plains, to explore ways to look at overlapping expenses that can be shared, and for long-range planning."

Mr. Wiener: "What we can do about the school board is we can be more vocal. We can show up at their meetings, we can vote in their elections, we can be there when they have their proposals. But directly, the Township Council can not do too much about the school budget."

Times: Do you see any area in the local budget that could be cut?

Mr. Wiener: "We can look over the budget every year and if we keep our fiscal responsibility and we have extra savings, it's possible there won't be tax increases of this magnitude. When the Democrats took over this year, they were passed on the cost of the storm. The budget surplus was less than the previous year, yet they (the Republicans) decided to raise taxes."

Mr. Rossi: "I think we can explore more inter-local agreements. There is a proposal to look into a joint health insurance act, which would reduce our insurance costs. In general, more inter-local agreements such as we have with the welfare board and the municipal courts, are the types of things that can minimize

expenses without jeopardizing the services to the community."

Times: Do you support the open space referendum?

Mr. Rossi: "I wholeheartedly support the open space referendum. Voters will determine if they want two points on their tax bill set aside for development of ballparks, recreation fields and maintenance of open space. Two points would tax the average homeowner about \$23 a year for 10 years. It's a relatively balanced way of creating a revenue to develop the open space and recreation needs of the community."

Mr. Wiener: "I think everyone is pretty much behind it. It's a good idea. My question is: (The Republicans) were in charge for 24 consecutive years and never came up with this proposal. The Democrats are in charge for nine months and in the first couple of months, they come up with this proposal."

We have a letter of intent from the county to use 22 acres of property at a dollar a year to build four new ballfields. A lot of this money will go to that."

Times: What do you favor doing with the former zoo property?

Mr. Rossi: "The proposal put in the open space proposal made last year by (Councilman Marks and McClintock) indicated that it would be used as a passive park and the Frazee House would be developed perhaps as a historical facility or for small meetings."

"There was a proposal for a large community center and I don't think that is what we represented to the residents around that area. I think (development of a passive park and the Frazee House) would be viable uses."

Mr. Wiener: "Mr. Rossi stated pretty correctly what the zoo property could be used for."

Times: Do you support the referendum calling for direct-election of the mayor?

Mr. Wiener: "I support it wholeheartedly. It's about time the people of Scotch Plains decided who their mayor is. I have a lot of confidence in the people of Scotch Plains. I commend Mr. Rossi for supporting this even though his fellow Council members were adamantly against it, one more so than the other."

Mr. Rossi: "(The Council Republicans) did not oppose the mayoral referendum. They opposed the process that was putting this on the ballot without a full public hearing, without allowing for public comment and with some questions as to whether the committee had appropriate time to consider it. I'm also disappointed that it's a one-choice deal. There are no changes in authority, merely changes in the term."

Times: Do you favor developing the so-called "hedge property" downtown, and why? What about its effect on the downtown parking situation?

Mr. Rossi: "I do support full exploration of development of the hedge property. As long as we can get parking, I think it would add continuity to the business district, give us the opportunity to get more ratables, and bring more people into town. I think whatever type of business is there, if there's a parking issue, it would need to be approved. We have certain requirements in town, requiring minimum parking spaces for particular

types of business."

Mr. Wiener: "Basically, I support it, but with reservations. I want to see new faces, but I want to see the same faces still there. I don't want this hedge property to be developed to just see an exchange of faces where other people get forced out of business. What kind of retail business would go there? There are retail businesses that require 2,000 parking spaces; others require 2,000. Obviously, that has to be studied."

Times: Besides grants, what other ideas do you have when it comes to revitalizing the downtown business district?

Mr. Rossi: "Grants are a way that we are able to do some of the revitalization. I'd like to move forward on a number of the things that are already underway. The parking behind CVS and the Second Street stores will complement those businesses."

I think we should explore extending that parking further down Second Street, recognizing that we do have some residences there and we need to be sensitive to their needs. Development of the hedge property can be a big advantage as well. Our business community has done a very good job."

Mr. Wiener: "Of course, we still want to try to do grants, because they're the closest thing to a free lunch we're ever going to get. We can develop the hedge property. We can deal with the business community."

Times: How do you think the Township Council has conducted itself this year?

Mr. Rossi: "It's incumbent for elected officials to move forward with a kind of civility. I think sometimes that was lost this year. Of more importance (than how Council members treated each other) is that (behavior) displayed to the public. On at least two occasions, public debate was cut short. If we're going to be responsive to our citizens' needs, we can't shut off the microphone inconsistent with the rules that govern these proceedings. That's where I think the biggest failure was."

Mr. Wiener: "For the most part, the Council got along well. There was one specific meeting where the Mayor did apologize for cutting off debate because she wasn't exactly sure of the procedure. The Republican Party had 24 years of experience in conducting meetings. This was the first year for the Democratic Party and I think they did quite well."

Times: How do you plan to balance the part-time nature of being a Councilman with the seemingly full-time demands on your time and dedication?

Mr. Rossi: "This is where we get a little help from the technology age. With e-mail, voice mail, faxes, I think many of us have gotten used to being available 24 hours a day. By making the commitment, if elected, to serve, I'll need to make the commitment to make sure I'm available when needed."

Mr. Wiener: "I basically feel the same way. The people have to be served and if I didn't think I could put the time in, I wouldn't run."

Times: What should be done regarding the Green Brook Flood Control project?

Mr. Rossi: "(The flood control project) is the number one priority."

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There may be
ONE MILLION
 reasons to re-elect
Neil Sullivan
 as 3rd Ward Councilman
 here are just a few...

Sunday Library Hours



Sundays are now
 "Family Day" at the
 Westfield Memorial
 Library. Neil fought for,
 and succeeded, in
 opening our library on
 Sundays. Neil wants to

explore how we can share with neighboring communities to get even more resources & to also open our library on Saturdays during the summer.

Safer Streets and Sidewalks



Under the leadership
 of the Public Safety
 Committee Chairman
 Neil Sullivan, the town
 council is now working
 with community groups

such as BRAKES, state and county agencies, and our schools to improve pedestrian safety.

Our program of Education, Enforcement and Engineering will reduce speeds on our neighborhood streets and make it safer for pedestrian and bicycle traffic.

We now have better enforcement, have added crossing guards and have more visible crosswalks for pedestrians. Later this year, innovative traffic calming measures will be added to Rahway Avenue.

Keep The Southside Firehouse Open



Neil will fight any attempt to close the Southside Fire Station, or any other action that reduces the fire protection for Third Ward residents served by the Central Avenue facility.

He has led the fight to give our firefighters the equipment they need for their safety & ours.

Central Avenue Revitalization

Neil helped write the law that is bringing millions of dollars in private investment to replace dilapidated houses with new townhouses and retail space on Central Avenue near Cacciola Street.

Under the leadership of the present town council, Westfield has secured a \$450,000 grant to renovate the street lighting and sidewalks along the Central Avenue corridor.

Want To Know More?
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