



Candidate Forums



Two Republicans, One Democrat Seeking Two Council Seats Square Off During Issue-Oriented Candidate Forum in Borough of Mountainside

By **KIMBERLY A. BROADWELL**
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

MOUNTAINSIDE — The Westfield Area League of Women Voters co-sponsored a candidates forum October 21 among candidates for Mountainside Borough Council.

This year, Republican incumbents Keith Turner and Paul Mirabelli and Democrat challenger Steve Brociner are vying for two seats on the six-member governing body.

The forum was co-moderated by Kimberly A. Broadwell, who reports on the Mountainside Council for *The Leader*, and David B. Corbin, Sports Editor of *The Leader*. Margaret Walker, of the League of Women Voters, served as facilitator.

Due to some technical problems and space considerations, the following is only a summary of answers and questions posed to the candidates and not an entire transcript. Readers can watch the debate in its entirety on TV-35.

Leader: It has been reported by borough government that municipal taxes have remained flat in Mountainside over the past four years, but that the 1999 overall spending plan of \$7.3 million was up \$100,000 over the 1998 budget. How have you been able to keep the municipal tax rate flat?

Mr. Mirabelli: "Well, we have done this a couple of ways. We sought to find revenue from outside sources other than the revenue from the real estate package from our residents. We advocate and have obtained a number of grants."

"We were one of the first towns in the country to apply for and receive a Cops in School grant, which put a police officer in our school. We have our officers there now. We are currently constructing a tier parking garage across the street, which is budgeted for \$190,000 which we were able to obtain a grant for \$180,000. We have also, every year, obtained a state grant to repave some of the roads in Mountainside."

"We also have been able to obtain a Pocket Parks grant which was used to help our recreational facilities. The Route 22/New Providence intersection was modernized with a grant from the state. Just recently we obtained a grant for a community bus which would be 100 percent funded by that grant."

"In addition, both myself and Mr. Turner run our own businesses, so we feel we have to run the Borough of Mountainside the way we run our businesses, which is to carefully review any expenditures that make differences to our own money. In addition, we have also been able to have additional revenue brought into town. There is a communications tower right behind Borough Hall and this

year, I believe, we have approximately \$80,000 in revenue from that. We expect that to increase to almost \$100,000 in revenue during next year."

"Lastly, I want to point out that when it comes to costs, we review it and make sure it's what Mountainside needs and it is at the right cost."

Mr. Brociner: "You know when you talk about low taxes, what I think about is low service. We don't have garbage removal, we don't have leaf removal, we don't have private pickup service that most municipalities have. That is part of your tax bill."

"If we had borough garbage collection, it gives you the opportunity for giving a lower rate because the people who collect trash love to give those municipalities one dose, one amount of money and that goes into your tax bill. You'll get a lower rate on your garbage bill and you'll get a deductible item, which you don't have, but you will get an increase on your taxes."

"I guess we are always talking about low taxes but never talk about low service when it comes to bargain hunting. There are 560 communities (in the state) and the state will give anybody a grant. I'm glad to see that we do take advantage of it and take that money and use it for a parking lot, which can only help people and I'm for that. But when we talk about being business people, and I am a business person too, I don't have any unvouchered expenses in my business. Thus, I don't understand why we have them in our town."

Leader: Within the last year and a half, a community room was added to Borough Hall. What programs have you seen added for Mountainside that are beneficial and what other areas of the Recreation Department do you see that needs to be added, deleted or expanded?

Keith Turner: "We have just completed the new community room and there were several new programs that were added from senior citizen, exercise, biking, tai chi classes and other recreation activities. This past year we have hired a program coordinator for the Recreation Department. Soccer programs were added as well another activity called Koosh Kids, which is a new sport. Anybody that is interested or wants to come to an activity, please feel free to contact the Recreation Department."

Mr. Brociner: "As far as the community room goes, we had to put something in this rather large municipal building. As far as TV-35 goes I think we can thank the Democrats for this forum tonight."

Leader: What in your view has been done to combat the lack of volunteers to the fire department and the rescue squad that had been reported in 1998 and what measures have been taken to monitor how these new

implementations are working for the borough?"

Mr. Brociner: "Well you know I don't think this is a problem unique to our town. Unfortunately in every town people's lives have become very complicated. Many people are working earlier to make ends meet. It is hard for people to volunteer and Mountainside is not an exception."

"I do recall being here one night when stipends were being discussed and a volunteer fireman asked about a better clothing allowance. Maybe we are not doing enough for these people, but I really don't think its a unique problem."

Mr. Mirabelli: "Mountainside has a long tradition of volunteerism and we will again continue to encourage that. We encourage our volunteer squads to keep their members and attract new ones by dedicating money for renovations of their buildings and by stipends. The firehouse right now is going under a renovation. We have increased firemen's clothing allowances. The rescue squad building has been recently renovated. We are also now paying the Borough Hall stipend to the members of the rescue squad in order to encourage them and I believe that this will help with recruitment."

Mr. Turner: "I know there have been many volunteers in our borough over the years and I would like to add that I feel that Mr. Brociner should maybe take the time to volunteer for his town."

Mr. Brociner: "I do volunteer, Mr. Mirabelli."

Leader: What new programs do you think should be expected or added for borough residents now that the new Comcast Franchise Agreement, which goes into effect in November, has given Mountainside their own access channel?"

Mr. Mirabelli: "Well I think right now as a result of the renewal of the contract franchise we were able to replace a character generator at the Deerfield School. Suddenly we have new programs, we have graduation programs, Christmas programs and programs from Berkeley Heights."

"We can also have programs from the Deerfield school, and more importantly, we now have the opportunity to broadcast exclusively on Channel 35. Again that was the result of the new franchise agreement and we are able to receive the Berkeley Heights channel which will give us the opportunity to see our children that are now attending high school at Governor Livingston."

"We now also receive the \$2,500 in additional money, which we will be using for the purchase of additional equipment. We received a new character generator for Borough Hall that will improve the quality of the programs that we see here and from the

police department the Fire Department and the Rescue Squad."

"In addition as the result of the Comcast Franchise renewal, free Internet access is available in the library and schools. There will also be instruction as to how to get on the Internet and use it. Within the past year we have hired a new TV-35 Coordinator to coordinate new programs."

Mr. Brociner: "That's terrific, but the agreement goes for the next 15 years. We have committed ourselves to technologies for the next 15 years. So on a monthly basis and on an annual basis, one of these days we are going to wake up and find after we signed this 15-year contract that they are shooting the signal from the moon or sending a signal back by rocket or something else and we can't get out of our 15-year contract."

So in 15 years from now we will all probably be out in the parking lot trying to wire something and somebody else will be getting it off of his wrist watch."

Leader: Recently the Mayor appointed a committee to review council's system of an unvouchered expense account or salary. How many people served on that committee, when can citizens become informed on the findings of that committee and what are your thoughts on last year's ordinance that would have given each council member a \$1,500 per year salary and a \$3,000 year salary for the Mayor?"

Mr. Turner: "I believe there were nine people that served on that committee and we haven't yet received a report from that committee. Volunteering is fine but having to spend countless hours figuring out mileage, phone bills, car loans, it takes away from the tasks that one is to do in the first place. This is not the way its works in a company."

"In the past years, since the beginning of our borough, we have found that council ordinances have allowed

\$50 per month for council members. With the cost of living increases this would translate into \$191 per month and in fact we were asking less than that at \$125. We don't mind volunteering our time. We all spend countless hours, make many phone calls, spend money on driving."

"As far as a salary is concerned, I have had trouble, with the word salary. We volunteer 30 to 40 hours per month. Tuesday, I was here from 6 p.m. until almost 11:30 p.m. Also, I want to afford anyone the opportunity to serve the borough, regardless of their financial means."

"I have had to use on occasion and also Councilman Mirabelli has also had to use baby-sitters sometimes. We want anyone to be able to try and serve the borough as a councilperson."

Mr. Brociner: "Well this town has gone for over 100 years without paying a salary. This town has at least 105 people. I figure, including school board and PTA members who don't ask for anything; you don't look for it and you don't get anything. They are doing it to volunteer. They are not asking to be compensated. So if these people are not asking to be compensated than I don't see why you should be seeing salaries for our council."

"For 25 years, that nobody seems to know about until — I don't know — about two months ago, these fellows were getting their money back in an unaccounted manner for 50 bucks a month. I didn't know about it. So I don't really understand why the issue of money is the issue? Either these people are here to do something to help the town or they are not."

Leader: How much would you anticipate is spent yearly on behalf of the borough by members of the council and for what?"

Mr. Brociner: "I don't have the foggiest idea what they spend their money on. That was never an issue in my mind. I don't understand why

dollars, all of a sudden, became part of the problem, part of the issue or part of the program."

"These folks are here doing things because they want to, because they feel that this is one hell of a nice town to live in and they want to participate in keeping it that way or they do not. If they need a part-time job then they ought to go out and get it."

Mr. Turner: "As I have stated before, we are not looking for a salary. The number of \$100 a month is a low ball number that we actually spend for volunteering between various expenses. It's difficult to find volunteers who have to pay to be a volunteer. With different expenses, mileage, phones, faxes and even baby-sitting, it adds up."

Mr. Mirabelli: "I just want to correct something that Mr. Brociner said that in 102 years nobody has received an unvouchered expense account. That is simply not true. Back in 1972, an account of unvouchered expenses for council members was started at \$50 per month."

"It was something that was started over 25 years ago and is continued today. It was something that we took a look at it and saw that we should update. We certainly spend money on phone calls, itemized business, faxes and copies."

"We shouldn't have to sit and go through our phone bills to come up with how many calls we made, sift through our papers to find out what the cost for paper used in copies. I think that we should be re-imburbed for our expenses and \$100 is not an unreasonable amount to ask for."

Leader: Mountainside government has reported that a new commuter parking lot will be constructed by the library. How many spaces can be expected and when will the project be completed? How is the project being paid for?"

Mr. Mirabelli: "Well my understanding or my recollection is that

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