

Nanticoke couple displaced by fire

Heidi Ruckno - Citizens Voice

A Nanticoke City couple was displaced Saturday evening after a fire at their Ridge Street home, authorities said.

The fire broke out around 6:34 p.m. at rear 151 Ridge St., the home of Leonard and Verna Dwynterko. It started in a bedroom closet and was extinguished within minutes, Nanticoke fire Lt. Richard Bohan said.

Damage was contained to that bedroom, but the rest of the home sustained some slight water damage, Bohan said.

Firefighters helped Leonard Dwynterko escape from the home, but he refused medical treatment at the scene. The couple was expected to stay with relatives Saturday night, Bohan said.

Assisting at the scene were firefighters and ambulance personnel from Hanover and Newport townships.

12/28/2007

Nanticoke saves money when state certifies city's safety committee

Savings equal \$9,247, or 5 percent of worker comp insurance bill.

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Nanticoke is entering the new year expecting a little extra cash in its coffers.

The city will save \$9,247, or 5 percent, on its annual worker compensation insurance bill because the state Department of Labor and Industry certified the city's safety committee earlier this month, Finance Manager Holly Quinn said.

The city usually spends about \$165,000 on the insurance annually.

About 40 city employees, volunteer firefighters and volunteer ambulance members are covered under Nanticoke's worker compensation plan.

Declared a financially distressed city in the last year, Nanticoke has looked for ways to save money without cutting services.

"I was excited. I want to save money wherever we can," Councilman Joe Dougherty said.

"We need it to pay bills."

The committee formed in March in an effort to promote workplace safety by presenting training seminars on a variety of safety techniques to help prevent illnesses or injury and to increase employee productivity.

Since its inception nine months ago, the committee has presented a fire extinguisher seminar and taught public works employees how to properly lift heavy materials.

Men in the public works department now think twice before trying to lift something that might be too heavy for them and ask for help, Quinn said.

Each city department has one representative serving on the committee, which meets once to twice a month to discuss safety classes that can be offered to employees.

Next year the committee hopes to hold a CPR training class, Quinn said.

12/25/2007

Byorick progresses as Xavier hoops reserve

College athletics Bill Arsenault - Times Leader

Former Nanticoke Area standout Aly Byorick is seeing action as a reserve with the Xavier University women's basketball team. But coach Kevin McGuff sees good things ahead from the freshman.

"Aly is a great kid and I'm happy she is part of our program," McGuff said. "Like all freshmen, she is in the process of learning what it takes to become successful at the Division I level. But she certainly has a bright future here at Xavier."

The 6-foot guard is averaging 11 minutes of action as a backup for the 6-4 Musketeers, who have no seniors and just two juniors on the squad. The former two-time Pennsylvania all-state selection is averaging 1.3 points a game, while recording 19 rebounds and four assists. She had eight points and nine rebounds in 22 minutes of action in a 97-60 victory against McNeese State.

Byorick is the career leading scorer at Nanticoke with 2,271 points. She helped lead the Trojanettes to a combined 58-2 record during her junior and senior years.



12/24/2007

Hurdles to revitalization not so high

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Despite recent setbacks, Nanticoke and Luzerne County Community College officials remain optimistic about the sale of the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street, especially since one hurdle is not as high as expected.

LCCC wants to buy the Kanjorski Center for its health sciences center, a project that city, county, college and state officials say will be the keystone of downtown revitalization. Sale agreements are in progress, and a final price has not been determined.

Obstacles to the sale include possible delays in a county bond containing \$20 million for LCCC projects, the loss of \$5.6 million in federal funding for a parking garage and the prospect of having to pay back a \$1.8 million grant.

"We are proceeding with every expectation this is going to move forward, and I have every confidence that it will," LCCC President Thomas Leary

said.

Good news is that the city's municipal authority, which owns the Kanjorski Center, might only have to pay back a small percentage of the \$1.8 million to the federal government in order to sell the building.

State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, recently met with federal Economic Development Administration officials in Philadelphia.

"They were enthusiastic about the project and committed their full support to helping us complete the deal," he said.

Under the terms of the \$1.8 million EDA grant used to construct the Kanjorski Center in 1994, the building must be used for economic development.

If the building is sold or used for other purposes, the municipal authority either has to get permission from EDA for the new use or pay the money back, according to Paul Matyskiela of the EDA Philadelphia Regional Office.

Nanticoke and Luzerne County Community College officials have two options:

They can convince EDA to allow the Kanjorski Center to be used for educational purposes, in which case they wouldn't have to pay the agency back. But EDA would still control the building, and it would be subject to federal restrictions.

They pay EDA whatever sum to which the agency agrees after submitting an assessment adjustment. Then federal involvement is removed from the project entirely.

Matyskiela estimates the city might have to pay the EDA only \$385,000, based on the required appraisal of the outside of the Kanjorski Center the municipal authority submitted. EDA is waiting for the authority to add any adjustments to the appraised value of the building.

"Obviously, if the appraised value of the building goes down, that amount will also," Matyskiela said.

City officials were pleasantly surprised to hear that, since they expected to have to fork over the whole \$1.8 million.

"It's news to me, but it's very good news," City Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

The cash-strapped city does not have the money, but Johnson thinks a deal should be worked out to pay the \$385,000, noting, "We've spent money on things less valuable than this."

Paying off the EDA might make more sense, Matyskiela believes. City officials are exploring both options.

"They made the argument that it was job training; we didn't say no, but we want them to put it in writing and make a case for it. But do they want to have us hanging around?" Matyskiela said. "Their decision is, basically, what is it worth to you to get the federal government out of your hair?"

But the decision may have to wait. Nanticoke General Municipal Authority Chairman Ron Kamowski said any deal with EDA is in limbo until the county frees up \$20 million for LCCC to buy the Kanjorski Center.

The \$20 million bond

Community colleges have only one funding source in the state's capital budget: the Community College Capital Fund.

LCCC received \$10 million from the state for the first phase of its master plan, and Luzerne County pledged the required \$10 million match.

But officials fear a complaint filed with the state Department of Community and Economic Development to stop the county from borrowing up to \$93.5 million could hold up the project. The amount includes the \$20 million total for LCCC.

Luzerne County activist Tim Grier, who filed the complaint, said LCCC should have asked the Pennsylvania State Public School Building Authority for a low-interest loan. Then the county could pay back \$10 million and the state could kick in its \$10 million, without the county having to float a \$20 million bond, he said.

"This authority exists strictly to help community colleges like LCCC with building projects. LCCC bypassed this authority and went straight to the county," Grier said. "There was a way cheaper option to go."

Leary said he was only recently made aware of the Pennsylvania State Public School Building Authority.

He stressed LCCC was following the procedure all community colleges follow, and fulfilled all the requirements of the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

"The county has traditionally supported capital projects," Leary said. "This is a very ambitious project, but the college followed the protocol which has been established for a long time. ... This is the funding we are familiar with."

No parking zone

The biggest blow was the loss of \$5.6 million for a parking garage. U.S. Rep Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, re-routed federal transportation funding for the project.

City officials now have to steer money away from other projects — such as most of a \$2.3 million grant meant for paving roads — to build the Kanjorski Center's garage.

Surface parking near the building is limited. When the Kanjorski Center was fully occupied, the municipal authority ran shuttle buses between it and a parking lot on Lower Broadway.

Leary said the college made it clear that in order to move downtown, it needs approximately 375 parking spaces for students and faculty. Main Street businesses also want more parking.

"It's not a luxury," Leary said. "It's a necessity people expect when they come into town."

Johnson agreed the parking garage is critical to the project.

"What LCCC is accepting as a *fait accompli* (an accomplished fact) is that we provide the parking," he said.

"We can find another way to do it, but it will be difficult without Kanjorski," municipal authority member Dennis Butler said. "We have all the pieces in place, except for him."

Kanjorski said lack of the garage should not inhibit LCCC's plans to move forward, a viewpoint contradicted by local officials — and himself.

On May 10, 2005, Kanjorski wrote in a letter to a former municipal authority chairman: "(One) of our top priorities should be the construction of a parking garage to be used by the tenants of the Kanjorski Center and customers for downtown Nanticoke businesses. The language I inserted into the highway bill specifically authorizes use of the funds for a parking garage. ... Building a parking garage is necessary for the future economic viability of the Kanjorski Center."

Yudichak called Kanjorski's idea a parking garage could be built five years down the road "preposterous."

"We have private investors willing to put up their own money in a new restaurant and new commercial space. How do you tell private investors, 'take a seat on the bench for five years and we'll see if we can get something for down the road?'" Yudichak said. "How many more years do the hard-working people of Nanticoke have to wait to get help in revitalizing their city?"

Kanjorski said he took the money away because he heard at a July 2006 public meeting, Nanticoke's mayor and council said they didn't want a parking garage. He said he didn't want to see the money lost, noting city officials have a pattern of not using money he obtains for them.

That angered city officials, who had frequently stated their intentions of building a garage. They just disagreed with Kanjorski on its size: they wanted to build it smaller. They also wanted a tenant for the center, vacant since October 2005.

"City officials never said no to the parking garage, never said no to the money," Yudichak said. "They said, 'scale back the parking garage and find us some tenants and some private investment.'"

Nanticoke Councilman James Litchkofski wants an explanation from Kanjorski.

"Besides Nanticoke being his hometown, we are his constituents. We employ Paul Kanjorski, the taxpayers do. He governs through the consent of the people, not arrogance," Litchkofski said. "If he makes decisions that affect the lives of thousands of people, then he needs to get to Nanticoke and tell those people why the money isn't coming."

Kamowski is pessimistic about further federal money.

"If the congressman says we have not been communicating with him, we beg to differ. City officials and Leary have met with Kanjorski, and he told them that the \$5.6 million was definitely taken away, and he was going to bring bigger, larger, easier-to-use moneys to the table," he said. "The congressman never gave concrete information about where the money would come from."

12/24/2007

Municipal authority sees development possibilities at Concrete City site as its next project

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Someday there might once again be well-kept houses and green lawns at a historic, former experimental housing community.

The closing nonprofit Regional Equipment Center gave Concrete City, located off Front Street in the Hanover section of Nanticoke, to the municipal authority for a \$10 consideration.

"We're the proud owners of the deed now," Municipal Authority Chairman Ron Kamowski said.

The authority is tied up with selling the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street to Luzerne County Community College for a health sciences center. Concrete City will be its next focus.

"Once the LCCC deal is on its way and moving, we want to look into turning it into a little upscale residential community," Kamowski said. "We don't want industrial. They would want the land for free, no taxes, then in 10 years they'd move."

Concrete City, which consists of 39 acres in Hanover Township and Nanticoke, contained 20 two-family residences built in 1911 by Delaware, Lackawanna and Western railroad's coal division. Homes rented for \$8 a month to favored employees of the Truesdale Colliery. Each house is constructed entirely of poured concrete, which made it unique at the time — and to this day.

Concrete City closed in 1924 when Glen Alden Coal Co., which took over the development in 1921, balked at putting in a sewer system to replace the concrete outhouses. The homes still stand, reduced to crumbling concrete shells adorned with paintball splats, target practice bullet holes and graffiti.

The municipal authority will have to work out what to do with the concrete houses.

"We would definitely like to see one of the structures remain and be restored as a monument to the area. You don't need six or eight of them sitting around," Kamowski said.

Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission designated Concrete City a historic site and erected a marker in 1998. Because of its status, municipal authority members were concerned about their ability to sell the property.

That shouldn't be an issue, a PHMC spokeswoman said.

Concrete City was determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places 16 years ago, but it has to be re-evaluated, PHMC public relations specialist Jane Crawford said in an earlier interview.

"The owner can sell this property to anyone," she said, but cautioned, "If a developer, for example, is going to use state or federal funding and state permits, the Historical and Museum Commission would review the plan because of this National Register eligibility."

That includes permits from the state Department of Environmental Protection or the federal Army Corps of Engineers, Crawford said.

"The agency (PHMC) works with people in this situation for the best outcome," she said.

12/23/2007

Nanticoke borrows \$300,000

The tax anticipation note will cover expenses until tax revenues start rolling in.

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The city is borrowing \$300,000 as a short-term loan in early January.

City Administrator Kenneth Johnson said the so-called tax anticipation note is common among municipalities to help them cover daily expenses until property tax payments and earned income tax revenues start rolling in.

While Nanticoke is still considered an Act 47 financially distressed city, Johnson said the city is doing better with cash flow since earned income tax revenues recently started pouring in.

“Right now we haven’t even dipped into the sewer fund. We’re paying payroll. We’re paying most of our bills through EIT (earned income tax),” Johnson said. “We’re doing better. I’m much more optimistic than I was a few weeks ago,” he said.

Council members approved accepting the loan from PNC Bank during the monthly meeting Wednesday night.

Officials tried to get competitive bids from other banks, including M&T. Johnson said even after a last minute phone call was placed earlier in the week, M&T never submitted a proposal.

But the city will still see some savings in interest costs because PNC Bank dropped the interest rate to 3.39 percent from 3.59 percent.

“When the fed (federal government) dropped the rate a quarter-of-a-point, I went back to them (PNC) and said could you reissue a new rate, and they said sure,” Johnson said.

He was unsure of exactly how much money the city would save.

The loan must be repaid by Aug. 31, 2008.

The \$250,000 short term loan taken out in July at a 4.34-percent interest rate from PNC Bank will be paid back by Dec. 31. The city will pay roughly \$5,425 in interest for this year’s loan.

Johnson said the city has enough money to repay the loan.

12/20/2007

Nanticoke officials hope to settle contracts

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City officials are anxious to settle contracts for Nanticoke’s seven public works employees and six clerical employees so they can be sure the 2008 budget is accurate.

The contracts expire Dec. 31. Kenny James, a 33-year employee of the public works department, urged council on Wednesday to think of the “little guys” in the ongoing negotiations.

“The only thing we’re asking for is, be fair,” he said.

Resident Hank Marks spoke up on their behalf, saying the public works and clerical employees are loyal, and they aren’t the problem — police and fire salaries are higher.

James agreed, saying he didn’t begrudge the police and fire departments their contracts, but noted, “We’re the little guys. We don’t have the power of the union.”

Public works employees are represented by the Teamsters Local 401, police by the Fraternal Order of Police Wyoming Valley Lodge No. 36, and firefighters by the International Association of Fire Fighters Local 2655.

The public works department has shrunk from 37 employees when James started in 1974 to seven today. Employees have gone without raises, new equipment, and undergone several health insurance provider changes, he said.

James, who also sits on the Greater Nanticoke Area school board, said he understands the cash-strapped city’s position. The teachers’ contract expired in August 2005 and negotiations are still in progress.

Nanticoke’s financial recovery plan, drawn up by the city’s recovery coordinator Pennsylvania Economy League, calls for minimal raises for clerical employees — none the first year of the contract and \$800 a year for the second and third. It also calls for employees to share equally in cost increases to their portion of the health care, vision and dental insurance the city pays for.

Nanticoke would realize bigger savings by raising doctor’s visit and prescription co-payments instead of having a premium share, James said.

Council passed the \$4.18 million budget 4-1 on second reading, with Mayor John Bushko voting no.

Tax collector Al Wytoshek wanted to know whether total real estate tax is 44 or 44.5 mills. A mill is \$1 on every \$1,000 assessed valuation. The city levies 30 mills for general purposes and 0.5 percent for the Mill Memorial Library. Wytoshek sparred with city officials over whether the debt service millage is 13.5, as he said, or 14 mills as Johnson and PEL said.

Debt service millage can only be used for outstanding loans. Last year the city paid off its 1995 loan and part of its 1998 loan, PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said, so council lowered the 29.38 debt service millage for 2007.

Wytoshek said the county tax bills say 13.5 mills for debt service. Regardless, Johnson said, the 14 mills was properly advertised and within the law. Unlike for an increase in general purpose millage, municipalities don’t have to petition county court to raise debt service millage, a fact confirmed by solicitor William Finnegan.

12/20/2007

Nanticoke’s 2008 budget includes no new taxes

Council members increased the city’s earned income tax to 2 percent earlier this year.

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Council members approved the 2008 budget of \$6.7 million during Wednesday night’s regular meeting.

But residents will be happy to know their taxes are not going up. At least not right now.

Residents will still pay a 2 percent earned income tax, which was increased earlier this year.

City officials acknowledged the city might need to raise taxes for debt services in 2009 because the debt service millage was reduced too much when council members figured the 2007 budget.

In 2006, the millage set aside for debt service was 30 mills, but it was reduced more than half to 14 mills for 2007, City Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

“They were able to drop it because they changed the whole tax structure of the city with earned income taxes,” he said.

“But from what my finance director has told me – and I don’t do that analysis because that is her job – she tells me that the 14 is actually too low.”

He said a former council member suggested lowering the debt services but council lowered it too much.

The city’s property tax rate for 2008 will remain at 44.5 mills, which Johnson said is the same as this year’s tax rate, with 30 mills paying for the general fund, 14 mills paying for debt service and 0.5 mill paying for the library. A mill is a \$1 tax on each \$1,000 of assessed property value.

City Treasurer Al Wytoshek asked if the city could leverage a tax rate of 44.5 mills without getting approval from a Luzerne Court of Common Pleas judge.

City Solicitor William Finnegan, Pennsylvania Economy League Executive Director Gerald Cross and Johnson informed Wytoshek the city only had to appear before a judge for such a request if the general fund tax rate would be higher than 30 mills.

Mayor John Bushko was the sole vote against the budget, saying he felt the funds allocated for attorney’s fees were too high. He said if some of those funds were cut the city could apply more money toward capital projects to fix the city’s roads.

12/15/2007

Teacher strike at GNA averted, for now

By mguydish@timesleader.com

The threat of a teacher strike at Greater Nanticoke Area has ended – at least for the short term – according to a union official who credits the progress made in negotiations this week.

Jane Brubaker, of the Pennsylvania State Education Association, said enough success had been made during Wednesday’s negotiations to satisfy the union and prevent a strike that had been threatened to start as early as Monday morning. A strike was threatened Dec. 3 when the school board voted to reject a state fact-finder’s report that offered a compromise between the latest offers made by each side.

Frustrated with the pace of talks that have been going on since 2005, the union had urged the board to reconsider and vote to approve the report. The union voted to accept the fact-finder’s report.

By state law, the board had 10 days to do so, which meant a second vote had to occur by Thursday. Since the union must give a 48-hour notice before a strike, the earliest a strike would occur would be Dec. 17.

The board made no public attempt to meet for a second vote, but a negotiation session was held on Wednesday. Brubaker said some progress was made so there would not be a strike on Monday.

But, she added, “There is still a possibility that one will occur in the future.”

Though the contract talks have been largely quiet and out of the public eye, the fact-finder’s report revealed the chief sticking points, including the board’s effort to have teachers pay part of their health insurance premium and a change in tuition reimbursement for teachers who take additional college courses.

12/13/2007

GNA school board, teachers union make progress in informal talks

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The Greater Nanticoke Area school board and teachers union negotiating teams met informally at the high school Wednesday to talk about the recently released report from the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board fact-finder.

The school board is not going to re-vote on the report, member Robert Raineri said.

But he indicated the session, which was just between the teams, without attorneys present, went fairly well.

“We’re making a little headway here. We need to tweak a few health insurance issues,” Raineri said. “We’re looking at raising their deductibles, trying to find a happy medium.”

GNA teachers, without a contract since August 2005, took a strike authorization vote on March 14. The Greater Nanticoke Area Education Association could give the district 24-hour notice on Friday and start striking Monday.

Pennsylvania State Education Association spokesman Paul Shemansky said striking is an option, but suggested it may not be necessary if the two sides keep on with contract talks.

“I think negotiations are going to continue to take place here. That’s a good thing,” Shemansky said. “I don’t think they’re too far apart.” Health insurance is one of the main sticking points in negotiations. The report by fact-finder Robert C. Gifford, Esq., a neutral third-party, took into account contract proposals from both sides.

GNAEA wants to raise deductibles and co-payments for doctors’ visits and prescriptions, saying it would cost the district 2.3 percent less for a traditional plan and 4.3 percent less for a voluntary Health Maintenance Organization plan.

The school board wants teachers to pay a premium share in 2007-08 of \$10 per paycheck for single coverage, \$12 per paycheck for husband-wife or parent-child coverage, and \$15 per paycheck for family coverage. In 2008-09, teachers would pay 3 percent of their premiums, and in 2009-2010 they would pay 4 percent.

Gifford sided with the teachers, because their proposal “offers plan design changes that will provide cost savings to the District.”

Teachers accepted the fact-finder’s report on Nov. 29. The board rejected it on Dec. 3. The board had 10 days starting Dec. 5, when the

report was made public, to re-vote. Under state law, both sides must let each other and the Pennsylvania Labor Relations board know for a second time whether or not they accept the report.

12/12/2007

LCCC officials worried

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com and bjarvis@citizensvoice.com

Luzerne County Community College officials are concerned delays in state approval of Luzerne County's borrowing plan will hold up new projects in downtown Nanticoke.

The state approved LCCC's master plan earlier this year, and Phase I is under way. The college was supposed to get \$20 million from a county bond to help pay for it. The state would reimburse \$10 million; the other \$10 million is from the county.

College President Thomas P. Leary is concerned about the potential loss of the county's \$10 million share, as well as the effect a delay in the funding would have on establishing the expanded programs.

At the LCCC board of trustees' Tuesday meeting, members approved a motion by Dr. Thomas O'Donnell to refrain from moving forward until it was certain money would be readily available.

According to trustee and Luzerne County Commissioner Greg Skrepenak, if political activist Tim Grier succeeds in his effort to stop the county from borrowing up to \$93.5 million, it would have a direct impact on LCCC.

"I'd be lying if I said it would not have an effect on this college, and not a good one," Skrepenak said. "We may have to default on our payment, which would threaten our ability to secure financing."

Still, Leary and Skrepenak expressed confidence funding would eventually be secured, although it might have to come from other sources.

Leary said the \$20 million would be used for:

Continued construction of the Public Safety Training Institute, for certification of emergency personnel.

Purchase and renovation of the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street in Nanticoke into a Health Sciences Center for the nursing, dental hygiene respiratory therapy, surgical technology and Emergency Medical Services programs.

Equipment for the culinary arts institute, which the college wants to create in a leased facility to be built by a private developer at Market and Main streets in Nanticoke.

The college is still moving ahead with a sale agreement and architectural plans for the Kanjorski Center, Leary said. LCCC had hoped to occupy the building by January 2009.

In the worst-case scenario, opening would be pushed back a semester until fall 2009, Leary said.

"It may be that I'm optimistic by nature, but I believe it's going to happen. So many people have worked so hard that I can't see it failing," he said.

The Nanticoke General Municipal Authority, which is responsible for the Kanjorski Center, had hoped the sale could be consummated quickly. The authority is broke, and has to borrow \$45,000 a year from the financially distressed city for maintenance and utilities.

"Luckily, the weather's been with us, so we're not super-buried in utility costs. But it's still an in-the-red proposition," authority Chairman Ron Kamowski said.

Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko said selling the Kanjorski Center is the first step in downtown revitalization. Several private investors have expressed interest in new projects because of LCCC's plans.

"We're just going to have to pray for the best, because that's a must for the whole downtown. That's the key project," Bushko said of the sale. "I guess we're just going to have to wait and see."

12/11/2007

A mission to clean up Quality Hill Playground

By kziolkowski@citizensvoice.com

During the last 10 years, Quality Hill Playground in Nanticoke gradually became a center for dumping and teenage mischief. It's easy accessibility to all terrain vehicles and vandals made it a hot target. But one man came from behind the curtain to turn the local park into a destination for children of all ages.

Kenneth Gill, 43, is a Nanticoke resident who has lived approximately 100 feet from the entrance to the park his entire life. When he was younger, the park was thriving with children, local sports teams and families. The park always had a constant flow of moving traffic until a few years ago when the grass on the ball fields grew too high, the rest rooms were vandalized and the equipment slowly decayed due to age. The local Little League stopped using the field and all attention turned away from the eyesore.

Gill watched as the once flourishing park began to slowly fall apart right before his eyes and decided to take action. Since the 1950s and 60s, a group called the Quality Hill Playground Association was responsible for the upkeep of the park. Since most members of the group had passed on, Gill decided to take the reigns as president. Through word of mouth, he was able to gain more than 20 supporters in a short amount of time to join his quest in revitalizing the park.

Since joining the association in 2000, Gill has lead his group of volunteers in removing most of the dumped material from the baseball field, restoring the restrooms, putting up new basketball and tennis nets, repainting and replacing equipment, cleaning out buildings and erecting a new sign in front of the park.

Gill and the association applied to the Lowe's Heroes program for the park. Lowe's Heroes volunteer teams are made up of employees from the local store, representatives from nonprofit organizations and concerned individuals from the community. The teams work with

homeowners, community groups and schools on safety projects. After reviewing his application, the group spent two whole days repainting the restrooms, putting a new roof on the sandbox, repainting the exterior of the buildings and installing new steel doors on the rest rooms. In the spring, Lowe's will return to install new rest room fixtures.

Recently, Gill and the Quality Hill Playground Association have been running fundraisers such as selling lottery tickets and comedy club tickets as well as asking for donations from local businesses. Currently they will depend mainly on the services of volunteers to clean the park in early April, when they run their annual Easter Egg Hunt. The association has requested money from the city, but has been told that there are no funds available for such projects.

Future plans for the park include cleaning out the largest building in the park and turning it into a pavilion so families can start to enjoy the park together.

Gill truly exemplifies the meaning of a local hero. His dedication to the association and the playground, as well as its surrounding neighborhood is something to be admired.

12/10/2007

Regionalized police force recommended in draft study

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Three South Valley communities could benefit by combining their police forces, according to the draft of a study by a regional police specialist.

For the last year, representatives from Nanticoke City and Newport and Hanover townships have been meeting with the Pennsylvania Economy League as part of the South Valley Regional Police feasibility study.

Consultant Bryan D. Ross, retired chief of the Berks-Lehigh Regional Police Department, drafted a report. It estimates the three communities could save more than \$400,000 and have a better-trained force that is more efficient and more effective at fighting crime. The new department would provide 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week coverage, PEL Policy Specialist Joseph L. Boyle said.

The study recommends at least 29 full-time officers, the total number in the three communities now: Hanover Township has 16, Nanticoke has 12, and Newport Township has one. Manpower and salaries would not be decreased, Hanover Township Commissioner Jeff Lewis pointed out.

"Almost everybody would be making close to \$50,000. That's not bad for a cop in Luzerne County," Boyle said.

The only thing officers are not guaranteed is that they would keep their rank, he said.

Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko is pessimistic.

"It doesn't save you any money at all. Not a dime," he said. "I would like to see it work, but there is no financial gain for us at all."

The combined department would go with the highest salary of the three, Hanover Township, he explained. For example, in Nanticoke patrolmen are paid \$40,131 a year, while in Hanover Township they are paid \$46,076.

Nanticoke was declared Act 47, or financially distressed, by the state in May 2006. Nanticoke's financial recovery plan, drawn up by PEL, states, "The city shall continue to aggressively explore alternative policing arrangements with special emphasis on the creation of a possible regional police commission."

Incoming Nanticoke Councilman Jon Metta said from what he's seen of the study, combining police departments makes sense.

"It probably would save money and provide better overall coverage," Metta said. "We still get a vote on how our money is spent, too."

Opinion on regionalization is divided among Nanticoke's 12 full-time officers, Bushko said. A regional department might be better for career advancement, because there's not much chance for promotion in Nanticoke, he said.

The officers in a regionalized department would have better training, which Bushko said he sees as one of the few advantages.

The three communities are experiencing a rise in criminal activity, Newport Township Commissioner John Zyla believes. A regional police department with specialized officers could help solve crimes better, he said.

"Am I in favor of it? Absolutely," Zyla said. "I think it would be beneficial to our community ... with the expertise we are going to get. As long as it's affordable."

The regionalization report is only a draft, Lewis emphasized. Officials from all three municipalities say they want more information before making any decisions.

"We're looking into some different options on how we can structure it (the regional department)," Lewis said.

There will be a public presentation of the study by Ross on Jan. 24 at Luzerne County Community College. During a meeting in February, officials of the three municipalities will discuss whether they want to take the study further.

"It will be interesting to see if it does pan out, since we have so many variables," Lewis said.

12/7/2007

Bidder asks GNA to table copier contract

By Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens Voice

A disgruntled bidder questioned the Greater Nanticoke Area bidding process Monday, claiming it unfairly favored the current vendor for a copier contract.

District resident Robert M. Hughes, representing Edwards Business Systems of Scranton, asked the GNA board to postpone voting on bids for a five-year photocopier lease and maintenance agreement.

The only bidder to receive full specifications was the current vendor, Topp Business Solutions of Scranton, Hughes alleged.

The other two bidders were not given specific information about the district's needs, such as what kind of computer network it has, or whether the bid was for unlimited copies.

"This at the very least should be tabled, and the information given to all bidders," Hughes said. "This is not a fair contract for taxpayers." The board didn't table the vote, but instead approved a contract with low bidder Topp. Topp bid \$277,500, Edwards bid \$297,186 and Xerox of Wilkes-Barre bid \$304,900.

The spec sheet that bidders are given contains a bare minimum of information. Hughes said he asked for more, but never heard from the district secretary, and GNA's information technology coordinator said he couldn't call Hughes from a cell phone inside the school building. Superintendent Tony Perrone said copier specs were available for three weeks, but Hughes only came to see him four days before bid deadline. Perrone said he sent Hughes to the people who generally deal with such matters, and if Hughes couldn't get to them, he should have told Perrone.

Board member Robert Raineri said after the meeting that he would investigate the bidding process.

"I'm going to question how that was done, just for my own satisfaction," he said. "We have to make sure these bids are fair to everyone."

12/7/2007

GNA negotiating teams reschedule meeting for next week

By Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens Voice

Greater Nanticoke Area teachers and school board negotiating teams didn't meet Wednesday as planned, due to weather conditions in Nanticoke, school board member Robert Raineri said.

The two sides will get together next week instead, to discuss the fact-finder's report, which was released publicly on Wednesday. The meeting will just be between the negotiating teams, according to Jane Brubaker, the teachers' Pennsylvania State Education Association representative.

"Their solicitor will not be there, I will not be there. It's just going to be a meeting with local folks," she said.

GNA teachers approved the fact-finder's report, but the school board rejected it. The board now has seven days to reconsider. State law requires that no less than five and no more than 10 days after the report is made public, the board and union have to notify each other whether they accept the report or not.

"I hope they can come to an agreement, and the board will realize this is something that will not cause a tax increase. It's well within their budget," Brubaker said of the fact-finder's recommendations. "With in excess of \$8 million in their budget reserves, they are in excellent financial condition."

GNA teachers have been without a contract since August 2005. The main issues are health care and salaries.

12/6/2007

Fact-finder's report for GNA teachers contract dispute released with report

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board released the fact-finder's report for the Greater Nanticoke Area teachers contract dispute on Wednesday.

* [Read the report](#)

Salaries and health insurance have been the main sticking points in negotiations, ongoing since months before the GNA teachers contract expired in August 2005.

These two issues are addressed in the fact-finder's report, along with the other four roadblocks: credits earned for a master's degree equivalency, personal leave, tuition reimbursement and early retirement incentive.

Fact-finder Robert C. Gifford, Esq. sided with the Greater Nanticoke Area Education Association in the matter of health care. GNAEA asked for a higher deductible and increased co-payments for doctor visits and prescriptions. On salaries, Gifford recommended increases somewhat more than the district proposed, but somewhat less than the union proposed.

"If you compare what the fact-finder recommended to other (contract) settlements in Luzerne County, it is very reasonable," said Jane Brubaker, the teachers' Pennsylvania State Education Association representative. "It is very close to what is average to this area. It does recommend some cost savings to the district.

"This is certainly not something that would need to impact the taxpayers of the district."

Last week, the teachers accepted the report. On Monday, the GNA school board rejected it by a vote of 6-1. The two new board members abstained from voting.

Within 10 days after the report is made public, the parties are required by law to contact the board and each other a second time about whether or not they accept the fact-finder's recommendations.

"We've accepted the report. We will not be changing our vote. We are asking (the board) to reconsider," Brubaker said.

Teacher and board negotiating teams met Wednesday to discuss the report, but representatives from both sides could not be reached for comment Wednesday night.

The board has to wait at least five days before re-voting, Brubaker said. That window gives the public an opportunity to look at the fact-finder's report and make comments, she said.

If the board stands firm on its decision to reject the report, the teachers could opt to strike.

“That is something the bargaining team will be considering, along with other options,” Brubaker said.

The union took a strike authorization vote on March 14, she said. If the union gives its 24-hour strike notice on Dec. 14, 10 days after the report’s release, teachers could hit the picket lines as early as Dec. 17, Brubaker said.

Based on the school calendar, she estimated the strike could last two to five days, depending on snow days. Once it starts, the state Department of Education calculates the number of days a strike can last so the district can get the required 180 days of instruction in by June 15 or the deadline of June 30.

12/6/2007

GNA contract issues released

Salary, insurance among sticking points

mguydish@timesleader.com

After nearly three years of contract talks that stayed under the public radar, the problems preventing a teacher contract at Greater Nanticoke Area are in the open, thanks to a state fact-finder report.

The issues at an impasse: “master’s degree equivalency,” personal leave, tuition reimbursement, early retirement, salary and health insurance.

The contract expired in August 2005, but the two sides started negotiations months earlier. The talks garnered scant public attention until Monday when the school board voted to reject the report. The union had accepted the report, and has threatened to strike if the board doesn’t reverse its decision.

By law, the board can do so within 10 days of the first vote.

The union asked for fact-finding, a nonbinding process offered by the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board, and both sides met with Fact Finder Robert C. Gifford informally on Nov. 8, followed by a formal hearing Nov. 13. Gifford issued his report Nov. 26, outlining the position of both sides and recommending an option in each case.

Master’s equivalency: The board essentially wants to eliminate this, requiring teachers to earn an actual master’s degree, rather than the equivalent number of credits, before they get incentives currently granted. The change would only apply to those hired after Feb. 21, 2007.

The union wants to maintain the status quo. Gifford proposes maintaining the status quo.

Personal leave: Teachers get two days per school year with several limitations, including a buyout at \$20 per day at the end of the school year. Teachers also have the option to convert unused personal days to sick days. The union wants to change the contract to allow accumulation of up to five personal days as “personal leave.” The district contends this would allow teachers to change personal days into a vacation. Gifford recommends keeping the status quo.

Tuition reimbursement: The district wants to eliminate reimbursement for courses taken beyond a “master’s equivalency,” and to keep the current reimbursement maximum of \$130 per credit. The district also wants teachers who receive reimbursements to remain employed by the district for three years afterward, or to repay some or all of the reimbursement, depending on when they leave. The union wants reimbursement increased to \$155 per credit, and to loosen restrictions on eligible online courses.

Gifford proposes increasing reimbursement to \$140 per credit and requiring repayment of all the money if the teacher leaves the district within a year and half the amount if the teacher leaves in the second year.

Early retirement: The union proposes a number of changes to the existing system that eliminate some age requirements, alter deadlines and change retiree health-care coverage. The district opposes the changes, and notes that the old contract expressly said the entire early retirement offer expired with that contract. Gifford proposes keeping the system in place with fewer and more modest changes than the union suggests.

Salary: The union proposes raises that would increase total base payroll by nearly \$1.4 million over five years, with average raises of 4.32 percent the first year, and 4.09 percent, 3.58 percent, 3.43 percent and 3.25 percent the following years. The union pointed out that the district has increased the surplus steadily to more than \$5.6 million. The district proposed a total payroll increase of a bit more than \$1 million, with the annual raises averaging 3.02 percent, 2.87 percent, 2.79 percent, 2.68 percent and 2.55 percent.

Gifford proposes annual raises starting at an average of 3.51 percent the first year and 3.4 percent, 3.11 percent, 3.03 percent and 3 percent the following years.

Health insurance: The union proposes a variety of changes in coverage – excluding sharing in premium costs – which it claims will result in savings between 2.3 percent and 4.3 percent depending on the plans chosen by teachers. The district proposes teachers pay 3 percent of their premium in 2008-09 and 4 percent the following year. The district notes total insurance costs have risen between 111 percent and 200 percent since the 1999-2000 school year, depending on which coverage plan you look at.

Gifford proposes adopting the union’s changes.

Read the report:

http://www.dli.state.pa.us/landi/lib/landi/plrb/fact_finding/greater_nanticoke_area_sd_psea.pdf

12/06/2007

Nanticoke council passes first reading of budget

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City council passed the 2008 budget 4-1 during a first reading Wednesday night. Mayor John Bushko was the only “no” vote.

The \$4.18 million balanced budget doesn't call for tax or fee increases. Earned income tax remains at 2 percent, with 0.5 percent for Greater Nanticoke Area school district. The real estate tax remains at 44.5 mills — 30 for general city purposes, 14 for paying back debt, and 0.5 for the Mill Memorial Library. A mill is \$1 on every \$1,000 of assessed value.

The only changes to the budget were in police overtime, which was reduced from \$60,000 to \$30,000, and firefighters' overtime, which was reduced from \$40,000 to \$20,000. City officials also added \$5,000 for Nanticoke's recreation committee when Councilman Joe Dougherty pointed out there was nothing in the budget for the newly recreated entity.

The second and final reading of the budget will be Dec. 19 at 7 p.m.

In other business, council:

Appointed Joseph R. Aliciene & Co. to conduct audits for 2007, 2008, and 2009. Dougherty and Bushko voted "no" because they believed J.P. Mazzoni, who performed the audit in previous years, should have a chance to re-apply.

Requests for proposals were sent to eight accounting firms, but Mazzoni said he never got his, city fiscal manager Holly Quinn said. Debated and ultimately tabled a resolution for the state Department of Agriculture to perform health inspections. Dougherty said the city would lose \$4,000 a year by giving up the inspections. Councilman Brent Makarczyk asked for a performance review of the current health inspector, Margaret Brezny.

Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority member Chester Beggs told council there are 11 properties incorrectly listed as belonging to the authority that taxes haven't been paid on for 30 years. They were sold to private owners who built homes on them, Beggs said. Tax collector Al Wytoshek said he would follow up on it with the Luzerne County tax assessor's office.

12/6/2007

Nanticoke mayor disagrees with budget

slong@timesleader.com

Council approved the first reading of a \$4.18 million budget for 2008 Wednesday night. No tax hike is planned.

Mayor John Bushko was the sole vote against the budget. He said there were several line items with which he didn't agree.

"There is nothing in there for capital improvements," Bushko said. "The 100,000 for lawyers is way over budget. I would say you could cut that in half."

Nanticoke Recreation Board member Jim Samselski asked if money would be allocated for the recreation board because nothing appeared on the currently proposed budget.

Councilman Joe Dougherty said the issue had been brought to council's attention and money would be allocated to the board.

Council must adopt a budget by Dec. 31 but can revise it as late as February because a new council member, Jon Metta, will be sworn into office next month.

Council also hired a new certified accountant to handle the city's audits.

Joe Mazzoni, a licensed certified public accountant from Dallas, served as the city's auditor for five years, Bushko said.

City workers sent out eight proposals seeking bids for an auditor, but only Joseph R. Aliciene & Co. of Pittston submitted a formal bid, city administrator Ken Johnson said.

Another company called inquiring about the offer but never submitted anything in writing, Johnson said, noting Aliciene came in to meet with him and discuss what work the city needed completed. The post office did not return any of the proposals, Johnson said.

Mazzoni said he never received a proposal packet in the mail. Bushko asked if the decision to hire an accountant could be tabled to allow Mazzoni more time to submit his paperwork.

But in a 3 to 2 vote, with Bushko and Dougherty voting against, Aliciene's company was hired to a three-year contract with the city to serve as the city's accountant.

"I just wanted him to have the opportunity to bid on it," Bushko said. "I believe it was sent. Things happen in the mail you don't know."

Aliciene will be responsible for conducting the city's 2007, 2008 and 2009 audit.

Aliciene's firm handles the audits for the City of Pittston and Nanticoke School Board, Johnson said.

Council approved a resolution allowing a liquor license to be transferred to Robert Hagenbaugh, who plans to open a restaurant at 396 E. Washington St.

12/5/2007

Nanticoke school strike could occur Dec. 17

Teachers union is waiting to see if school board changes its mind on a fact-finder's report on contract.

By mguydish@timesleader.com

A teachers strike in Greater Nanticoke Area School District could come as early as Dec. 17, union lead negotiator Jane Brubaker said.

The union members voted unanimously last school year to authorize a strike, meaning the negotiating team can call for a strike whenever it feels it is necessary. The only legal requirement is to give the district 48 hours notice.

Union President Deborah Zaborney warned the district Monday night that a strike was likely after the school board voted 6-1 with two abstentions to reject a fact-finder report that the union had accepted. The Times Leader had incorrectly reported the vote was 8-1, but new board members Tony Prushinski and Frank Vandermark Jr. abstained.

"They've been negotiating for three years, and I know the report just came out," Prushinski said Tuesday, adding that he had seen the

report but did not get a chance to scrutinize it closely before he was sworn in as a board member Monday. "I didn't think it would be fair to anyone to make a judgment without knowing more."

The union contract expired August 2005.

"There are a number of tentative agreements that were reached on some issues," Brubaker said, but a few major sticking points stalled the process, prompting the union to request that both sides submit to state fact-finding. "It can be requested by either party and it's usually used when you've reached a point where you've got to change the dynamics to move the parties forward."

A fact-finding hearing was held Nov. 13. Before that, the last negotiating session had been Sept. 26, Brubaker said. When the report was issued, both sides had 10 days to accept or reject it.

The union approved it, contending it was fair and that the district could afford it without a tax increase. Now that the board has rejected it, both sides have 10 days to reconsider their votes. If nothing changes, the process is over.

Brubaker said the union is waiting the 10 days to see if the board reconsiders its vote before deciding whether to call a strike. That would mean a strike won't happen until Dec. 17 at the earliest.

The fact-finding report becomes public record after either side rejects it and officially notifies the state Labor Relations Board, which oversees the process. Department of Labor spokesman Christopher Manlove said the notification came late Tuesday afternoon and that the report would probably be available this morning.

12/5/2007

Kitchen fire damages Nanticoke home; no one is injured

Times Leader staff

A pot of boiling oil left unattended resulted in a structure fire Tuesday night.

The fire at 269 Mountain View Drive sparked at about 9 p.m. No one was injured by the fire and the family was not displaced.

"It was a kitchen fire. It started on the stove: unintentional," Nanticoke Fire Chief Mike Bohan said.

Bohan said the kitchen is "pretty well destroyed" but that the rest of the first floor of the home received mostly smoke and water damage.

12/4/2007

Nanticoke steps closer to strike

By Elizabeth Skrapits - CVoice

Greater Nanticoke Area teachers could be the next in the county to go on strike, depending on what happens in the next 10 days.

The school board voted 6-1 with two abstentions on Monday to reject the fact-finder's report, which is drawn up by a neutral third party based on contract proposals from both sides. Greater Nanticoke Area Education Association members voted last Thursday to accept the report.

Now that the board has turned the report down, it has 10 days to reconsider and take a re-vote.

"It's time now to meet in the middle and find a compromise that's fair to all," GNAEA President Barbara Zaborney told the board after the vote. "If you don't reconsider... the next step in an impasse resolution is a strike. The choice is yours."

New board members Tony Prushinski and Frank Vandermark, freshly sworn in by Magisterial District Judge Donald Whittaker, abstained from voting on the report.

Jeff Kozlofski, just re-appointed as board president, was the sole yes vote. His vote drew cheers and applause from the more than 200 people, mostly teachers and supporters, who partly filled the high school auditorium.

The six board members who voted against the report did so because they had to accept it as a whole, board vice president Ken James said. They apparently didn't agree with parts of it. The fact-finder's report will most likely be made public after the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board is notified of the board's decision, said Robert Raineri, a member of the school board's negotiating committee. Until then, he couldn't discuss the report's specifics.

Zaborney said the fact finder's recommendation was for a five-year contract. However, Greater Nanticoke Area teachers have been without a contract since August 2005.

"We will be back at the bargaining table two years from now. Just two years," Zaborney said.

Health insurance and salaries are main sticking points, as they are in the two other Luzerne County districts without a contract, Lake-Lehman and Northwest Area. Both of those teachers' associations held brief strikes in June, and Lake-Lehman teachers returned to the classroom Nov. 9 after a second, 19-day strike.

Greater Nanticoke Area teachers were willing to make changes and compromises for the fact-finder's report, said Jane Brubaker, the teachers' Pennsylvania State Education Association representative. The recommendations in the report would not require a tax increase to fund, she said.

The teachers' union will wait to see what the board does during the next 10 days and make plans accordingly, Brubaker said.

After the meeting, Kozlofski urged the two sides' negotiating teams to sit down together just to talk. Raineri said the board's negotiating team has requested a meeting with the teachers, which will most likely take place this week.

Kozlofski is optimistic.

"In my opinion, they're getting together, they're going to negotiate, they're going to settle this," he said.

12/4/2007

For Acker, a smooth road from GNA to St. Joe's

Bill Arsenault - Times Leader

It didn't take long for Sarah Acker to get adjusted to women's major college basketball.

The 6-foot-3 center from Nanticoke Area has played in all six games and started five for St. Joseph, which is 4-2 after a 65-58 victory against Manhattan on Sunday.

Acker played 22 minutes and finished with six points, five rebounds, three blocks and two assists.

On the season, Acker is averaging 26.7 minutes. She's second on the team in scoring (10.7 ppg.) and leads in rebounds (9.0) and blocked shots (nine).

"Sarah has been a great addition to our team," coach Cindy Griffin said. "Her size and ability to rebound have meant the most to us thus far. She is becoming a steady offensive threat around the basket, as well."

Griffin doesn't see Acker slowing down as the season progresses.

"We expect Sarah to continue to improve her off hand and her understanding of post defense and compete with some of the best post players in the country," Griffin said.

12/4/2007

Teacher strike threatened in Nanticoke

Ralph Nardone - Times Leader

Greater Nanticoke Area teachers threatened a strike at Monday night's school board meeting.

What prompted the threat was the board's refusal to accept a state-appointed fact-finder's report presented to them, which outlined recommendations to alleviate a contract impasse.

The board voted 8 to 1 against acceptance of the report.

The specific details of the recommendations were not available.

The union did not set a strike date, but Barbara Zaborney, president of the Greater Nanticoke Area Educator's Association, told the board the fact-finder's recommendations are "more than reasonable" and said a strike will happen at an "opportune time." She would not elaborate.

Nanticoke teachers have been working without a contract since August 2005, according to Jane Brubaker of the Pennsylvania State Education Association.

Zaborney said the recommendation did not require any tax increases for the district. She added the education association membership voted "overwhelmingly" to accept the recommendations even though they included significant "compromises."

"We are an important part of the school district," Zaborney said. "We are professional educators offering the best possible education for the residents and taxpayers."

She added the teachers helped the district in the past when money was tight, agreeing to wage freezes and other concessions. However, she noted the board promised them their "sacrifices would be remembered."

"That time is now," she said.

Board president Jeff Kozlofski, who cast the only vote to accept the fact-finder's report, said he thinks it is a "fair deal for both the district and the teachers."

"Nobody wins if there is a strike," Kozlofski said. The biggest losers are the district students, he added. However, without accepting the union's offer, essentially the whole negotiation process is "back to square one."

Kenny James, vice president of the school board, stressed the board wants "a fair contract for the teachers."

He pointed out the district is one of the poorest in Luzerne County and whatever agreement is made has to "work for the community as a whole."

12/3/2007

Difficult financial decisions in Nanticoke's future

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke's budget and financial recovery plan don't call for laying off employees.

But in the future, as costs go up while the financially distressed city's income stays the same, council and Mayor John Bushko might have to make difficult personnel decisions.

At present, layoffs are a "remote" possibility, Councilman James Litchkofski said.

Councilman Bernie Norieka says expenses are already reduced to bare bones, so personnel is the only major place left to cut costs.

Out of every dollar the city takes in, 75 cents goes for salary and benefits — particularly in the police and fire departments — a sizeable chunk of the budget, he said. Council should look at personnel reduction, whether it means freezing hires, through attrition, or layoffs, Norieka said.

Police and fire personnel can't be laid off under their contracts, which are up for negotiation next year. Clerical staff and public works department employees could be cut. Their contracts expire at the end of this year and currently are under negotiation.

The public works department, at seven men, is already understaffed, Litchkofski said. As soon as their contract is settled, the city can start subcontracting out services such as pothole patching to save money and free the men up for other work, he said.

Nanticoke's \$4.18 million 2008 budget is balanced, and does not contain any fee increases or new tax hikes. Residents already pay an earned income tax of 2 percent, twice the normal rate, because of the city's distressed status.

The higher income tax will help the city for a while, but Pennsylvania Economy League representatives predict that within five years, expenses will overtake revenues. As with household budgets, costs for necessities, including utilities and health insurance, go up, but the amount of money coming in stays about the same.

During a budget discussion last week with representatives from the PEL, Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinators, Norieka asked if cutting two of the city's six clerical employees would help. There are two in the tax office, one collecting refuse fees, two in the economic development office, and one in the police department. PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said laying off two employees only saves \$50,000.

Bushko strongly opposes the idea. Clerical salaries range from \$19,000 to around \$28,000, making them the lowest-paid employees in the city, he said.

Besides, the city really only pays for three of the six, he said. Greater Nanticoke Area pays one tax office worker's salary; one community development salary is paid for through federal Office of Community Development funds, and refuse fees cover their collector's salary, Bushko said.

Although it costs the city \$17,000 for one Blue Cross/Blue Shield family plan, three of the six clerical workers take buyouts. They get \$2,000 from the city, Bushko said.

He doesn't think raising the buyout to \$4,000 while making the other employees pay \$50 to \$100 per paycheck toward their health insurance premiums will save the city money.

Incoming Councilman Jon Metta said he couldn't tell what the future will hold. Good contracts should help prevent layoffs, as well as monitoring overtime and following the recovery plan, he said.

12/3/2007

Nanticoke worker hours at issue

Councilman wants clerical staff to join other city employees in working a regular eight-hour day.

slong@timesleader.com

Some city officials want to ensure all employees work a standard eight-hour day.

The city's financial recovery plan adopted by council last December requires all full-time city employees work at least 35 hours per week. Most of the city's employees do work eight hours a day with a paid lunch, but not all.

Nanticoke's six clerical employees are considered full-time employees. They work 30 hours a week and receive city-paid health insurance benefits, accrued sick leave, two weeks of paid vacation time and 22 paid holidays.

The six women work 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. with a paid hour for lunch in the city's refuse department, tax collection office, community development and police department.

Councilman Bernie Norieka wants them to work a standard work day, just as he said they would in a private sector job. That's an additional hour a day per employee, he said.

"If they don't like it they can go look in the private sector and they will see there are no other benefits," Norieka said.

He said he knows he is not popular right now with employees, but he said he is representing the taxpayers. "Somebody has got to take a stance and we have to get the city back on its feet."

He said the city needs to find ways to cut costs, but it appears that can only be done by looking at personnel costs.

"Seventy-five cents out of every dollar goes to pay employees' salaries and benefits," said Norieka, who was appointed to council in April after former councilman Bill O'Malley resigned.

He wants to improve the efficiency of the office staff by increasing the hours and realigning staff to help the code enforcement department. With the office staff working longer hours, more paperwork and city functions will run smoother by maybe realigning some of the office staff into other departments, including code enforcement, Norieka said.

Incoming councilman Jon Metta, who will replace Norieka on council, said he believes the city needs to follow the recovery plan because it can't afford not to.

"It is very tight. We can't go out of the plan," he said.

Although he won't be sworn in until January, Metta has attended nearly every public City Council meeting and workshop to keep abreast of the city's issues. As a councilman, he will oversee the city's finance department.

Supporters of the clerical staff, including Mayor John Bushko and city treasurer and tax collector Al Wytoshek, said it's not the workers' fault that they work fewer hours than other city employees. Bushko has served on council for 14 years.

Wytoshek, a former council member, said former administrations offered the employees perks when the city couldn't always offer a pay raise during contract talks. "It's not the girls' fault they got all the benefits because we were looking to pacify them 'cause we knew we didn't have the money to pay them extra."

City administrator Ken Johnson said the salaries range from about \$19,000 to \$30,000, plus benefits.

Johnson is actively negotiating with the clerical staff's union officials, but no determination has been reached regarding additional salary compensation or the exact working hours.

Morale concerns

Worried about staff morale, Johnson said he respects the workers because he knows they work hard and didn't ask for these additional perks.

The perks, he said, were granted through contracts with previous administrations.

Jim Murphy, an agent for Teamsters Local 401, which represent the city's street department and clerical personnel, declined to comment Sunday because of ongoing negotiations.

Bushko and Wytoshek believe the office staff should be compensated appropriately for the additional hours they are being asked to work. "I don't think anybody should have to work an extra hour without extra pay," Bushko said.

The recovery plan does not provide for a pay raise in the first year of a new contract. It does provide an \$800 pay raise during the second and third years of a contract. The contract ended last year, but it was extended for a year with no pay increase. So they have worked one year already without a pay increase.

If the city does agree to increase the clerical workers' salaries, it must also be approved by the city's financial advisors, the Pennsylvania Economy League and the state.

"Any proposed settlement would be reviewed to determine its effect on the city and its budget," said Jerry Cross, PEL executive director. Johnson said he just wants to ensure the municipal building is open the necessary hours to be more convenient for Nanticoke citizens needing to pay their bills.

"The function of city government is to provide services," Johnson said.

"The more convenient we can make those services, the better it is for the citizens of Nanticoke."

What's next

What: Nanticoke City Council meeting

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Municipal building, 15 E. Ridge St.

11/29/2007

Nanticoke Area Notes

By Pam Urbanski

K.M. Smith Elementary School institutes Pre-K Counts program

Pennsylvania has made great strides in serving young children through early childhood initiatives such as the Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts program.

Established by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, the program gives children an opportunity to get a head start in the classroom. Seventy-five million dollars was made available to Pennsylvania school districts for the program.

Diane Klish, director of the Family Center in Nanticoke, wrote the grant for the Nanticoke program and was fortunate to receive it. Nanticoke Area is just one of six schools in the county that was awarded the funding. In Pennsylvania, the push is on to initiate early learning standards.

"All schools are really trying to standardize their kindergarten programs so that when a child enters kindergarten, no matter where in Pennsylvania, the student is expected to know certain skills and learn certain academics," Klish said.

"We're really excited about this new program. It gives our youngest children an opportunity to get ready for the kindergarten classroom," she said.

Klish said that, at first, the emphasis is placed on socialization. "We teach our children many things including how to get in line, how to take turns, how to treat their classmates and teachers with respect and empathy," she said.

Continuing, she said, "In addition to socialization, children learn important skills such as holding a pencil and scissors correctly, cutting, colors, how to spell their first and last names and more."

The Pre-K Counts program is housed in the K.M. Smith Elementary Center. There is one teacher and an aide. The program runs five days a week and children go to class two and a half days a week. Parents can chose from two different times: morning sessions are from 8:20 to 11:05 a.m. and afternoon sessions are from 11:40 a.m. to 2:25 p.m. The program is free.

For more information or to enroll your child in the program, call the school at 735-3740.

Tax rebate period ends

Nanticoke City Tax Collector A.J. Wytoshek announced the rebate period for 2007 school taxes and school per capita taxes has ended.

Taxes are payable Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 1 to 4 p.m. at the tax office in the Nanticoke City Municipal Building. Mail-in payments will not be accepted by postmark. Nanticoke City property and city per capita taxes are now in penalty value, which ends Dec. 15.

Anyone needing assistance or an appointment should call 735-2800.

Santa is coming to town

Santa Claus will make a stop in Nanticoke on Sunday, Dec. 9. The Santa parade will start at 1 p.m. at the Nanticoke Area High School and finish at Patriot Park where the Christmas festivities will be held.

There will be horse and buggy rides and sounds of the season will be provided by the Greater Nanticoke Area choir. There also will be fun activities, surprises and, of course, a gift from Santa.

The event is sponsored by Nanticoke Civic Pride.

Basketball bus trip set

The Nanticoke Recreation Board is sponsoring a basketball trip to see former Nanticoke Area High School standout Sarah Acker play on the college level. Sarah plays for St. Joseph's University. The game is Sunday, Feb. 24. St. Joseph's will play George Washington University. The buses will leave from the Nanticoke Area High School parking lot at a time to be announced. Cost is \$20 per person or \$25 per person if you would like a T-shirt. Reservations must be made by calling Mike at 735-7421 or Jim at 735-8108. Reservations are due by Feb. 15.

11/28/2007

Nanticoke officials launch cost-cutting effort

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City officials, aided by financial advisers, went hunting for ways to trim next year's expenses.

They discovered their cost-cutting options are limited, and even laying off city employees won't help.

Council, Mayor John Bushko, city administration and representatives from the Pennsylvania Economy League, Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, met Tuesday to go over the \$4.18 million 2008 budget. The city is having a hard time meeting expenses in 2007, which cuts into next year's budget.

The city raised its share of earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent this year, but money didn't come in as anticipated, and neither did real estate tax. PEL expected county-wide reassessment to take place by 2008 instead of being postponed, research associate Harry Miller said.

In addition, higher health insurance costs — a 15 percent rate increase instead of 10 percent — and spending more than planned on a city administrator and for legal fees helped bust the budget.

The city's main expenses are for police and fire departments, but their contracts have minimum staffing levels that must be met, Miller said. Councilman Bernie Norieka suggested laying off the refuse money collector and an employee from the tax office.

That would only save about \$50,000, PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said. Instead, Miller suggested clerical employees' duties be shifted to the public works department and code enforcement office.

The officials decided to slash overtime in half. Police overtime will be reduced from \$60,000 to \$30,000 and firefighters' from \$40,000 to \$20,000.

Since changes to the budget are minimal, the city won't have to re-advertise it. Council plans its second vote on the budget during the regular meeting Dec. 19 at 7 p.m.

11/23/2007

Nanticoke takes action to smooth Kanjorski Center transition

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The Nanticoke General Municipal Authority board voted to take over the Kanjorski Center from the Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority, in hopes it will pave the way for an easier sale to Luzerne County Community College

LCCC wants to buy the Kanjorski Center to turn it into a health sciences center. Transferring the property from the redevelopment authority to the municipal authority would streamline the sale process because the college will only have to deal with one entity, the municipal authority's solicitor Joseph Lach said.

When the Kanjorski Center was about to be built, a September 1993 agreement among the city and both authorities gave each of the three parties a specific role in the creation of the office building.

The city's role was to obtain the grants and other funding to construct the center, then sign the money over to the municipal authority.

The municipal authority had charge of developing, constructing, leasing and managing the office building, which was to have Travelers' Insurance Co. as its first tenant.

The redevelopment authority was tasked with acquiring parcels of land on East Main Street and putting them together to form the development area for the center. The redevelopment authority then held the deed to the property.

The 1993 agreement gives the municipal authority the option to purchase the property from the redevelopment authority at any time for \$10, with written notice of its intention. The redevelopment authority then has 30 days to transfer the deed to the municipal authority.

Redevelopment authority board member Steve Buchinski, who sat in on the municipal authority meeting, said his board's solicitor, Susan Maza, would have to interpret the agreement. However, Lach said he believed the agreement was "very straightforward."

"In my personal opinion, not only is it legal, but it make sense," Lach said.

Besides streamlining the sale, in a city with a population of under 10,000 and limited resources, it doesn't make sense to have responsibilities for the downtown projects spread out in different directions, Lach said.

"It seems unreasonably cumbersome to have all these different groups trying to get something done," he said.

Municipal authority board member Dennis Butler wants city officials and the municipal and redevelopment authority boards to continue to work together on their common goal: the sale of the Kanjorski Center and related downtown revitalization projects.

11/21/2007

Rates dip for health trust schools

Costs will drop next year and probably for next 2 or 3 years.

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While there's no dollar figures attached yet, members of the Northeast Pennsylvania School District Health Trust will see their health insurance rates drop not only this coming year, but also probably for the next two or three years.

Add to that what has become an annual habit of giving members one-month without paying premiums – equivalent to another 8.5 percent decrease – and the Trust is finally providing the kind of taxpayer savings promised when it was formed in 1999, Executive Director Andrew Marko said.

Next year's rates will be, on average, 4.1 percent less than this year, Marko said, the biggest rate reduction in the Trust's history and the third in a row. While it won't be certain until sometime next year, members will also likely get one month free of premiums. Much of the savings are possible because of a hefty surplus of about \$12 million and a constant search for ways to save more, Marko said.

It's a sharp change from the early, turbulent years of the Trust marked by double-digit increases and multimillion-dollar deficits.

"The goal of the trust has always been to bring stability to districts without interfering with benefits, and we have reached that goal,"

Marko said. "We expect to maintain this level for two or three years at least."

The Trust was formed by 10 school districts, two vocational-technical schools and the Luzerne Intermediate Unit, but Dallas and Pittston Area school districts withdrew this summer, claiming they could save more money on their own. Five months later, the Trust announced the changes in insurance premiums each member will pay this year, and all but one saw decreases ranging from 1.5 percent to 7.8 percent. While the Trust initially planned to spread costs evenly among districts and set a single rate for all, that plan was scuttled early, and each gets a slightly different premium, so each has a slightly different change in the premium annually.

Marko said Tunkhannock Area will see a 0.5 percent increase while the rest will see the following decreases: Hanover Area, 6.4 percent; Lake-Lehman, 3.8 percent; LIU, 5.3 percent; **Greater Nanticoke Area, 4.4 percent**; Northwest Area, 7.8 percent; West Side Vo-Tech, 2.9 percent; Wilkes-Barre Area, 1.5 percent; Wilkes-Barre Area Vo-Tech, 2.5 percent; Wyoming Area 7.6 percent; and Wyoming Valley West, 7.6 percent.

Marko said that, barring some major change, members can also expect one month without a premium, which amounts to several hundred thousand dollars for most.

"We expect to maintain stability, with zero increases or even decreases for the next three or four years," Marko said.

11/16/2007

GNA board OKs plan for school improvement

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Greater Nanticoke Area School Board approved a plan Thursday for Nanticoke High School's second year of state-mandated school improvement.

To comply with the federal No Child Left Behind law, students take the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment tests to determine their reading and math abilities. Districts must make adequate yearly progress goals in test participation and school attendance.

Nanticoke High School's problem is with reading proficiency in economically disadvantaged and special education students, according to the Department of Education.

As part of the plan, teachers will use the state's "Adopt an Anchor" program, Superintendent Anthony Perrone said. It enables teachers to align their curriculum with PSSA standards to help prepare students for the tests.

Principals will do classroom walk-ins each day to see how the teachers are doing, Perrone said. The principals will submit weekly reports.

"I'm happy we have a plan and are moving forward," board member Pattie Bieski said.

She thanked federal funds coordinator Michael Pawlik for his work.

Greater Nanticoke Area's Educational Center and Elementary Center received warnings from the state for test performance. The problems concern reading and math for special education students at the educational center and reading for special education students at the elementary center.

In other business, board member Robert Raineri said teachers contract negotiations are in the fact-finding process, where a neutral third party looks at both sides' proposals and makes recommendations.

It should end Nov. 26, after which the teachers union and school board will have 10 days to vote on the fact-finder's report, Raineri said.

He expects the board to vote during the Dec. 3 meeting.

Greater Nanticoke Area teachers have been without a contract since June 2005. Health insurance and salary increases are main sticking points

Hank Marks of the Greater Nanticoke Area Taxpayers Association said most full-time teachers "don't know how well they have it."

"They're well-paid, have top-shelf benefits, and only work 180 days a year," Marks said.

He also noted, "Our education is not very good as far as test scores are concerned," which provoked a few indignant noises from the audience.

11/16/2007

GNA random drug testing policy gets initial approval

slong@timesleader.com

The Greater Nanticoke Area School Board approved the first reading of a random drug-testing policy during its meeting on Thursday.

At the request of district officials, state troopers used drug-trained sniffing dogs to inspect the high school on Oct. 13 while the building was in lock-down. "There were no drugs of any kind found," Superintendent Tony Perrone said.

Specifics of how the entire drug-testing policy will work and how often the testing will be conducted are still being ironed out, but Perrone said the district will use a private medical lab to conduct the testing.

"We are trying to make this a drug-free school zone," he said. "It will just be athletes now, but eventually it will be extracurricular also." Parents must sign a waiver to allow for the testing or their child won't be allowed to participate on the district's sports teams. Students on prescription medication would not be subject to penalties that would be enforced on students who test positive for illegal substances, Perrone said.

Officials also approved the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment improvement plan.

The plan, which is required to be submitted to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, describes the district's testing standards and what activities it will use to help students improve their standardized test scores.

School board member Patricia Bieski said the district has a long way to go to improve the scores, but at least it is now moving in the right direction.

"I am glad we are not just talking anymore and are moving forward to improve the PSSA scores," she said.

Further details of the plan were not available.

11/15/2007

Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority stops short of approving contract with architectural firm

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The redevelopment authority board postponed voting to approve a contract with architectural and planning firm Facility Design & Development Ltd. for downtown improvements, saying they want more answers.

The contract is for streetscaping Main and North Market streets, including new sidewalks, streetlights, parking, planters and benches. It would follow recommendations in the strategic plan the Scranton-based architectural and planning firm prepared for Nanticoke and unveiled in April 2006.

The streetscaping is part of an overall plan for downtown redevelopment, the cornerstone of which is the sale of the redevelopment authority-owned Kanjorski Center on East Main Street to Luzerne County Community College for a health sciences center.

LCCC also wants a culinary arts center constructed on the site of the city-owned senior center at Market and Main streets. Since city and state officials expect the projects to bring millions of dollars in private investment downtown, they want to give its main streets a new look.

Municipal authority Chairman Ron Kamowski signed off on the contract with Facility Design & Development at the authority's Oct. 22 meeting.

The redevelopment authority met two days later, but members wanted to wait until city council voiced its support and authority solicitor Susan Maza checked over the contract. Council gave the OK on Nov. 7.

The redevelopment authority wanted a few items in the contract changed or clarified. Redevelopment authority Chairman Chester Beggs called for a joint meeting with the municipal authority.

"I don't want to sign anything and have more money problems," he said.

The other members agreed. They would like a representative of Facility Design & Development to be present at the upcoming meeting.

The authority's main question was how much the project will cost. The firm's fees

would be 10 percent of the budget, based on available funds, the contract states. Maza said the wording was vague. She said the board should be given a specific budget amount with a breakdown showing how it could be used.

The \$15,000 Facility Design & Development would receive on signing the contract is already covered.

State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, did not attend the meeting, but said earlier the municipal authority had received a \$100,000 grant for professional services related to the downtown projects. The grant can cover architectural fees, legal fees, site preparation, the appraisals, and anything else needed to get things ready, he said.

But funding for the project itself is still being worked out.

U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, DNanticoke, took away \$5.6 million federal transportation funding from the redevelopment authority. The money was for streetscaping and a parking garage for the Kanjorski Center.

11/15/2007

Nanticoke officials gear up for contract talks

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

To stay on budget and follow the financial recovery plan, city officials will have to gear up for tough contract negotiations next year, including taking away some employee perks.

"Act 47 is not a bed of roses, and it's not a cure-all," Gerald Cross, executive director of Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator Pennsylvania Economy League, told council. "The responsibility still rests with the city fathers."

Under state Act 47, the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, distressed municipalities like Nanticoke have to pass a balanced budget for three straight years. The \$4,183,677 budget for 2008 that council and Mayor John Bushko passed in preliminary form on Wednesday is balanced.

"This is the first reading and numbers could change," Bushko said.

Revenue is mainly from earned income tax, increased last year from 1 percent to 2 percent, with 0.5 percent going to the Greater Nanticoke

Area School District.

The biggest hike in expenditures is \$110,000 for legal fees, up from \$20,657 in the 2007 budget. Bushko thought the amount was excessive. But Joseph Boyle, PEL policy specialist, said the city chose the amount to plan for labor lawyers' fees, with four employee contracts expiring. The clerical staff and public works contracts, which expire Dec. 31, are in negotiations, and talks will start next year for police and fire contracts, up Dec. 31, 2008.

Personnel expenses make up 75 percent to 80 percent of the budget, PEL research associate Harry Miller said.

Labor costs got the city in financial trouble in the first place, Miller said. Nanticoke's financial recovery plan calls for extensive changes to new contracts that will save the city money.

The subject of the six members of the clerical staff was particularly thorny.

Clerical salaries are in the "low \$20,000s," fiscal manager Holly Quinn said.

But clerical staff get benefits fully paid by the city - health insurance is approximately \$17,000 a year per person - 22 paid days off, two weeks of vacation, several sick days a year and pensions, Councilman Bernie Norieka said.

In addition, clerical staff work six-hour days. The recovery plan calls for them to work an eight-hour day, with one hour paid lunchtime.

It isn't fair for them to have their hours increased, with only an \$800 a year raise allowed them by the recovery plan, tax collector Albert Wytoshek believes.

They should have been working seven hours a day all along, Norieka said. Bushko, agreeing with Wytoshek that \$800 wasn't much, said the staff signed on for six hours.

Cross said most people in Nanticoke earn less than \$50,000 a year. He pointed out that residents wouldn't like paying higher income taxes so city employees could have higher salaries and benefits.

"Poll the citizens of Nanticoke next time you're out, and see how they feel about the working conditions (in city hall)," Cross said.

"That'll fly like a lead balloon," Wytoshek admitted.

Bushko requested another meeting to go over the budget line by line. He hopes to cut expenditures, he said.

"Unless you're willing to talk personnel reduction or benefit reduction, there's not much we can do," Miller said.

11/15/2007

Nanticoke rolls out '09 budget

slong@timesleader.com

The financially distressed city currently in Act 47 status got its first glimpse at the 2008 budget during a specially called meeting Wednesday night.

The \$4.18 million budget is a 23.3 percent increase over the 2007 general fund budget of \$3.38 million.

The 2008 budget does not include any higher taxes, sewer or refuse fees. But there is also no plan to fund capital improvements, which frustrated Mayor John Bushko, who has been actively seeking to get the roads and sewer lines fixed.

Higher health care costs, repayment of state loans and labor benefits under current union contracts account for the largest increases in the budget.

Medical insurance costs rose 14.7 percent for 2008, City Administrator Kenneth Johnson said. The city pays 100 percent of the costs for full-timers and their families.

A series of no-interest loans scheduled for payback to the state next year were expenses, which could not be put off, also increased the 2008 budget.

A \$200,000 loan and a \$70,000 payment on the 10-year, no-interest loan from 2006 must be paid next year, Johnson said.

The police department's budget increases \$161,694 and the fire department budget increases \$281,183 over the next year due to "significant wage increases under the current bargaining agreements," Johnson said.

Bushko proposed going line by line to review each department.

"Unless you are willing to talk labor, benefits and the number of employees reduction you won't reduce the budget tremendously, and some you can't touch because you are under budget contracts," said Henry Miller, a senior research associate for the Pennsylvania Economy League.

Taxes were raised earlier this year when the city adopted a commuter tax of 1.33 percent and raised the earned income tax to 2 percent.

Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas Mark Ciavarella on Tuesday approved the city's request to maintain the new tax rate approved in the spring.

The city expected to receive \$1.7 million this year by increasing the income tax in late spring, but as of Sept. 30 only \$580,673 had come in.

Johnson and PEL officials believe most of those 2007 taxes, an estimated \$736,667, will come in next year by April 15.

Johnson and PEL think an additional \$1.02 million will be generated from the higher taxes in 2008.

The city council is hoping to pass the budget by Dec. 19.

11/13/2007

Need for appraisal questioned

slong@timesleader.com

An appraisal of the exterior of the Kanjorski Center will be conducted within the next two weeks in an effort to keep the downtown renovation project on track. The building, owned by the Nanticoke Municipal Authority, is part of a plan to move some Luzerne County Community College programs into the heart of the city.

The Kanjorski Center appraisal is expected to cost \$3,000, according to Ron Kamowski, authority chairman. Other city-owned structures, including the Senior Citizen Center, which also may be purchased by LCCC, will be appraised at a later date, state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke said.

Kamowski would not release the names of the other sites because the authority hasn't decided which properties should be appraised, he said.

A \$100,000 state community revitalization grant will pay for appraisals and other behind-the-scenes work, including legal fees, and will be used to acquire properties needed to proceed with the three-pronged, \$21 million project, Yudichak said.

LCCC wants to move its health sciences program into the Kanjorski Center and its culinary arts program into the Senior Citizens Center by 2009.

A private restaurant developer, yet to be named, has expressed interest in working with the culinary arts center by opening a restaurant in downtown Nanticoke.

The federal Economic Development Administration requires an appraisal on the Kanjorski Center's outer shell to determine the building's value before it can be sold to the college.

"We need an appraisal to determine the monies owed to the EDA," Kamowski said.

Results from the appraisal are expected to be presented to the authority in about two weeks.

Nanticoke City Administrator Kenneth Johnson doesn't see the need for an appraisal since the property is being transferred from the municipal authority to the community college.

"It's not the cost that bothers me. What's the appraisal for? Why do they want an appraisal?" Johnson said. "We are going to be transferring this to LCCC, another public entity."

When the Kanjorski Center was constructed 13 years ago, the federal EDA paid \$1.8 million toward the total cost.

The money was provided with the stipulation that at least a portion of the original funds be repaid to the EDA if the building is sold within 20 years, Kamowski said.

An interior appraisal will not be conducted because the college is expected to spend \$6 million on renovations that would make it suitable to house the health sciences program with dental labs, faculty offices and classrooms.

U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, said he's working with the EDA office to reduce the building's cost so LCCC can purchase it at a reasonable cost.

"We are trying to get a waiver or reduce the amount," Kanjorski said, noting he would assist LCCC to help it qualify to buy the building. He said he is planning to meet with the economic development officials after the appraisal is complete.

Earlier this year, Kanjorski rerouted a \$5.6 million federal allocation from the Nanticoke project to the Hotel Sterling in Wilkes-Barre and another project in Lackawanna County. He said he feared the 11th Congressional District would lose the funding because Nanticoke officials were taking too long to complete the deal.

City council members Brent Makarczyk and James Litchofski insist the \$5.6 million still belongs to Nanticoke.

City, county and school officials have made numerous requests to Kanjorski to redirect the money to Nanticoke and the municipal authority.

Makarczyk and Litchofski said they believe the appraisal is a smokescreen being used by Kanjorski to keep the federal money away from his hometown.

"It's even been brought up that it could be a delay tactic until the bill gets passed and the money be removed from our possession,"

Makarczyk said.

Kanjorski said he is working to find additional funds for the project.

"It's not the cost that bothers me. What's the appraisal for? Why do they want an appraisal?"

Kenneth Johnson

Nanticoke City Administrator

11/13/2007

Schools gang up on staph

Institutions stress hygiene to combat drug-resistant infections.

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After two school districts reported cases of Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, local schools are taking measures to prevent students, faculty and staff from becoming infected. Cases have been confirmed in the Wyoming Area and Wilkes-Barre Area school districts.

Most are trying to prevent infection through education. Some are sending home informational letters and good-hygiene tips to parents and educating their employees on the spread of the bacteria. One local university recently installed automatic hand sanitizers in the dining hall. MRSA is a bacterial infection that is resistant to certain antibiotics, but it can be treated. The elderly are most prone to the infection because of weak immune systems, but anyone can become infected. The infection is generally spread through direct contact. If someone has an open wound, the bacterium is able to penetrate the skin, causing the infection, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

When the students from the Wilkes-Barre Area School District contracted the infection, Andrew Kuhl, director of secondary curriculum, said officials informed parents.

Superintendent Jeffrey Namey sent parents an eight-page letter that explained what happened and included information about the disease,

its symptoms and instructions on how to stay protected and how to keep areas clean, Kuhl said.

Employees were briefed on the disease.

“Meetings were held for all faculty and they were given the same type of information the parents received for their use for their particular building,” Kuhl said.

Younger students were taught how to properly wash their hands, Kuhl said.

“The nurses had the kids sing their ABCs while washing their hands so they knew they properly washed their hands long enough.”

At Kistler Elementary School, where one case was reported, district officials sanitized the building.

“We are doing that in all of our buildings,” Kuhl said. “Our staff has been taking precautions right along. I feel we were well-prepared.”

There have been no reports of MRSA in the Greater Nanticoke Area School District but officials are taking precautions. “We have not had any issues, which is good,” said Sandy Najaka, registered nurse at the high school. “We are using disinfectants and wiping down tables, desks, gym equipment and things like that.”

Nanticoke administration sent letters to parents, telling them there have been no MRSA cases in the district, Najaka said.

“We told parents to make sure they teach their children basic hygiene such as covering their mouth when they cough, washing their hands, not taking drinks or eating other people’s food. Common-sense things,” she said.

The school has a hygiene education program that teaches the younger children about general hygiene and discusses communicable diseases with the older students.

Nanticoke Webdesign note: Go to www.gnasd.com to read letter.

Misericordia University had a quick response, too, according to Charlotte Slocum, director of student health services.

She said the school placed automatic hand sanitizers in the dining hall and added more in the health center and weight rooms.

Misericordia is discouraging students from sharing razors or soaps and suggests students wash their bed sheets and laundry frequently. If they become sick, they are encouraged to visit the health center immediately, Slocum said.

Wilkes University is using MRSA as an educational tool.

“It is important to note that we’ve taken this national news of MRSA and staph infections as an educational opportunity by informing our students and staff about the signs and symptoms and how to prevent it,” said Christine Seitzinger, associate director of marketing communications.

A four-page document of information regarding MRSA was sent to all students on campus, she said.

Little People Day Care School Inc., Wilkes-Barre, has always followed a strict cleaning regimen, said director Christine Lupcho.

“We’ve been doing what we’ve been doing, and so far, so good,” she said. “Our toys are always cleaned, usually a couple times a week. We have cleaning people come in every night. We follow our state regulations; we have to keep everything really clean to begin with, which we’ve been doing.”

Signs and Symptoms

How to Stay Healthy

- Red bumps such as pimples or boils
- Deep, painful abscesses or pus-filled lesions
- If a wound is not healing even with the use of treatment, contact a physician immediately.
- If not treated, these wounds can cause infections in bones, joints, surgical wounds, the bloodstream, heart valves and lungs, which can become life threatening.
- Take daily showers
- Continually wash hands throughout the day
- Keep open wounds properly covered until healed
- Do not share food or drinks with other people
- Sanitize toys that may be shared among more than one child
- Sanitize commonly touched areas around the home
- Athletes should shower immediately after practice or a game

Information collected from the Pennsylvania Department of Health and The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

11/13/2007

Same but different

Former Ship’s Inn now Map’s

By Ron Bartizekrbartizek@timesleader.com

The nautical theme remains, but everything else about the former Ship’s Inn restaurant has been given an upgrade at the new Map’s that opened in mid-October.

“Nanticoke is a town of traditions,” said owner Pam Hardesty, in explaining the continued seafaring decorations that include maps on the wall. But don’t think that’s the origin of the name – “Map’s” also is the possessive of “Pam” backwards.

“We flipped it around,” Hardesty, 45, said, “and it worked right out.”

The once-popular spot has been spruced up inside and out, she said. Hardesty bought the building that had been closed for two years, then got to work.

“We’ve completely remodeled everything,” with new booths, new carpeting, all new lighting, fresh paint and a new canvas awning,” she said. With 50 seats, “it’s cozy.”

The restaurant has a full bar and liquor license. That will come in handy for manager Joy Kelly, who Hardesty said is known for her signature perfect Manhattan. Kelly, a family friend, has catered private parties in the region for many years. Co-owner Tosha Hardesty, Pam's daughter, will be in the kitchen. From the Nanticoke High School class of 2000, she is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and was most recently a sous-chef at Skytop Lodge in the Poconos. "She wanted to bring her skills back to the community," Pam Hardesty said. The menu will be "fine dining, American cuisine," using fresh ingredients, with everything cooked to order. Hardesty has been a waitress at many local restaurants, she said, but "I've never owned one." Staffing beyond the owners and manager will mostly be family members, along with a few high school students. She's not giving up her day job yet, though, in the billing department of a health care organization. The restaurant had a "soft opening" during the second week in October, Hardesty said. Monday night it hosted an invitation-only reception for community dignitaries.

FINDING MAP'S

Address: 15 W. Ridge St., Nanticoke

Hours: Wed.-Sat., dinner only, 5 p.m.

Phone: 258-0140

Other: Will be booking private parties Sundays-Tuesdays.

11/12/2007

Educational Support Professionals are the backbone of the schools

Editor: Wednesday, Nov. 14, we celebrate Educational Support Professionals Day. On this day we honor the custodians, maintenance, cleaners, aides, cafeteria workers, secretaries, hall monitors, transportation assistants, tech aides and others who provide invaluable services to our schools.

ESP Day is designed to recognize the ESP for their never ending hard work and dedication to making public schools great for every child. Today's Support Professionals make it easier for students to learn in positive, supportive and safe environments.

All ESPs are equal and essential partners in the education process.

Thanks to all the Educational Support Professionals who are essentially "the backbone of our schools."

J.D. Verazin

President

Greater Nanticoke Area Educational Support Professionals

11/9/2007

Nanticoke employees will be paid

Despite continued financial problems, city will be able to meet its payroll obligations.

slong@timesleader.com

All 39 city employees will receive paychecks today, even though the city continues to experience cash flow problems, city Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

Council members expressed concern last month that the city might not have enough money in its general fund to cover payroll expenses. Late last week, tax collector Berkheimer Associates sent the city a check for earned income taxes paid during the second and third quarters, Johnson said. He would not reveal the amount of the check.

"If this continues, we should be OK," Johnson said. "Regardless, the city will make payroll and try to pay other bills."

Mayor John Bushko Wednesday night dismissed the notion that the city would not have been able to pay its employees. There is enough money to meet payroll for the rest of the year, he said.

In May, the city voted to increase its earned income tax from 1 percent to 2 percent after obtaining approval from a Luzerne County court. The city receives 1.5 percent and the remaining .5 percent is paid to the Greater Nanticoke Area School District.

However, the income generated from the tax has not flowed in as quickly as estimated by the Pennsylvania Economy League officials, who are mandated by the state to help the city recover from its Act 47 status.

Despite repeated requests, Nanticoke residents are not contacting their employers to have the extra tax amount withheld from their paychecks. Residents who don't have the funds removed now will get hit with a tax bill next spring.

"The monies will come in, just not at the rate anticipated," Johnson said. "I knew we were going to have some issues with it, but didn't know it would be this rough."

Gerald E. Cross, executive director of the Pennsylvania Economy League, said the city's cash flow is under control.

By the numbers

2007-08 budget review

Total city employees: 39 full-time

Total payroll: \$65,000 payable bi-weekly on Fridays

-Source: City of Nanticoke records

Pennsylvania Economy League and City Administrator Kenneth Johnson will present the 2008 budget to the city council 7 p.m.

Wednesday, Nov. 14 at Nanticoke's municipal building at 15 E. Ridge St. The budget is anticipated at \$3.1 million. Council has until Dec. 31 to approve the budget.

11/8/2007

Nanticoke official adds clerk's duties

City's administrator takes over the job after the city clerk resigns.

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City administrator Ken Johnson is now serving double duties with the city after being named the new city clerk during Wednesday night's meeting.

Johnson read a letter of resignation dated Nov. 5 from city clerk Anthony Margelewicz effective immediately.

"I have to realize that I cannot carry out the duties as custodian of the city records while I am not able to control the deposition of storage," Margelewicz stated in the letter.

He said the "work environment had become increasingly hostile" and he was not allowed access to a computer for at least a year while handling his part-time duties.

None of the council members, Mayor John Bushko or Johnson would elaborate on these claims.

Bushko called Margelewicz a great friend after accepting his resignation.

He also said the city needed to take applications from people interested in filling the appointed seat.

Bushko said the clerk's job should be handled by a city resident, not a city administrator.

City councilman Bernie Norieka countered that, saying the city didn't need to fill the city clerk position because Johnson could handle those duties.

"I think Mr. Johnson has enough on his plate," Bushko said.

Johnson said although serving as the city's administrator is a challenging job, he would do the clerk's job as requested.

There are other communities in Pennsylvania where the city administrator and clerk are the same official.

The city will save \$6,400 a year by consolidating the clerk's job with Johnson's duties as city administrator.

"The council will save money we don't need to pay for that position," Norieka said.

As clerk, Johnson will now be responsible for maintaining the city's minutes from each meeting, handling roll call duties and endorsing documents with the city's official seal as necessary.

Margelewicz did not return calls seeking comment.

11/8/2007

Nanticoke taking money from projects to replace \$5.6 million in federal funds

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Increasing unlikelihood of getting \$5.6 million federal money means city officials will have to re-route funding from other important projects.

Council voted Wednesday to use most of a \$2.3 million federal grant for street improvements around the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street.

Council originally planned to use the money to repave Alden Road, Prospect Street, Union Street and possibly three others. City officials are keeping \$700,000 of the \$2.3 million to repave and do sewer work on Alden Road.

Nanticoke General Municipal Authority is selling the Kanjorski Center to Luzerne County Community College for a health sciences center. The project is considered crucial to millions of dollars in private investment downtown.

The Kanjorski Center lacks parking. U.S. Rep Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, got the city \$5.6 million to build a parking garage in the 2005 federal transportation funding act. However, Kanjorski is taking the money away from Nanticoke in a bill passed by the House but still in the Senate.

The \$2.3 million, which is federal K-route money, can't be used toward a parking garage, Councilman Brent Makarczyk said. It can be used for things like sidewalks, streetlights, and on-street parking, which the \$5.6 million would also have gone toward.

Makarczyk, angry about comments by Kanjorski in an Oct. 21 article in The Citizens' Voice, said he believes the city will never get the \$5.6 million, so has to divert money from other projects, like the K-routes.

He refuted Kanjorski's statement that the parking garage is not necessary right now. On several occasions in 2005 and 2006, Kanjorski referred to the need for parking at the Kanjorski Center, Makarczyk pointed out. Neither did city officials ever say they didn't want the money, as Kanjorski claimed, Makarczyk said. He said they wanted it to be spent wisely.

"In my opinion, he decided the project was not what he wanted, so he took taxpayer money and tried to kill the project," Makarczyk said.

"For a 'hometown hero' to go out of his way to kill the biggest city project in years, to me is very sad."

Councilman James Litchkofski agreed.

"It seems to me (Kanjorski) is devaluing the project and devaluing the residents. It's a shame," he said.

In other business, council accepted city clerk Anthony Margelewicz's resignation.

"I have come to realize that I cannot carry out the duties as custodian of the city's records when I am not able to control their disposition or storage," Margelewicz states in his resignation letter. "At the same time I have not had reliable access to a computer for a period in excess of one year and the work environment has become increasingly hostile."

City Administrator Kenneth Johnson will take over clerk duties, which include meeting minutes, at no extra pay.

11/8/2007

Deployment ceremony set Saturday for troops

By bkalinowski@citizensvoice.com

National Guard officials are busy preparing for Saturday's deployment ceremony to bid farewell to members of the 109th Field Artillery who will leave for the Middle East within weeks.

The event will mark the final time the entire battalion will be united in formation until the soldiers return in late 2008 or early 2009. Family, friends, veterans or simply patriotic members of the community are encouraged to attend, said Sgt. John Paul Karpovich, a battalion human resources official who organized the event.

"This is it. It's a time when we say, 'Go forward, carry on the mission, be safe, represent the Wyoming Valley and come home safe,'" Karpovich said.

Soldiers will hear an inspirational message from battalion commander, Lt. Col. Kevin Miller, and an Army chaplain. Other speakers slated include U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke; state Sens. Ray Musto, D-Pittston Township, and Lisa Baker, R-Lehman Township, and state Rep. Phyllis Mundy, D-Kingston.

About 160 soldiers from Alpha Battery (Plymouth), Bravo Battery (Nanticoke), Headquarters Battery (Wilkes-Barre), and Golf Company (Wilkes-Barre) are set to mobilize between Nov. 26 and Dec. 3 for an eventual deployment to Afghanistan, Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. This is the third time since Sept. 11 the 109th has been called to serve the nation and Karpovich is hoping the soldiers will receive a much deserved send-off. "It means a lot when someone cares and says, 'Thank you for what you are doing.' That means the world to someone who wears the uniform," he said.

11/1/2007

Nanticoke Area Notes

Pamela Urbanski writes Nanticoke Area Notes every other Thursday. You can reach her by e-mail at pamurb806@aol.com.

GNA soccer program helps area kids get in their kicks

Over the last several months, area athletes have been taking part in the Greater Nanticoke Area Youth Soccer Program. GNAYS intramural soccer, as it is called, gives kids ages 5-17 an opportunity to give the sport a try and to learn a little more about the game.

"A lot of the young people who play in our league do so because they want to see if it is a sport that they will like and might continue with in high school," said Dave Lane, GNAYS president. "It is also an opportunity for them to learn the fundamentals of the game and to work on the skills that they have already acquired."

Lane says it is also just a way for kids to have some fun with their friends and play a sport they really enjoy.

This is Lane's fifth year as president of GNAYS. He and his wife, Charlene, put in a lot of time making sure players have a successful season. From coaching to taking care of the fields, it is a job that takes up their Saturdays and many hours during the week. Why are they so dedicated?

"We do it because we love the sport and we enjoy watching the kids play and having a good time," Lane said. He started coaching when his daughter, Kaitlyn, played U8; this year she is a U18 player. He also has another daughter, Lindsay, who plays U14.

"It is great to see them all go from U8 players and not knowing what they are doing to U18 skilled players," Lane said.

There are 24 teams from Nanticoke that participated in the soccer program. More than 200 students and 40 coaches from Nanticoke have taken part.

Each team practiced twice a week and played a game on Saturday, starting in September and finishing up this past week. That means that between 300 and 400 young people and their families from all over the Wyoming Valley were in town for a Saturday soccer game.

Four fields were used: three at the Hanover Recreational Park and one at Lower Broadway. The soccer association made a donation to the Hanover Recreation Club and they in turn took care of the three fields. They also ran a concession stand at the fields located in the Hanover section of Nanticoke.

During the regular season, scores are not kept. Of course players know who wins and loses, but the stats are not kept and scores of games are not allowed to be published in the newspaper. That all changes when teams enter the County Cup.

The County Cup is an intramural soccer tournament where score is kept and a champion is crowned in each age division. Teams are entered from all around the Wyoming Valley.

This year, four Nanticoke teams entered the cup. Two teams will play for the championship on Saturday: a U14 girls team coached by Dave Chapin and a U18 girls team coached by Dave Lane. Two teams, a U12 girls team also coached by Lane and a U13 girls team coached by Paul Cimaksasky, made it to the third round of the tournament before being eliminated. As with any quality youth program, a lot of volunteers give their time.

Thank you to all the coaches and adults who helped to make this season a success. Hats off to the officers of GNAYS: Dave Lane; Patty McNulty, treasurer; Paul Cimaksasky, secretary; and Jay Bohn, U8 commissioner.

Congratulations to all the players for a fine season and for representing your community so well.

Calling all mat men

Registration for the Nanticoke Elementary Wrestling Program will be held Nov. 12 from 7 to 9:30p.m. at Green Street's Restaurant. The program is recommended for children in fourth through sixth grades; however, kids ages 5-9 may be admitted if a parent provides supervision.

The program is structured to teach all participants the basics of wrestling, as well as expose them to some actual competition. Practices will be held twice a week, beginning in December. Cost is \$25 per wrestler, \$40 per family. For more information, call Joann at 735-2376 or Bob at 735-1434.

Craft fair scheduled

The Friends of the Mill Memorial Library will hold a fall craft fair Sunday from noon to 4 p.m. Vendors will sell jewelry, crafts and holiday items, including beautiful stained glass. There will also be a book sale, and be sure to stop by Granny's Attic. Also stop by for some delicious food and baked goods, the kids' face painting and more surprises to come. For more information, call the library at 735-3030.

10/29/2007

Closing nonprofit selling 40 acres to Nanticoke

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

For sale: 40 acres in Nanticoke and Hanover Township containing a 97-year-old historic landmark.

The nonprofit Regional Equipment Center is giving Concrete City, located off Front Street in the Hanover section of Nanticoke, to the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority to sell for economic development. Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission designated the experimental former coal-mine housing community a historic site and erected a marker in 1998.

The property consists of seven acres in Nanticoke and 33 acres in Hanover Township.

"You're going to have property in Hanover Township?" Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko asked the night the authority voted to accept it.

"If we can sell it, John, I don't care if it's in Russia," municipal authority chairman Ronald Kamowski said.

The municipal authority is broke, and needs money for maintenance on the mostly-vacant Kanjorski Center on East Main Street — at least until it can be sold to Luzerne County Community College.

The Regional Equipment Center, which was created to allow municipalities to borrow heavy equipment, is closing by the end of the year. Executive Director Joseph Yudichak offered Concrete City for a token payment of \$10, Kamowski said.

"We were negotiating with the (Nanticoke) historical society at one time, and they wanted to save one building, fence it in," Yudichak said.

"The cost of maintaining one building, and fencing and insurance was just too much for us."

Municipal authority solicitor Joseph Lach will do a title search on the property. Once the ownership is clarified, authority members hope they can find someone to buy it, Kamowski said. He's not sure what the authority will do with the concrete structures.

"We really have no plans right now," Kamowski said. "The property became available to us, and we figured it was the last piece of developable land left in the city limits, so we took it."

Concrete City in wilderness

At the end of a deeply-rutted rocky dirt road loom the shells of what were once considered a unique marvel of company housing for coal miners.

Paintball players, target practitioners and partiers have littered the once-immaculate grounds with beer containers, spray paint cans and assorted types of spent ammunition.

Tangles of overgrown foliage give no hint of the lush lawns and gardens residents once cultivated. Graffiti-covered bare concrete is devoid of any trace of the white paint with green trim that once graced the homes.

Concrete City's 20 two-family residences were built in 1911 by Delaware, Lackawanna and Western railroad's coal division to house 40 favored employees of Truesdale Colliery. Each house, made entirely of poured concrete, rented for \$8 a month — but only to English-speaking, high-level mine employees.

Glen Alden Coal Co. took over Concrete City in 1921. The company didn't want to put in a required sewer system — each residence had a concrete outhouse — and abandoned the housing complex in 1924.

As legend has it, Glen Alden Coal Co. tried to demolish it, but gave up when they discovered even 100 sticks of dynamite didn't dent the buildings.

"Well, they could today," Yudichak said.

The houses are weathered and crumbling, and years of use as a training ground and shooting range by firefighters, police and the military — as well as damage by vandals — have taken their toll.

"The problem with it is, the buildings are a disaster waiting to happen. Someone has to take it over and do something," Yudichak said.

"Someday there will be a major accident there."

10/27/2007

Nanticoke businessman hopes to rebound from devastating fire

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Joe Waiter looks at the damage in disbelief.

A freak fire last weekend ravaged the Nanticoke auto garage he has run for three decades.

Now, the 59-year-old is forced to start anew.

But the hardest part, Waiter says, is he could not prevent what happened.

Nanticoke fire officials determined the devastating blaze was accidental and originated under the hood of a 1998 Ford F-150 truck parked overnight inside Waiter's Broadway Garage on Alden Road.

Signs point to a faulty cruise-control switch that has caused fires in Ford vehicles around the country, led to millions of recalls and prompted class-action lawsuits, Waiter said he was told by a fire investigator.

"Your life changes in an absolute instant. It's devastating," Waiter said. "I don't think I should have a life's work ended in an instant at no fault of my own. That's the hard part. That's the depressing part."

Kevin Thomas, the investigator probing the blaze from York-based Kufta Associates, said he couldn't comment about the fire.

According to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration files on its Web site, more than 4.5 million Ford vehicles — including Ford F-150s — that were equipped with the cruise-control deactivation switch used from 1992 to 2003 had the potential to "overheat, smoke or burn" and created "a significant risk of fire."

A 2005 CNN report on the issue said the \$20 switch, attached to the brake master cylinder, was designed to be powered — or hot — even when the vehicle was off. Over time, brake fluid could seep into the electrical components of the switch, sparking a fire and fueling the flames even when the vehicle had been idle.

The fire at Waiter's garage began Friday, Oct. 19, around 12:30 a.m., more than six hours after he closed for the night. Waiter said he completed general maintenance on the truck, which the owner recently purchased.

Regardless of how the fire occurred, Waiter can't escape the feeling of losing his livelihood — at least temporarily.

He has been in the business since 1960, when he began working for his father. He opened his current garage at 107 Alden Road in 1978.

Now, it's ruined.

The exterior of the building doesn't give a true picture of the fire's wrath. A large hole opened up in the roof. Black smoke stains the eaves. Inside, though, nearly everything — including business records — is burned beyond repair.

He has adequate insurance, but says it does little to ease the mental anguish of the loss. Plus, he knows there's a long road ahead before life will become normal again.

Waiter says the building must come down, but his career will not end. He predicts he'll reopen in a new building within a few months.

"I will be back," Waiter said.

10/25/2007

Redevelopment authority joins chorus clamoring for federal funds

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The city's redevelopment authority on Wednesday added its members' voices to those of the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority in asking for \$5.6 million federal funding.

Last week, city council and mayor John Bushko asked the two authorities, which own and manage the Kanjorski Center, to send letters to the U.S. Department of Transportation asking how to start drawing down on the money to build a parking garage for the building. The municipal authority board signed the letter Monday, and both letters will be mailed together.

Luzerne County Community College wants to buy the Kanjorski Center for a Life Sciences Center. The authorities are jointly prepared to immediately start designing and building a parking garage, as well as other improvements related to more than \$40 million in downtown redevelopment projects, according to the letter.

The anchor for the projects is LCCC's presence downtown in the Kanjorski Center and at a new Culinary Arts center to be constructed at Market and Main streets.

The \$5.6 million was earmarked by U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke in the 2005 Transportation Funding Act. He has since taken the funding away from Nanticoke, giving part of it to Wilkes-Barre in a bill that hasn't passed in the Senate. City officials believe the \$5.6 million is still theirs until the bill passes.

Unlike the municipal authority, the redevelopment authority is waiting to vote on a contract with Facility Design & Development Inc. as designers and architects for downtown projects on Market and Main streets, including the culinary arts center.

Redevelopment authority chairman Chester Beggs, who is also on the municipal authority board, suggested both authorities wait until city council approves the contract. Additionally, Beggs wanted redevelopment authority attorney Susan Maza to look over the contract.

The municipal authority signed off on the contract, conditional on council's approval, but the redevelopment authority is holding off until after next week's council meeting.

The redevelopment authority plans to ask the municipal authority to have the Kanjorski Center appraised.

10/24/2007

Nanticoke still fighting for federal funding

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Members of the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority aren't giving up hope they can get back \$5.6 million in funding for an important project.

U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, originally got the \$5.6 million in the 2005 Transportation Funding Act, to be used for a parking garage and other improvements to East Main Street around the Kanjorski Center. The congressman later took the money away from

Nanticoke. He gives part of it to Wilkes-Barre in a bill that is still in the Senate.

Kanjorski previously went on the record saying he most likely won't get the \$5.6 million back.

The redevelopment and municipal authorities, which own and manage the Kanjorski Center, need the money for a parking garage.

The building has no parking, which is part of the deal for the sale of the building to Luzerne County Community College for its new health sciences center.

City officials are anxious to start building. They believe that until and unless the bill passes, the \$5.6 million belongs to them. Council voted last week to ask the two authorities to send letters to the U.S. Department of Transportation, asking if it can start releasing the funds.

"We're still hoping the congressman will change his mind about the money he re-allocated," municipal authority chairman Ron Kamowski said. "We know he cares about Nanticoke. Maybe he will have a change of heart."

In other business, the authority will contract with Scranton-based Facility Design and Development Ltd. for the Market and Main street redesign project, conditional on council's approval. Authority member Chester Beggs wanted city officials' cooperation, and the other members agreed.

Fees will not exceed 10 percent of the project costs, which Kamowski noted was "lower than standard." The firm's principal, Alex Belavitz, will be paid a \$15,000 retainer, which Kamowski said was fair, considering all the work he has done for the authority over the past two years, much out of his own pocket.

The authority is broke, relying on the city for funds. But money to pay for professional services, including those of Facility Design and Development, is available from an unidentified source. Kamowski said he wasn't sure from whom or how much there is.

Solicitor Joseph Lach said until a formal announcement is made, he can't disclose where the money comes from. All he could say is it isn't from a private source, and it is for "the professional services that will tie the project together."

"If someone wants to give us money, we'll take it," authority member Henry Marks said.

10/21/2007

Congressman says approval of educational use for Kanjorski Center more important than garage

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke probably won't get its \$5.6 million federal funding for a parking garage at the Ka

and when it is, he will find other ways of getting money.

In an interview last week, the 12-term congressman stressed that it is most important to ensure the building could be used for educational purposes so the city's redevelopment authority could sell it to Luzerne County Community College to develop as a health sciences center.

"I was called on board by the mayor to help get LCCC located downtown in the Kanjorski Center. That chore I have taken on. It is moving along with great progress," he said.

The federal Economic Development Agency gave the Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority a job creation grant in 1994 to build the Kanjorski Center.

Under the grant's terms, the center can only be used for commercial purposes, Kanjorski said. If it is sold within the next seven years, the city must pay back \$1.9 million, the balance of the grant. LCCC wants to buy the building outright, but Kanjorski suggests a lease.

"If they do not get approval of use by EDA, they won't be able to use the building," he said.

He got the federal agency to listen to the college's proposal, and brought U.S. Sens. Arlen Specter and Bob Casey on board to help plead the case.

City and college officials are anxious to begin renovating the Kanjorski Center and building the parking garage so LCCC can start classes in January 2009. The college's move downtown is considered a key part of revitalization and economic development.

Kanjorski said it is not a lack of parking holding up the project — the college can use existing ground spaces until the garage is constructed.

"The parkade could be built a year from now, two years from now, five years from now," he said.

In the federal transportation funding bill signed into law in August 2005, Kanjorski gave Nanticoke's redevelopment authority \$5.6 million for a parking garage at the Kanjorski Center and other improvements, such as new streetlights.

Kanjorski said he decided to re-route the money, giving \$3 million to Wilkes-Barre for Hotel Sterling parking, after Nanticoke's July 17, 2006, joint municipal and redevelopment authority meeting. He said at that time the mayor and council said they didn't want the parking garage.

"When I find that the mayor and unanimous members of council don't want that money, when I've got two, three, four communities dying for that money ... do you think I should leave it there and lose it?" he said.

The process to re-allocate the \$5.6 million "was started and completed 15 months ago," he said.

The original bill removing the money, H.R. 1195, was introduced by U.S. Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., on Feb. 27, 2007, according to the Library of Congress' THOMAS database. It was passed by the House and went to the Senate in March. On June 6, the Committee on Environment and Public Works passed H.R. 1195 with its earmarks struck out, including the one taking the \$5.6 million away from Nanticoke. They were all restored in H.R. 3248, which passed in the House on July 31.

Kanjorski said he did not remove the Nanticoke earmark a second time. The House committee simply re-inserted everything into the new bill, he said.

H.R. 3248 has been in the Committee on Environment and Public Works since Aug. 3. Kanjorski believes it is "highly impractical" to remove the earmark taking out the \$5.6 million. The \$168 billion bill involves more than 6,000 earmarks, 40 of them his.

“It is highly unlikely I can convince anyone in the House or Senate to open that bill up,” Kanjorski said. “They would take me away in a straitjacket if I asked for that, to change the allocation of \$5.6 million.”

City officials say they always wanted a parking garage for the Kanjorski Center, they just couldn’t agree on how big. Based on plans by Scranton-based Facility Design and Development Ltd., they decided to use the \$5.6 million for a two-level parking garage, plus more on-street parking for residents and businesses.

Councilman Brent Makarczyk said there would be approximately 300 parking spaces in the garage and on the ground. New streetlights on East Main Street for added safety are also in the plan.

LCCC officials announced plans for the Kanjorski Center and a culinary arts center to be built at Market and Main streets during a press conference on Sept. 4. Less than two weeks later, the loss of the \$5.6 million came to light.

After the discovery, Kanjorski and his staff met with Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko, City Administrator Kenneth Johnson, and LCCC Interim President Thomas Leary. Kanjorski told them the \$5.6 million is “meaningless” unless the EDA allows the use of the Kanjorski Center for education instead of commerce.

But city officials, concerned about the scarcity of funds for parking, aren’t satisfied.

They would like the EDA grant issue resolved, because they don’t want to pay back the money, and they want to sell the building, Johnson said. But parking is a crucial component of the deal.

“The issue is yes, we need to get the \$1.9 million relieved, clearly. But if we don’t, there are other avenues we can deal with. That can be resolved,” he said. “The bottom line is, the college is deferring to the city, saying we promised to give them parking.”

On Wednesday, council and Bushko voted to ask the redevelopment and municipal authorities to send a letter to the U.S. Department of Transportation asking to start drawing from the \$5.6 million.

But when asked if Nanticoke officials could access the money, Kanjorski replied, “My opinion right now is no.”

Since the bill is in the Senate, the U.S. Department of Transportation would have to wait until it is passed, he said.

And Kanjorski is confident he can find funds elsewhere.

“I’ll get them a parkade. I’m pretty successful at getting those things,” he said. “Myself and the two senators agreed we will get them money for parking.”

10/20/2007

Nanticoke man will receive crime prevention award

A Nanticoke man is one of 17 Pennsylvanians selected to receive the Governor’s Crime Prevention Volunteer Award, according to an announcement by Gov. Ed Rendell on Friday.

Nicholas Pucino was the only Luzerne County resident selected for the award.

“These Pennsylvanians are to be commended for their leadership and commitment to making their neighborhoods safer,” said Rendell. The Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency made Friday’s announcement as part of crime prevention month, which was developed by the National Crime Prevention Council to encourage volunteer, grass-roots collaboration in preventing crime.

As the state’s criminal justice planning agency, the commission works to prevent and reduce crime in Pennsylvania and respond to the needs of victims. At Rendell’s direction, it collaborates with state and local elected officials, juvenile and criminal justice agencies, victim service agencies, community-based organizations, nonprofits, schools and others to achieve these goals. For more information about the commission, visit www.pccd.state.pa.us.

10/19/2007

Printing business opens in Whitney Pointe development

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The Whitney Pointe development is mostly rocky ground strewn with mounds of coal.

For more than three decades the land has lain fallow as developers concentrated their efforts in the north end of the Wyoming Valley, or passed the region by.

But now, in the center of 323 strip-mined acres, there is a small, drab-gray building — the first business to set up shop in the beleaguered park.

C.P.S. Direct Marketing and Communications, a developer and printer of marketing materials, officially opened the doors to its new facility Thursday.

“For a few generations, this (development) has been a symbol of the failure of the south valley,” said state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke. C.P.S.’s opening “sets a new stage. It tells the world that we’re open for business.”

Yudichak said he has been in contact with several other businesses interested in locating in Whitney Pointe, which is owned by Ken Pollock, and a spur from the Canadian Pacific line is under construction.

“I never envisioned anything going in here,” said C.P.S. owner Wayne Oplinger. “But when I sat back and thought about it, it’s a great place to do business.”

Oplinger moved his 11-year-old business from South River Street in Wilkes-Barre to Whitney Pointe as it became clear the growing business needed more room.

He employs 15 sales people, graphic artists and press operators. In the next few years, Oplinger said, he hopes to see his staff grow to around 60 to fill orders mostly from Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey, but as far away as Florida and Hawaii.

“You’re seeing this first in a long line of success stories in the county, and here in the south valley,” said Luzerne County majority Commissioner Greg Skrepenak.

Current plans for Whitney Pointe include 150 residential lots and 19 industrial parcels.

10/19/2007

Nanticoke council approves plans for parking garage

City officials ask Kanjorski to reroute federal funds to pay for the project.

slong@timesleader.com

City council Wednesday night approved plans for the parking garage project for Luzerne County Community College’s relocation into downtown.

Council voted 4-0 to allow the Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority to proceed with the \$7 million garage on East Main Street even though the federal funds originally earmarked to pay for it have been diverted to another project.

Some councilmen believe that if the authority moves forward with the project, U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, will have to reroute the \$5.6 million funding package back to the city for the LCCC project.

“It’s my understanding all Congressman Kanjorski has to do is make one phone call to reroute that money,” Councilman Bernie Norieka said.

Mayor John Bushko said he believes the original allocation has been given to other projects, so new funding must be found to replace it. After speaking with Kanjorski before the council meeting, the mayor said he wanted to give Kanjorski time to try to find new money for the project.

The federal funds in question were part of the Federal Highway Transportation Bill. Kanjorski said he diverted the money to other projects in the district, including the Hotel Sterling, because he was concerned the money would be lost if Nanticoke did not proceed in a timely manner.

Wednesday’s vote allows the authority to proceed with the design and building phase on a 400-vehicle garage adjacent to the Kanjorski Center. LCCC intends to move two of its programs into the center by January 2009.

Councilman James Litchkofski drafted a letter to J. Richard Capka of the Federal Highway Administration in an attempt to force Kanjorski to reroute the funding to Nanticoke. In the letter, he asked about steps the city, Redevelopment Authority and Municipal Authority should take to ensure Nanticoke receives the money.

Plymouth Township Supervisor Gale Conrad and Newport Township Board of Commissioners sent letters to Kanjorski requesting the money be restored because it will propel the development of other projects in the South Valley region.

“We are forced to ask why is the South Valley less deserving of federal funds than any other region in the 11th Congressional District,” the letter stated.

Councilman Brent Makarczyk called for the removal of Kanjorski staffer Walter Sokolowski from the Redevelopment Authority.

Administrator Kenneth Johnson said council cannot remove Sokolowski from the board, but can request his resignation.

Neither Sokolowski, a former mayor of Nanticoke, nor Kanjorski could be reached for comment.

10/19/2007

GNA evacuated after bomb threat found

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A threat scrawled on the mirror in the boy’s room of a middle school caused the Greater Nanticoke Area School District to dismiss classes early Thursday and led to the entire school being searched for explosives.

The building was swept by a cadre of Nanticoke police officers, and no explosive devices or weapons were found. Classes are scheduled for today at the regular times.

Superintendent Anthony Perrone said “someone wrote something on a mirror that ‘we’re going to blow this place up at 11:30.’ ”

The discovery of the threat led to an immediate evacuation of the school and the early dismissal for the district’s middle school and elementary schools. Middle school students were bused home at noon and the elementary schools were bused home at 1 p.m. The high school was dismissed at its regular time.

The threat caused classes to be canceled for about 800 students, Perrone said.

“We immediately called 911 and the police and they were here immediately,” Perrone said. “They were phenomenal. They went through the whole school.”

Perrone insisted that the school is safe but expressed apprehension about talking to the media about the crime because he said he feared it may embolden others to commit copycat acts. He said, however, when the district and police find out who is responsible, they will be prosecuted.

10/18/2007

Blaze damages Nanticoke home

An 88-year-old woman is displaced by the fire, which melts neighbor’s siding.

jgrad@timesleader.com

Flames burned high enough to scorch an attic window and hot enough to melt plastic siding on a neighboring home nearly 20 feet away Wednesday afternoon.

Fire department fans pumped smoke and heat out of a second-story window as firefighters doused the melting side of the neighboring home with water.

The fire began about 4:10 p.m. at 178 W. Ridge St. Displaced from the home was 88-year-old Sophia Homitz.

The American Red Cross was attempting to help Homitz find housing as the sun set. Homitz was too shaken up to talk at the scene.

David and Amy Saraka were visiting her mother's home on West Ridge Street when they spotted the fire.

"We had just pulled in and we were helping my mom with her house," Saraka said. "That's when we noticed the black smoke."

Saraka said, "my husband ran like hell trying to get her off the front porch. She wouldn't move."

Eventually David Saraka and Sue Heinz managed to pull Homitz to safety. No one was injured.

Larry Karnes is a captain and a 17-year veteran of the Nanticoke Fire Co. He said that structurally the home is sound, "however, it's total devastation inside. First and second floors are burned up pretty bad."

"When I came up with the control car, the flames were coming out of that attic and flames were blowing out of that hole."

The temperature inside the structure was so hot it melted the rugs in the house, which clung to the firefighters' protective gear and caused slight heat exhaustion to some of the early responders.

The neighboring home sustained "extensive damage on the outside," Karnes said. "We broke in. We haven't notified them."

Karnes said the origin of the fire is now being investigated. If the fire company does not find the fire's origin, a fire marshal will be dispatched to the scene from Troop P Wyoming of the state police.

Chip Miller, a 27-year veteran of the Nanticoke Fire Co., was one of the first to respond. He described the first floor as having extensive fire damage and speculated that the fire may have started in the cellar of the home.

UGI responded to the scene to cut power and gas to the home, as per standard company protocol. Nanticoke City Medic, Nanticoke police, Honey Pot Fire Co. and Hanover Township Fire Co. also responded to the scene.

10/18/2007

After Nanticoke Yard Sale, Halloween, Christmas events

Editor: Citizens' Voice

On Saturday, Oct. 6 the Nanticoke Civic Pride Committee sponsored another citywide yard sale with a treasure hunt. Over 250 people participated in the sale and over 350 maps were given out, and many of these people came from out of town.

The yard sale is not only for our citizens to sell their items, but a chance to meet their neighbors and other people from all over.

It also gives people a chance to see our beautiful city and what we have to offer, not only now, but in the future.

I want to thank the Nanticoke Civic Pride Committee, Mayor John Bushko, Yvonne Bozinski, Theresa Sowa and Betsi Cheshinski for all their help. Also, the girls in the tax office in the city building who accepted phone calls and made our maps and lists. Dave Alberola from Emjaze Marketing, Inc. for graciously donating his bench sign on Main and Market streets and the Salvation Army who sent one of their trucks to take all the usable items. A big thank you to The Citizens' Voice for their well written stories about the yard sale and especially to the citizens of Nanticoke, who know that our city is growing stronger each day.

Finally, the Civic Pride Committee not only works tirelessly for the yard sale but other community activities such as our upcoming Halloween parade for the children of Nanticoke which will be on Sunday, Oct. 27 from 2 to 4 p.m. and our Santa Parade and party which is held sometime in December. For more information on these events and many more please go to our website at Nanticokecity.com.

J.D. Verazin

Nanticoke Civic Pride Committee

10/18/2007

Nanticoke City wants access to federal funds

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City council, tired of waiting to see whether a \$5.6 million federal grant will be pulled, voted Wednesday to take action.

Since the \$5.6 million belongs to the city by law, officials say, they are asking to access the money.

It is needed for a parking garage at the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street, which Luzerne County Community College is buying to turn into a health sciences center. The project is key to start approximately \$40 million in downtown redevelopment.

U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski put the \$5.6 million earmark into a federal transportation funding bill President Bush signed into law in 2005.

Kanjorski redirected it to Wilkes-Barre and Lackawanna County projects in a bill passed in the House in February. The money was restored to Nanticoke by the Senate, but removed in another bill that passed in the House on July 31 and is now in the Senate.

During meetings with city and college officials and in letters to them, Kanjorski indicated he wouldn't help get the \$5.6 million back, according to council members.

"It is my serious belief we're not going to get that money at all," Councilman Bernie Norieka said.

Since the new bill taking the money away hasn't been passed in the Senate, the money is still available for Nanticoke, Councilman Jim Litchkofski said.

Council voted to ask the city's redevelopment and municipal authorities, which own and manage the Kanjorski Center, to submit a letter to Federal Highway Administrator J. Richard Capka. In it, they ask how to start drawing funds from the \$5.6 million. They say they want to

start building the garage, and that \$1.2 million in state and local funds are ready to contribute to the project. Council also voted 3-2 — Mayor John Bushko and Councilman Joe Dougherty voted no — to ask Walter Sokolowski to resign from the redevelopment authority board. He was not at Wednesday's meeting. Sokolowski was Kanjorski's chief of staff in Wilkes-Barre at the same time he was on the redevelopment authority, Councilman Brent Makarczyk said. Sokolowski knew Kanjorski tried twice to take away the \$5.6 million and never said a word, Makarczyk said. "His actions, what he did, are unforgivable at this point, and I don't think he deserves a seat on that board," Makarczyk said. Bushko pointed out that although council could ask for Sokolowski's resignation, he doesn't have to give it. Sokolowski was recently hired by the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board, according to its spokesman, Doug Harbach. Sokolowski will serve as an enforcement agent at the Mount Airy Casino Resort when it opens.

10/18/2007

Firefighters teach valuable lessons to children and senior citizens

Pam Urbanski - Nanticoke Area Notes

The Nanticoke Fire Department was very busy last week as it joined with other fire companies around the U.S. in celebrating National Fire Prevention Week.

The theme for this year was "It's Fire Prevention Week — Practice your Escape Plan." According to the National Fire Protection Association, in 2006, fire departments nationally responded to 1.6 million fires and 24 percent were home fires. Home fires killed 3,030 people — roughly eight people every day. Yet, only 23 percent of households actually have developed and practiced a home-fire escape plan. "Fire prevention week gives us an opportunity to go into classrooms and share fire safety tips with the students," said Fire Chief Mike Bohan.

The program consisted of a movie entitled "Planning Your Escape." A discussion about fire safety and a firefighter who dresses in full gear including breathing apparatus is also part of the demonstration.

"It's important that children are able to see what a firefighter looks and sounds like in full gear," said Bohan. "We don't want children running away and hiding from firefighters who are trying to rescue them."

An interesting thing happened to Chief Bohan that proves seeing a firefighter dressed up is important. His granddaughter Kalya attends Little Stars. Kayla has been at the fire department many, many times for visits. During the presentation, Kayla began to cry when firefighter Miller approached her in full gear.

"It was scary for her but an important thing for her to experience," the fire chief said.

This year, the fire department including career and volunteer firefighters, met with 1,315 students in kindergarten through fifth grade. The firefighters also visited Head Start, Little Stars, Learning Station and Big Daddies.

Students in kindergarten and first grade toured the fire-safety house, an actual house where children practice escaping two ways as theatrical smoke is blown through the house. Each fire safety program ends with Ember the fire dog showing children what to do in case their clothes catch on fire: "Stop, drop and roll."

Firefighters also take time to visit the three high-rise apartments in the city. "Our seniors really appreciate our program and we enjoy visiting with them," Bohan said.

The chief also recommended that parents/caregivers review what was learned and ask questions about the fire-safety program.

Smoke detectors available

The Nanticoke Fire Department once again has teamed up with WNEP-TV, Channel 16, for Operation Save A Life, a program designed to distribute and install smoke alarms in city homes that do not have the life-saving devices.

Kidde Corporation has donated 10,000 smoke detectors to a 17-county region including Luzerne County.

One of the most important things you can do to is to install smoke detectors and keep them working," said Chief Mike Bohan. "Putting up smoke detectors and not having working batteries or taking the batteries out to put them in something else is a mistake."

"Twice a year you should change the batteries. Change your clocks change your batteries," he advised. Testing batteries once a month by pressing the button on the smoke detector is also a good idea.

The Nanticoke Fire Department will distribute and install, free of charge, residential smoke detectors. Call the fire department at 735-5860 to make arrangements.

Annual Halloween parade set

The City of Nanticoke is holding its annual Halloween parade Saturday, Oct. 27, from 2 to 4 p.m. at Patriot Park. Children ages 1 to 14 are invited to show off their Halloween costumes. Of course, prizes will be awarded and there will be surprises and treats for each child. In case of inclement weather, the Halloween festivities will be held at city hall, 1 East Ridge St. For more information, call 735-2800.

Band sponsoring trip to NYC

The Greater Nanticoke Area High School marching band is sponsoring a trip to New York City on Sunday, Nov. 18 to see the 75th anniversary performance of the Rockettes' Christmas Show at Radio City Music Hall. The bus will leave Nanticoke at 8 a.m. and return at 11 p.m. Cost is \$65. Children 12 years of age and under will receive a free goodie bag.

Call Cindy Garren at 735-0792 to register.

Spaghetti dinner and more

Parishioners of the Transfiguration of Our Lord Church are holding their third annual spaghetti dinner Sunday. Serving will be from noon to 4 p.m. A Ukrainian auction featuring home-cooked meals and goodies and a bale sale also will be held.

Tickets can be purchased at the door or by calling John at 735-6878, Gerry at 824-3880 or Jill at 824-4603. The church is located at Center and Bliss streets in the Hanover section of Nanticoke.

Youth group fundraiser

The youth group of the Holy Child/Holy Trinity/St. Mary of Czestochowa/St. Stanislaus parish community is collecting empty inkjet, laser cartridges and used cell phones. The youth group has partnered with Planet Green in a fundraising effort to collect these items. Collection boxes are located in the vestibules of all the churches.

Also, if you drink Coke or any other Coke products that have the "mycokerewards" labels on them, please save them and drop them off at boxes in the church vestibules or at the parish office. For most Coke products, the codes are on the bottle caps, while on other products the labels are on the opening of the box.

Spaghetti at St. John's

You won't have to cook dinner Sunday, Oct. 28. Instead, you can fill up on homemade spaghetti and meatballs at St. John's Orthodox Church. The dinner will be held from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tickets are \$7 for adults and \$3.50 for children 10 and younger. Take-out soups also will be available.

The dinner will be held in the church basement located on Welles and Front streets in the Hanover section of Nanticoke.

10/14/2007

Yard sale, hunt helpers lauded

Times Leader

On Oct. 6, the Nanticoke Civic Pride Committee sponsored another citywide yard sale with a treasure hunt. More than 250 people participated in the sale and more than 350 maps were given out. Many of the participants were from out of town.

The yard sale is not only for our citizens to sell their items, but a chance to meet neighbors and people from all over. It also gives people a chance to see our beautiful city and what we have to offer, not only now, but in the future.

I want to thank:

- the Nanticoke Civic Pride Committee, Mayor John Bushko, Yvonne Bozinski, Theresa Sowa and Betsi Cheshinski for their help.
- the girls in the city tax office who accepted phone calls and made our maps and lists.
- Dave Alberola from Emjaze Marketing Inc. for donating his bench sign on Main and Market streets.
- the Salvation Army, which sent one of its trucks to take usable items.
- The Times Leader for its well-written stories about the yard sale.
- Nanticoke citizens, who know that our city is growing stronger each day.

The Civic Pride Committee not only works tirelessly on the yard sale but on other community activities such as our upcoming children's Halloween parade. It will be held for Nanticoke children from 2 to 4 p.m. Oct. 27 and our Santa Parade and party will be held in December.

For more information about these events and many more, go to our Web site at www.nanticokecity.com.

J.D. Verazin - Civic Pride Committee

10/12/2007

New heat units, windows OK'd for GNA high school

slong@timesleader.com

The high school will be getting new windows, heating units and window shades after the Nanticoke Area School District approved participation in the state's Energy Conservation program during Thursday's meeting.

The \$1.1 million contract will be paid for using funds from the district's general fund, board member Gary Smith said. The district will save thousands of dollars in interest fees by just paying for the work instead of acquiring a bank loan.

About 70 new windows will replace the ones originally installed when the school was constructed in the early 1970s. The school's wall air conditioning and heating units are being replaced because it is becoming difficult to find parts, Smith said.

"We pay for it upfront, but they ultimately pay for themselves," Superintendent Tony Perrone said.

Work to replace the windows and wall units is scheduled to begin in early 2008 after all the materials arrive.

To avoid disrupting classroom activities, the work will be done at night or during school vacations, Smith said.

Board members also unanimously approved a payment of \$5,000 to the city of Nanticoke for new equipment to be installed in the new police cruisers.

Perrone said the money is being well spent because for the last two years, officers patrol the high school grounds and have lunch with the students daily.

"They offer me a service," Perrone said. "The behavior of the kids has improved 100 percent."

In other news:

Administrators are seeking two yearbook advisors from the faculty to work with the high school seniors, Perrone said. Michael Fedorko and Amber Hyder were appointed as student advisors for the 2007-08 school year. Judith Clarke and Bethanne DeAngelo were hired to work 30 hours a week at \$14 an hour as family development specialists at the Family Center. Heather Zegarski was appointed as a classroom aide for the pre-kindergarten program. Her hours and salary were not available. Stanley Cardinale was hired as a crossing guard, but his salary was not available.

10/12/2007

Nanticoke school board approves energy performance review

By Elizabeth Skrapits

Greater Nanticoke Area school Board gave final approval Thursday night for CM3 Building Solutions of Trevoese, Bucks County, to undertake a \$1.17 million energy performance review of the 1972-era high school building. The project includes a new heating, ventilation and air conditioning system, a new hot water heater, direct digital controls, and replacing windows and shades in 50 classrooms, board President Jeff Kozlofski said. He said the board wouldn't need to raise taxes: the project should pay for itself within 12 years through energy savings. In other business, the board: Hired Judith Clarke and Bethann DeAngelo as family development specialists at \$14 an hour. They will be paid via a grant, Kozlofski said. Appointed Heather Zegarski as a pre-kindergarten classroom aide. Elementary teacher Janice Shiffka resigned as of Oct. 7. Her position will be posted. Donated \$5,000 to Nanticoke City police for new equipment. "They're always helping us out down here," Kozlofski said. "Their presence is felt and appreciated."

10/6/2007

Kanjorski meeting with Nanticoke, LCCC officials deemed 'productive'

By Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens' Voice

While he was in town on Friday, U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, met with representatives from Nanticoke City and Luzerne County Community College about securing money for downtown parking. The meeting, which included Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko, City Administrator Kenneth Johnson and LCCC interim President Thomas Leary, went well, city officials said. "Clearly there was a commitment by the congressman to facilitate the college moving downtown," Johnson said. "He ended the meeting by saying it was very productive." Parking is a key element in the college's planned move of its health sciences department into the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street. There was \$5.6 million allocated for a garage and on-street parking in a 2005 transportation funding act, but a bill currently in the Senate takes it away. Even if Kanjorski can't restore the \$5.6 million, he will try to get whatever he can for the project, Bushko said. Kanjorski will work with Republican Sen. Arlen Specter and Democratic Sen. Bob Casey, he said. The senators and congressman will also help the city do something about a \$1.9 million federal grant that has to be paid back if the Kanjorski Center is sold, Johnson said. It is critical to find funding quickly, since the college needs to move into the building by January 2009, Bushko said. "Everybody in the room knew how crucial timing is," Johnson said. "The congressman indicated first thing Monday when he gets back to the (Washington, D.C.) office he will work on the issues."

10/5/2007

Nanticoke yard sale features treasure hunt

Citywide event gives shoppers a chance to win one of four \$25 prizes.

slong@timesleader.com

Do you love antiques? Do you love finding unique, one-of-a-kind art pieces or furniture at reasonable prices? Well, don't miss Nanticoke's Citywide Yard Sale on Saturday. Shoppers could also win a little green to stuff in their own pockets. This fall the Nanticoke's Civic Pride Committee is also hosting a treasure-hunt game. By following written clues, shoppers can decipher the codes to find a yard sale on a particular street. Another set of clues will guide the shopper to the marked mystery item. If the shopper purchases the mystery item they win one of four \$25 prizes. "You never know what kind of surprises we are going to have," said committee member J.D. Verazin, who developed the treasure hunt idea. In its second year, the citywide yard sale allows residents to make some extra money while clearing out unwanted items and encouraging visitors from as far away as Shickshinny to visit Nanticoke. It also allows Nanticoke residents to meet other people living in the city as many locals also travel the streets during the citywide shopping event.

"It brings people into town to see what we have to offer," Verazin said. "It promotes community involvement and community pride." Committee members will pass out lists of the more than 200 homes across the city which registered to participate in Saturday's event at Patriot Park in downtown Nanticoke.

Residents who did not sign up for the sale can still participate by placing items in their front yards for sale. The lists will just help shoppers find the homes easier.

A Salvation Army truck will be parked near the Old Nanticoke Bridge on North Market Street at the former street department facility from 3 to 5 p.m. to accept gently worn clothing items or other items Nanticoke residents wish to donate to a good cause.

Shopping details...

What: Nanticoke Citywide Yard Sales

When: Saturday

Where: pick up maps and addresses of yard sales at Patriot Park, Broad and Market Streets

For more information: visit www.nanticokecity.com

10/4/2007

Nanticoke plans second citywide yard sale for Saturday

By Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens' Voice

The old saying goes that one person's trash is another's treasure. Nanticoke plans to take that to a new level this weekend.

The Nanticoke Civic Pride Committee has planned a city-wide yard sale Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., and the theme is "Treasure Hunt."

When you stop by Patriot Park to pick up a map showing the more than 200 people who are participating in the sale, you will also get a list of hints and clues. Follow them to find the four places around the city where secret "treasures" are waiting to be purchased. If you buy one, you win \$25.

Civic Pride Committee member J. D. Verazin came up with the idea for the second citywide yard sale of the year.

The first was on July 14.

"Hopes are we're going to have a bigger and better one next year, because plans are already in the making," Verazin said.

After Saturday's sale, a Salvation Army truck will be stationed near the Nanticoke bridge on Lower Broadway Street from 3 to 5 p.m. so residents can donate unsold items.

"That's a way for the community to help the Salvation Army and the Salvation Army to help the community," Verazin said.

The Salvation Army requests people bring only items that are usable or salvageable, he said. If the truck isn't at the spot, don't leave anything there, Verazin said.

10/4/2007

Nanticoke council urges restoration of funds

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City council members reiterated their support Wednesday for Luzerne County Community College's plans to move downtown, and made a public plea to U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, to restore funding for parking.

Luzerne County Community College is buying the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street for a health sciences center, but the building lacks parking.

In March, city officials adopted a plan drawn up by Facility Design and Development Ltd. It calls for 215 to 220 spaces in a parking garage, and an additional 100 to 150 spaces on the street to take care of downtown businesses and residents, councilman Brent Makarczyk said.

Kanjorski put \$5.6 million for a downtown parking garage into the federal transportation funding bill that became law in 2005. In February, and again in July, Kanjorski put provisions in new bills taking away the \$5.6 million for Nanticoke. The latest bill, HR 3248, is in the Senate.

City and college officials didn't learn the funding had been pulled until September. By then, many people had put a lot of work into bringing the college downtown, in hopes of a "way to kick-start, perhaps, a regional project," councilman James Litchkofski said.

"This is our best chance for revitalization, and I think it would be foolish to walk away from the plan," he said.

LCCC plans to occupy the Kanjorski Center by January 2009. Time is tight, Litchkofski said. If Kanjorski won't come through, city officials must find another way to get the money, he said. They believe it would be easiest if Kanjorski strikes the provision out of HR 3248 before it passes in the Senate.

"We implore Congressman Kanjorski to become the final piece of the puzzle," Makarczyk said. "We hope he can come down and be the saver (of the project)."

Mayor John Bushko, who met with Kanjorski two weeks ago, said he believes the Congressman is on board, but simply wants to do more research. It's frustrating because it's taking so long, Bushko said, but stressed he didn't think Kanjorski would ruin the project.

"We'll have a plan B, but let's not give up on our plan A," Bushko said.

In related business, council agreed to apply for state slot machine gaming funds on behalf of LCCC.

The \$8.6 million the college is requesting would be spread out over several years, City Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

He said the money would be used for LCCC's \$26 million master plan, which includes constructing new buildings and renovating existing ones.

In other business, council:

Approved Joseph Kordek as code enforcement officer at \$35,000 a year, to start in about two weeks. Kordek is zoning officer for Ashley and Sugar Notch boroughs.

Hired Amos Vanderhoff to fill a vacancy on the police department. He was a police officer in Warrior Run.

Under a new city policy, Vanderhoff and Kordek will have to pass medical exams before starting work.

"We have a lot of injuries, and we think we should cover our bases first, make sure people are fit before they take the job," Bushko said.

10/4/2007

Nanticoke High School homecoming: It truly was a night fit for a queen

By Pam Urbanski - Nanticoke Area Notes

Greater Nanticoke Area Junior-Senior High School has a new queen.

Miss GNA Melanie Laird and her court were crowned during homecoming festivities. Prior to the homecoming game students held a parade and bonfire.

"It really was a nice event for our students," said Principal Mary Ann Jarolen.

"It was a community event. The Nanticoke Police and Fire Departments led the parade, and the fire department did a great job in controlling the bonfire, making sure it burned properly. We had a nice crowd along the parade route," she said.

The GNA marching band provided the music and students who participate in fall sports were introduced during the bonfire.

Prior to the football game, Miss GNA and her court arrived in style at the stadium, riding in some cool cars. Upon arrival, they were greeted by members of the 109th National Guard who escorted them to the center of the field where they were introduced to families, friends and fellow students who elected them.

Homecoming queen Melanie Laird she is the daughter of Sarah and Bob Laird. She is a member of the volleyball and swim teams. She is also a member of the National Honor Society and the French Club. Her plans are to study nutrition.

Her court, in alphabetical order, is as follows:

Kaitlin Bowalick, daughter of Greg and Trish Bowalick. She is a member of the yearbook staff, student council and National Honor Society. She is named in Who's Who among American High School seniors and the National Honor Roll. She is a member of the soccer and basketball teams.

Keira Lohman, daughter of Kevin and Doreen Lohman, is a member of the basketball, volleyball and track teams. She excels academically as well as a member of the National Honor Society, National Honor Roll and Who's Who Among American High School Students.

Leigh Ann Rentko, daughter of Karen and Jack Rentko, is a three-letter winner in field hockey and basketball and a two-letter winner in soccer and track. She also was named second team all-scholastic for basketball and all-state in basketball and track. She is a member of student council and Who's Who among American High School Students.

Rachel Zerfoss, daughter of Alan and Janice Zerfoss, is a three-letter varsity winner in field hockey and cross-country and a two-year varsity letter winner in soccer and track. She is a member of Majestic X Field Hockey club. She has been class treasurer for the past 3 years and is also a member of Who's Who among American High School Students and the National Honor Society.

Fall festival in Newport Twp.

The Newport Township Community Organization's fourth annual fall festival will be held Saturday from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. at Holy Child Grove in Sheatown. Festival will feature ethnic and American food, as well as a bake sale and a chili cook-off. Entertainment will be provided by the David Blight Dancers and students from Front and Center Music Company. The band Nameless will perform from 2 to 4 p.m.

Children's activities include face painting, a free hayride, an art contest, a moonwalk and a talk and demonstration by State Police Trooper Martin Connors from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

O'Hara's Orchards will sell 6 to 8 varieties of apples and sliced caramel apples. Popcorn also will be sold by Cub Scout Pack 430 of Glen Lyon.

City-wide yard sale

The Civic Pride Committee is holding a fall, city-wide yard sale Saturday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. An added feature is a treasure hunt where participants have a chance to win \$25. Committee member J.D. Verazin came up with the idea, which will list clues to street names in town. Residents of Honey Pot and Hanover section of Nanticoke also are participating. Stop at Patriot Park for a map of the city. For more information, call 735-2800.

Chinese auction at St. Stan's

St. Stanislaus Church will hold its annual Chinese auction Sunday. Doors open at 11 a.m. and auction begins at 1 p.m., at the school hall on West Church Street. Prize include gift certificates and theme baskets. For information, call 735-4833.

BBQ at Holy Child

Holy Child Parish is holding its annual chicken barbecue Sunday from noon to 3 p.m. in the parish dining room on Newport Street in Sheatown. Cost is \$8. For information, call Michele at 735-8909.

10/4/2007

PennDOT misspells street signs

Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens' Voice

Pennsylvania Department of Transportation knocked the "L" out of Kosciuszko Street in Nanticoke Wednesday morning.

As part of a complete overhaul of the intersection of Kosciuszko and Main streets, PennDOT put up new street signs. And for about an hour, Kosciuszko became "Koscluszko" and Jefkin was "Jifkin."

"As soon as they went up, we saw," PennDOT Project Manager Jim Grabowski said.

PennDOT removed the signs shortly afterwards and sent them back to the printer. It won't cost anything to have them redone, since it was a printer's error, he said.

However, although Kosciuszko Street will be properly spelled, Jifkin Street will stay the same, Grabowski said.

"Actually, 'Jifkin' is right. The blue sign is wrong," he said. "I'm from Nanticoke, and when I saw the 'Jefkin' sign down there, I was surprised they kept it up."

Does PennDOT often deal with misspelled signs?

"Not really. For the amount of signs we put up, no. And it's not a big deal to change it," Grabowski said.

Work at the intersection, which has been going on since April, is expected to wrap up by the end of next week.

Permanent traffic signals will be unveiled Thursday, with different timing on the lights to improve traffic flow, Grabowski said. Sidewalks need to be fixed in two places, the correctly-spelled signs have to go up, and some important manhole and storm drain work will be done, he said.

"People may be complaining when we dig up the road we just paved, but we found a drainage system underground that wasn't on the plans," Grabowski said.

10/4/2007

Nanticoke seeks casino tax funds for LCCC

slong@timesleader.com

The city is seeking \$9.6 million in casino taxes from the state Department of Community and Economic Development to help Luzerne County Community College relocate its culinary arts and health sciences program downtown.

Council members during Wednesday night's meeting unanimously approved allowing the city to apply for the funds on behalf of the city and college. It might be tough for the city and college through their partnership to actually win a portion of the money because several cities across the county are seeking a portion of the money. Communities surrounding the Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs in Plains Township get top priority for the casino tax funds.

Moving two of the college's largest and most popular academic programs downtown would not only provide an economic boost to Nanticoke, but the entire county, City Administration Ken Johnson said. He believes that means there is a good possibility they could be approved.

Councilman James Litchkoski said he was disappointed and hurt when he learned the \$5.6 million in federal transportation funds originally designated for a parking garage in downtown was pulled by U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke. The congressman redirected the money into the Hotel Sterling project in Wilkes-Barre.

"It is the way to kick-start perhaps the regional economy," Litchkoski said. "This is our best chance at revitalization. I think it would be foolish for us to walk away from this plan. We need this to come to fruition."

College officials originally applied for the money first, but were told they could resubmit the application if the city sponsored it, Johnson said.

Community and Economic Development money assists cities and counties in funding projects designed to spur economic development, helping add new jobs and tax revenue.

Community college officials couldn't apply for the money on their own because they are not a city.

10/3/2007

Nanticoke councilmen plan to make their points

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke councilmen, upset about the possible loss of \$5.6 million in federal money and frustrated at delays in restoring it, plan to make their feelings known at tonight's council meeting.

The point they say they want to get across is that if U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, supports his hometown and plans to bring Luzerne County Community College downtown, he will allow the city and college to start using the money immediately.

"We're pleading with him not to take the money away," Councilman Brent Makarczyk said. "We're ready to move, we're ready to start drawing down. Don't take the rug out from underneath us."

The \$5.6 million, granted to Nanticoke in a 2005 federal law, was removed by Kanjorski in a bill passed by the House of Representatives in February. When it was restored in the Senate in June, it was removed again in a new House bill in July. That bill is in the Senate.

The money is to make improvements to Main Street and help build a parking garage for the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street, which LCCC is buying to renovate into a health sciences center. City officials call it the biggest chance for downtown revitalization in decades.

Kanjorski announced he would work with city and college officials to get money for the parking garage, but does not mention returning the \$5.6 million, the councilmen say.

"We don't want to find an area for new funding down the road. Just give us what you said you were going to give us," Makarczyk said.

"From my understanding, the money is still there."

Federal authorities confirmed that the \$5.6 million is available for Nanticoke to start spending immediately, unless Kanjorski persists in taking it away and giving \$3 million to Wilkes-Barre and \$2 million to Lackawanna County, according to council's list of 25 points regarding the situation.

Councilman James Litchkofski categorized the list as "talking points, for the public record," to be read at tonight's council meeting.

Other issues the councilmen outline in the list include:

Kanjorski wants to build a larger parking garage by adding a third or fourth deck, which would increase costs by \$4 million "and essentially kill the project."

Kanjorski's recent requests for additional information and desire to expand the project "appear to be nothing more than delay tactics that will only precipitate the loss of federal funding."

Kanjorski said in 2006 that the \$5.6 million could be used for the parking garage project when it had a different developer, so "Why is the \$5.6 million no longer OK for the LCCC project?"

If Kanjorski doesn't want to cooperate in returning the \$5.6 million, council will "respectfully ask him not to impede the project any further," the document states.

"I believe bringing LCCC downtown, the streetscaping and so forth, is what is right for the city. This isn't something that was pulled out of the air, this isn't some slapdash idea. This is something that was researched, that was backed up by various studies," Litchkofski said. "I am frustrated, and I am at a loss as to why this money can't come to Nanticoke."

9/29/2007

Specter pledges to work with Kanjorski on regaining LCCC funds

By dallabaugh@citizensvoice.com

U.S. Sen. Arlen Specter said he would work with U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, to try to regain federal funds for Luzerne County Community College's expansion into downtown Nanticoke.

"They (federal funds) are hard to find, but it is a necessary project to build that facility so development can go forward," Specter said during a visit to the college on Friday.

The college is buying the Kanjorski Center in downtown Nanticoke for a health sciences center, slated to open in January 2009. Kanjorski earmarked \$5.6 million in a 2005 transportation funding bill for a parking garage and improvements to East Main Street, such as new streetlights. City officials say more parking and street improvements are crucial for LCCC's plans.

A bill passed in the House that is currently in the Senate takes the \$5.6 million away from Nanticoke and gives \$3 million to Hotel Sterling in Wilkes-Barre. Specter said the \$5.6 million was not final, but it was on the books.

"When the allocation was made, it came through Congressman Paul Kanjorski's office. When he made a shift, I respect that," Specter said. The senator said he spoke Friday morning to Kanjorski, who stressed the importance of getting funding for the project in downtown Nanticoke.

"I think it is very important to move ahead there with the parking area so the college can be developed," Specter said.

Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko, who attended the event at LCCC on Friday, also spoke of the importance of obtaining federal funds for the parking garage and streetscape improvements.

"I thought we were going to get the money back," Bushko said. "We might have to expand on the garage. It might be too small. I might ask for more money."

Members of the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority, which manages the Kanjorski Center, believe the parking garage might be more expensive than anticipated. Authority chairman previously said that it averages \$2,200 a spot to build a parking facility.

Elizabeth Skrapits, staff writer, contributed to this report.

9/25/2007

Kanjorski Center sale almost complete

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Luzerne County Community College is completing plans to buy the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street

"The sale is going through. It's almost done," Mayor John Bushko told the General Municipal Authority, which manages the building.

That's why getting back \$5.6 million in federal funding to build a parking garage for the Kanjorski Center and make other improvements downtown is more important than ever, authority members say.

The college wants to use the Kanjorski Center as a health sciences center. A final price and terms are being worked out, according to attorney Joe Lach, who is providing legal aid to the authority. The municipal authority initially considered leasing the Kanjorski Center to LCCC, because a \$1.9 million federal Economic Development Agency grant used to construct it would have to be paid back if the building is sold.

U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski promised to help the city with the EDA grant situation and assist in returning the \$5.6 million, Bushko said.

In the federal transportation funding bill President Bush signed into law in August 2005, Kanjorski included \$5.6 million for a parking

garage for the Kanjorski Center.

In a bill passed in the U.S. House in February, Kanjorski removed the money for Nanticoke. Instead, he gave \$3 million to Wilkes-Barre for the Hotel Sterling renovation. The provision taking the money away from Nanticoke was stricken out in Senate committee in June. The money was re-routed again to Wilkes-Barre in a new bill passed in the House on July 31. That bill is still in the Senate.

"Technically, a phone call from the Congressman to the Senate can put the money back," municipal authority chairman Ron Kamowski said.

If Kanjorski can't get the original \$5.6 million back, he will try to get the city money some other way, Bushko said.

Kanjorski previously told Bushko he re-assigned the federal funds because he didn't think the city would use them. The Congressman stated he did not know until recently LCCC planned to buy the Kanjorski Center.

Last week, Kanjorski met with Bushko, LCCC Interim President Thomas Leary, and Nanticoke administrator Kenneth Johnson about the project. Bushko said Kanjorski's aide, Walter Sokolowski - who is on Nanticoke's redevelopment authority board - told him the city should know in about two weeks whether the \$5.6 million is reinstated.

The college has to occupy the Kanjorski Center by January 2009, Kamowski said. LCCC's timetable is "tight, very tight," Bushko said. He said it will cost the college almost \$8 million for modifications and additions.

9/25/2007

Homecoming queen is grandfather's hero - Citizens' Voice

I've been blessed with seven grandchildren, who have all overcome adversity and become heroes to me. One, Melanie Laird, has just experienced the honor of being elected homecoming queen at Greater Nanticoke Area.

Melanie lives in Pond Hill with parents Bob and Sarah Laird and sister Elisa. When her dad was in the Navy and Melanie was one day old, she underwent surgery at UCLA because one lung had not developed properly. No one knew how physically active she would be able to be in the future.

In junior high she began to play on the volleyball team. However, one shoulder began to get lower and her back started to curve; her ribs were growing together.

More surgery was required. After recuperating, she joined the swim team, but the slight scoliosis became more pronounced. An assessment at Shriner's Hospital in Philadelphia found that she would need rods in her back.

She recovered with few setbacks and was even able to resume her sports activities.

As an honor student planning on college and a kind, friendly person who interacts well with others of all ages, this Pond Hill resident well deserves being chosen GNA homecoming queen and being nominated as my everyday hero.

9/22/2007

Nanticoke revises loan request to gain time from state

By slong@timesleader.com

City Council voted unanimously Wednesday to revise a loan request that would give the city six more months to repay a \$200,000 loan to the state Department of Community and Economic Development.

The loan originally was scheduled to be repaid by June 2008. Depending on the city's cash flow, the state should release the money within the next month.

While the city's cash flow is "not so good," it has enough to continue handling day-to-day operations, said Councilman Bernie Norieka, the finance director.

"All the city employees will be collecting their checks," Norieka said. "There will be no interruption of services."

City officials originally requested the zero-interest loan in July and a public hearing was held in August to determine if Nanticoke was eligible to receive the money.

"We really think the state is going to give us the money. It's in their best interests," Pennsylvania Economy League Executive Director Gerald Cross said.

The Nanticoke Municipal Authority received another \$15,000 loan from the city after officials unanimously voted to grant the loan so the authority can pay its monthly expenses, including the maintenance of the Kanjorski Center. This is the third loan the authority has received from the cash-strapped city.

The authority is required to repay the loan to the city, with interest, after the building is sold to Luzerne County Community College.

In other business, council approved a 2008 budgetary document required by the state to fund the city's pension funds.

Mayor John Bushko and City Administrator Kenneth Johnson did not attend the meeting. They were in Washington, D.C., on business

9/20/2007

Nanticoke officials meet with Kanjorski to restore funds

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

They gave it the old college try, and came back optimistic new college funding could be restored.

Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko, City Administrator Kenneth Johnson and Luzerne County Community College Interim President Thomas Leary traveled to Washington, D.C., Wednesday to confer with U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, about \$5.6 million in federal money

taken from the city and given to Wilkes-Barre.

The \$5.6 million, designated in the federal transportation funding bill President Bush signed into law in 2005, is crucial for Nanticoke's redevelopment and municipal authorities to build a parking garage for the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street.

LCCC plans to buy the authority-owned building to transform it into a health sciences center. The college's presence downtown is a key factor in revitalization. City officials feared loss of the \$5.6 million and their subsequent inability to provide sufficient parking could scuttle the deal.

The meeting in Kanjorski's office started at 1 p.m. and ended after 5 p.m. It concluded with "a commitment on all sides to work cooperatively for the benefit of Nanticoke and LCCC," according to a statement from Kanjorski.

"As a long-time supporter of LCCC, I look forward to continuing to work with Mr. Leary and city officials to bring academic programs of the college downtown," Kanjorski stated.

"I believe we had a very productive meeting with the Congressman and his staff," Leary said as he drove back from Washington with Bushko and Johnson. "I remain very optimistic that this partnership between the college and the city of Nanticoke will be accomplished with the Congressman's assistance."

"I think things went well," Johnson agreed.

Bushko said Kanjorski asked for more information, such as cost estimates, so he will be more comfortable with the project. City officials will get together whatever Kanjorski needs, Bushko said.

"When he goes to bat for us, he wants to know we're all on the same page," Bushko said.

It might be too late for Kanjorski to amend the proposed legislation that takes funding away from Nanticoke, because it is currently in the Senate awaiting passage. U.S. Senators Arlen Specter and Bob Casey can still make changes to the bill, or Kanjorski could get funding for Nanticoke by a different route.

On February 27, H.R. 1195, which amended the act President Bush signed into law in 2005, was introduced in the House of Representatives. It took away the \$5.6 million for Nanticoke. Instead, Wilkes-Barre was to get \$3 million for parking for the Hotel Sterling restoration project. H.R. 1195 was passed in the House and sent to the Senate on March 27.

The Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works passed H.R. 1195 during its June 6 meeting. The committee struck the provision giving the \$3 million to Wilkes-Barre, effectively restoring the original \$5.6 million earmark for Nanticoke.

However, on July 31, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 3248, which puts the amendment giving money to Wilkes-Barre instead of Nanticoke back in the transportation bill. The new bill went to the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works on Aug. 3.

"H.R. 3248 has been passed by the House, according to our staff, and therefore, if the Senate were to pass it as it is now, it would go to the President for his signature," said Pete Rafle, Communications Director for the Committee on Environment and Public Works. "It can be amended, but it would have to be amended in the Senate."

Leary and Bushko are also asking the Congressman for help in getting the federal Economic Development Agency to forgive a \$1.9 million loan used to build the Kanjorski Center. The loan has to be paid back if the building is sold before a certain date.

9/20/2007

Nanticoke talks with Kanjo over parking plan 'positive'

slong@timesleader.com

Seeking federal funding to build a parking structure in downtown Nanticoke, Luzerne County Community College and Nanticoke city officials meet with U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski for several hours Wednesday at his Washington, D.C., office.

Nanticoke City Administrator Kenneth Johnson described the meeting as a "very positive" and productive discussion to update Kanjorski on the progress of the plan allowing the college to purchase the four-story Kanjorski building.

"He wants some more conscious and detailed information about downtown," Johnson said noting the city would get the congressman the information quickly.

Kanjorski expressed desire to continue working with the city and college to help revitalize the South Valley community.

LCCC is planning to purchase the Kanjorski Center to house its health sciences program and purchase the Nanticoke Senior Citizens Center to house the culinary arts program. Both are scheduled to be opened in 2009.

However, a parking facility must be built to allow enough space for college students and visitors to park.

The \$5.6 million originally allocated for the project was rerouted by Kanjorski for the Sterling project in Wilkes-Barre.

Kanjorski said he diverted the funds because he did not think Nanticoke wanted a downtown parking structure.

City officials said they always wanted a parking facility, but wanted one that was not as elaborate or expensive as the one the congressman favored.

9/20/2007

Jenna Butzek forgoes her scissors to pursue a modeling career

By Pamela Urbanski - Nanticoke Area Notes

I was driving up Main Street the other day when I noticed a special sign congratulating Nanticoke resident Jenna Butzek on receiving a modeling contract.

One might think that a young lady who receives such an honor probably has been working very hard and very long. Think again.

This is a success story about a talented young lady that you don't hear very often. Jenna is a graduate of Nanticoke Area Junior-Senior

High School and a student at Empire Beauty School in Moosic. "I always have been interested in doing that kind of work," Jenna said. But she thought she might want to focus more on hair and makeup so she decided to talk with family friend Joann Danko. Joann, who is a former Nanticoke resident, is the assistant director for Accents II, a select talent and model agency. Jerry Wildes is the director. Joann trains and grooms individuals with the hopes of getting them into the entertainment business. Personal development is another area in which she helps young people gain confidence. "I love what I do," Joann said. She has been dedicated to this profession for close to a dozen years. In talking to her you can tell she has great enthusiasm and is passionate about her work. She has sent people all over the world.

"When Jenna came to see me, it had been a while since I last saw her. She had grown into a beautiful young lady. We talked about her interests and I encouraged her to attend some of our sessions," Joann said. After only two sessions, Joann entered Jenna into convention class. "It usually takes about two years for someone to enter into a convention, but I knew immediately that Jenna had a lot going for her," she said.

They were off to New York City and the INTA, the largest modeling convention in the world, at the Hilton Hotel.

Jenna would compete against more than 7,000 young ladies for the right to model and/or act.

"After talking with some of the parents and realizing how long their sons/daughters were preparing for something like this, I thought to myself, what are we doing here," said Nancy Butzek, Jenna's mom.

Jenna entered the fitness model category. She modeled and acted for the judges. They really liked what they saw. So much so that she won first place in the swimsuit competition. Yep, she took home top honors after defeating some 6,500 girls. But she wasn't done yet. She took third place in the TV/commercial category and she finished second place overall for fitness model of the year.

Jenna just blew everybody away. She is just amazing. For Jenna it was a total shock. "I really wasn't expecting anything to come of this. I thought it would just be fun and a good experience," Jenna said.

She was so sure an award was out of the question, she wore sweatpants, flip-flops and a T-shirt to the awards ceremony. "I was so embarrassed I had to go up on stage like that. But I made up for it because on the last night everyone attended a ball and everyone was dressed formally. That's when I received the fitness model of the year award. I felt a little better," Jenna said.

Following that competition, Jenna received 13 callbacks, seven for modeling and six for acting. She has signed a major modeling contract with MMG Talent in New York City and already has had an all-night shoot for the movie "Consent." "That was really difficult because we worked from 6:30 p.m. to 6:30 a.m.," she said.

You can get a glimpse of Jenna by checking out the Accents II billboard across from Sam's Club in Wilkes-Barre Township.

Jenna is the daughter of Nancy and John Butzek.

Congratulations and good luck Jenna!

Mystery dinner theater set

If you're looking for something different to do next weekend, I have the perfect event for you.

The Nanticoke Special Care Auxiliary is hosting a mystery dinner theater Saturday, Sept. 29, at 6 p.m. at Alden Manor. Bracken Theater Group will perform as those eating dinner get to figure out who dunnit.

"I enjoy volunteering because it's something we can do as a group to help our patients," said auxiliary member Claire Cohen. Last year, the auxiliary donated \$10,000 to the hospital for patient care and new equipment. Proceeds will benefit patients at Special Care Hospital on Washington Street. Tickets are \$35 and can be purchased at the door or by calling Claire at 735-6919 or Mary at 735-2193.

Golomki and haluski sale

St. Mary's Catholic Women's Council will hold a golomki and haluski sale Wednesday from 4 to 6 p.m. in the Head Start School basement on South Hanover Street. Cost is golomki is \$1.50 each and haluski is \$3 per container. There will be no advance orders.

9/17/2007

Sterling project gets Nanticoke cash

U.S. Rep. Kanjorski said inaction by Nanticoke officials prompted him to redirect \$5.6M to Wilkes-Barre.

slong@timesleader.com

Federal funds totaling \$5.6 million that were allocated for a major Nanticoke redevelopment project have been diverted to Wilkes-Barre's Sterling Hotel project because local officials failed to take action, U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski said Friday.

Originally, the money was intended to pay the bulk of the construction costs of a \$7 million parking garage on East Main Street.

Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, said he chose to "redirect these funds" to other projects within his district because he did not want to lose the money.

"I did not want the city of Nanticoke to lose ... \$6 million," he said.

But, state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, insists that the \$5.6 million in federal highway bill funding is still available to the city.

Officials with the city, the Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority and the Nanticoke Municipal Authority were considering a plan promoted by the South Valley Partnership that included Luzerne County Community College moving its culinary arts and health sciences program into the downtown when Kanjorski granted requests from developers seeking funding to build a parking garage and complete phase one of the Sterling Hotel renovations in Wilkes-Barre.

The partnership's plan would include landscaping, new sidewalks, new lighting, on-street parking, retail space throughout several streets in downtown Nanticoke and a parking lot adjacent to the Kanjorski Center.

Kanjorski claims he was never notified of the college's plan to move into the downtown until after reading papers regarding the Sept. 4 press conference during which officials announced formal plans to move the college's two programs downtown.

"As a longtime supporter of LCCC, I applaud any effort to draw students into downtown Nanticoke," Kanjorski said.

Former city councilman William O'Malley said Walter D. Sokolowski, a Kanjorski staff member, is a member of Nanticoke's Redevelopment Authority board and should have informed Kanjorski about the college's plans.

Kanjorski said he knew the city was planning the street renovation project, but thought the \$5.6 million could not be used because of restrictions on the funds.

But, Yudichak said state Department of Transportation officials confirmed the federal money could be used to pay for the project. He's asking Kanjorski to work with U.S. Sens. Robert P. Casey, D-Scranton, and Arlen Specter, R-Philadelphia, to ensure that the funds are reverted back to their original designation before the bill is sent to President Bush for his signature.

"We should not be in a position where we are pitting one community against another. We have a viable product that will generate new energy and new tone for the South Valley," Yudichak said.

He believes the Sterling Hotel developers will not lose any money for their project because Kanjorski could allocate more money toward that project before Bush signs the bill.

Kanjorski and Yudichak expressed desires to work together with other officials to ensure funding is found to build a parking garage so college students, teachers and visitors will have parking spaces accessible to the Kanjorski Center and new culinary arts institute.

"If you would like me to help you pursue funds for parking I think I can again be helpful there, but it is essential that I know the money will be spent," Kanjorski said.

9/15/2007

Nanticoke officials hope Kanjorski will help get federal funds back

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, defended his decision to take \$5.6 million in federal transportation funding away from Nanticoke, saying he didn't want to lose it for his district.

City officials say they definitely planned to use the money for a crucial project - and hope Kanjorski can help them get it back.

In the federal transportation funding bill President Bush signed into law in August 2005, Kanjorski included \$5.6 million for a parking garage and street improvements in downtown Nanticoke.

In February, Kanjorski put an amendment in a new bill taking the \$5.6 million away. Instead, he opted to give Wilkes-Barre City \$3 million for parking at the Hotel Sterling and Irem Temple.

The bill to amend the federal transportation act, House Resolution 1195, passed in the U.S. House of Representatives in March and is now in committee in the U.S. Senate.

No \$5.6 million means Nanticoke can't build a parking garage for the Kanjorski Center. Luzerne County Community College plans to use it for a health sciences center and also build a culinary arts institute further down on East Main Street, a move city, county and state officials hope kicks off South Valley revitalization.

"It may jeopardize the sale of the Kanjorski Center if we can't provide parking," Nanticoke Municipal Authority member Dennis Butler said. "That would have changed everybody's plans. Why weren't we notified he was taking it until now?"

In a letter to Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko dated Friday, Kanjorski said he is committed to doing whatever he can to help the city and LCCC, but it is essential that he knows the money will be spent.

"I'm trying to get Nanticoke back on track," Kanjorski said. "I want people to know there could never be a personal or political conflict that interferes with the betterment of Nanticoke."

Kanjorski said he cut the \$5.6 million because at a July 2006 meeting of the redevelopment authority - which owns the Kanjorski Center; the municipal authority manages it - former councilman William O'Malley said the mayor and council opposed building a parking garage for the center.

"I took action to reassign the money, because I didn't want it lost," Kanjorski said. "I had requests from three or four cities, the most pressing of which was Wilkes-Barre."

Nanticoke officials always wanted more parking for the Kanjorski Center, O'Malley said. What they opposed was the original plan for a garage that was too big and expensive.

"He took one portion there out of context and said we weren't in favor of the parking garage. That's true: we weren't in favor of a \$7 million, 400-car garage. But at the same meeting, we had plans for another one that made more sense," O'Malley said.

"At no time did anybody say we weren't doing a parking garage," Butler said. "We debated on the size of the parking garage, not on the necessity of having one."

At that time, the Kanjorski Center had been mostly vacant for two years and dependent on a fiscally distressed city, said state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke.

"They weren't saying no, they were saying 'let's find a tenant, let's find a project that is sustainable, that will lead to greater economic development in the downtown,' and we have that," Yudichak said.

City officials wanted to follow the South Valley regional plan that called for not only a parking garage, but on-street parking, new streetlights and sidewalks, and other improvements, O'Malley said.

Kanjorski said he was unaware LCCC wanted to buy the Kanjorski Center until he was invited to a recent press conference, which he did not attend.

"I was in a meeting where Kanjorski's top aide, Wally Sokolowski (a member of the redevelopment authority) sat right next to me, and we discussed the necessity of parking," said municipal authority chairman Ron Kamowski.

"I cannot understand that the congressman was not aware we were trying to strike up a deal with LCCC that would enable us to match the \$5.6 million he got us, and to bring a continually renewable source of business to the downtown area," he said.

Kanjorski said he would seek money for the parking garage project, after he is briefed on the specifics.

"I'm very pleased the congressman is willing to help us, to restore that \$5.6 million that is currently law," said Yudichak. "This money has been committed to Nanticoke, it's in the current law. All we're saying is, let the law stand."

Claire Schechter, assistant managing editor, contributed to this report.

9/14/2007

Revitalization money may be cut

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The possible loss of federal funding puts the cornerstone of Nanticoke's downtown revitalization project in jeopardy, although it could help prop up an important Wilkes-Barre City project.

In the federal transportation funding bill passed in August 2005, U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, included \$5.6 million to build a parking garage for the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street in Nanticoke.

City, county and state officials, confident funds were in place to remedy the parking problem at the office building, moved forward with plans to bring Luzerne County Community College into it - the centerpiece of downtown revitalization. Plans were drawn up for a two-story parking deck with a restaurant and shops in front, to be built on the vacant lot next to the Kanjorski Center.

What local officials didn't know until this week was in February Kanjorski had the bill amended to pull the \$5.6 million for Nanticoke, cut it to \$3 million, and reassign it to parking and street improvements at the Wilkes-Barre Sterling Hotel down River, Market or Franklin streets as far as the Irem Temple.

"No one was aware of this action," said state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke. "Perhaps there was some misunderstanding that we can clear up."

The amendment to the transportation bill, House Resolution 1195, passed in the U.S. House of Representatives in March and is in committee in the U.S. Senate.

Luzerne County Commissioner Greg Skrepenak believes Nanticoke lost the money because Kanjorski and Yudichak are political adversaries. The chairman of the county commissioners pointed the finger of blame directly at the veteran congressman.

"I have nothing against Paul," Skrepenak said. "I work well with Paul and I work well with John, but when you look at this, it just doesn't add up. This is what gives politicians a bad rep. I think if a project is viable for the community and the big picture, you put personal feelings aside and do the right thing."

Kanjorski did not respond to messages left with his office and chief of staff Thursday.

Municipal and redevelopment authority members knew the Kanjorski Center needed more parking, either a lot or garage, to make it marketable.

"What type of parking we were going to put in was up in the air," said Ron Kamowski, chairman of the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority, which is responsible for maintaining the building. "Part of the (\$5.6 million) was always geared towards parking. We were just trying to spread out the funds to allow us to also beautify the downtown."

Redevelopment authority member Walter Sokolowski, who works in Kanjorski's Wilkes-Barre office, could not be reached for comment. LCCC officials recently announced the college planned to turn the Kanjorski Center, mostly vacant since October 2005, into a state-of-the-art health sciences center. The college also plans to build a culinary arts center at Market and Main streets. City, county and state officials hoped the college's presence downtown would provide a catalyst for revitalization of the entire South Valley.

"If we can't give LCCC parking, it will definitely become an issue with the sale," Kamowski said.

"I don't want to see everything go up in smoke," Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko said. "If we lose it, we'll do something, I'm sure. But I don't think we can come up with \$3 million for a parking garage. And there's not enough room for surface parking."

LCCC Interim President Thomas Leary is optimistic.

"I have not had any conversation with the congressman or his office, and based on the congressman's record, I would fully expect he would support this important project that will benefit the citizens of Nanticoke and the students of Luzerne County Community College," Leary said.

Yudichak said he worked with college, county and other local officials to put together a letter to Kanjorski, asking him to reconsider and lend his support to the Nanticoke project.

The Citizens' Voice obtained a draft copy of the letter. It requests the presence of Kanjorski and U.S. Sens. Arlen Specter and Bob Casey at a meeting - date unspecified - to review the project in detail.

Skrepenak said he supports the draft letter to Kanjorski. Skrepenak was disappointed he didn't learn the money for Nanticoke was yanked from the bill until recently.

Skrepenak insisted his stance should not be interpreted to mean the two projects in Wilkes-Barre are not worthy of federal funding.

Nanticoke has been languishing, and bringing the college downtown would help breathe new life into the city, he said.

"The focus has been on Wilkes-Barre for a while, and I certainly believe Wilkes-Barre has a come a long way," Skrepenak said. "Wilkes-Barre is the county seat and needs a lot of attention. However, Nanticoke and the South Valley need a shot in the arm. This project helps the community college and benefits Nanticoke's economy. The county has been supportive and the state legislature has been supportive. We

thought Paul was too."

Todd Vonderheid, president and CEO of the Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber of Business and Industry, declined to discuss the funding situation.

James Conmy, staff writer, contributed to this report.

9/10/2007

Pope John Paul II School's book sale ends today

Event is an attempt to empty the library, which will be used by the Nanticoke Food Pantry.

By sdelazio@timesleader.com

Another page has turned for Pope John Paul II School.

Since Saturday, Nanticoke's only Catholic school, closed recently by the Diocese of Scranton, has been selling the contents of its library to book lovers. The sale will conclude today.

"We have a big variety of books, from encyclopedias to religious," said Alice Pawlowski, a Pope John Paul II graduate and book sale volunteer. "We have a big variety of books, not only children's, and people should take advantage of it."

Sale organizer Bill Borysewicz, youth director of Holy Trinity Church in Nanticoke and former music teacher at Pope John Paul II, said the sale comes as a final farewell to the longtime Catholic school, which was formed when three Catholic grade schools in Nanticoke closed and Pope John Paul II opened in 1982.

Once the library's contents are removed, the area, along with another room on the first floor, will become the Nanticoke Food Pantry, run by St. Stanislaus Church, around late October.

The rest of the building, including the classrooms, will be used as a CCD center for the churches, under the leadership of Pastor Jim Nash, in just two weeks.

"All the money raised at the book sale will be put right back into the school," Borysewicz said, citing that since the closure of several Catholic schools in the area, all are in debt to the diocese in some way. "I realized the books would never be used again and decided to bring up the idea of having a book sale," Borysewicz said.

Borysewicz said there are nearly 2,000 books in the library and thought the sale would have a better turnout. He expects that in the near future there will be another sale in an attempt to clear out the library for the food pantry.

"Are we going to have to trash (the rest of the books), will someone want them for something? I just don't know what will happen," Borysewicz said. "This is very sentimental for a lot of people, since a lot of the parishioners came to school here."

Gloria Eget, a visiting nurse from Nanticoke, said she stopped by the book sale to pick up some Bibles for her clients. "A lot of them don't have one, so I thought I'd come and buy them one."

Others, such as Phyllis Warren, also of Nanticoke, saw an announcement in the church's weekly bulletin about the sale and decided to purchase a few religious books for the Lighthouse Worship Center in Nanticoke.

The center will open a library soon, Warren said, and she wanted to donate materials to be used there, along with the center's Bible study group, and to be available for members of the church.

"One school closes, and another opens," Warren said. "It's sad to see Pope John Paul close, but that's the way the Lord works. It's his doing."

Borysewicz said once the books are either sold or gone from the library, the shelves will be sold, too. "We got a lot of questions about the religious figurines and crosses in the school building, but we're going to keep them for the CCD center.

"A lot of people are getting used to the fact that Pope John Paul has closed, and just wanted to come to the library to take home a memory."

If you go

Where: 518 S. Hanover St. – Pope John Paul II School library

When: Today, from noon to 3 p.m.

Prices are:

10 cents-25 cents for softcover books

50 cents-\$1 for hardcover books

\$3 for a set of encyclopedias

Watch for another book sale at the school in the near future.

9/9/2007

Officials say LCCC's plans for Kanjorski Center are healthy for Nanticoke

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Luzerne County Community College's plans to take over the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street should help make Nanticoke a healthy community - literally and figuratively.

Local and state officials believe the college's adaptation of the Kanjorski Center into a health sciences center and the creation of its culinary

arts institute at Market and Main streets will bring economic health to the ailing downtown by attracting new businesses and bringing more potential customers to existing ones.

By bringing the health sciences department - one of the college's largest - downtown, LCCC will be able to provide many expanded or new health care services and educational opportunities to city and county residents, from children to seniors, at little or no cost.

"It has a positive impact on just about every group in the city, including students, business people, senior citizens, and high school students who will be graduating," said LCCC Interim President Thomas Leary. "I don't think there are any real limitations on how these facilities will enhance the community."

Engaging residents will be a priority, according to Dr. Dana Clark, dean of nursing and health sciences at LCCC. She hopes to meet with community service groups within the next few months, as well as form an advisory committee made up of area residents.

The college already provides public services such as health fairs and blood pressure screenings at places like senior centers and grocery stores, but will have the opportunity to do more.

The Kanjorski Center is near four senior high-rise apartment complexes. Nanticoke Villa at Main and Walnut streets and Nanticoke Housing Authority owned Oplinger Towers at 270 E. Main St. are right down the street. Housing Authority owned Park Towers at 1 E. Green St., and Nanticoke Towers, 100 Nanticoke Ave., are a few blocks away.

"We are going to be working with the Agency on Aging, have discussions about some partnership events," Clark said. "I think it's going to be very, very helpful for seniors."

LCCC has a clinic that provides tooth cleaning, exams and other dental care to children and adults at reduced costs, Clark said. The new dental facility on the first floor of the Kanjorski Center will have additional dental chairs and state-of-the-art equipment.

Other things the college is planning include:

- A health care library that is accessible to seniors.
An expanded speakers' bureau - one already exists, under the directorship of Joseph Grilli - to give lectures and health workshops.
Public educational resources on alcohol, drug and gambling addiction.
New volunteer opportunities.

The culinary arts institute will also have social and educational programs open to everyone, such as speakers from out of town and cooking classes in a proposed 70-seat auditorium, Clark said.

LCCC plans to officially occupy the Kanjorski Center in January 2009, the year Mercy Special Care Hospital at 128 W. Washington St. celebrates its 100th anniversary.

The two Nanticoke institutions have always had an informal relationship. But recently, the college started talks with representatives of the 50-bed long-term care hospital on forging a stronger partnership.

"We want to do things with (LCCC), but we don't want to wait until 2009," said Mercy Special Care Hospital administrator Robert D. Williams. "It seems to be a nice fit, that we're very excited about."

Mercy Special Care Hospital employs nurses, nursing aides, phlebotomists, and respiratory therapists - all professions students can learn at LCCC. Students currently do phlebotomy and nursing internships there, but Williams hopes to strengthen that relationship by offering scholarships.

The hospital has laboratories comparable to those that will be constructed in LCCC's new facility, and a full-service respiratory department using cutting-edge hyperbaric oxygen therapy for hard-to-heal wounds, Williams said.

By interning at the hospital, which is "in their own backyard," students can get practical experience in the acute care and chronic care services they are going to be facing when they graduate, he said.

"It's kind of a before and after: they receive the training at the community college, then they are able to see the real-life experience throughout their training and after graduation at hospitals like ours," Williams said.

9/8/2007

State releases \$72,000 to Nanticoke

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The state has released its hold on the last of Nanticoke's federal grants, clearing the way for the financially distressed city to apply for more.

The state Department of Community and Economic Development is allowing the city to have approximately \$72,000 in Community Development Block Grant money left over from 2001, city administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

Council learned from Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator Wednesday that the state freed up \$358,460 in CDBG money for 2007 and \$381,267 the city had coming for 2006. By Friday, city officials were told they could also have the 2001 funds.

DCED froze all Nanticoke's grant money due to financial management problems and incorrect grant administration by previous city officials. The current council and mayor hired key personnel to handle city finances and administration and followed other conditions called for by the state.

"It seems like at present we're comfortable with the changes the city has made. The financial management system is much stronger," said DCED spokesman Greg Morgan in Harrisburg. "The important thing is, they've definitely improved what we've asked them to improve in."

CDBG money, allotted annually to the third-class city, can go for projects such as road paving in areas that are designated low- to

moderate-income.

Fire apparatus is acceptable, and the city will use part of the 2006 and 2007 CDBG money for payments on a fire engine. The \$72,000 from 2001 might be used to pay off the loan taken out to buy it, Johnson said.

Johnson had hoped to use CDBG money for the city's 20 percent match of a \$2.3 million federal grant that will be used for repaving Alden Road, Prospect Street, Union Street, and possibly three others. However, since CDBG money is federal - although administered by the state - it can't be used to match other federal funds.

The paving could wait until 2010, when the city has enough money from earned income tax, Johnson said. He will also talk with State Sen. Raphael Musto, D-Pittston Township, and State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, to see if state funding is available.

Johnson said the city can use liquid fuels money, which municipalities receive from the state tax on gasoline. However, there won't be enough for the entire match, and the city must set some of the money aside for emergency snow removal.

"I'm willing to recommend we use liquid fuels, because this is a big project - this is a monster," Johnson said. "We're talking major impact. We've got a great opportunity here for infrastructure improvement."

9/7/2007

Nanticoke considers hiring two new police officers

Citizens Voice

Nanticoke City Council briefly discussed the possibility of hiring two new police officers at Wednesday's meeting. Mayor John Bushko said he would like to hire three, but there isn't enough money. There are 11 officers, one of whom is out on disability, and the overtime pay "is really getting up there," Bushko said.

Members of the Rotary Club presented police Chief James Cheshinski with six portable spotlights for his department. The club held fundraisers at the Honey Pot Cabbage Roll and during South Valley Heritage Days to purchase the spotlights, member Frank Vandermark said.

Council named tax collector Berkheimer Associates as tax officer, delinquent tax collector, and tax hearing officer in a new agreement. Berkheimer will receive 1.9 percent of collections instead of 2.75 percent, city administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

9/6/2007

Nanticoke eyes police, fire hires

slong@timesleader.com

Mayor John Bushko urged council on Wednesday to hire at least two more police officers and firefighters because of injuries, a retirement and some vacancies.

He would like to hire three police officers, but doubts there is money to pay the salary of a third officer.

Bushko announced during Wednesday's council meeting that he recently received results from the civil service tests. He said the city needed to do something to reduce the numerous hours of overtime being worked by officers.

"Right now, we have 11 police officers. One is out on heart and lung (disability) and our overtime is getting up there," Bushko said.

Councilman Brent Makarczyk, fire department director, said he would like hire to one or two new firefighters to alleviate some of the overtime other firefighters are working to cover for employees who have been out while recovering from injuries.

But Makarczyk and Bushko realize the city's finances must be considered. The city's Act 47 recovery plan does not include any provisions to hire any police officers or firefighters.

In other business, council members learned the city would save a tremendous amount of money after a new contract with Berkheimer Associates, the city's tax collection agency, was signed.

For years the city paid 2.75 percent on the total amount collected by the tax collection firm. Under the new contract, set to expire Dec. 31, 2008, the city will only pay 1.9 percent of the total funds collected.

The city's exact savings can't be calculated because it would depend on the total amount of taxes that Berkheimer collects, City Administrator Ken Johnson said.

"That would be very difficult because of the earned income tax issues and when it's coming in," Johnson said. "Ultimately, it will be a significant savings, that is the best I can say. That is a significant percentage difference."

Also Wednesday, Johnson said some of the city's roads are expected to be repaved next year.

The council passed a resolution agreeing to repave Alden Road, Prospect and Union streets using funds from the federal government, which will reimburse the city 80 percent of the costs. It will be the city's responsibility to pay the remaining 20 percent.

The exact costs to pave the roads are not known.

9/6/2007

State releases Nanticoke's community development cash

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City officials received good news Wednesday about grants needed for paving streets - and even better news about their relationship with an important state agency.

Nanticoke can now have its \$358,460 Community Development Block Grant money for 2007 and \$381,267 for 2006. Approximately \$72,000

from 2001 is still on hold, said Gerald Cross, executive director of Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, the Pennsylvania Economy League.

CDBG money is from the federal government, but it is administered by the state Department of Community and Economic Development. DCED froze Nanticoke's CDBG funds because the city had financial management problems, and past administrations didn't follow grant rules.

In the beginning, meetings between DCED and city officials were strained, according to Cross. But as council and Mayor John Bushko showed good intentions by hiring fiscal manager Holly Quinn and city administrator Kenneth Johnson and worked to set up financial controls, DCED thawed towards the city.

"I do think you need to step back and congratulate yourselves," Cross said.

He added that the improved relationship with DCED "will put Nanticoke City on the same standing with other cities" when it comes to getting grants.

It is important for the financially distressed city to be on good terms with the state - particularly since DCED gave it the distressed designation and is responsible for monitoring its recovery progress.

The city will use \$32,930 of the 2006 CDBG money for a fire engine payment, and \$279,709 for improving Maple Street from West Broad Street to West Green Street; West Noble Street from Hanover Street to Fairchild Street; and West Ridge Street from Market Street to Hanover Street.

The 2007 CDBG money is slated for another fire truck payment of \$32,930; there is \$261,016 for repaving Nanticoke Street from Market Street to Main Street and Slope Street from Main Street to Hill Street; and the remaining \$64,522 is for administration.

The money is available now, but it is too late to pave this year, Johnson said. The jobs have to be bid out, and by the time bids come in, it will be too cold for road work.

Alden Road, Prospect Street and Union Street will also be repaved next year using \$2.3 million in federal money council signed an agreement for on Wednesday.

Nanticoke needs to come up with a 20 percent match - about \$484,000, Johnson said. It will come from a combination of sources, including CDBG funds and liquid fuels money, which the state gives municipalities from the gasoline tax.

9/6/2007

Nanticoke business evacuated after gas leak discovered - Citizens' Voice

A small gas leak in downtown Nanticoke led to the brief evacuation of the Weis Market off of Market Street on Wednesday morning. The leak occurred before 10:30 a.m. while a contractor was clearing brush near a natural gas regulator station behind Weis near North Walnut Street, UGI spokesman Chet Merli said. The brush trimmer damaged a 1-inch fitting on an 8-inch main, causing a low pressure leak.

The company received notification of the leak around 10:30, Merli said, and leak was sealed off by about 11 a.m. shortly after a maintenance worker arrived. In the meantime, emergency personnel evacuated the supermarket as a precaution for about 10 minutes, a store manager said.

The gas was not released into the ground and the amount released into the air was "not enough to cause a problem," Merli said.

9/6/2007

Nanticoke Area Notes

By: Pam Urbanski

Community Ambulance calling for subscription drive support

If you've ever been sick or injured or require emergency care from home, you know how invaluable our community ambulance is. The Nanticoke Fire Department Community Ambulance is dispatched when people call 9-1-1 and have a medical emergency. They serve residents in the Nanticoke and Plymouth Township areas. Paramedics and emergency medical technicians provide services 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week. Volunteers make up the rest of the crew and their assistance is invaluable.

I was quite surprised to learn of the training an EMTs and paramedics must have. The training provides clinical and administrative skills needed for a person to care for another person.

A paramedic provides advanced-level pre-hospital emergency life support under the direction of an emergency room physician through radio contact. They commit to an entire year of intensive training. They must log more than 2,000 hours of training, pass a national registry test and be Pennsylvania certified. A physician or medical director also must certify them annually. Finally, they must continue with their education.

Dan Shaw has been a paramedic for 25 years. He is also the coordinator for emergency services for the Nanticoke Ambulance. For him, the job is most rewarding. "I feel good about and believe in what I do," said Shaw. "I know I am making a difference in someone else's life."

Dan tells me he goes a step further for requirements and reviews every call. "We scrutinize every call and make sure we follow state guidelines," Shaw said. "Nanticoke Area is a very busy place. We're always going."

Last year, they handled more than 2,000 calls.

Shaw is asking residents for their help and support in maintaining quality emergency services in the Nanticoke Area. "We are now conducting our annual subscription drive. The money we collect will go a long way in providing residents the best care we can," he said.

Shaw tells me the money goes toward upkeep of the ambulance and also for purchasing the best equipment. "Our ambulance cost upward

of \$125,000 and a cardiac monitor for the unit cost around \$20,000. This fundraiser helps us to make capital purchases The money also is used to pay personnel to man the ambulance 24-hours-a-day, seven-days-a-week," Shaw added.

A subscription rate for an entire household is \$50. A household with senior citizens is \$35. Additional donations also are accepted.

Why subscribe?

"A call with basic life support care cost \$525. That could be anything from treating a sprained ankle or broken bones. If you require advanced life support, are a cardiac patient, have an accident, the cost is \$825. We bill the insurance companies. If you do not have insurance, you are required to pay the whole bill. If you have insurance, we accept their payment, but we do not charge you for the balance of the bill," Shaw explained.

As you can see, we all should be sending in our subscriptions. I guess we all figure "It won't happen to me. I won't need emergency care." But, we never really know.

Subscription letters have been mailed. Anyone who did not receive one or for more information, call 735-5201.

Book sale at Pope John Paul

A sale of books from the Pope John Paul II Elementary School will hold a book sale Saturday from 3 to 6 p.m., Sunday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. and Monday from noon to 3 p.m. at the school library, 518 S. Hanover St., Nanticoke.

Course to be presented

The Rev. James Nash, pastor of the Holy Child, Holy Trinity, St. Mary of Czestochowa and St. Stanislaus Parish Community, announced a nine-week course entitled "The Challenge of Living the Beatitudes Today," will be presented by Sister Gertrude Grimes on Thursdays beginning Sept. 27 at the Holy Trinity Parish Hall, 520 S. Hanover St., Nanticoke. Times for the presentation are 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., 1 to 3:30 p.m. and 7 to 9:30 p.m.

To register your name and time selection, call the church office at 735-4833 or Sister Gertrude Grimes at 383-2763.

Community group to meet

Newport Township Community Organization will meet Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. at the Knights of Columbus building (formerly St. Dennis Church) on East Main Street in Glen Lyon.

The group will discuss its various projects including promoting the elimination of abandoned buildings, the cleaning up of neglected properties, the improvement of recreation parks and its upcoming fall festival to be held Oct. 6. All township residents are welcome to attend.

9/5/2007

LCCC's master plan reshapes Nanticoke

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

A school with technologically advanced labs and classrooms to train new generations of nurses, emergency medical technicians, dental hygienists and respiratory therapists.

A state-of-the-art culinary and hospitality school to prepare students for jobs ranging from pastry chef to casino manager anywhere in the United States.

And an unprecedented opportunity to transform Nanticoke's business district - not to mention bring new growth to surrounding communities.

These plans are coming to life, now that the Pennsylvania Department of Education has approved the \$20 million first phase of Luzerne County Community College's master plan. It calls for renovation of existing buildings and the creation of new ones, like a culinary arts center at Main and Market streets and the purchase of the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street for a health sciences facility.

"I'm really excited about this," LCCC interim president Thomas Leary said.

The college's plans for downtown Nanticoke are part of a \$40 million private and public investment strategy state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, believes will provide the most significant revitalization opportunity the South Valley has ever seen.

"We have to start thinking regionally," said Luzerne County Commissioner Chairman Greg Skrepenak, one of the speakers at a presentation Tuesday in front of the Kanjorski Center.

"With food and health, we hope to make you a healthier community," quipped Dr. Dana Clark, dean of nursing and health sciences at LCCC.

The health sciences center will host nursing, dental, surgical technology, respiratory therapy and emergency medical services programs, according to Clark. She estimates 1,000 students will come to the building each day. In addition, LCCC plans to provide services to community residents, including drug, alcohol and gambling education resources and health care programs.

Kanjorski Center renovations will cost \$7 million to \$8 million and should be complete in time for LCCC to occupy the building in January 2009, said Pat Clemente of the A & E Group of Wilkes-Barre.

Although the outside of the Kanjorski Center will stay the same, the inside will be gutted, he said. The architectural firm's plans include a 6,000-square-foot addition to the 44,000-square-foot building and remodeling the second and third floors for nursing and technician programs. The first floor will be a dental clinic with 24 chairs, Clemente said.

Facility Design and Development Ltd., the firm responsible for the South Valley strategic plan that calls for bringing LCCC downtown, is designing the culinary arts center.

It will feature the latest technology and include work areas with individual cooking stations, said Salvatore Shandra, chairman of hotel and restaurant management at LCCC.

He said the 20,000-square-foot building would allow the college to expand its culinary and hospitality programs to prepare students to meet industry needs on local, state and national levels.

A price for the Kanjorski Center is still under negotiation, Leary said. The final hurdle to selling it is a \$1.8 million federal Economic Development Administration grant that must be paid back if the building is sold. Yudichak said state and federal officials want to set up a meeting with EDA representatives to show what is being done with the center.

Members of Nanticoke's redevelopment and municipal authorities, which own and manage the Kanjorski Center, are thrilled with LCCC's plans. The center has been 80 percent vacant since October 2005, and maintenance costs coupled with a lack of revenue have bankrupted the authorities.

"We've had our ups and downs," said redevelopment authority Chairman Chester Beggs, who also sits on the municipal authority board.

"We've been stuck in a rut for too long," agreed Hank Marks, also a member of both authorities.

City, county and state officials worked together to bring the project to fruition. The help of U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, was also crucial, especially in obtaining a \$5.6 million federal grant for a parking facility for the Kanjorski Center, municipal authority member Dennis Butler said. Surveys show most students drive to campus, so more parking is necessary, Leary said.

"This is a historic day in Nanticoke," Mayor John Bushko said. "I've been (in office) 15 years and this is the first time everybody agreed on doing a project. It's unbelievable."

9/5/2007

LCCC expands downtown

Culinary, Health Sciences centers to open in 2009

By slong@timesleader.com

Luzerne County Community College students could be roaming around the city's downtown by 2009.

The college's Health Sciences Center is expected to be open in January 2009 at the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street.

Nanticoke's Senior Citizens Center, at the corner of East Main and North Market Streets, will be transformed into the college's new 20,000-square-foot Culinary Arts Institute scheduled to open in fall 2009. School officials are still negotiating the sale of both buildings.

"Our new health sciences and hotel and restaurant management downtown Nanticoke facilities will enhance our college's ability to meet the increased demand for a trained work force in the health care and hospitality professions," interim President Thomas Leary said Tuesday at a press conference announcing the plans.

With an additional 12,000 square feet of space, the Nursing and Health Sciences program will be able to expand its community outreach services to serve more area residents, said Dana Clark, dean of LCCC's Nursing and Health Science program.

"We are going to have a model of health care that we hope will be a state and national model," Clark said, noting she wants to encourage residents to serve on the advisory committee. "We would like you to tell us what you need as part of health services in the future."

Once renovated, the three-story building with a basement level will have two nursing classrooms and labs, a simulation bay, respiratory therapy lab, lung function lab, 24-seat dental clinic, dental lab, surgery technician lab and house the college's emerging drug-and-alcohol studies program.

New courses in physical therapy technology, occupational therapy technology and pharmacy technology will also be offered.

Boasting a classroom demonstration kitchen, two modern kitchen labs with individualized work stations and a pastry arts lab, the culinary institute's two-story, 20,000-square-foot building will more than triple the college's hotel and restaurant management facilities.

With the additional space, the college hopes to expand courses by having enough space to offer classes in casino management and leisure/spa management, said Salvatore Shandra, LCCC's Hotel and Restaurant Management program chairman.

A private developer plans to open a restaurant in conjunction with the institute, allowing students to learn the restaurant management business in a hands-on environment. Details regarding the restaurant's name, theme and menu offerings haven't been worked out.

"We are so fortunate to have a private investor to go and put a facility up for us that we can still keep education separate from service," Shandra said. "So the students are going to get the best of both worlds right within the same distance where they are educated."

9/3/2007

Nanticoke business owners anticipate downtown changes

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Owners of existing businesses, some of which have been on East Main Street for decades, are looking forward to watching plans for downtown Nanticoke become a reality - and they hope to be part of the revitalization process.

Last week, Luzerne County Community College officials received the all-clear from the state Department of Education to go ahead with the college's master plan. The plan includes obtaining the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street for a health sciences center and constructing a culinary arts institute on the site of the city-owned senior center at Market and Main streets.

"To take the college and to tie it into the business community really can transform the town," said Bob McDonald, owner of McDonald's Newsstand. "It really is Nanticoke's biggest asset."

McDonald said the store has been at 73 E. Main St. for more than 100 years. It has been in his family since 1969; he took it over in 1982.

"I think it will be wonderful. If and when it happens, I expect to remodel and join in the fun," McDonald said of proposed improvements to

the business district. "I believe in the town."

LCCC's plans to expand operations from its base at Kosciusko Street near Middle Road to downtown Nanticoke have encouraged private investors, who are formulating plans of their own. One as-yet unidentified developer wants to demolish the former CVS building next to the Kanjorski Center for mixed-use commercial space. The additional foot traffic brought in by the college would especially be a boon to shops and restaurants.

"It's definitely going to help us, definitely. The people in charge of it have to be commended. They worked hard on it," Clifford Pomicter said. "But come in and talk to us too. Ask the little guys what we want."

Pomicter co-owns Mary Lou's Deli and Mini Mart, 135 E. Main St., with his wife Mary Lou. It's a cozy place featuring what Pomicter calls "mom's food, comfort food."

The couple tried a similar venture in downtown Nanticoke about 20 years ago, but they gave up.

"At that time there was no parking on the main street. That killed us. We had to close," Pomicter said. "We tried it again 20 years later, and we're still fighting the same."

The Nanticoke General Municipal Authority plans to build a parkade in the vacant lot next to the Kanjorski Center. It will be set back from the street, with a privately owned restaurant and possibly retail space in front.

"We need parking to take care of the businesses they have now, not down the road," Pomicter said.

He thinks there should be more on-street parking, in addition to the parkade. The city has federal grant money, which was secured by U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, for streetscape improvements such as new streetlights and sidewalks. Pomicter believes there has to be some way to widen the roads and make the sidewalks safer for the additional people who hopefully will be using them.

James Bartuska co-owns Bartuska's Furniture with his brother Denis. Their grandfather, Peter Bartuska Sr., started the business at 147 E. Main St. in 1934.

The brothers are looking forward to the transformation, James Bartuska said. Anyone who comes downtown is someone who may stop in at the store, who ordinarily might not, he said.

"We're very excited every time we hear and read anything," Bartuska said. "The only thing is we still don't know what's going on."

Since the former YT Hardware was recently demolished, Bartuska's warehouse is the last remaining building on the block of East Main Street to the east of the Kanjorski Center.

Bartuska doesn't know whether he should be seeking estimates for stuccoing and painting the side of the building that once shared a wall with YT or if the warehouse site is part of plans for the parkade complex.

"We've been wanting to sit down with them; unfortunately, things have happened rapidly," State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, said of downtown merchants.

"For businesses that have already invested in Nanticoke, we want to enhance their business as well. We don't want new development to edge them out."

One of many subjects for discussion among local elected officials is the creation of a redevelopment/economic development fund to help existing businesses, Yudichak said. Nanticoke's municipal authority board members would particularly like to look into grant funding for refurbishing building façades along Main Street.

Overall, the business owners are looking forward to a new day downtown.

"I'm excited about the changes, and I'm optimistic about the future of the city," Bartuska said.

"It's about time. It really is," Pomicter said.

"More than just bodies on the street, which is tremendously important, I really believe it will change peoples' attitudes," McDonald said.

8/30/2007

County calls emergency on bridges

Nanticoke/West Nanticoke span over Susquehanna River will be first worked on, county engineer says.

By Jennifer Learn-Andesjandes@timesleader.com

The Nanticoke/West Nanticoke Bridge will be the first span tackled under the state of emergency declared by Luzerne County Commissioners on Wednesday, said county Engineer Joe Gibbons.

Gibbons said that the bridge over the Susquehanna River is "one step above" requiring a weight restriction – something he wants to avoid. The emergency declaration will allow him to shop around for a consultant qualified to conduct specialized testing of that bridge and others without seeking public requests-for-proposals. Gibbons said the public request process would be more of a hindrance in this situation because very few companies specialize in the repairs he is seeking.

"It's almost similar to a CAT scan for a person," he said.

The testing will identify feasible repairs that may be done to delay the need for costly replacement, he said. Commissioners want to focus on bridges that are needed for emergency evacuations and school transportation.

The Water Street Bridge in Pittston and the Poplar Street Bridge in Plymouth Township will also undergo specialized testing, he said.

"I'll be able to sleep a lot better when those three projects are completed," Gibbons said.

Gibbons estimated that studies and some basic work on the three bridges will cost at least \$1 million.

The study may determine that something as simple as cleaning and coating bridge components will protect the Nanticoke/West Nanticoke Bridge from further salt corrosion during the winter, Gibbons said.

He estimates that the Nanticoke/West Nanticoke Bridge would cost \$25 million or more to replace.

The Water Street Bridge has a weight limit, but Gibbons does not expect consultants to find a fix that will allow the county to avoid

replacing the structure. Gibbons said he doesn't want to start pushing for a replacement until he receives a prognosis from a consultant. Gibbons wants a consultant to explore the possibility of a "radical project" to fix the Poplar Street Bridge, which may not be used by buses and emergency vehicles because it has been downgraded to a 10-ton weight limit.

He thinks it will be possible to remove and replace the "superstructure part" of the bridge, which is essentially the metal beams and deck. That would be cheaper than building a new bridge from scratch, he said.

Commissioners Greg Skrepenak and Rose Tucker approved the declaration during a special meeting. Minority Commissioner Stephen A. Urban said he was unable to attend due to a "scheduling conflict," but sent an e-mail to the county chief clerk/manager expressing support for the declaration.

Wilkes-Barre resident Stanley R. Suchoski challenged the declaration during the meeting.

"Is the sky falling here? Are the bridges in such a deteriorating condition here that we need this procedure?" he asked.

While stressing that safe bridges are important, Suchoski questioned whether the declaration will give a "blank check to contractors and suppliers" and whether the money spent will lead to tax increases after reassessment.

Skrepenak said all county bridges in use have been deemed safe, but he wants to make sure they stay that way. He said spending a lot of money won't be an issue because the county doesn't have funds to fix everything at this time. The special testing will lead to a formal plan to budget work that must be done in coming years, he said.

This is not just some shot in the dark that we're taking after the tragic situation in Minnesota," he said.

8/27/2007

'Perfect case study' for development

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com



Luzerne County Community College's expansion into downtown Nanticoke will provide new chances to reinvigorate the city's run-down business district.

The state Department of Education approved changes to the first phase of LCCC's master plan on Friday, giving the college the go-ahead to purchase the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street and to build a culinary arts school at Market and Main streets.

Just as the college has a master plan to guide its growth over the next several years, Nanticoke, Newport and Plymouth townships share a regional strategic plan to guide theirs. Because of this plan, LCCC is expanding into downtown Nanticoke — which, in turn, attracts private developers key to revitalization, said state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke.

"This is a perfect case study in how to do development," said Alex Belavitz, president of Facility Design and Development Ltd., the firm that developed the South Valley plan. "Revitalization has to be centered on involving and engaging the private side early on, private investors and private capital ... so it's not all grants and public money."

Encouraging private investment in Nanticoke's downtown was one priority in the plan. Another was to forge a better relationship between the city and LCCC, described by Yudichak as "the South Valley's biggest asset."

"Since the school has been in existence, it's been on an island," Nanticoke Councilman Brent Makarczyk said. "Neither (the city nor LCCC) benefited from the other."

Downtown Nanticoke projects, which Yudichak estimates will mean \$40 million to \$50 million of public and private investment, include:

- A building with a parkade in back and a restaurant and shops in front, to be built on the vacant lot next to the Kanjorski Center. A restaurateur who went through LCCC's culinary arts program is interested in starting a "destination" restaurant, Yudichak said. The parkade would be built with federal and state grants.

An office and retail building, possibly with room for a new senior center, to be constructed by a private developer at the site of the former CVS building on East Main Street.

LCCC's culinary arts institute, to be in a new building at Market and Main streets, where the existing senior center and a small office building stand. A private developer would construct it.

The Susquehanna Coal Co. office at Market and Main streets, restored and transformed into 11 apartments for seniors by the Nanticoke Housing Authority, under the direction of the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Throw in new sidewalks, streetlights and other Main Street improvements called for in the strategic plan, and officials believe they have a recipe for successful downtown revitalization.

“You have to have a plan. We would not have been able to attract the college to the downtown, the restaurateur, or the private developers if we did not have a plan,” Belavitz said.

“You need to partner with private business so there’s an investment and a commitment to the city,” said attorney Joseph Lach of Plymouth

Township, one of the South Valley Partnership principals.

The South Valley Partnership, a non-profit community development organization, was formed in late 2003, according to Lach. Its first order of business was to collect state grants and other funds to hire a planning firm.

In April 2006, Facility Design and Development Ltd. unveiled the South Valley plan, which included analysis of existing conditions and suggestions for improvements that would act as catalysts for new projects.

“With this strategic plan for Nanticoke and surrounding areas four years ago, we had no preconceptions. We had no idea how to turn the community around,” Belavitz said. “It’s highly rewarding, personally and professionally, to see what can be accomplished with a plan, and having the support of the community leadership.”

City, county, state and federal officials have been working together, Belavitz said. He particularly credits the efforts of Yudichak, the office of U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, and city officials.

Nanticoke is an economic hub of the South Valley, so it made sense to start there, Lach said. But it won’t end there, he assures Newport and Plymouth Township residents.

“People in those two townships have no doubt been sitting patiently, wondering, ‘What’s in it for us?’” he said. “This is not an effort that’s just restricted to Nanticoke.”

8/26/2007

A new musical produced by a Nanticoke native will be featured in a major New York City theatre festival next month.

Geri Anne Kaikowski - Citizens' Voice

Michael Height has been developing a musical titled “Tully (In No Particular Order)” since the fall of 2005. He became involved with the show when two college friends, who wrote the play, approached him about doing a reading of their show.

“Tully (In No Particular Order)” was submitted along with nearly 400 others for inclusion in the New York Musical Theatre Festival. The show underwent a blind jury process presided over by musical theatre notables. At the end of the process, “Tully (In No Particular Order)” was one of 18 works chosen to be presented as part of the NYMF Next Link Program.

“Tully (In No Particular Order)” features music & lyrics by Stephanie Johnstone and book and additional lyrics by Joshua William Gelb. The show will also be directed by Joshua William Gelb.

The musical tells the story of a man named Tully who has lost his memory. But there are affairs, murders and betrayals forcing him to remember and to face the consequences of his actions.

The show will receive seven performances at the Sage Theater, 711 Seventh Ave., New York City. Performance dates and times are: Sept. 20-22, 8 p.m.; Sept. 23 and 25, 4:30 and 8 p.m. and Sept. 28, 4:30 p.m.

Tickets are available for purchase through Theatermania.com (<http://www.theatermania.com>), beginning Sept. 1.

For more information on the show, visit <http://www.tullymusical.com>, the show’s Myspace page at <http://www.myspace.com/tullymusical>. Information on the New York Musical Theatre Festival can be found at <http://www.nymf.org> or by calling 212-664-0979.

8/25/2007

State approves LCCC revisions

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The wait is over for Luzerne County Community College officials.

On Friday, they received word the Pennsylvania Department of Education approved revisions to the first phase of the college’s master plan. It includes two major projects in downtown Nanticoke: the conversion of the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street into a health sciences center and construction of a culinary arts institute at Market and Main streets.

Construction is already underway on a third project, the Public Safety Training Institute at Prospect Street and Middle Road.

For LCCC Interim President Thomas Leary, the announcement was the highlight of a hectic Friday, as college faculty and staff prepared for the start of classes on Monday.

“I was thrilled,” Leary said. “We’re looking forward to a great year, and this is the icing on the cake.”

He added the projects “will benefit the students, the college and the community.”

“This was the major piece that needed to be in place,” said state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke. “We have an opportunity now to do something of great significance that will start revitalization of the South Valley region.”

Funding for the projects is a 50-50 split between the state and Luzerne County, which will each contribute \$10 million.

Yudichak particularly credited commissioner chairman Greg Skrepenak and LCCC board chairman Ross Scarantino for helping get plans and funding in place.

There will be an official announcement Sept. 4 at the Kanjorski Center.

Before then, a sales agreement for the building must be hammered out. Under the terms of a \$1.9 million federal Economic Development Administration grant used to build the Kanjorski Center, the city has to pay back the money if it is sold.

Even though community colleges can be eligible for EDA funds, the agency has indicated it won't forgive the grant if LCCC buys the center.

U.S. senators Arlen Specter and Robert Casey have sent letters to the EDA asking for reconsideration.

The full grant amount might not have to be paid back, Yudichak said. It also would not affect the price of the Kanjorski Center.

Members of the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority, which manages the center, will be glad to turn the office building over to LCCC.

The center has been mostly vacant since October 2005, when its main tenant moved out.

Without the rental income, the authority went broke and had to borrow money from the financially distressed city to pay its bills.

8/25/2007

LCCC receives approval to receive \$20M for major capital projects

slong@timesleader.com

Luzerne County Community College officials received approval Friday afternoon for their \$20 million request to proceed with three major capital projects, Interim President Tom Leary said.

Luzerne County and the state Department of Education will each provide \$10 million, allowing the college to secure the lease/purchase of the Kanjorski Center, renovate the Nanticoke Senior Citizen Center for the college's culinary arts program and continue construction on the Public Training Safety Institute.

"I would have to describe it as rather exhilarating. It is a very exciting time for the college and Nanticoke," Leary said. He added that it was nice to finally see such a project come to fruition after working on it with so many people.

Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko was ecstatic to learn the funding had been received because this would provide a much needed economic boost to downtown Nanticoke.

"It's a great shot in the arm. It's the savior of our downtown district," Bushko said.

"It helps the city, the downtown and the school."

The college plans to finalize negotiation details next week to purchase the Kanjorski Center owned by the Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority, Leary said.

He and other school officials presented a revised master plan to state Department of Education budget officials almost three months ago requesting the funding.

Details of the Kanjorski acquisition and LCCC culinary arts program expansion will be released during a news conference on Sept. 4 at the Kanjorski Center.

If you go

What: Luzerne County Community College's news conference

When: 2:30 p.m. Sept. 4

Where: Kanjorski Center in Downtown Nanticoke

8/25/2007

County readies bridges appraisal

Officials will declare a state of emergency so engineer can address work on some spans.

By Jennifer Learn-Andes jandes@timesleader.com

Luzerne County officials plan to declare a state of emergency so the engineer's office has more freedom to tackle the most vulnerable and crucial county bridges.

The declaration saves time because the office won't be slowed down by normal purchasing and public advertising procedures, county officials say.

Commissioner Chairman Greg Skrepenak made the announcement Friday. County Chief Clerk/Manager Sam Guesto will separately brief commissioners Stephen A. Urban and Rose Tucker early next week and ask if they will approve it so the county doesn't have to wait until the Sept.

12 commissioner meeting, Skrepenak said.

While the county engineer's office doesn't believe there are any immediate safety concerns with any of the county's 350 bridges, Skrepenak said emergency action is warranted because the Aug. 1 collapse of the Interstate 35 bridge in Minnesota "put the whole country on notice."

"It's not as if we're worried about any of our bridges falling down today, but some of them do need to be looked at and need some work," Skrepenak said. "We want to make people feel safe and comfortable and know that we are being proactive in our approach."

Urban said he has been advocating bridge repairs and has no problem with an emergency declaration. Tucker could not be reached for comment.

County Engineer Joe Gibbons said he will initially focus on aging bridges that are part of emergency evacuation routes and/or used heavily by school buses and emergency vehicles. He already has three county bridges that meet this description: the Nanticoke/West Nanticoke Bridge, the Poplar Street Bridge in Plymouth Township and the Water Street Bridge in Pittston.

Gibbons said he wants to conduct advanced tests of these and other bridges to see if anything may be done to bolster them or extend their use so the need for replacements may be delayed.

The Poplar Street Bridge, for example, has been downgraded to a 10-ton weight limit based on a past county inspection, he said. That means school buses and fire trucks must use other routes, Gibbons said. He's concerned because the Poplar Street Bridge is an evacuation route when the U.S. Route 11 bridge floods. Plymouth Township Supervisor Edward Brennan said he and other township officials have been pleading with the county to do something about the Poplar Street Bridge for years. He said the bridge is used heavily by pedestrians, including children, and they walk close to traffic because the walking portion of the bridge has deteriorated.

Brennan said he and other township residents get frustrated when they see the county spending money on trails and recreation programs without taking care of the bridge.

"Those extra expenses are nice if you have money left over, but take care of the basic infrastructure needs first," Brennan said. "This bridge is in dire need of repair, and it's affecting our community." Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko was pleased that the Nanticoke/West Nanticoke Bridge is among the top three.

"It's a vital link into Nanticoke," he said.

Gibbons stressed that he will eventually come up with action plans for all bridges. Imposing weight restrictions has become necessary on many county bridges, but he worries that motorists ignore weight-limit postings.

"An out-of-town heavy equipment operator or delivery person might not pay attention, and that could further compromise the bridge," he said.

Skrepenak said the county will seek funding streams and determine if any county bond money is left to use on bridge repairs.

Urban said the county must put its findings into the hands of state legislators so they understand the seriousness of the county's bridge problems and the need for more money. The county can't rush out and replace all the bridges at once because the county would have to come up with an estimated \$40 million to \$60 million, which is only a fraction of what would have to be kicked in by the state and federal government, Urban said.

County officials stress that all bridges are inspected, and inspections are done more frequently if they are put on extra watch status. Eighty of them meet the state's definition of a bridge, spanning more than 20 feet.

8/23/2007

Agency hears testimony on loan for Nanticoke

Financially distressed city seeks extra funds until it gets money from higher tax.

By Ron Lieback@timesleader.com

The state Department of Community and Economic Development heard testimony at a public hearing Wednesday night from the Pennsylvania Economy League and the city regarding a short-term loan and a grant under the financially distressed municipalities act, or Act 47.

The city is requesting additional funding through a \$200,000 loan, and \$136,000 in grant funds through the act. In April, the city created a higher earned-income tax and a commuter tax to help balance out the budget.

Starting May 1, residents were required to begin paying an additional 1 percent in earned-income tax and nonresidents started paying a 1.33 percent commuter tax.

The higher rates were estimated to generate \$1.7 million, but collections of the earned-income taxes were started a month late as the city worked to ensure its payroll tax collector, Berkheimer Associates, was prepared to garnish the appropriate workers' wages.

"It is the city's position that the recovery plan (Act 47) is the key to our recovery," said Kenneth Johnson, city administrator. "Our current problem is with (earned-income tax) collections."

Pennsylvania Economy League Executive Director Gerald Cross said the city needs the additional revenue to bring the budget back to normal.

"The PEL believes the balance will be collected by the city by April or May 2008," Cross said.

Tom Ruskey, from the office of state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, also requested that if a revision of the Act 47 grant and loan is completed, the state Department of Community and Economic Development would look into hiring a person in the city for direct involvement managing the funds due to future projects in the city.

"We're currently working with the city on several economic development projects," Ruskey said. "There is \$40 million in public and private investments ... all of these new projects will lead to future monies coming in and adding to the vitality of downtown."

8/23/2007

GNA Superintendent Anthony Perrone looks forward to the new school year

Pamela Urbanski - Nanticoke Area Notes - Citizens' Voice

I enjoy talking with Nanticoke Area School District Superintendent Anthony Perrone. As always, he is excited about the start of another school year. Yes, even after all these years.

One doesn't have to listen to him speak a long time to understand he really cares about the students — all students. He is anxious to get started.

"We have two new programs this year that are funded entirely by grants. A pre-school program for 4-year-olds will begin in early fall. We

can accommodate up to 40 children and our goal is to have 20 in the a.m. and 20 in the p.m.," Perrone said. "For more information you can call K.M. Smith School at 735-3740."

Because of grant money, the district also was able to hire two family center specialist counselors, who will work with children who have been removed from their homes and are under the jurisdiction of Children and Youth and in foster care.

"We will offer family counseling and home visits. Our goal is to get the students back with their families," Perrone said.

Something he is going to place emphasis on this year is raising the PSSA test scores. "Our scores have been a little low, so we will all work very hard to raise the scores. We will follow the state curriculum and adhere to their recommendations," Perrone added.

Mary Ann Jarolen, high school principal, will lead a committee of parents, faculty and staff to review those recommendations. The superintendent also is proud of the district's buildings and grounds. I agree with him. I was walking around the complex the other day and men were busy making sure the outside is attractive to everyone.

"I'm very proud of our campus. We have two new schools and new building projects have been completed. Paving has been done at the high school and K.M. Smith School. Our athletic fields are looking good," he said.

Perrone's wish for the New Year? "I hope we can work out a contract with our teachers and that everyone gets along. The emphasis should be on the kids. That is what we are here for," Perrone said.

School bells to ring at GNA

It is hard to believe we are nearing the end of August. Where did summer vacation go?

The Greater Nanticoke Area School District opens its doors for a new school year Tuesday. Full-day classes will be in session for all students in kindergarten through 12th grade. The cafeteria will be operating on the first day of school and breakfast will be available Wednesday. There is no school Friday, Aug. 31, and Labor Day.

Bus transportation tips

Janet Yezefski, director of transportation for the Greater Nanticoke Area School District, tells me her department is ready and eager to start a new

school year and asks for parental cooperation. "We ask that parents do not call the transportation office for bus times. Bus schedules will be posted in all district buildings," Yezefski said. "If your child's/children's bus time or bus stop has changed from last year, you will receive a postcard notifying you of the change," she said.

Yezefski also told me children new to the district, including students who attended parochial schools last year and will attend public school this year, should have notified her department. "Those who did not receive a postcard from the office of transportation should call our office immediately at 735-5066," she said.

One thing she asks is that students be at their stops five minutes early. "We try to stay as close to pick-up time as possible, but it's always good to give yourself a little extra time," she said.

Anyone interested in becoming a GNA substitute crossing guard and is dependable, can pass a criminal background check, have child-abuse clearance, have good hearing and eyesight and are available between 7 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., should call Janet at 735-5006 or email busgna@gnasd.com.

Road work continues

Jeff Novitski, assistant construction manager for PennDOT, reminds motorists a traffic advisory is still in effect for Main and Kosciuszko streets. The good news, however, is that the work is ahead of schedule. "We had set a completion date of Nov. 2, but we are ahead of schedule. Don E. Bower Construction Company has been doing a great job working overtime and keeping things running smoothly as they add a new drainage system, sidewalk and paving work and the addition of new traffic signals," he said.

"A problem arose the early part of this week when the utility company replaced some underground conduits that did not work properly," Novitski said. "Unfortunately, they had to tear up the road work we just did. We are hoping they will have the problem corrected by the middle of the week so that we can have the overlay done at the end of the week. Once that is done, the traffic signals and clean-up work is all that is left to do," Novitski said.

A message from the police chief

Nanticoke Police Chief James Cheshinski offers some good advice for parents and caregivers who have children returning to school and students heading back to Luzerne County Community College.

"Please give yourself some extra time in the morning. Children should always walk in pairs and whenever possible cross the street where there are crossing guards," Cheshinski said.

He also asks that motorists avoid Main Street and Kosciuszko Street. "There are a lot of alternate routes. Please use them for the first few weeks and until the construction work on Main Street and Kosciuszko Street is complete."

As for college students, using Middle Road while construction continues is good advice. He asks for people to be patient, slow down and be aware of the increased motor vehicle and pedestrian traffic. "It is the responsibility of all of us to keep our children safe," he said.

Nanticoke seeks new housing director

Head of the city's Housing Authority for the past 2 years is leaving post Aug. 31.

slong@timesleader.com

The search is on for a new director at the Nanticoke Housing Authority for the third time in seven years. After handling the agency's day-to-day operations for two years, Perry A. Clay is leaving to become the director of the Rental Housing Program at Virginia Beach, Va. His last day is Aug. 31.

It could take several more months until Clay's replacement can be found. In the interim, the authority can hire an outside consultant, appoint someone as an interim director or allow a board member to handle the daily activities on a nonpaid basis.

Solicitor Vito DeLuca plans to meet with board chairwoman Christina Buttrick by the end of the month to discuss options on filling the position until a permanent director can be hired. The next regularly scheduled board meeting is Sept. 20.

DeLuca, who began serving the board in 1998, is not worried about any renovation projects being halted because of Clay's departure.

The board is seeking sealed bids for its capital fund improvements projects to renovate the agency's five buildings.

"Probably close to three years of the last seven years they operated without a permanent housing director," DeLuca said.

Most of the administrative staff has more than 20 years experience in handling housing authority issues, Clay said.

The Pennsylvania Housing Authority Act requires housing authority executive director applicants to meet stringent criteria and be hired through the Civil Service Commission.

Board members want to take their time to find the right candidate because an executive director's job is protected under state law, DeLuca said.

"You are locked in with them and can't just get rid of them without just cause," DeLuca said. Housing directors serve until they retire, resign, die or get another job. "It is a very important position, not only for the housing authority, but for the city, too."

After gaining board approval, Clay implemented a nurse's aide training program for residents, partnered with Luzerne County Community College to offer a series of workshops and developed New Horizons Development of Nanticoke, a nonprofit agency that renovates historical sites to provide middle-income housing for elderly residents.

It will be the board's decision if these programs will be continue to be offered to residents.

8/19/2007

Hometown boy savors championship moment

jbombulie@citizensvoice.com

Receiver Jim Jones couldn't sprint to the trophy fast enough once it was displayed on a table at the 10-yard line.

Defensive end Troy Blackwell pumped skyward the Gatorade cooler that he had just emptied on coach Rich Ingold's head.

Lineman Deon McPhee danced to the sounds of "Glory Days" playing over the loudspeakers like he was Courteney Cox in the "Dancing in the Dark" video.

Kicker Dave Davis recorded all of it for posterity on his hand-held video camera.

The Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Pioneers all celebrated their American Conference championship game victory over the Green Bay Blizzard on Saturday night.

Only one player, however, could say he celebrated it on his home turf — Nanticoke Area graduate Todd Bargella, the team's only local product.

When Bargella posed for pictures after the game — with the trophy in one arm and his biggest fan, an adorable 9-year-old named Haley who emerged from his rooting section in the stands wearing a miniature replica of his No. 86 jersey, in the other — he was doing so just miles from where he grew up.

"I'm flabbergasted right now," Bargella said. "Just to run out of that tunnel and see my friends who I played mini-football with cheering me on and my parents, my family, my friends, I can't describe the feeling. I'm ecstatic.

"Bringing home a championship like this to the community is fantastic. This community lacked sports championships for a while now and this is the beginning of a new era. I'm thankful and blessed to be part of this team.

"We have one more game to go and we're going to do what we do best, which is win football games."

While af2 teams sometimes add former high school standouts from their home region in a bid to draw fans, Bargella was no token local for the Pioneers on Saturday night.

Now a 6-foot-5, 275-pound lineman, Bargella harkened back to his high school and college days as a tight end when he caught a 9-yard pass in the first quarter. He nearly scored on the play too, being knocked out of bounds at the 1.

Later, with the Pioneers clinging to a three-point lead in the fourth quarter, receiver Tyreak Saviour fumbled after making a catch at his own 15-yard line. If Green Bay recovered, the Blizzard would have great field position and a chance to take the lead. Instead, Bargella, blocking down field, alertly fell on the ball.

Finally, with 20 seconds left, Bargella jumped on Green Bay's onside kick, salting away a 46-43 victory for the Pioneers. He stood and raised the football to a cheering crowd of 5,635.

"Right then and there, I knew we were going to bring a championship home," Bargella said.

Saturday night's conference championship comes at a time when things are looking up for Bargella.

After graduating from Western Carolina in 2004, he had a pro day for NFL scouts but found no takers. He spent a little time with the

Columbus

Destroyers of the Arena Football League, but shortly thereafter took a job as a corrections officer at the Luzerne County Correctional Facility, all the while thinking he could be putting his sport management degree to better use.

Last year, he was hired as an assistant athletic director at Lackawanna College, a position he finds fulfilling. Now, after a year off, he's back playing

the sport he loves on a championship team.

"I wasn't satisfied with myself. I had to come out to play one more time," Bargella said. "I called Coach Ingold and asked him to come aboard and he welcomed me. I have to thank Coach Ingold for believing in me and giving me an opportunity to be a part of all of this."

8/17/2007

Nanticoke holding finances in check

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The city looks to be in decent financial shape so far this year, but something stinks about money borrowed from the sewer fund. Actual numbers through June and projections from July-December indicate the city could have a \$12,000 deficit at the end of 2007, council learned Wednesday. Harry Miller of Pennsylvania Economy League, the city's financial recovery coordinator, called it "very manageable."

"(A deficit of) \$12,000 on a \$3 million operating budget is real good if you can achieve it," said auditor John Bonita, part of the city's financial recovery team. "Right now it looks like you're on budget."

The financial recovery plan drawn up by PEL projected a deficit of \$765,000 in 2007.

Nanticoke was declared financially distressed by the state in May 2006. One reason was because each year the city spent more than came in. And the annual deficits kept increasing. The deficit was \$102,000 in 2005 and estimated at \$120,000 in 2006, the recovery plan shows. It would have been higher in 2006, but council took out loans.

Although numbers for 2007 look good, it's too soon to be certain. There might be major expenses before the year's end, according to city Administrator Kenneth Johnson. For example, a huge fire, snowstorm or murder in November could drive up fire, public works or police expenses.

One thing the city must do is get its state Community Development Block Grant money released as soon as possible, Miller said.

The city has \$358,460 in CDBG money due for 2007 and \$381,267 for 2006, plus about \$73,000 left over from 2001.

The state put the money on hold because the city's financial management was poor, and past administrations failed to follow state rules for administering grants.

CDBG money is used for things like paving and making payments on a fire truck. About \$54,000 toward the fire truck had to be borrowed from the sewer fund, Miller said.

Mayor John Bushko asked how the money was transferred without going through council. Council has to approve such transactions.

Neither Miller nor Johnson could say what happened.

Most of the problems with the CDBG funds have been cleared up. The city can start drawing from the money for projects, but Johnson wants to wait until one final issue is resolved.

When the CDBG money comes in, a priority will be reimbursing the sewer fund.

"I guarantee it's going back," Johnson said.

8/17/2007

Nanticoke puts skateboard ordinance on hold

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Council postponed voting on a new skateboarding ordinance for the second time, in order to gather more ideas on how to revise it — or perhaps drop it.

City officials are concerned about skateboarders damaging property and creating a nuisance. They want an ordinance with stiffer penalties to keep skateboarders from trespassing, but the councilmen and mayor aren't sure whether it should be banned from downtown or all over the city.

The current ordinance prohibits skateboarding on sidewalks downtown and streets anywhere in the city. Violators pay a \$5 fine plus costs. The new ordinance proposed by police Chief James Cheshinski raises the fine to \$100 up to \$1,000 and bans skateboarding downtown, defined as Green Street to the south, the Susquehanna River to the north, Hanover Street to the west and Chestnut Street to the east. The ordinance is modeled on Wilkes-Barre's, Nanticoke Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

"I don't think it's enforceable," Mayor John Bushko said.

Councilman James Litchkofski would push for a downtown ban, particularly around Greater Nanticoke Area school district property and the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street, which the Nanticoke redevelopment authority owns. The wax used by skateboarders makes concrete slippery, which Litchkofski worries could create a liability issue.

Skateboarding is a problem all over the city, Councilman Bernie Norieka said, noting he sees five or six skateboarders on Espy Street in the Hanover section.

"It's not an easy problem," Norieka said.

He said the ideal situation would be for skateboarders to have a place of their own. The South Valley Partnership plans to build a skate park on Lower Broadway, but it is being delayed while property ownership issues over the numerous parcels of land are worked out. The current ordinance only prohibits skateboarders on downtown sidewalks. If people in other parts of the city complain about skateboarders on sidewalks, police can't chase them away, Johnson said. Johnson told council to give him ideas within the next three weeks, so at the Sept. 5 meeting they could decide whether or not to write a new ordinance.

8/15/2007

Nanticoke organizing treasure hunt

Citywide yard sale designed to bring people into the city scheduled for October.

By rlieback@timesleader.com

The Civic Pride Committee is planning another citywide yard sale for fall, but this one has a twist — it's also a treasure hunt.

Sharpen that brain of yours and you might be \$25 richer during the yard sale, which is scheduled for 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Oct. 6.

Committee member J.D. Verazin, who brainstormed the idea, said that it will feature clues to street names in the town. For example:

Where do people wear 10-gallon hats and pointy boots? Where do baseball players play?

If you figured "west" and "green," then you'd be one step closer. Now you just have to visit a yard sale on West Green Street, and if you purchase an item that's marked, you win one of six \$25 prizes.

"Every year we'll be coming up with something new like this treasure hunt to keep it exciting," Verazin said. "The event keeps growing from last year."

The first citywide yard sale was held during one weekend last summer, and the second was held in the beginning of this summer. Verazin said the committee decided to split the single event into one summer and one fall event. For this year's summer event, Verazin said, about 280 residents signed up.

"It was great for Nanticoke," he said. "We had people walking around 2 hours before the yard sale was scheduled to begin."

This year Verazin is expecting a higher number of people to sign up for the fall and is asking residents of the Honey Pot and Hanover sections to call 735-2800 to register for October's event. The address of everyone who registers will be printed onto a map that will be offered at Patriot Park on Oct. 6.

"This event brings a lot of people into Nanticoke," Verazin said. "People from as far as Shickshinny were here, and it was great for local businesses."

Larry Karnes, owner of Larry's Pizzeria on the corner of Church and College streets, said tables were set in the back parking lot to satisfy the customers during this summer's sale.

"We were selling anything that we had ready and it was going," Karnes said. "People were walking around town hours before (the yard sale) started."

And for residents participating in the sale, Verazin said it's a perfect opportunity to lose the extra summer stuff and get ready for winter.

"It's also great for the extra cash," he said. "One lady made \$350 selling only dollar items, so that tells you something."

Karnes said he's going to prepare more for October's event, due to running low on everything during the summer sale. He recommends other businesses also better prepare.

"This is a great impact on Nanticoke," Karnes said, who's also a city fire officer. "I've never seen so many positive people come through Nanticoke on one day."

8/15/2007

Two districts left out of trust surplus

Dallas, Pittston say they should get funds despite leaving group.

By mguydish@timesleader.com

As promised, the Northeast Pennsylvania School District Health Trust gave its members a month without paying premiums, saving them more than \$3.3 million.

Also as promised, the two districts that withdrew from the trust at the end of July — Dallas and Pittston — won't see a penny of that savings even though they contributed to the surplus that funded it.

In fact, solicitor Robert Mariani said at the trust meeting Tuesday that he had sent a letter to the two districts rebutting their claim to a share of the trust surplus, estimated earlier this summer in excess of \$15 million. Dallas and Pittston believe they should get back any money they put into the surplus, and have cited the fact that the trust, in writing, promised to abide by fiduciary rules laid out in the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act. Those standards would require the trust to return any money in its surplus to the departing districts.

Mariani said his letter to Dallas and Pittston was not yet public record because the dispute could end up in court, but did say it explains that "from our perspective, they have no claim on the trust surplus."

The trust provides health insurance to eight school districts, two vocational technical schools and the Luzerne Intermediate Unit. Each got a share of the \$3.3 million credit based on their monthly premiums: Hanover Area, \$254,221; Lake-Lehman \$269,245; LIU \$334,052; Greater Nanticoke Area \$212,410; Northwest Area, \$158,325; Tunkhannock Area, \$297,504; West Side Vo-Tech, \$80,233; Wilkes-Barre Area \$881,465; Wilkes-Barre Area Vo-Tech, \$70,317; Wyoming Area \$241,807; and Wyoming Valley West \$516,670.

Greater Nanticoke Area and Northwest Area tried to leave the trust but were blocked by a court injunction won by the teachers union. Even though Dallas has left the trust and thus has no one sitting on the board, Dallas teacher Bill Wagner attended Tuesday's meeting as a spectator, and trust co-chairman Phillip Russo singled him out as a "founding member" of the trust, giving him a plaque for his service since the trust was formed in 1999.

The trust board also voted to extend Executive Director Andrew Marko's contract by one year, through August 2008, giving him a 3 percent raise. Marko, the retired superintendent of Wyoming Valley West School District, said the raise bumps his salary to \$80,000, but noted he has not accepted a raise for three years.

8/14/2007

Health Trust credits school districts with \$3 million

Mark Gurdish - Times Leader

As promised, the Northeast Pennsylvania School District Health Trust gave its member school districts a month without paying premiums, saving them more than \$3.3 million. Also as promised, the two districts that withdrew from the Trust at the end of July - Dallas and Pittston - won't see a penny of that savings.

In fact Solicitor Robert Mariani said at the Trust meeting this morning that he had sent a letter to the two districts rebutting their claim to a share of the Trust surplus, which was used to provide the premium credit enjoyed by Trust members this month. Dallas and Pittston believe they should get back any money they put into the surplus, and have cited the fact that the Trust has, in writing, said it will abide by fiduciary rules laid out in the federal Employee Retirement Income Security Act. Those standards would require the trust to return any money in its surplus to the departing districts.

Mariani said his letter to Dallas and Pittston was not yet public record because the dispute could end up in court, but did say it explains that "from our perspective, they have no claim on the Trust surplus."

Part of the roughly \$15 million surplus was used to credit the eight remaining districts as well as three other members - two vocational technical schools and the Luzerne Intermediate Unit - with a total of \$3.3 million, effectively eliminating the August premiums. Here's a breakdown: Hanover Area, \$254,221; Lake-Lehman \$269,245; LIU \$334,052; Greater Nanticoke Area \$212,410; Northwest Area, \$158,325; Tunkhannock Area, \$297,504; West Side Vo-Tech, \$80,233; Wilkes-Barre Area \$881,465; Wilkes-Barre Area Vo-Tech, \$70,317; Wyoming Area \$241,807; and Wyoming Valley West \$516,670

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The Trust board also voted to extend Executive Director Andrew Marko's contract by one year, through August 2008, giving him a three percent raise. Marko, the retired superintendent of Wyoming Valley West School District, said the raise bumps his salary to \$80,000, but noted he has not accepted a raise for three years.

8/14/2007

Greater Nanticoke Area teacher spends week at NASA Langley Research Center

By bjarvis@citizensvoice.com

Tony Fleury is the type of science teacher who constructs a homemade hovercraft strong enough to hold 300 pounds while levitating an inch off the ground, and then proceeds to allow his students to ride it around school thanks to a 100-foot extension cord.

"I just give them a push and let them go down the hallway and hope they don't knock someone over," Fleury said with a laugh. "Most of my students are visual learners. They really have to see something to keep their interest, so I try to do demonstrations as often as possible."

With street credibility like that, it came as no surprise that Fleury was among 20 science teachers selected nationwide for a weeklong summer

workshop led by scientists at the NASA Langley Research Center in Hampton, Va. Known as My NASA Data, the program aims to bring a "real world element" to science classes through issues like air quality and global warming.

"It's for teachers who show real drive and are eager to start the year off with new lesson plans for their students," said NASA outreach coordinator

Katherine Lorentz. "While scribbling down notes as fast as possible, the students ask, 'Who would ever need to use this information?' The answer is NASA."

In designing lesson plans, which can range from using aerosols to determine volcanic eruptions to using satellites to research the effects of coral

bleaching, teachers are encouraged to use bona fide data from NASA rather than make up numbers. Upon completion, the lesson plans will be posted on NASA's Web site, downloadable by teachers across the globe.

"NASA has so many educational programs available," Fleury said. "I hope teachers will take advantage and see what each lesson plan is designed to do, and how to do it in their classrooms."

The real highlight of the workshop, however, was the tour of NASA's high-tech wind tunnels and model shops.

"It's absolutely amazing what they can produce and the techniques they use. It's like something from a science fiction movie," Fleury said.

"The purpose of going to workshops is to learn how to better serve my kids. Now I can give them ideas and say, 'Here's this guy, he makes

models of airplanes for wind tunnel tests. Maybe it's for you.”

Now in his fifth year at Greater Nanticoke Area, Fleury teaches physics to juniors and seniors as well as physical science to eighth graders. In addition to the hovercraft, Fleury is known to bring out a bed of nails to teach students a lesson on the effects of pressure — and not to believe everything they see on television.

“He's a tremendous teacher,” said Superintendent Anthony Perrone.

8/13/2007

GNA project will make high school energy-efficient
By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Greater Nanticoke Area school board is undertaking a \$1.1 million renovation project at the high school to make it more energy-efficient. The board awarded an energy conservation services proposal to CM3 Building Solutions of Treose, Bucks County, pending final approval by solicitor Vito DeLuca.

The project involves 50 classrooms in the high school. New windows are being installed now, building and grounds supervisor Frank Grevera said.

The school's heating system was installed in the 1970s and is losing a lot of heat through the windows, Superintendent Anthony Perrone said.

The district will get its \$1.1 million investment back in savings on energy and repairs over the next 12 years, Grevera said.

A loan won't be required because there is enough money in the district's fund balance, Perrone said. By paying for the renovations outright, the district saves \$250,000, Grevera said.

8/13/2007

PennDOT lends hand in GNA bus quandary
By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The state Department of Transportation is providing a short-term solution at a dangerous intersection for Greater Nanticoke Area school buses.

However, state and Plymouth Township officials say a long-term solution is needed — and the sooner, the better.

For many years, the bus stop in front of the Tilbury fire hall has been a transfer point for Greater Nanticoke Area students from remote areas.

Since the spring, bus drivers have been forced to take Allen Street, a narrow alley, instead of Route 29 to get to Route 11 because of a 10-ton weight limit on the unsound East Poplar Street bridge.

The drivers are concerned about entering the busy road from Allen Street because tall signs block their vision, “including a yellow reflector sign that's probably the worst of them all,” according to White Transit bus company owner Richard Andrejko.

After assessing the situation with Andrejko last week, Plymouth Township supervisors and state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, asked the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation to lower the signs and put in temporary lights or flashers to alert motorists to the school buses emerging onto Route 11.

“We are putting the paperwork in to be able to make those changes in the height of the signs,” PennDOT spokeswoman Karen Dussinger said.

She believes the signs can be adjusted in time for the start of the Greater Nanticoke Area school year on Aug. 28.

PennDOT will visit the site this week to see about temporary signals, township Supervisor Chairwoman Gale Conrad said.

If the bridge on East Poplar Street, which is county-owned, didn't have a weight limit on it, there wouldn't be a need for lowered signs or temporary light, Conrad said.

The biggest problem of all is the need for a traffic signal at routes 11 and 29, Andrejko said.

Although township officials have been asking for a traffic light since 2003, PennDOT won't bid out the project until 2010.

That's because a bridge on Route 11 at the intersection, damaged by the June 2006 flooding, has to be repaired at the same time, since sensors and other components for the lights will go in it.

There's no word on when the county might replace the East Poplar Street bridge. The supervisors are hoping it can be done as soon as possible, and that PennDOT will move the traffic light and Route 11 bridge project up on its list.

“Unfortunately, it's not just one issue, it's both,” Conrad said. “We have to work with everyone we can to make it safe for the bus drivers and the children on those buses.”

Yudichak said he would work with state, county and township officials on a long-term solution.

8/13/2007

Did You Know?....Snapshot from a Century - Times Leader

A Nanticoke philanthropist's gift in 1937 brought immense joy and beauty to her city. When the will of Samantha J. Mill was read, it was found that she left \$100,000 and real estate for the building of a public library and a park. The Mill Memorial Library and park have served generations of Nanticoke residents in the 70 years since the bequest was announced.

8/9/2007

South Valley Chamber of Commerce wants you to celebrate Heritage Days. Even though the summer is slowly winding down, there still are plenty of things to do in Nanticoke.

Heritage Days, sponsored by the South Valley Chamber of Commerce (SVCC), are under way at Lower Broadway.

According to Jerry Hudak, SVCC president, the organization was created from the Greater Nanticoke Area Chamber of Commerce.

"We decided to create a regional chamber of commerce so we would have a stronger organization," said Hudak. "It is really hard for a smaller community to get something accomplished, but if we all work together, things happen."

Some of the communities that have joined the SVCC include Newport Township, Plymouth, Plymouth Borough, Hanover Township, Shickshinny, Mocanaqua and Berwick.

"Our goal is to promote an industrial area with thriving businesses. We keep track of available property and what is needed for our regions or businesses," Hudak said.

So how did the Heritage Days come to be?

"A group of us that attend the SVCC meetings decided it would be a great idea for residents to recall their heritage," Hudak said.

"Our heritage is a gift and we think that we need to promote our heritage and the South Valley Area. We also wanted people to have an opportunity to get out and build community and have a good time," he added.

Each night during Heritage Days there is a different theme. Tonight is Motor Sports Night.

"There seems to be a lot of interest in this area for racing and so we thought it would be a great idea to bring in some people who are involved in the sport," said Julianna Zarzecki, a member of the Heritage Days committee.

On hand will be the Danko racing team, winners of the recent Giant Despair Race in Northeastern Pennsylvania.

The Spencer racing family also will be starting up the engines and showing off their cars.

"Bring your cameras because this is always a great opportunity for a photo shoot," added Zarzecki.

Additionally, music will be provided by 40-Lb. Head from 6 to 9 p.m.

Rides will be available for the kids and tonight you pay one price (\$9) to ride all night.

Friday is Firefighter Night. A firemen's parade will begin at 5 p.m. at the Greater Nanticoke Area High School and end at the Lower Broadway fairgrounds.

I'm told there will be some wacky contests and the OZ band will provide music from 6 to 9 p.m.

Saturday is Bike Night with a bike run starting at 2 p.m. at the high school.

The cost to participate in the ride is \$10 and proceeds go toward the Eric Vannuci Memorial Fund. You might remember that Eric was struck by a car and killed in Plymouth.

"We wanted to do something to honor Eric's name and this seemed to be a good idea and something that a lot of people like to do," Hudak said.

The Newport Township Fire Department and John Yogi are sponsoring a potato-pancake eating contest and registration begins at 4 p.m. John

Stanky will provide the musical entertainment from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. and X Country will take the stage from 6 to 10.

There will be refreshments and all kinds of ethnic foods. There will be different displays related to the heritage of the South Valley Area and crafters also will be on hand.

Events take place tonight and tomorrow from 5 to 11 p.m. and Saturday from 3 to 11 p.m.

For more information, call 735-6990, 735-3175 or 592-7074.

Taxes are in the mail

City Treasurer Albert J. Wytoshek announced the 2007 Greater Nanticoke Area School District property taxes and per capita taxes were issued. As

per Act I, the school board adopted a plan to provide an option for installment payments of real estate taxes. This option applies to Homestead and Farmstead eligible properties. A taxpayer who chooses the installment plan will have the option to pay in three equal installments, which are due Aug.

31, Oct. 31 and Dec. 17. If the installment plan is selected, the taxpayer is not eligible for the 2 percent discount. If a taxpayer chooses to pay the tax in full, the rebate period will end Oct. 3. Face value ends Dec. 3 and the penalty period ends Dec. 15. Anyone who has not received a tax statement should notify the office at 735-2800. When paying by mail and requesting a receipt, enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Taxes for the current year are payable at the municipal building tax office Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. The 2007 city property taxes and city per capita taxes are in penalty period. All per capita taxes will be issued on a separate statement. Residents 18 and older are responsible to pay per capita tax. Any resident who has not received a statement is asked to contact the tax office. Pam Urbanski writes Nanticoke Area Notes every other Thursday.

8/9/2007

Bad bridges, intersection sources of concern for bus company boss

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Two weight-restricted bridges and a busy intersection without a traffic light are creating a trifecta of danger for school buses in Plymouth Township.

School starts on Aug. 28 for Greater Nanticoke Area students. White Transit bus company owner Richard Andrejko is worried the situation caused by bad bridges on East Poplar Street and Route 11, and the lack of a traffic light where state routes 11 and 29 meet, could lead to an accident.

“It’s like a stick of dynamite sitting out there waiting for someone to touch it with a match,” Andrejko said. “I’m really concerned about the safety of the children. That’s the primary issue here.”

An aging bridge on East Poplar Street that Luzerne County engineers believe is beyond repair has a weight limit of 10 tons. The bridge is near the Tilbury Fire Company at a point that is not only a GNA bus stop, but also a main transfer point for students from rural areas, Andrejko said.

Since they can’t cross the East Poplar Street bridge, school buses have to make a sharp, tight left turn onto Allen Street, which is little more than an alley.

“It’s virtually impossible to make the turn without backing up a few times,” Andrejko said.

Allen Street leads to Route 11. The problem is, at that intersection there is a collection of signs on the right side — facing toward Berwick — that are just the right height to completely block a bus driver’s view of traffic on Route 11 south, Andrejko said.

Plymouth Township supervisor chairwoman Gale Conrad, state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, his chief of staff Thomas Ruskey, and GNA Transportation Coordinator Janet Yezefski took a ride with Andrejko on a full-size school bus Wednesday to see the problem for themselves.

“It’s bad enough the buses have to take an alternate route and can’t go over the East Poplar Street bridge ... but they can’t see properly on Route 11 due to the height of the bus,” Conrad said.

A traffic light at routes 11 and 29 would give buses a chance to turn safely onto Route 11, since traffic would be stopped, she said.

“There needs to be a traffic light at the intersection,” Andrejko said. “Every day when we pull out there with children on the bus, it’s dangerous. It’s a catastrophe waiting to happen.”

In 2003, the supervisors asked the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation for the traffic light. After the June 2006 flood, they contacted PennDOT to check on the project status, Conrad said.

The bridge on Route 11 near the intersection was given a weight limit of 20 tons by PennDOT due to flood damage, she said. The bridge needs to be repaired or replaced, so installation of the traffic light has been postponed because the light sensors and related apparatus have to go in the bridge, Conrad said. According to PennDOT, the project will be bid in winter of 2010.

In the meantime, moving the signs at the Route 11 and Allen Street intersection, and possibly adding temporary flashing lights to alert motorists to the school buses, might help, Yudichak believes.

PennDOT spokeswoman Karen Dussinger said the signs can probably be adjusted if the township supervisors submit a formal request for review.

“I’m sure we’ll work with them on that,” she said. “Safety is safety.”

8/7/2007

County: Bridge in West Nanticoke can’t be repaired; visit to span set

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Plymouth Township officials are concerned about the deteriorated East Poplar Street bridge, which is a nuisance for Greater Nanticoke Area School District transportation and the Tilbury Fire Co.

Recent inspections led the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation to place a 10-ton weight limit on the bridge. That means most school buses and fire trucks can’t cross it.

For years there has been a Greater Nanticoke Area bus stop in front of the Tilbury fire hall. Buses now have to turn left at the fire hall, go down Allen Street — known as “the alley” — and come out in front of Banko’s, Supervisor Chairwoman Gale Conrad said. The wide turn is difficult for school buses, she said.

Fire trucks also have to make the turn to avoid the bridge, but Tilbury fire Chief John Rinehimer believes the situation is more inconvenient for the school district. “We have red lights and sirens and they don’t,” he said.

Conrad said township officials sent letters to Luzerne County, which is responsible for the bridge, in March and July, but never got a response.

County Engineer Joseph Gibbons said he never received the township’s letter of July 20, which was sent via registered mail. Jim Brozena, who was chief county engineer in March, has since been named director of the county flood protection authority.

When contacted Monday, Gibbons said fixing the East Poplar Street bridge is out.

“The bridge is such that it cannot be repaired,” he said.

Gibbons couldn’t estimate when it could be replaced. It has to be put on PennDOT’s Transportation Improvement Program list, he said. The 12-year plan is updated every year. As old projects are completed, new ones are put on. “Right now we have 25 other bridges in design,” Gibbons said.

State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, his chief of staff Thomas Ruskey and a representative of White Transit, which provides bus service to GNA school district, plan to visit the bridge this week with Plymouth Township officials.

8/7/2007

Do Not Call List ??
Citizens'Voice

Pennsylvanians tired of telemarketers got some relief five years ago when the state legislature passed the Do Not Call law in 2002. The federal government followed suit two years later, establishing the National Do Not Call Registry.

For those people who signed up first on the Pennsylvania list, it's time to re-register. The federal and state Do Not Call registries only last five years. Each list works differently, but serves the same goal.

As Thomas Ruskey, chief of staff for state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, said "It makes sense to be on both, because they're both free and it can only help."

Registering by Sept. 15 on the Pennsylvania list guarantees that telemarketers cannot call your home or cell phone by Nov. 1.

Telemarketers who do call could face \$1,000 fine, which can increase to \$3,000 if the telephone number belongs to a person and \$3,000 if the call is placed to a person 60 or older and is on the Do Not Call List.

The Pennsylvania attorney general's office maintains the state Do Not Call List. The Federal Trade Commission maintains the national one.

You can register at the state level by calling 1-888-777-3406 or www.attorneygeneral.gov. Register on the federal level at www.donotcall.gov.

8/7/2007

Breakers improve to 3-0 in softball nationals

The Times Leader staff

WILSON COUNTY, N.C. – Securing a perfect record heading into the double-elimination bracket of the 12-and-under Babe Ruth Softball World Series is definitely on the minds of the Luzerne County Breakers this week.

The Breakers kept their winning streak going with a 7-4 win over the host team Wilson County (N.C.) on Monday to run their record to 3-0 in pool play. With a fourth win today, the Breakers can lock up a bye in the first round of the World Series.

Lindsay Roberts picked up the win on the mound, pitching the first three innings and striking out five batters.

Angela Hillan struck out one in relief.

Roberts also took charge of the Breakers' offense, swatting an RBI triple, one of two hits for the pitcher. Kayley Schinski and Nicole Novakoski each hit RBI singles for Luzerne County.

The Breakers (3-0) are scheduled to face Heartland (Mo.) at noon today at Onnie Cockrell Field in Wilson County. Heartland (1-2) would need a win to have a chance of making the next round.

8/7/2007

Event scheduled in Vannucchi 's honor

slong@timesleader.com

Erik Vannucchi was looking forward to his college days at University Park when his life was cut short by a hit-and-run driver on May 29. The 19-year-old Plymouth man had completed his sophomore year at Penn State Wilkes-Barre and was headed to Main Campus when tragedy struck.

But his memory lives on, and organizers of Nanticoke's second annual South Valley Heritage Days are holding a motorcycle bike run in Vannucchi's honor.

The bike run is one of numerous events planned for the festival, which runs from Wednesday through Saturday.

Food, crafts, games and entertainment, and a parade will be featured.

Motorcyclists will leave from Nanticoke High School on Kosciuszko Street at 2 p.m. Saturday on a course through Back Mountain, Glen Lyon, Wilkes-Barre, Hanover Township and Nanticoke.

"All the money that is being raised will go to the Vannucchi family," said Kevin Greenberg, spokesman for the South Valley Chamber of Commerce. The chamber is hosting the four-day festival.

Heritage Days festivities kick off at 5 p.m. Wednesday when officials tap a keg of root beer.

The newly minted annual festival started last year as chamber members look for a way to highlight the South Valley's rich heritage in Luzerne County.

"After a couple business meetings at the chamber it was decided we should have something to celebrate our history in the South Valley," said Jerry Hudak, Chamber of Commerce president. "It's rich in history and folklore."

This year also features an inaugural potato pancake eating contest at 4 p.m. Saturday

"We invite contestants to bring their appetites and see how many they can devour," Hudak said.

Minivan shuttle service will pick up residents from the three senior citizen high-rise towers in Nanticoke hourly on Wednesday during the polka-themed night. Glen Lyon residents can be picked up at 5 p.m. at the senior citizen center with a return trip at 9 p.m.

Children may have their pictures taken while sitting in a race car Thursday during the motorsports-themed night.

The Danko race team from the Giants Despair Hillclimb in Wilkes-Barre Township will make an appearance, and antique, restored and stock cars will be featured.

Fire departments throughout the county have been invited to participate in a 6 p.m. parade on Friday during Fireman's Night.

Music will be provided nightly, from 6 to 10, and will include polka band Jolly Joe and the Bavarians on Wednesday; local recording band 40 Lb. Head will on Thursday; Oz Band on Friday and two bands on Saturday – John Stanky, from 3:30-5:30 p.m., followed by X Country at 6 p.m. during Bike Night.

If you go

WHAT: South Valley Heritage Days

WHEN: Wednesday-Saturday

WHERE: Nanticoke Fairgrounds, Lower Broadway

NOTES: Admission is free. Food, crafts and games will be featured.

INFO: 735-6990

8/6/2007

Nanticoke skateboard law hits snag

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City officials want to help police by regulating where skateboarders can skate, but they aren't sure how to do it fairly.

Last week, council set aside, unpassed, an ordinance prohibiting skateboarding and skating downtown. "Downtown" would be considered the Susquehanna River to the north, Green Street to the south, Hanover Street to the west and Chestnut Street to the east.

The problem council found was that if passed, the ordinance would allow some skateboarders but not others to skate in front of their homes.

"It has to be fair for everyone," Mayor John Bushko said.

Nanticoke police wrote the ordinance based on Wilkes-Barre City's, Nanticoke Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

"This is a pretty important issue, because we are dealing with a police department problem," Johnson said, adding, "I honestly don't know what changes we're going to make before the next meeting."

If skateboarding is only banned downtown, kids will start hanging out in other parts of town, and people will complain, Bushko said.

"It will be a tough ordinance to enforce," he noted.

Like Johnson, Bushko doesn't favor a citywide ban. Most of the problem is at the Kanjorski Center and in the Weis Market parking lot, city officials say. Skateboarders are causing property damage to downtown businesses, and they are a danger to pedestrians, Johnson said.

"It's fine for kids to be on skateboards in the parts of the city where there are not a lot of people," Johnson said. "I think the police department is absolutely accurate in where they are going with this."

The proposed ordinance is weaker than the existing one, because it only prohibits skateboarding downtown, while the current ordinance bans it everywhere, Johnson noted. What a new ordinance would have is a stiffer penalty: a fine of \$100 to \$1,000 instead of \$5 under the current ordinance.

The fine is actually higher, Bushko said. He was told by Magisterial District Judge Donald Whittaker that fines must be a minimum of \$25. Community service can also be given instead, Bushko said.

"Hopefully the skate park will be built within a few months and this will all be behind us," Bushko said.

To build the skate park — which is the first part of a proposed recreation complex on Lower Broadway — the South Valley Partnership has to lease land from the city's redevelopment authority. What's holding it up are some legal issues involving land ownership.

"We're getting close," said Thomas Ruskey, chief of staff for state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke.

The redevelopment authority is working on the details, Bushko said. He said authority solicitor Susan Maza recently met with city attorney William Finnegan to come up with a lease agreement.

8/6/2007

Sending a unified message

Participants told to contact legislators and vote out officials who don't address polarizing problem.

By Jennifer Learn-Andesjandes@timesleader.com

Frank Scavo wanted the 200 or so people at Sunday's Voice of the People USA rally in Nanticoke to make their feelings known to federal legislators, so he dialed Sen. Arlen Specter's number.

Scavo explained in the voice recording that he had a message from the people, and he faced his cell phone at the audience.

"Close the borders," the crowd screamed in unison before bursting into applause.

Scavo told the group that he and others aren't against immigrants, just illegal ones. He and others said they are tired of critics painting them as racist. Scavo said he is a descendant of legal immigrants and held up their framed naturalization certificate.

"This is how it's done. Where did we go off track?" Scavo said, blaming government leaders. "There is only one way this will ever get fixed, and that is with we the people, the voice of the people."

The message to contact legislators and vote out officials who don't do something about illegal immigrants was stressed repeatedly during the rally at Patriot Park.

"If you do not register to vote then you're the moron," said Eric Bieski, who helped to bring the rally to Nanticoke. "Honestly, it is cool to

vote.”

Bieski said he was born and raised in Nanticoke and worries that its cheap housing will attract illegal immigrants, including those who are leery about staying in Hazleton. Renee Butts, the organization’s executive secretary, pumped up the crowd, asking why the U.S.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement “isn’t doing its job.”

“What are they doing? Reading the latest Harry Potter book?”

The crowd booed when she brought up U.S. District Judge James Munley’s ruling that Hazleton’s illegal immigration ordinances violate the U.S. Constitution.

“My, what an admirable man. He is too much of a coward to stand up for any of us,” she said. “He expects us to wait for the federal government. I don’t know about you, but I am not going to hold my breath.”

Several city police officers stood at the park perimeter, but they reported no disruptions. There were no counter-protestors. There was one outburst, when a woman yelled out that people should put as much energy into fighting the city’s drug and crime problems. However, she quieted down when others in the audience told her that illegal aliens were the issue of the day.

Several T-shirts were sold to raise money for Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta’s appeal of Munley’s ruling. The T-shirts said “Illegal Stops Here. Hazleton PA.”

There were lots of American flags, and others wore T-shirts that said “Border Patrol” and “Welcome to America. Now speak English.”

Anthony Zaykoski, of Bear Creek Township, brought a sign that said, “Illegals must go. We can’t afford them.” The flip side said “Lou B is helping us. We must support him.”

Zaykoski said it’s the first time he attended a rally. He said he is tired of feeling powerless and wanted to show federal officials that lots of people

want action.

“These people coming here illegally are ignoring our laws,” he said.

Retired border patrol agent Mike Cutler said politicians have “politicized the immigration issue.”

Cutler said he testified in 15 Congressional hearings since the attacks of Sept. 11, and he rattled off statistics about illegal immigrants.

More than 25 percent of the criminals in jails across the country are identified as illegal aliens, he said. He also maintained that an illegal alien is

three to four times as likely to be involved with a felony as a United States citizen.

“For our country to allow criminals to enter our nation and victimize our citizens is an outrage,” he said.

“These people coming here illegally are ignoring our laws.”

Anthony Zaykoski

Bear Creek resident

8/4/2007

3 county teams eye big prize

dkonopki@timesleader.com

Manager Dan Markowski was hoping his team would win a district championship and maybe – if things went really well – it could make a run in the state playoffs.

Three weeks later, the Luzerne County Breakers U12 team is in the Babe Ruth Softball World Series in Wilson County, N.C.

The team comprised of players ages 12 and under flew out of Newark, N.J., on Thursday and will open play at 5:30 p.m. today against Ohio Valley. The Breakers won the local district championship and state title – both of those tournaments were played in Ashley – before taking first place in their division at a regional tournament in Vineland, N.J., to earn a spot in the World Series.

“We figured we’d win our district and maybe the state (championship),” Markowski said. “Once we got to the regional, we thought we’d give it our best shot. We never expected to go this far.”

The Breakers are one of three teams in Luzerne County who will be playing in national tournaments next week. The Luzerne County Cougars earned a berth in the U10 division of the Babe Ruth Softball World Series and the U14 Wyoming Valley Flames qualified to compete in the ASA World Fast Pitch Class A World Series in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Markowski says his players aren’t going to North Carolina to be spectators. “We’re going down there to win. We asked the girls what they want to do, and they want to win.”

According to Markowski, the Breakers have advanced with timely hitting, quality defense and solid pitching. Lindsay Roberts and Angela Hillan have been splitting most of the pitching duties, while Nicole Novakoski has taken the mound for a few innings during the postseason.

“It’s been an all-around team effort,” Markowski said. “Everyone has been contributing.”

And the parents have been extremely supportive, he said. “Most of them have been taking their vacations around it. They always make sure the girls get to practice on time. And the girls don’t mind practicing. It’s been a lot of fun.”

In addition to the three pitchers, other members of the team are Kayla Benjamin, Kayley Schinski, Katie Kowalski, Sydney Kotch, Hannah Dalmas, Mallory Markowski, Katlyn Wolfe, Bronwyn Perrins, Allie Matulewski and Kayla Tarnowski. The assistant coaches are Michael Kotch and Judy Pazgan. Most of the players live in Nanticoke and Newport, with one each from Wilkes-Barre and Hunlock Creek.

World Series play commences today with four days of round-robin competition. The participating teams are divided into two brackets for round-robin play. Each team is guaranteed four games. The first-, second-, and third-place teams from each division in the round-robin will advance to double-elimination play, which begins on the following Saturday. According to its Web site, Babe Ruth League, Inc. provides transportation to the World Series, as well as housing and meals for all participants and coaches, at no cost to the teams.

Information about the Luzerne County Cougars was not available and phone calls were not returned.

The Wyoming Valley Flames will begin the 20-team Myrtle Beach tournament with pool play Tuesday and Wednesday. The Flames will play the

Wake Forest (N.C.) Rockers, followed by games against the South Carolina Express and the Maryland Champions. The top 10 teams advance to a double-elimination tournament, with the champion being crowned next weekend.

Members of the team are Sarah Bertoni, Amanda Cardone, Marissa Chiampi, Brooke Darling, Mallory Getz, Artonya Gordon, Jamie Hampsey, Sarah Konopki, Kaitlyn Opet, Clarissa Tarnowski and Erica Yanora. The manager of the team is Bob Bertoni and the assistant coaches are Neil Opet and Bob Tarnowski.

8/2/2007

Nanticoke expects no trouble from rally Sunday

Voice of the People USA, which opposes illegal immigration and backs Hazleton laws, sets event for Patriot Park.

slong@timesleader.com

City officials aren't anticipating any problems Sunday afternoon when a Hazleton-based organization hosts an illegal immigration reform rally, which could possibly draw hundreds of people to downtown.

Mayor John Busko promises there will be a police presence at the rally though no additional officers have been scheduled to work to cover the event. Usually, two officers work each shift.

Voice of the People USA will hold a rally at 1 p.m. Sunday at Patriot Park. Dan Smeriglio, founder of the Hazleton non-profit group, spoke during a July 28 rally in New Jersey where a few illegal immigration supporters were arrested.

Voice of the People officials contacted the city about the rally before last week, when Hazleton's illegal immigration ordinance was declared unconstitutional by a federal judge. Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta vows to appeal the judge's decision.

"They claim they have had a lot of residents contacting them asking them to come to Nanticoke," City Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

Eric Bieski, a 19-year-old Nanticoke resident, has raised the issue of establishing illegal immigration laws in the city.

In May, Bieski asked council members to consider passing an ordinance similar to Hazleton's which would punish landlords and businesses for renting properties or hiring illegal immigrants.

The city council has not taken any action on the issue.

Calls to Bieski and Smeriglio were not returned as of press time.

The rally will be treated just like any other public event held at Patriot Park, Johnson said, noting the city is not endorsing the message organizers are presenting.

"We are not condoning it. It's a public space and they can use it," Johnson said. No city permits had to be issued for the rally.

City officials are just waiting to see how the appellate courts rule on the issue before deciding to consider an illegal immigration ordinance.

"The court ruled this is a federal issue, not a state or local issue," Johnson said.

If you go...

What: Immigration reform rally

When: 1 p.m. Sunday

Where: Patriot Park in Nanticoke on Prospect Street

Organized by Voice of the People USA, www.voiceofthepeopleusa.com

8/2/2007

Nanticoke's new code officer resigns his post

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Council learned Wednesday the city is losing another employee, the second within two weeks.

Code Enforcement Officer Scott Paveletz turned in his resignation, Councilman Brent Makarczyk said. Public Works Director Anthony DiPietro

resigned July 20.

The loss of Paveletz leaves the city "kind of in a bind," Mayor John Bushko said. Gerald Cross, executive director of Pennsylvania Economy League, Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, had just finished telling council code enforcement is a high priority.

Code enforcement involves making sure city ordinances and codes are followed, in order to protect residents' health and safety. An officer does things like cite owners of problem properties.

On June 6, council hired Paveletz at a salary of \$35,000 a year plus benefits. Officials couldn't say why he resigned, and he was not present Wednesday. A replacement will be sought immediately. City engineer Darryl Pawlush of Michael J. Pasonick Associates said a related but separate entity, Pasonick Equipment, can provide code enforcement services in the meantime.

City officials are holding off on replacing DiPietro. PEL's financial recovery plan calls for an analysis of the public works department, and Cross said

the state Department of Community and Economic Development is working on finding a peer — someone with firsthand public works experience —

to do a yearlong review.

Council postponed voting on an ordinance prohibiting skateboarding downtown.

"I think we have to do a little more research," Bushko said. "I don't think it's 100 percent fair to everybody."

[Council agreed. If passed as-is, the ordinance means "some kids can skate in front of their house, some can't," Councilman Joe Dougherty said.

The ordinance, drawn up by city Administrator Kenneth Johnson, defines downtown boundaries as the Susquehanna River on the north, Green Street on the south, Hanover Street on the west and Chestnut Street on the east. Greater Nanticoke Area high school is included, but a skate park planned for Lower Broadway is excepted. Anyone caught skateboarding or roller skating downtown could face a fine of \$100 to \$1,000, and/or up to 30 days in jail.

In other business:

Resident Dorothy Yeager complained about more and more cars being parked along streets, making passage difficult. She asked if some roads could be made one-way. Bushko agreed re-routing traffic on city streets is something city officials should investigate.

The city will soon be cleared to receive \$381,267 in state Office of Community Development grant money from 2006, Bushko said. Part of the money will be used to repave Maple Street from West Broad to West Green, West Noble Street from Hanover to Fairchild, and West Ridge Street from Market to Hanover. Pawlusch said he is ready to go "full steam ahead" with engineering plans.

City officials will look into whether there is enough money in the sewer fund to do something about Orchard Street, which Bushko said contains a main sewer line.

8/2/2007

Nanticoke's full-time code enforcer resigns

slong@timesleader.com

Council members learned Wednesday night during their meeting that the city's code enforcement official resigned.

City Administrator Kenneth Johnson confirmed that he spoke to Scott Paveltz earlier Wednesday about the resignation. Johnson said he had not yet received a written letter of resignation.

Johnson did not attend the meeting because he is at home recovering from arm surgery. It was not immediately known why Paveltz resigned.

Councilman Jim Litchofski asked what the city could do until a new code enforcement official could be hired.

Daryl Pawlusch of Pasonick Engineering said his firm could handle the work without any cost to the city.

"They don't charge the municipality," he said. "The contractors pay the fee."

The duties of a code enforcement official and building code official are very different, said Harry Miller, a Pennsylvania Economy League senior research associate.

Code enforcement officials ensure the city's ordinances, including those regarding high grass and junked vehicles, are being followed.

Council did not make any decision regarding what its next move will be.

Paveltz was scheduled to undergo training to eventually become certified as a code enforcement official.

The state requires municipalities to have licensed code building officials to inspect and issue permits for new building construction, remodeling, electrical and plumbing work.

"We are still in compliance with the state building code," Johnson said.

The city has one part-time building code official, Andy Kratz.

Paveltz was hired as a full-time code enforcement official in mid-June at a salary of \$35,000 to handle nuisance reports. Before Paveltz was hired, the city went several months without an employee to handle complaints on high grass or nuisance properties.

7/30/2007

Nanticoke rally to back reform

Event set for Sunday in support of Hazleton ordinances and Barletta.

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A group that supports Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta and the city's illegal immigration ordinances that were struck down by a federal judge last week will hold another in a series of rallies in support of Barletta, the ordinances and immigration reform next Sunday at Patriot Park.

Dan Smeriglio, founder of Voice of the People USA, said several speakers are scheduled for the 1 p.m. rally, which he expects to be peaceful, in contrast to recent similar rallies he's attended as a speaker and helped organize.

Counter-protesters who were sympathetic to the plight of illegal immigrants and who believe Hazleton's laws are unjust became loud near the end of a rally in Scranton in June, prompting the host to end the rally slightly early and police to clear the streets.

And five people affiliated with a counter-rally at an immigration reform rally in Morristown, N.J., at which Smeriglio spoke on Saturday were arrested, and dozens more cited with disorderly conduct, according to The Daily Record newspaper in Morris County.

Morristown resident Rob Pearson organized that rally in part to support Morristown Mayor Donald Cresitello's plan to deputize police to enforce federal immigration laws.

Despite the disruption by counter-protesters, Smeriglio described the Morristown rally as "fun."

“The audience was so great, they were so pumped up and into it. It’s nice to see that kind of reaction in another state,” Smeriglio said. Smeriglio hopes for a similar reaction from the crowd he expects in Nanticoke, where he says many residents have asked for a rally to show their support for Barletta.

Smeriglio said he’s glad Barletta plans to appeal U.S. District Judge James Munley’s decision, in which he called the Hazleton laws a violation of the U.S. Constitution supremacy clause, and said that legislation in matters like immigration are under the auspices of the federal government.

Hazleton’s Illegal Immigration Relief Act would fine landlords who rent to illegal immigrants and suspend the licenses of businesses that hire them. A related ordinance would require all renters in the city to register with the city and prove citizenship or legal residency status. Speakers scheduled for the Nanticoke rally include York talk radio host Gary Sutton, retired border patrol agent Mike Cutler, 9/11 Families for a Secure America president Peter Gadiel, Morristown’s Rob Pearson, and Voice of the People members Frank Scavo, Greg Griffin, Renee Butts and others.

7/29/2007

Cabbage Roll brings out veggie hurlers

By bkalinowski@citizensvoice.com

The sloped road in the city’s Honey Pot section is actually called River Street, but most locals have always known it as “Cabbage Hill.” A fledgling tradition of bowling cabbages down that hill has taken the moniker to a new level.

One day a year, the Cabbage Roll makes the street a venue for a spectator sport in an odd — but apparently successful — fundraising effort for the Honey Pot Volunteer Fire Department. It’s modeled after similar exploits decades ago when coal miners would gather to zip cabbages down that very hill, which then was dirt.

At this year’s event on Saturday, hundreds lined up for a chance to whiz their head of cabbage the longest distance down the hill. To play, it cost \$2 for a roll ticket and \$1 to “rent” the cabbage. Insurance was available for \$1, which would allow you another try in case of an errant roll that didn’t make 100 feet. Organizers had 1,500 cabbages on hand. Brussel sprouts were available for kids to roll. Some people, like 16-year-old Stephen Swicklik — the self-described “Cabbage King from Cabbageland” who dressed the part: crown, green cape, cabbage-topped scepter and all — brought his own cabbage. That qualified him for the “cheat” division.

See, most vie to win cash prizes in the youth, adult or senior category, using the standard-issue cabbage. Those who manipulate theirs — such as wrapping rubber bands around it — get lumped by themselves. Last year, one culprit was caught using a frozen cabbage. The course is a straight lane, lined with clear plastic. Filled fire hoses act as bumpers. Amid a hot July afternoon, dozens of spectators lined each side of the lane through most of the 500 foot course. On the porch of nearly every “Cabbage Hill” home were families enjoying the festivities. One group even had a keg of beer.

In the weaning minutes of the event, it seemed only fitting Carol Gorski’s roll would go the furthest. Gorski, 67, grew up on “Cabbage Hill” and, like other Honey Pot natives, knows the history of the hill. Decades ago, when Honey Pot was primarily farm land and cabbages were aplenty, a group of coal miners would gather to roll cabbages down the hill.

“They had a day off. They’d sit with their family, have a beer, and roll cabbages down the hill,” said Cabbage Roll founder, Honey Pot Assistant Fire Chief Chet Kopco.

Kopco, known by many as “Father Cabbage,” said the second-annual event has been a boost in the arm for the fire department’s finances, but thereal joy is watching all the fun people have. Whether the roller is a youngster, a bulky bodybuilder, or a frail grandmother, everyone’s cabbage has a chance to go the distance, he said.

It’s all a matter of how the cabbages rolls.

“Cabbage Hill is the only place in America where everybody is equal,” he said.

7/29/2007

Special head game

Sending cabbage down a hill is a chance for fun while raising cash for a Honey Pot fire truck.

slong@timesleader.com

Cabbage ruled the day in Nanticoke Saturday as 300 participants gave the leafy vegetables a roll down Cabbage Hill for a good cause. Money raised from this year’s Cabbage Roll will help the Honey Pot Volunteer Active Fire Company No. 6 put a down payment on a new fire truck to replace the 1965 unit currently being used.

“It’s getting old; they’ve had some fundraisers to do repairs on it to keep it alive,” said Ron Zaykoski, a social member of the fire company, who coordinated the construction of this year’s 500-foot cabbage roll course.

“We don’t want to buy a new truck. We just want to put a down payment on a used truck. Something a little bit newer and more reliable.” As of 7:40 p.m. Saturday the fire company earned \$500 from just the cabbage rolling, Zaykoski said. It was unknown how much was raised from the festival activities where attendees could enjoy live music and munch on food from various vendors.

People traveled near and far to test their cabbage-rolling skills at the festival, which first began in August 2005.

Michael and Carol Kuzio traveled three hours from Shelton, Conn., to test their rolling skills while supporting her brother’s fire company. Carol’s brother is Honey Pot Fire Chief Frank Wolfe.

“To see all these people come out just to roll a head of cabbage and support the fire department it’s worth the trip,” Carol Kuzio said. Nanticoke resident Mary Skovronski’s friends from King of Prussia came to cheer her on during her first cabbage roll.

“It’s fun. It’s like giving back to the community,” she said.

Last year the fire company sponsored the Six-County Firemen’s Convention. Now the Cabbage Roll festival has returned for good, planners said.

Participants compete in three age divisions: youth, 10 to 17 years old; adult, 18 to 64 years old; and seniors, 65 and older, to see who can roll their cabbage the farthest down the 500-foot plastic tarp. A creative division allowed participants to slightly change their cabbages using aluminum foil, freezing them or drilling three finger holes in them like a bowling ball. Firefighter hoses lined the tarp marking the out-of-bounds marks.

“It’s all good family fun and that’s what it’s all about,” Zaykoski said.

The top three winners in each category will receive cash prizes and a plaque. A creative division entry broke the record for longest roll after a cabbage wrapped in foil went to 484.5 feet. In 2005, Sharon Iquasiak won the contest with a roll of 479.9 feet.

7/27/2007

Skateboard devotees set city cleanup

Project in Nanticoke is to improve image of skateboarders, who hope to have skate park built in county.

boboyle@timesleader.com

Quick! When you think of skateboarders, what first comes to mind?

Troublemaking? Vandalism? Juvenile delinquency?

How about community service?

A group of skateboarders will conduct a cleanup in Nanticoke from 2 to 6 p.m. Sunday.

Why?

“First, we want to help clean up the city,” said Kevin Pizzano of Dallas. “And we want to improve the image that people have of skateboarders.”

The cleanup is coordinated by 20-year-old Bill Borowski, who said he and fellow skateboard enthusiasts want to show the community that they are good people.

“We’re trying to do something good for the community, but we want to also improve the way people think of skateboarders,” Borowski said. “We are planning to do a cleanup every month to show we are serious.”

Borowski said the cleanup will be concentrated on the area near the Kanjorski Building and Weis Market, including the parking lots and streets.

“Skateboarders have a bad image and we want to get rid of it,” Borowski said.

Pizzano, 26, and two of his friends – James Gidosh, 29, of Wilkes-Barre, and Mike Valentukonis, 30, of West Wyoming, are the founders of Northeast Pennsylvania Free Skate Park Association. They are trying to convince elected officials to build a skate park in Luzerne County. The three attended a Wilkes-Barre City Council meeting this month to ask officials to consider building a facility in the city.

They plan to attend the next meeting of the Luzerne County Commissioners on Sept. 10 to ask for the county’s help.

“We’ve always said we want to help out,” Pizzano said. “We need to dispel the image that skateboarders are bad kids.”

Pizzano said the local skate park group will hold a cleanup in Wilkes-Barre, but said a date and site have not been determined.

Luzerne County Commissioner Chairman Greg Skrepenak came out in support of building a skate park, while Wilkes-Barre City has asked for time to study the idea.

Gidosh, Pizzano and Valentukonis would like to see a state-of-the-art facility built somewhere in the county. They said a park would provide a safer and more authentic venue for skateboarders who are relegated to vacant parking lots, sidewalks and streets.

Their organization claims there are more than 13,500 skateboard enthusiasts in the county, making it one of the top recreational activities in the area.

According to a Times Leader Web poll of more than 7,000 people, 70 percent favor building a skate park.

“The interest in skateboarding is there and has been for years,” Pizzano said. “We just want a place to ride our skateboards. And we want to show

people that we’re not bad people. We want to help out. That’s why we’re going to Nanticoke Sunday.”

Pizzano said interested volunteers are asked to meet at 2 p.m. Sunday in front of Weis Market, Nanticoke.

7/26/2007

Nanticoke-Newport just 1 game short

Locals lose 4-3 to West Point while still showing the ability that got them there.

By Dave Rosengrant drosengrant@timesleader.com

On its way to the state title game, Nanticoke-Newport put up some gaudy numbers and outscored opponents by more than 30 runs in winning the 11-12-year-old District 16 East and Sectional softball championships.

The team probably wished it could have saved a few of those runs for the state tournament.

Despite losing to West Point 4-3 in the gold medal contest on Wednesday at Feichtel Field at the Mary F. Byers Memorial Sports Complex, the squad still accomplished a rare feat by finishing second in the state and only losing two games in the postseason.

The team probably wished it could have saved a few of those runs for the state tournament.

Despite losing to West Point 4-3 in the gold medal contest on Wednesday at Feichtel Field at the Mary F. Byers Memorial Sports Complex, the squad still accomplished a rare feat by finishing second in the state and only losing two games in the postseason.

"It was a great team effort during this run," said Nanticoke-Newport Manager Bill Rubasky. "This is a great group of kids and parents. ... They have a promising future."

Nanticoke-Newport (12-2) took a 2-0 lead in the top of the first inning without getting a hit. Nanticoke-Newport leadoff hitter Sammi Gow scored the game's first run when Lizzy Dougherty was safe on an error. Dougherty then came around to score on a suicide squeeze by Hannah Rubasky.

West Point cut the lead in half in the bottom of the first when Katie Hickey drove in Alyssa Bates with a single. It tied the game in the bottom of the second inning on a Caitlin Tobin single that scored Taylor Smail.

The game remained tied until the top of the fifth. That's when Gow came through with an RBI single that scored Cassie Yalch, who walked to lead off the frame. Nanticoke-Newport was six outs away from forcing a decisive championship game in the best-of-three series with a 3-2 lead.

But West Point came right back in the bottom of the inning and scored two unearned runs on Nanticoke-Newport errors to take a 4-3 lead. Nanticoke-Newport never gave up, though. And with two outs in the top of the sixth, the team got a rally going when Ashley Horoschock and Yalch had back-to-back singles. But Brooke Chapin popped out to West Point second baseman Leah Daigle to end the game.

"I'm very proud of these girls," Bill Rubasky said. "They didn't quit and played as hard as they could. There is nothing else I could ask for."

With this impressive showing, the sky is the limit for this team. The historic 2003 PIAA Class 2A championship team for Greater Nanticoke Area didn't win a Little League title until they were 16 years old.

"This team has a good shot at (winning a state title) because to get this far and being 12 years old is a big accomplishment," Rubasky said.

7/25/2007

DiPietro resigns Nanticoke public works post

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke's public works director has resigned, leaving an already shrunken department even smaller at the height of outdoor work season.

Anthony DiPietro gave his notice over the weekend, city officials said.

"We're very regretful we had to accept his resignation," city Administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

Johnson could not give details because it is a personnel issue. DiPietro could not be located for comment.

DiPietro was hired in June 2006 at \$35,000 a year. Now that he's gone, the public works department is down to seven full-time men, the lowest number ever. Mayor John Bushko said in the 1970s and 1980s, there were approximately 25 public works employees.

But there were increasing financial problems, which led to the city being designated financially distressed by the state in May 2006.

In addition to road work, public works employees perform maintenance at city hall, take care of Patriot Square, and cut grass at the lots the city owns, Bushko said.

Nanticoke's recovery plan, drawn up by recovery coordinator Pennsylvania Economy League, calls for contracting out maintenance of city buildings, and for work like grass cutting to be done by seasonal employees.

There is money budgeted for a public works director. However, the plan states, "There is a question whether the public works department will be able to meet the challenges facing the city during the recovery plan period." It calls for "the city in conjunction with the plan coordinator (to) reevaluate the department's effectiveness in early 2008."

The mayor and council will sit down with PEL to figure out what to do about getting another public works director, Litchkofski said, noting, "That's not to say we won't fill the position, but it gives us an opportunity to consider our options."

In the meantime, road crew foreman Walter Pavelitz will be in charge of the department, Litchkofski said.

Summer is when the department's workload is heaviest. In addition, on Friday and Saturday, visitors will be coming to Nanticoke for the Honey Pot Fire Company's Cabbage Roll fundraiser.

City officials aren't worried.

"We're going to get the area taken care of, and we should be on target," Litchkofski said.

The fire company has done a lot of weed control at Cabbage Hill and cleaned up the Honey Pot access roads, Bushko and Litchkofski said. And with summer half over, it won't be long before being temporarily short-staffed won't matter, Bushko believes.

"In winter there's not really that much to do, just keep up with equipment, repair the storm drains and wait for snow," he said.

7/25/2007

Roll out the cabbages

Heather M. Gazella Weekender Intern

Curiosity drew thousands to this event last year, and the 2007 Cabbage Roll Festival promises to be bigger and better.

If you are looking for something unique to do this weekend, the Honey Pot Fire Company is hosting the 2nd Annual Cabbage Roll Festival at the Lower Broadway Fairgrounds in Nanticoke. The Festival includes two days of food and entertainment, with guest appearances, and the main event: cabbage rolling.

The Weekender recently talked with Chet Kopco, assistant fire chief of the Honey Pot Fire Company, a.k.a. "Father Cabbage," about the

cabbage tradition that first started nearly 100 years ago. According to the Cabbage Roll Festival 2007 Web site, Sundays were a day of rest for many coal miners in the Nanticoke region. Many residents of the Honey Pot area tended the garden, went on picnics, drank a little beer, and stumbled upon the idea of rolling cabbages — “cheap bowling balls” — down a hill.

In 2005 the Honey Pot Fire Company revived this tradition of rolling cabbages down Cabbage Hill, better known as North Market Street in the Honey Pot section of Nanticoke. This year, the Cabbage Roll Festival is a fundraising event for many non-profit organizations in the lower Luzerne County area. It not only serves as a fundraiser for the fire company, in its goal of purchasing a new Fire Engine, but also as a way to bring the community together and remember the history of the area.

The Cabbage Roll is a unique sporting event for all ages, in which participants roll cabbages down Cabbage Hill for distance prizes. The Cabbage Roll itself will be held on Saturday, July 28 starting at 2 p.m. with opening ceremonies beginning at 1:30 p.m.

The competition is open to all ages, from infants to seniors. “Father Cabbage” says that his favorite part of the Festival is the cabbage roll. “[Even though] I’ve never gotten to roll one,” he said. “We have a Brussel sprout division for infants; their parents help them roll Brussel sprouts down the hill.”

There will also be an open division that includes senior citizens who will be coming from local nursing homes.

The Cabbage Roll was so competitive last year that participants altered the state of their cabbages in order to gain an advantage.

“Yes, it is a competition, and prizes are involved, which means some engineers go the extra mile,” Kopco said with a laugh. “One [person] wrapped

500 rubber bands around the cabbage to make it bouncy. Other cabbages have been frozen, and one person may be bringing a cabbage sealed in nitrogen.”

Kopco added that there is now a division for those competitive engineers and for added audience entertainment.

Cabbages can be brought from home or purchased on the hill but cannot be wrapped, glued, frozen or altered to change the natural shape, except for

removal of loose leaves and to trim the stem end of the cabbage.

“We are expecting between 4,000 and 5,000 people at this event,” Kopco said. “The first year, it was a tiny gathering to raise money. But this year we took a [big leap and] advertised nationally, and added more entertainment.”

Added features of the festival include live music from Beyond Fallen and 40LB Head; a Cabbage Roll Challenge between the Coal City Rollers roller derby team and the NEPA Miners football team, its coaches and cheerleaders; Pride Motorcycle Club bike show; and fireworks on Friday night. WWF professional wrestling legend King Kong Bundy will also be there to meet and greet fans plus take photos and sign autographs.

“There may be a mystery roller scheduled for Saturday,” Kopco added. “We have been getting calls from the governor’s office asking about the event, and he may be coming.”

The 1st Annual Pride Cabbage Roll bike show will be on Friday, July 27. Classes include: Classic 1980 and older, sport bike, cruiser, touring and rat

bike. Entry is free and open to everyone. Trophies will be awarded to first, second and third places. “Best of Show” will get a trophy and a free tattoo from 570 Tattooing Co. in Wilkes-Barre.

When: Fri. & Sat., July 27-28.

Fri., 6 p.m., Sat., 12 p.m.

Where: Lower Broadway

Fairgrounds in Nanticoke, and Cabbage Hill, Honey Pot

7/25/2007

Golfers close to the win

Citizens Voice

Several law enforcement members with Nanticoke ties nearly claimed victory in the recent Luzerne County Drug Task Force golf tournament at the Wyoming Valley County Club, finishing in what they said was a “close second.”

The runners-up were: Retired Nanticoke officer Bill Brown, Nanticoke police officer Mike Roke, former Nanticoke officer and Liquor Enforcement Officer Mike Rutkowski, and Magisterial District Judge Don Whittaker.

Winners were Joe Urban Sr., Joe Urban Jr., Lenny Malashefski and Harry Zdzarski.

7/24/2007

Nanticoke authority awaits state word on proposed LCCC downtown project

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The Nanticoke General Municipal Authority board is playing the waiting game.

Board members are eager to get started on plans for downtown revitalization, but several public and private development projects hinge on Luzerne County Community College’s master plan being accepted by the state Department of Education.

The Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority owns several properties in the city, including the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street. The municipal authority manages the properties and steers downtown redevelopment plans.

LCCC officials want the Kanjorski Center for a health sciences center. They are also looking at the site of the city-owned senior center on

Market and Main streets for a culinary arts school. The projects have attracted interest from private developers, including one who wants to demolish the nearby authority-owned former CVS building and construct an office building at the site.

LCCC officials revised the master plan to include the two new off-campus schools and sent it to the state for approval, which is necessary for funding.

State Department of Education spokesman Mike Race said earlier Monday the plan was received June 30 and is under review. Depending on whether the department needs more information, it should make a decision in two to three weeks, he said.

Authority member Richard Butler wondered what would happen if the deal with LCCC fell through. Authority chairman Ron Kamowski said the Kanjorski Center is still being advertised for sale.

In addition to the LCCC sale, new sidewalks, streetlights, and other downtown improvements are key.

“All the developers want to see the downtown area streetscaped. That is very important,” Kamowski said.

He contacted the U.S. Department of Transportation, which is forwarding information and paperwork for a \$5.6 million federal grant U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, obtained for the improvements.

Butler proposed looking into grants to improve the façades of privately owned buildings across the street from the Kanjorski Center. He said it is important to look at the entire picture, instead of doing revitalization projects piecemeal.

“I think what we need to focus on now is the Kanjorski Center and the corner of Main and Market streets,” authority solicitor Joseph Lach said. “If we work on those, other things have a chance of falling into place.”

7/23/2007

Plymouth Twp., Nanticoke road crews team up for road paving project
Citizens' Voice

The first cooperative paving project between two financially strapped South Valley municipalities was a success. Last week, Plymouth Township's road crew joined Nanticoke's to pave parts of Arch and Broadway streets and the Allied Services parking lot, which contains a city-owned storm sewer.

Both departments did a good job, according to Nanticoke City Administrator Kenneth Johnson and Mayor John Bushko. Best of all, the bill will be about \$10,000 — a third of what it would have cost to bid out the project, Johnson said.

He indicated the money could come from the three pieces of Nanticoke's road equipment recently sold by council.

Sole bidder Orval's Towing Service got the 1992 Chevrolet half-ton pickup truck for \$210. A 1983 International dump truck went to Visnefski for \$400, the lowest of three bidders. A 1996 Case backhoe received numerous offers, leading Johnson to remark, “Everybody bid on the backhoe. It was very popular.” High bidder was Rinehimer Equipment at \$9,300.

In other business, council appointed Yvonne Bozinski to the recreation commission, rounding out the nine-member board.

7/21/2007

Clay resigns from Nanticoke Housing Authority post
Citizens' Voice

Perry Clay, executive director of the Nanticoke Housing Authority, has resigned, citing personal reasons.

“It's just not the place for me,” Clay said. “Plus, I got a really good offer.”

He didn't elaborate.

Kenneth Johnson said although he has only been Nanticoke's city administrator for a short time, his experiences with Clay were “very positive” and he regretted seeing him go.

“He did a lot of good for the housing authority. We need to continue to go in that direction,” Johnson said.

The Nanticoke Housing Authority is a federal agency subject to regulations of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. It is in charge of the city's public housing: 268 elderly high rise apartments and 149 low-income family apartments in five sites — Park Towers, Oplinger Towers, Nanticoke Towers, Nanticoke Terrace and Apollo Circle.

The authority also administers Nanticoke's 51 Section 8 vouchers for housing owned by private landlords. The authority's most recent project is a plan to convert the former Susquehanna Coal Co. office at Market and Main streets into 11 apartments for moderate-income seniors.

7/20/2007

Nanticoke skateboarders make their point
By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

A group of young Nanticoke skaters wanted to get the point across that skateboarding isn't a crime.

To protest city officials' intention of strengthening the skateboarding ordinance by imposing bigger fines, they left a paper trail downtown Thursday.

It was 17-year-old Mack Wydawski's idea to make hand-lettered signs reading “Skateboarding is not a crime.” Fellow skateboarders Tyler Woods, 16, and Billy Borowski, 20, helped make about two notebooks' worth — more than 100, they estimate — and fasten them to trees and utility poles along Main and Market streets.

“People put up garage sale signs and stuff. It's freedom of speech,” Borowski said.

Wydawski, Woods and Borowski, along with their friends Joe Bobbin, 16, Todd Stefanski, 14, and Brad Swartwood, 16, consider skateboarding a way of life.

“I’ve been doing it for eight years. I kind of take it seriously,” Borowski said.

They say it keeps them away from drugs and gets them active outside instead of sitting inside playing video games. And it keeps them out of trouble — well, mostly.

The trouble is, there’s nowhere to skate. Thursday evening, the guys hung out around Greater Nanticoke Area High School for a while, but school district officials don’t like them skating there. Usually they “just wander,” Wydawski said.

Borowski said in the past he and other skaters attended numerous council meetings and gave petitions full of signatures to elected officials.

“They said wait, so that’s what we’ve been doing,” he said.

Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority and the South Valley Partnership are finalizing a deal to create a skate park on Lower Broadway. It could be ready by August.

Skaters are grateful they’ll finally have a place to go, but resent the idea of being fined for doing what they love.

Council voted to prepare and give input on the skateboarding ordinance being created by city administrator Kenneth Johnson and police chief James Cheshinski.

The current ordinance calls for a \$5 fine and costs if skaters are caught on sidewalks or streets downtown. The new ordinance could call for fines ranging from \$100 to a maximum of \$1,000.

“They are damaging the property in the downtown, and that is where this is coming from,” Johnson said. “I’d like to wait until the skate park is built, but I am worried about people getting hurt. We have liability issues. It’s not that we don’t like skateboarders.”

Mayor John Bushko said the ordinance needs a lot of work.

“When I see the kids on Patriot Square skateboarding ... I could care less as long as they’re not interfering with anybody or knocking people down. They’re not ruining anything,” he said.

“That’s going to be a very, very tough ordinance to enforce. You’re going to basically say you can’t skateboard in the whole town. And the kids are right: It’s not illegal.”

Members of the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority, which is responsible for the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street, say skateboarders damage the concrete entranceway to the office building.

Because the existing ordinance is so weak, authority members asked police to charge skateboarders with trespassing, which carries a heavier penalty: a fine of \$150 — \$270 including court costs. Woods and Wydawski know that from experience. They were among the first to be cited, back in January.

Parents just end up paying fines anyway, Bushko said. Community service would be more meaningful, he believes.

7/20/2007

No-hitter propels Nanticoke ahead

The Times Leader staff

Thanks to some crafty pitching from Hannah Rubasky, Nanticoke will be moving on in the Pennsylvania State Eastern Softball Tournament.

Rubasky threw all six innings for a no-hitter in Thursday’s opening round 1-0 win over Lehigh, striking out nine batters in the effort.

“It was a tight game, they (Lehigh) kept it really close,” said Nanticoke coach Bill Grabowski.

Sammy Gow scored the lone run for Nanticoke, reaching base on a lead-off walk. Gow stole second and was knocked in on an RBI single by Heather Perkowski.

Maggie Gola had the only other hit for Nanticoke in the contest, reaching first base on a single.

Nanticoke advances to the second round of the tournament where it will play the Section 7 winner, West Side, located near Philadelphia, at 5 p.m., today in Morrisville.

7/20/2007

Nanticoke, Plymouth Twp. work together to fix roads

slong@timesleader.com

The city of Nanticoke and Plymouth Township across the Susquehanna River are both cash-strapped, Act 47-designated communities, but working together, each has managed to accomplish what they couldn’t have done separately.

Several streets in Nanticoke were in desperate need of repair. City Administrator Ken Johnson didn’t want to bid the project out because it could take months before the work could begin. Being a city short on money, he also worried about cost.

Then he remembered Plymouth Township had recently paved several of their roads using township equipment. In fact, by using its own employees and equipment, the township saved about \$280,000 to repair the roads after last year’s flooding, said Ed Brennan, township street supervisor.

So the two Act 47 communities struck a deal. (Plymouth was declared Act 47 in July 2004 and Nanticoke was named Act 47 in May 2006.)

Nanticoke streets were damaged after a severe rainstorm last month. One area near Weis Market and Allied Services Rehabilitation demanded immediate attention. Water fell so fast it overwhelmed a storm water drain located behind the rehabilitation center before flowing under Broadway and Arch streets and causing “monstrous ripples” in the pavement, said Johnson.

“In this case the manhole didn’t pop,” he said. “The water has to go somewhere. So it went underneath the pavement. It was really broken

up.”

After digging out the L-shaped intersection, it was determined the manhole and catch basin needed to be repaired, in addition to repaving the damaged pavement. The new grate-manhole allows water to rise to the surface in case the storm water drain is overwhelmed again. Broadway and Arch streets reopened Thursday morning after the two-day project was completed.

Nanticoke used asphalt provided by Plymouth Township for the project, but will pick up the tab for it. The township also made available a street paver, but rented a roller and street sweeper to complete the job.

“Actually when it is all said and done, this will not cost township taxpayers anything,” township Secretary/Treasurer Steven Gryzmski said.

Johnson confirmed Nanticoke would pay for all expenses incurred by the township, including renting equipment and payroll costs. But by working with Plymouth Township, Nanticoke saved a tremendous amount of money.

Total costs for the project will not be known until all invoices are received, but it is being estimated at \$10,000. “The cost was at least a third of what it would normally be,” Johnson said.

Brennan says he supports smaller communities forming a regional public works department to get smaller local paving projects completed quicker using shared equipment and employees while saving taxpayer money.

7/20/2007

Health trust: No premiums for August

Schools get one-month reprieve because of a \$4 million surplus.

By Terrie Morgan-Beseckertmorgan@timesleader.com

School districts that remain in the Northeast Pennsylvania School Districts Health Trust will not have to pay premiums for August, saving the districts more than \$3.3 million, the trust’s board of directors announced Wednesday.

Andrew Marko, executive director of the trust, said that figure is an estimate based on the premiums the districts paid in May and June.

The premiums vary from month to month depending on usage, and the July figures are not in yet, he said.

The trust was able to offer the one-month forgiveness of premiums thanks to a \$4 million surplus. The savings will be spread among eight school districts, two vocational technical schools and the Luzerne Intermediate Unit which still participate in the trust. It remained unclear whether two districts that recently opted to leave the trust, Pittston Area and Dallas, will receive any money back.

“I really can’t tell you. The lawyers are dealing with that,” Marko said.

The trust was formed in 1999 with the intent of lowering health care costs. Several districts have become dissatisfied over the years, however.

The Greater Nanticoke Area and Northwest School districts want to join Pittston and Dallas in pulling out of the trust, but they were prevented from

doing so after the teachers unions at both schools filed a court challenge. That case is now pending before a state appellate court.

The estimated savings for each district that remain in the trust are:

- Hanover Area - \$264,507.
- Lake Lehman - \$278,947.
- Luzerne Intermediate Unit - \$344,173
- Greater Nanticoke Area - \$218,615.
- Northwest Area - \$169,573.
- Tunkhannock Area - \$300,491.
- West Side Area Vocational Technical School - \$76,806.
- Wilkes-Barre Area - \$854,541.
- Wilkes-Barre Vocational Technical School - \$74,603.
- Wyoming Area - \$250,401.
- Wyoming Valley West - \$534,769.

7/19/2007

Health trust gives back \$4 million surplus to member school districts

By bjarvis@citizensvoice.com

As the Northeast Pennsylvania School Districts Health Trust voted Wednesday to use its surplus to give school districts a month off from paying health insurance premiums, there was no shortage of smiles in the room.

By granting a “reserve credit forgiveness” for August, the health trust’s 11 member districts will save more than \$4 million, board members said.

“I jumped at the opportunity to save our taxpayers money this morning and voted yes on the costs savings that were offered,” said Northwest Area teachers representative Gary Hasinus.

Phil Russo, of Wyoming Area, co-chair of the health trust, said the board learned of the surplus as it approached budget season in June. As a matter of policy, the health trust sets aside three months’ worth of premiums in reserves, or about \$12 million, for IBNR — claims that have been Incurred But Not Reported. The \$4 million surplus is in addition to the reserves.

Executive Director Andy Marko said 2007 marks the third year in a row that member districts have received a credit forgiveness of about

\$4 million.

“We think it’s a good thing. Obviously it will save the districts a lot of money,” Marko said. “(In the last three years), the numbers have remained constant.”

Originally formed in 1999, the health trust was comprised of 13 schools that banded together in an effort to fight rising costs from Blue Cross-Blue Shield.

Dallas and Pittston Area dropped out of the trust earlier this year. Attorneys for those districts have requested that part of the surplus be set aside until it is decided whether Dallas and Pittston Area will receive any of the funds.

Northwest Area and Greater Nanticoke Area had also voted to leave the trust but were blocked in June by an injunction obtained by the teachers union.

Pennsylvania State Education Association spokesman Paul Shemansky said he hoped the credit forgiveness would help negotiations move forward in districts without a contract, including Northwest Area, Greater Nanticoke Area and Lake-Lehman. “It was very good news today. When you can save money, everybody’s happy,” he said.

7/19/2007

Nanticoke moving ahead with plans for skate park and tougher laws

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

There’s bad news and good news for skateboarders in Nanticoke.

Bad news first: City officials said Wednesday they want to toughen the ordinance against skateboarding downtown, possibly with much higher fines.

Now the good news: That skate park is definitely coming, probably in August if everything goes as planned.

A lease for the land is the last obstacle to building the skate park, the first phase of the South Valley Partnership’s 134-acre regional park on Lower Broadway. The land was consolidated from numerous separate parcels into one, through the efforts of Plymouth Township attorney Joseph Lach.

Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority members Hank Marks and Walter Sokolowski have been working with authority solicitor Susan Maza on a long-term agreement. The authority will likely be in charge of the land, and lease it to the South Valley Partnership for \$10 a year, Marks said.

The transaction will only be for the skate park for now, because the authority doesn’t want to hold it up any longer, Marks said. All the authority needs is the deed and then work out the details, he said.

There is money and equipment to build the skate park, state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, said. “I’m hoping if we can resolve the land issues before the end of July, we can start work in August,” Yudichak said. “This has been a long work in progress. I think we’re finally on the horizon.”

It would be just in time for skateboarders because council is preparing to pass a stronger ordinance.

City Administrator Kenneth Johnson told council he is working with police Chief James Cheshinski on a new ordinance for skateboards and in-line skates.

They could be prohibited in the downtown business district or city-wide. Skateboarders who trespass on private property could pay fines of \$100 to \$1,000, unless they have written permission to be there, Johnson said.

“I don’t think people are against skateboarding per se, but skateboarders are taking it one step further and damaging people’s property,” said city attorney William Finnegan.

Under the current ordinance, using a skateboard or skates on sidewalks in a business district or on any street means a \$5 fine plus costs. Municipal authority members, tired of skateboarders damaging concrete at the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street, asked to charge them with trespassing, which carries a heftier fine.

“Quite a few children got cited at the Kanjorski Center this week, and I received 100 calls,” Mayor John Bushko said.

7/19/2007

City to fine for false alarms

Nanticoke council adopts an ordinance to charge property owners for responses.

slong@timesleader.com

Property owners with security alarms will be fined fees starting July 28 if the police, fire department or ambulance personnel respond to their residence or business for a false alarm.

Council members adopted an ordinance during Wednesday night’s council meeting to charge property owners for false alarms.

Councilman Bernie Norieka was absent from the meeting, but previously had supported the ordinance.

The first time a homeowner’s system signals a false alarm they will be fined \$10. Fees increase on a scale for a maximum of \$50 on the fourth false alarm response. Valid emergency alarms will not be fined.

During a previous council meeting, Norieka suggested a fixed rate administrative fee be added to cover the cost of mailing out the bill.

The previous alarm ordinance required property owners to pay an annual \$125 each July to register their system with the city.

“It penalizes people that have systems that they take care of,” City Administrator Ken Johnson said. Under the new ordinance the registration fee is waved.

Police Chief Jim Cheshinski likes the new ordinance. Before the 911 system was installed, burglary alarm systems were hooked up directly

to the police department, he said. Now the alarm companies call 911 directly when an alarm alerts.

“Officers will be able to handle more true emergencies,” he said.

“I do believe false alarms are an issue for every department.”

From July 1, 2006, through June 30, Nanticoke officers responded to 57 alarms. Only two of those were valid alarm calls, according to police records.

Mayor John Bushko announced Tom Walski asked to be replaced as the city’s representative on the PPL Advisory Board. Officials were considering appointing Tom Wall, a zoning board member. If Wall is appointed to the utility company advisory board, he might resign from the zoning board. Council members decided to wait to appoint Wall until they find a replacement for his seat on the zoning board. Three surplus vehicles were sold to the highest bidders in each category. A 1992 Chevrolet 7 ton pickup was awarded to Orvel’s Towing for \$210. A 1983 International dump truck was awarded to Vishneski for \$400. A 1996 Case backhoe was awarded to Rinehimer Equipment for \$9,300.

7/17/2007

Singing District 16 takes win

Nanticoke-Newport wins the championship, 7-0

tlsports@timesleader.com

Nanticoke celebrates their District Five Championship over Carbino Club in Nanticoke Monday evening.

(S. John Wilkin/The Times Leader)

For its pre-game warmups heading into the championship, the Nanticoke-Newport softball team matched every fly ball with a team chant, every simulated play with a song.

It was this routine that brought all of the District 16 champion’s 13 players sprawling to the turf just beyond their third base dugout Monday evening, where they formed a circle and reminded Carbino Club, the District 17 champion, of their superior experience and their victory when the teams met just two days earlier.

In doing so, Nanticoke-Newport sang, “Everywhere we go, people wanna know...”

Six innings later, Nanticoke-Newport claimed the Section 5 championship with a 7-0 victory as its reminder became a verdict.

For Carbino Club manager Joe Miraglia, Monday’s game brought about memories of the previous year, when he boasted a more experienced team and won sectionals.

This year, however, Miraglia’s roster consisted of only four 12-year-olds and eight 11-year-olds. Nanticoke-Newport had 11 12-year-olds with only two 11-year-olds.

That disparity became blatantly obvious in the first inning when Carbino Club committed the first of its six errors and pitcher Casey Pearce surrendered the first run of the game when first baseman Hannah Rubasky singled home Gabby Grabowski.

Meanwhile, Nanticoke-Newport pitcher Brooke Chapin pitched three perfect innings.

“I wasn’t even aware of the perfect game,” said Chapin. “I knew I just had to keep pitching hard.”

Nanticoke-Newport took advantage of Carbino Club’s inexperience in the third inning when the District 16 champion scored two of its four unearned runs.

Carbino Club’s sole chance of shaving its deficit came in the fourth inning, when center fielder Caroline Mancuso singled to center field for her team’s first hit. Third baseman Gina Chieffallo then reached first base on a fielder’s choice only to be thrown out at third base trying to advance on Sara Miraglia’s infield hit. Miraglia’s pinch-runner, Ari Grabowski, was thrown out as well when she tried to advance to third on catcher Anna McElroy’s single to center field.

In the top of the sixth, Nanticoke-Newport’s bats reignited for four runs of insurance with a one-run double and a two-run double by Sammy Gow and Gabby Grabowski, respectively.

“Errors definitely played a key role since four runs scored on errors,” said Joe Miraglia.

Nanticoke-Newport will head to Morrisville as one of four teams competing for the Eastern Pennsylvania championship starting Thursday, with the winner advancing to the state championships in Milton.

7/15/2007

Nanticoke, Plymouth Township join economic forces

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com,

Nanticoke officials, faced with an emergency paving situation, worked out a deal with neighboring Plymouth Township that could be the first of many cooperative efforts between the two financially distressed municipalities.

Plymouth Township’s road crew will pave part of Arch Street almost to the rear of the Kanjorski Center, and an area around the Allied Services parking lot on Market Street off Main Street, Nanticoke Administrator Kenneth Johnson said. The lot contains a city-owned storm sewer that overflowed and caused damage after a heavy thunderstorm about a month ago, he said.

Repair is a priority. The road is “deplorable,” said Plymouth Township supervisor Ed Brennan, who is also roadmaster. It is a main route for city and township residents to access Main Street businesses and the shopping center, he said.

City officials wondered how to go about fixing the problem area. Then it occurred to Johnson that although Nanticoke didn’t have the right equipment, its neighbor did.

He knew Plymouth Township road crew's capabilities: before taking the job as Nanticoke's administrator, Johnson worked with the township as an employee of its financial recovery coordinator, Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance. Plymouth Township was declared Act 47, or financially distressed, by the state in July 2004; Nanticoke in May 2006.

"They see the roads we've done, and the work we did, and they were like, wow," Brennan said. "We have the equipment, and we know how much money it saves."

It also saves time: the project will probably start Monday. If it was bid, it would take weeks, Johnson said.

"Frankly, this is a win-win for everybody. We're able to do this without bidding — because we're using another municipality it doesn't require bidding — and we're going to use state contract materials. There's no way to do it cheaper," Johnson said.

The project will probably be around \$10,000, about a third of what it would cost if bid out to a paving company, Johnson estimates. Money for the job might come from a piece of road equipment the township plans to sell, he said.

The city and township should enter a formal intergovernmental agreement, so they can do more joint projects in the future, Johnson said.

7/14/2007

Northwest Area, Greater Nanticoke Area explain their reasons for filing appeals

Brian Jarvis - CV

Northwest Area and Greater Nanticoke Area school districts filed a motion Thursday outlining their reasons for appealing a judge's decision that temporarily barred them from leaving the Northeast Pennsylvania School District Health Trust.

In twin documents filed at the Luzerne County Courthouse, the two districts said withdrawing from the trust is not a "matter subject to bargaining" and does not qualify as an unfair labor practice charge.

By exiting the trust, Northwest Area and Greater Nanticoke Area are acting well within the law and health benefits for school employees would remain identical, the documents said.

In June, the Pennsylvania School Education Association was able to secure a temporary injunction against the two districts from Luzerne County President Judge Mark Ciavarella. A hearing scheduled to determine whether they could leave the trust without the PSEA's permission was cancelled by Ciavarella because the school district's attorneys appealed his injunction.

7/12/2007

Nanticoke woman brings home the gold

Pam Urbanski

If you think being a quadriplegic confined to a wheelchair can keep Doris Merril down, think again.

The Nanticoke resident is 83 years young, and she's an Olympic medal winner with an amazingly positive outlook on life. Doris has been competing at the national Wheelchair Olympics for the past 10 years and came home with two more medals last month.

Diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in the late 1950s and confined to a wheelchair for decades, she considers herself a blessed woman.

"I have a wonderful life. God is the best physician, and my family and friends are the best support system," she said.

Among Doris' fondest memories are those from her teaching days. She taught at Wilkes College and for 20 years in the Nanticoke school district.

After her husband passed away in 1987, her family encouraged her to participate in the Wheelchair Olympics, an annual event sponsored by the Paralyzed Veterans of America. These Olympics draw more than 600 athletes from 48 states. Doris served in Naval intelligence during World War II.

Over the past decade, Doris has won numerous gold medals and a few silver and has visited places like Alaska, California, Puerto Rico and England to name a few.

"When we get together we forget our disabilities. Everyone who works the games are so kind and really make us feel like we are loved and important," she said.

This year, she earned gold medals in the 25-yard and 50-yard freestyle swim and the air gun competitions. Her best event has always been bowling — she has won gold each of the last 10 years —, but this year she had to settle for two silver medals.

"My son, Pepper, tells me I was socializing entirely too much," she laughed. "I was thrilled with the silver, but he was a little upset. He told me I need to concentrate a little more."

Congratulations, Doris! Good luck next year.

Trash to Treasures

Don't forget about the Trash to Treasures citywide yard sale slated for this Saturday, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Everyone is welcome to participate.

The idea behind the event is to coordinate the dozens of garage sales held throughout the year, have them on the same day, and try to draw the biggest crowds to the sales. There will be something for everyone. Local merchants will have special promotions and sidewalk sales to coincide with the event. Stop by Patriot Park to pick up a map that lists the addresses of each home that is participating. For more information, call city hall at 735-2800.

Block Party

The residents and staff of Guardian Elder Care Center invite everyone to the facility's fourth annual Block Party and fireworks show on Friday, July 20, from 3 to 9 p.m. The day will be filled with fun, food, games, music and fireworks.

Entertainment for the day will be provided by Jolly Joe and the Bavarians. Food vendors will offer pizza, ice cream and, according to Joe Penora, activities director at Guardian, lots of polish food. Again this year, the staff and the residents themselves have put together theme baskets that will be raffled off.

One thing I remembered when I visited Guardian was how wonderful the nurses and all those who take care of the residents are. They are like one big family. They really go above and beyond the call of duty to put this day together.

During the party, the residents are brought outside to enjoy the day. An amazing fireworks display is promised at dusk. If it's anything like the last few years, it is something you don't want to miss!

Summer camp

A summer camp for children in kindergarten through sixth grade will be held the week of July 23-27, from 9 a.m. to noon, at Saint Francis Parish Center on East Green Street. The camp will be conducted by the Sister Servants of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. The day will be filled with games, crafts, Bible stories and music. For more information or to register, call the parish office at 735-6903. All are welcome.

Health screening

St. Francis church will host a health screening for \$45 next Tuesday. Life Line Screening will scan the carotid artery in the neck to check for plaque buildup, which can lead to stroke. The company will also offer a bone density scan to test for osteoporosis. Each test takes about 10 minutes. To pre-register, call 1-800-324-1851.

7/11/2007

Attorney hired by Nanticoke municipal authority to aid with downtown projects

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The Nanticoke General Municipal Authority board hired a lawyer and started looking into real estate appraisals in hopes potential downtown projects bear fruit.

Luzerne County Community College is interested in leasing or buying the authority-owned Kanjorski Center on East Main Street to turn into a health sciences center.

The authority board hired attorney Joseph Lach, who serves as Plymouth Township's solicitor, to represent the municipal authority in the situation.

LCCC is also considering the city-owned senior center on Market and Main streets for a culinary arts school. LCCC officials altered the college's \$20 million master plan to allow the health sciences center and culinary institute to be created off-campus instead of on-campus. The revised plan is awaiting approval from the state Department of Education. LCCC Interim President Thomas Leary said Tuesday the college has not yet received official word from the state.

The Kanjorski Center and two neighboring East Main Street properties, the former CVS building and a vacant lot, both also owned by the authority, should be appraised, authority chairman Ron Kamowski said.

Instead of advertising, which the broke municipal authority can't afford, board member Dennis Butler suggested the authority contact area appraisers qualified for commercial real estate. Under state law, the authority does not have to advertise because it is seeking a service. Butler estimated the appraisals should cost \$8,000 to \$10,000.

7/10/2007

Nanticoke Girls Repeat as District 16 Champs

Citizens Voice

Nanticoke retained the District 16 11-12 year old softball championship in convincing fashion Monday, posting a shutout win over Plains, 18-0.

Hannah Rubasky threw all four innings for the winners, allowing one hit and striking out six.

Sammi Gow led the offense with three hits, including a double and she also drove in four runs. Cassie Yalch added three singles. Brooke Chapin had two singles and three RBI and Sarah Higgins connected for a two-run single. All nine starters connected for a hit for Nanticoke.

Plains' Marissa Lecara led off the first with a single.

Nanticoke advances to the Section 5 Tournament on Friday at 7:30 at Nanticoke's field against Christy Mathewson.

7/10/2007

Nanticoke girls roll to 11-12 crown

Times Leader

Hannah Rubasky kept Plains hitters in check, pitching all four innings, striking out six and allowing only one hit in Nanticoke's 18-0 win over Plains in the 11-12-year-old District 16 Softball championship game.

Sammi Gow led Nanticoke with three hits, including a double, and four RBI; and Cassie Yalch went 3-for-4. Brooke Chapin went 2-for-4 and drove in three runs for Nanticoke.

Marissa Lecara was the lone Plains batter to get on base, singling in the game's first at-bat.

Nanticoke will host a sectional game at 7:30 p.m. Friday against D17 South division winner Christy Mathewson at the Nanticoke Little League Field, located behind Nanticoke Area High School.

7/8/2007

A Look Back 1987 Nanticoke evacuation

Plant fire sparks teamwork

slong@timesleader.com

With the Susquehanna Nuclear Power Plant less than 20 miles away, residents on the city's east side feared the worst in the early-morning hours of March 24, 1987, as sirens blared throughout town telling them to evacuate their homes.

"It was pretty much panic," said Linda Prushinski, a Nanticoke Emergency Management Board member.

"The public thought it was the nuclear power plant because of the glow in the sky. So it was very intense"

Shortly after midnight an electrical fire at Spencer Metal Processing Company on Alden Road near West Union Road in Nanticoke prompted a city-wide evacuation after potentially toxic fumes were released into the air. The company specialized in coating metals with anti-corrosion materials through an anodizing process.

Eight months after their original plant was destroyed by fire in Edwardsville, Spencer Metal Processing Company, a family-owned business, relocated to Nanticoke in a zoned commercial area.

About 12:15 a.m. a Spencer Metal Processing foreman Mark Guzenski smelled what he believed to be burning wire or rubber. After investigating he discovered 35-foot high flames shooting from the top of the three-story building, according to an investigation report by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Fire Administration division.

The fire department arrived within five minutes of Guzenski's call.

Less than an hour later then-Nanticoke Fire Chief Don Casey noticed a toxic cloud of nitric and sulfuric acid was starting to develop above the 45,000-square foot plant, the Environmental Protection Agency noted in their documents.

A four-year volunteer firefighter in 1987, current Nanticoke Lt. Rich Bohan vividly recalled the scene as he was one of the first to respond.

"I thought initially we were going to be able to get it, but then it just got ahead of us," Bohan said.

"It became a losing battle."

Firefighters from the four surrounding counties responded to calls to help fight the blaze and safely evacuate the city.

After it became apparent the blaze was growing faster than could be controlled, the decision turned to start preventive measures to keep the chemicals stored in the building from washing into the water system.

Knowing several chemicals were stored in the building, including six 55-gallon drums of sulfuric acid, Nanticoke Mayor John Haydock ordered an evacuation begin at 2:26 a.m. to get residents to safety.

Sulfuric acid, nitric acid, phosphoric acid, acrylic acid, ammonia, caustic soda and chromic acid were all stored in the Spencer Metal's 100-year old brick and wood building.

When water is added to sulfuric acid it creates toxic fume clouds, FEMA said. Small doses of the acid can burn the eyes, throat and skin. Larger exposure can lead to death.

A mock emergency drill the Saturday before the fire was instrumental in ensuring emergency personnel knew how to safely evacuate the entire city, including senior citizens in the housing department's high rise apartments, Prushinski said.

All of Nanticoke, parts of West Nanticoke and the Sheatown and Alden sections of Newport Township were evacuated in stages starting with West Nanticoke after Haydock declared a city-wide emergency, FEMA said.

More than 100 ambulance crews poured into Nanticoke to transport the elderly residents and Nanticoke State General Hospital patients to other hospital or nursing home facilities.

An estimated 15,000 residents fled the area with some seeking refuge in several local shelters. Hanover Area High School provided shelter for 1,500 people. Others stayed in motels or with family living nearby.

Stephen Beganich, now Luzerne County's Emergency Management Coordinator, recalled the day's events as he rode into Nanticoke as a volunteer with the Avoca Ambulance Service to move Birchwood Nursing Home residents to safety.

"It was a surreal scene to see all the people leaving Nanticoke," said Beganich, a Pittston Area High School junior at the time.

"All the traffic was coming out of the city and none of the traffic except emergency vehicles were going into Nanticoke." Avoca was one of just many area ambulance services responding from throughout the county to evacuate more than 250 nursing home residents and elderly residents living in the city's high rises to other facilities in Wilkes-Barre and Scranton.

Nanticoke firefighters battled the four-alarm blaze for six hours before finally getting it under control at 6:30 a.m. When Nanticoke's ladder truck developed a hydraulic leak about 12:41 a.m. Hanover Township responded with a 75-foot ladder track to help fight the fire, FEMA's report said.

Several air quality tests were conducted every two hours throughout the day at various sites in the area to determine when people could safely return home, said Mark Carmon, now a community relations coordinator with the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection.

EPA officials conducting an investigation at Aladdin Plating in Lackawanna County and a team of Wilkes University representatives arrived in Nanticoke to assist with air monitoring under the department's supervision. The local Department of Environmental Protection

did not have enough equipment to handle all the air samplings needed.

“They had some of the air monitoring equipment we had,” Carmon said.

“That was a big help.”

There was also worry that water used in fighting the blaze would flush some of the toxic chemicals into a local stream possibly feeding into the Susquehanna River.

Dikes were constructed at the rear and on the sides of the plant to contain the contaminated water, which was being closely monitored by the state’s environmental protection agency.

Once it was determined the chemicals stored in the building had dissipated and would not cause any health problems the mayor gave the all-clear allowing residents to return home after the 16-hour ordeal.

It’s now customary for several communities to have local emergency management committees, but that wasn’t always the case. Nanticoke’s Emergency Management Board was originally formed after the power plant was established in Salem Township.

Shortly after the Spencer plant fire the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection began a formal emergency response division responsible for handling environmental accidents.

“It was thought by having emergency response capabilities we could better respond to an event like Spencer Metal,” Carmon said.

“It gives us a 24 hour response capability of responding to emergencies.”

The agency, known at the time as the Department of Environmental Resources, has always had people trained to handle air quality, water quality, solid waste and water supply issues. But until the Nanticoke evacuation there was no dedicated team to respond immediately to environmental disasters.

Lessons learned

If Nanticoke had not been as prepared to handle the situation not all would have went as smoothly.

“If the Spencer fire and evacuation proved anything, it proved the value of pre-fire planning and emergency preparedness,” FEMA’s report stated.

Fire department officials inspected the Spencer Metals building three months before the fire. During the inspection they noted all chemicals stored in the facility and as well as the blueprints of the facility.

Streamlined emergency response plans between local and county officials detailing the chain-of-command, roles and responsibilities of agencies involved helped the flow of communication.

Scheduling practice drills are vital to ensure emergency management personnel know what needs to be done and how to effectively implement those programs.

“Benefits realized from the training and practice exercise was that the volunteers responded naturally to their roles and were well-prepared.”

The Pennsylvania State Fire Marshall’s investigation later concluded wires exposed to the acidic fumes from the chemicals were corroded over time causing the electrical fire.

Company owners Jean Spencer and her son Mark took responsibility for hiring a firm to clean up the site under EPA oversight. In August 1987 Mark Spencer decided not to reopen the facility after several lawsuits were filed by Nanticoke residents seeking damages for emotional distress and any future health problems.

The Spencers were not available for comment for this story.

Timeline:

Tuesday, March 24, 1987

12:15 a.m. – Fire reported at Spencer Metal Processing Plant in Nanticoke on Alden Road

12:20 a.m. – First fire firefighters arrived on scene

12:41 a.m. – Fire department ladder truck develops hydraulic leak. Ladder truck brought in from Hanover Township

12:43 a.m. – Worry about chemical run off into stream and eventually Susquehanna River

1:45 a.m. – Fire Chief Don Casey recommends an evacuation

2:26 a.m. – After consulting with other emergency officials Nanticoke Mayor John Haydock declares the city should be evacuated in stages.

Entire evacuated area includes all of Nanticoke, Sheatown and Alden sections of Newport Township

9 a.m. – A dike was constructed to contain runoff water

6:30 a.m. – Main fire under control. Firefighters continue to fight hot spots until 4:30 p.m.

4:45 p.m. – Haydock announces during press conference at Nanticoke City Hall residents can safely return home

Sources:

Investigation report by Hollis Stambaugh of the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Fire Administration division.

Report from Environmental Protection Agency concerning Spencer Metal Processing Plant fire

7/6/2007

Facing yet another cash flow problem, the financially distressed city has been forced to borrow more money.

By hruckno@citizensvoice.com

On the advice of the Pennsylvania Economy League, council voted 4-0 Thursday to approve an amendment to its financial recovery plan that includes a short-term loan for \$200,000. The money must be paid back by June 30, 2008.

Because of the way taxes are collected, the city does not expect to see earned income tax revenue until sometime next year, city administrator Ken Johnson said. In order to make ends meet, it needed to borrow more money.

“The state allowed us to borrow short-term money and not do some capital improvements until next year,” Johnson said.

Nanticoke City became an Act 47, or financially distressed, municipality in 2006. That designation gives the state authority over all its financial decisions.

The city received several offers Thursday to purchase a backhoe and two trucks, but council did not award any bids. They will be awarded at next month’s meeting.

Wytoshek thought that money should go into its own account, so he suggested opening a new account to deposit the proceeds. Johnson did not think that was necessary, but council gave Wytoshek the authorization to open a checking account with M & T Bank.

In other business, council passed an ordinance that would allow the city to charge residents a fee if the police or fire department responds to a false alarm at their homes. The fee will be \$135 per household.

7/6/2007

Nanticoke borrows \$200,000 from state to cover expenses

Officials say additional earned income tax funds are not coming in as quickly as expected.

slong@timesleader.com

Worried about having enough money to operate the city on a daily basis through the end of December, Nanticoke city officials unanimously approved borrowing an additional \$200,000 from the state during Thursday’s council meeting.

“It’s zero-interest but they have to pay it back out of the money they collect from their earned income tax,” Pennsylvania Economy League Executive Director Gerald Cross said. PEL was authorized by the state to help Nanticoke recover from its financial distress.

Starting May 1, residents were required to begin paying an additional 1 percent in earned income tax and nonresidents started paying a 1.33 percent commuter tax. Nanticoke Area School District receives ? percent of the resident earned income tax.

The tax money is not being generated as quickly as city officials originally believed it would be because some employers are not withholding the extra money, Councilman and City Finance Director Bernie Norieka said.

“We can only go for so much and we have to pay it back,” he said.

If employers do not begin collecting the additional taxes, residents will get hit with high city tax bills next year demanding the money.

This is not the first loan Nanticoke has taken out in the past year. Nanticoke received a \$700,000 interest-free loan from the state last September which must be paid back within 10 years.

This latest loan must be paid back no later than the end of next June. Under the new loan agreement, the city’s \$35,000 loan payment on the \$700,000 loan originally due at the end of August will also be deferred until June. However, if the city continues to have cash flow problems into next year, the state might allow the repayment to be deferred until December 2008, Cross said.

On the advice of PEL representatives and former interim city administrator Bob Sabatini, council members took out a \$250,000 loan from PNC bank in May to help them cover daily operating expenses until the additional tax revenue begins to roll in. The short-term loan must be repaid by the end of the year.

Frustrated at having to borrow even more money, Mayor John Bushko asked if the city would get to keep any money from the higher taxes or if all the taxes collected would be used to pay off these loans.

“We are trying to do everything right, but it’s like we are having to go to the bank every other month,” he said.

PEL Senior Analyst Henry Miller assured the council once employers start withholding the additional taxes there will be enough money to operate the city while paying back the loans.

Norieka was the sole vote against the council approving a \$2,173 purchase for five new microphones. Currently council members share four microphones and several residents often complain they can’t hear the council members during the meetings.

“We just have to start cutting expenses somewhere,” Norieka said.

Councilman Brent Makarczyk did not attend the meeting.

7/6/2007

Health trust Schools that planned to leave group have been at least temporarily blocked by court injunction

Legal battles don’t stop coverage

By Mark Guydishmguydish@timesleader.com

They’re in, they’re out, they’re in again.

A legal battle between two local school boards and the teacher union has turned health insurance coverage into a yo-yo.

The districts were ready to switch coverage July 1, the union blocked the move by obtaining a court injunction, and the districts have appealed.

How does all this affect the organization providing or not providing coverage?

The districts – Greater Nanticoke Area and Northwest Area – have insured teachers through the Northeast Pennsylvania School Health Trust since the local consortium was formed in 1999 by 10 districts, two vocational-technical schools and the Luzerne Intermediate Unit. The trust is “self-insured.” It contracts an actuary to calculate premiums and uses several providers such as Blue Cross to administer medical, dental and vision plans, but collects the money itself and assumes responsibility for the coverage.

To keep all that coordinated, trust rules say districts can only leave at the end of the fiscal year, June 30, which is what Nanticoke and

Northwest had intended to do until the June 28 injunction. With the injunction, the trust had to tell providers it would need to keep coverage of several hundred employees it had expected to drop from the rolls.

“It’s an important issue. The vendors were on notice that more than likely (the two districts) were going to leave the trust” said trust accountant Ralph Scoda, who is also business manager for the Wilkes-Barre Area School District.

“Now that responsibility falls back to the trust, and so the trust had to contact the vendors again,” he said.

The sticking point for both dropping and instituting coverage is the effective date of coverage.

Still, Scoda said, the yo-yo nature of this legal battle shouldn’t cause any major problem for the trust.

“We’ve got great working relationships with all the vendors,” he said, “so it’s something we’ve been able to work through.”

If the legal wrangling lasts to Aug. 1, the districts could benefit financially. Flush with about \$15 million in extra money, the trust is giving members a pass on August premiums in an effort to lower the surplus to \$12 million, which would be equal to about three months worth of premiums from all members. A consultant recommended the three-month gauge as a cushion against unexpected problems or high-priced claims from catastrophic illnesses or injuries. One reason districts are leaving the trust is a belief that the surplus is excessive.

The dispute spans two courts. The temporary injunction was issued in the Luzerne county Court of Common Pleas while the appeal was filed with Commonwealth Court.

7/6/2007

Nanticoke girls advance to East Division finals

Brooke Chapin blanked Plains to power Nanticoke to the District 16 East division championship game on Monday with a 9-0 victory. Chapin struck out six and gave up no walks in six innings.

Nanticoke’s Cassie Yalsh had a hit and two RBI, while Maggie Gola and Sara Higgins each had a hit and RBI.

Plains’ Madysen Jones had a triple.

7/3/2007

Nanticoke to get funding

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The state’s capital budget calls for \$10.5 million for seven projects — two of which are new — that would expand Luzerne County Community College and help reshape downtown Nanticoke.

“Harrisburg is definitely providing us with a catalyst for much-needed revitalization,” councilman Joseph Dougherty said. “Hopefully it will happen. Nanticoke is well overdue for some good news.”

After being re-considered three times, the \$1.5 billion capital budget, HB 1589, made final passage in the state House of Representatives 151-47 on Tuesday and went to the Senate. The capital budget allocates funding for things like roads and construction.

One of the new projects for Nanticoke is to raze the CVS building on East Main Street. A private developer wants to construct a building large enough to house a new senior center and office space, said State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke. The state Department of Labor could move there if LCCC buys the Kanjorski Center to use for a health sciences center.

The CVS building, vacant for years, is not in good shape, Yudichak said. The developer walked through with architects and engineers and decided it was better to build new. The capital budget allocates \$1 million towards the project, which the developer would match, Yudichak said.

There is \$2 million in the capital budget for the second project: off-campus housing for LCCC. A private developer is looking at the former LS Skate-A-Rama building on Washington Street.

“There’s nothing definite, but it is a project we’re exploring,” Yudichak said.

Community colleges don’t have dormitories, but there have been preliminary studies on turning the building into a 60- to 120-room off-campus housing facility geared towards non-traditional students commuting from long distances, he said. The building has fire damage, but it is structurally sound and has a ready-made underground parking facility, Yudichak said.

The college is not currently negotiating for student housing, but would consider discussions, LCCC interim president Thomas Leary said.

“(It) is exploratory, in that housing is currently not part of our master plan, but we would consider any proposal if moneys became available and there was a definite need for student housing,” he said.

Nanticoke City administrator Kenneth Johnson said turning the LS Skate-A-Rama into student housing would bring young people into town, and also clean up an eyesore.

If passed as-is, the capital budget also sets aside:

\$1 million towards LCCC’s Public Safety Institute, under construction on Middle Road.

\$3 million for LCCC’s Culinary Arts school, to be built at Main and Market streets where the city-owned senior center currently stands.

\$500,000 towards the Nanticoke Housing Authority’s project of converting the former Susquehanna Coal building on Market and Main streets into senior apartments.

\$1 million for the park the South Valley Partnership has planned for Lower Broadway.

\$2 million to match a \$5.6 million federal grant U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, obtained in 2005 for downtown improvements. A two-tiered parking facility will be built next to the Kanjorski Center with entrances on Main Street and Arch Street, Johnson said.

7/1/2007

Nanticoke skate park almost a reality
By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

If all goes well, skateboarders could be showing off their moves at the long-awaited skate park on Lower Broadway in Nanticoke by midsummer.

Plans are drawn up, money is in place, and equipment is ready to build the skate park, the first attraction in a proposed 134-acre South Valley regional park.

All that remains is to determine who will control the site — Nanticoke City or its redevelopment authority — and lease it to the South Valley Partnership, which is building the park.

“It’s so tantalizingly close, that from my perspective, the minute we have an understanding, I think the work should begin,” said attorney Joe Lach, solicitor for Plymouth Township and a South Valley Partnership member.

State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, secured funds for the park. Lach spent many hours clearing up the legal tangle of a hodgepodge of pieces of land that belonged to long-gone coal companies, defunct railroads, or property owners whose homes and businesses were demolished for flood mitigation after Tropical Storm Agnes in 1972.

The work is finally complete, except for who controls the parcels: some belong to the city, others to its redevelopment authority.

“The problem down there is the chopped-up ownership,” Nanticoke administrator Kenneth Johnson said.

At the last redevelopment authority meeting, members Hank Marks and Walter Sokolowski were appointed to a committee to negotiate a long-term lease agreement with the South Valley Partnership, authority solicitor Susan Maza said.

Lach sent a draft agreement, which Maza forwarded to Marks and Sokolowski. The committee will come up with a final agreement for the board to review, Maza said.

Nanticoke’s solicitor William Finnegan will contact Maza, so the two attorneys can determine who ownership of the parcels will be transferred to the city or the authority, Sokolowski said. Whichever one has combined ownership will hold the lease, he said.

The redevelopment authority is trying to expedite the process, so when the contract is signed, the South Valley Partnership can start on the park right away, Sokolowski said.

“It’s summertime, and we realize they’re soon going to run out of good weather to do this,” he said.

Sokolowski said he and the other redevelopment authority members support the recreation park. When he was mayor, he oversaw creation of the Lower Broadway soccer field.

When the lease is signed, it shouldn’t take long to create the skate park, Lach said. It involves grading the land — which is fairly flat anyway — pouring a concrete base, installing the skate equipment, and erecting a fence.

The city’s newly re-created recreation board will probably oversee the skate park, Mayor John Bushko said. The South Valley Partnership would welcome that, Lach said.

“If the rec committee wants to oversee the actual functioning of the park, that’s a home run,” he said.

Terry Acker, Mike Borowski, Robert Katra, Ron Kile, David Lane, James Samselski, Gary Smith and Frank Vandermark are on the board. Lach said with their “credentials of being dedicated to the kids in Nanticoke ... They will do a good job and take the responsibility seriously.”

The city will probably be responsible for taking care of the skate park, Johnson said.

“We want to maintain it because it’s going to be a terrific asset,” he said. “We want to provide something in our city so skateboarders have a place to go ... Cities that do well are those that provide activities for everyone, from youngsters to seniors.”

6/30/2007

Health trust hearing canceled
By bjarvis@citizensvoice.com

Northwest Area and Greater Nanticoke Area School districts may have to wait until next year to pull out of the Northeast Pennsylvania School District Health Trust.

Although a hearing was scheduled Friday to determine if the two school districts could leave without the teachers union’s permission, Luzerne County Judge Mark Ciavarella balked due to an appeal filed by the schools’ attorneys.

A day earlier, Ciavarella had granted the union a temporary injunction that barred the schools from leaving the trust. School attorneys promptly appealed Ciavarella’s decision to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Though the same attorneys insisted Friday they were ready to proceed, Ciavarella refused unless they withdrew the appeal.

“There’s nothing for me to hear until the Commonwealth tells me whether I’m right or wrong,” Ciavarella said. “I don’t have jurisdiction until this matter is resolved.”

After a private conversation, school attorneys decided not to withdraw their appeal.

Ciavarella then declared the temporary injunction still in effect.

Greater Nanticoke Area and Northwest Area, along with Dallas and Pittston Area, had voted to pull out of the health trust effective June 30. All four districts are retained by Elite Brokerage Services with the aim of starting self-funded insurance plans.

John Audi, attorney for the Pennsylvania State Education Association, said there was no legal way the two schools could now pull out of the trust, at least not this year.

“They outmaneuvered themselves,” Audi said. “The deadline was today. They can’t go to Elite now. If they do, there will be a contempt of court action.”

Still, Audi said the door was open for the schools to bargain with the union and pull out of the health trust in 2008. "All we want is a fair playing field. Teachers have the ability to bargain both for negotiations and benefits," he said.

Attorneys for the school districts declined to comment or speculate on their next move.

Greater Nanticoke Area board members Robert Raineri and Cindy Donlin, who were in attendance, also declined to comment until they received more information on the reasons behind the appeal.

The PSEA originally filed an injunction because it was allegedly left out of the decision-making process despite being an equal partner in the trust, which it claims violated a unfair labor practice under Pennsylvania law. It also voiced concern over whether the new broker would provide equal coverage or result in mid- or long-term savings.

Originally comprised of 13 schools, the health trust was formed in 1999 to offset rising health care costs from Blue Cross-Blue Shield.

6/29/2007

Legal glitch keeps districts in Health Trust

Mark Gurdish - Times Leader

Attorneys for two school districts attempting to withdraw from the Northeast Pennsylvania School District Health Trust apparently undermined their own case by appealing a temporary injunction blocking the withdrawal.

Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas Judge Mark Ciavarella had granted the injunction Thursday, sought by the teachers union to keep Northwest Area and Greater Nanticoke Area School Districts from withdrawing from the Trust, a consortium of districts formed to lower health insurance costs. Since the withdrawal had to occur no later than June 30, Ciavarella scheduled a noon hearing today to determine if the injunction would be permanent.

More than two dozen people gathered for the hearing, and attorneys from both sides said they were ready to proceed, but Ciavarella's first question was about an appeal the law firm of Elliott Greenleaf and Siedzikowski had filed Thursday In Commonwealth court seeking to overturn the injunction.

Ciavarella said he has no jurisdiction in the case until there is a decision on the appeal. The district attorneys then consulted outside the courtroom before returning and saying they will not withdraw the appeal. Ciavarella immediately ruled there could be no hearing. Union Attorney John Audi then asked if the temporary injunction was still in effect, and Ciavarella said yes.

Attorney Eric Bronstein, representing both districts, declined comment. Audi said that he believes this forces the districts to stay in the Trust for another year, because they had to withdraw by Saturday and clearly could not legally do so as long as the injunction is in effect. "They made a tactical error trying to be smart," Audi said.

6/29/2007

Schools' health trust pullout halted

Judge says GNA, Northwest can't leave consortium without union approval.

Mark Gurdish - Times Leader

A Luzerne County Judge issued an injunction stopping two local school districts from withdrawing from the Northeast Pennsylvania School Health Trust and set a hearing for this afternoon on the dispute between the teacher union and the school boards.

The Pennsylvania State Education Association filed separate paperwork asking for preliminary injunctions Thursday against Greater Nanticoke Area and Northwest Area School Districts, insisting the districts could not withdraw from the trust – a consortium formed in 1999 to lower health insurance costs – without union approval. The union previously filed unfair labor complaints and grievances with the state labor relations board, and argues in the court papers that the districts should not be allowed to withdraw from the trust until that action is settled. The withdrawal was set to become official July 1, the first day of the trust's fiscal year.

The union points out that part of the written agreement in joining the trust reads: "nothing in this Trust Fund Agreement shall be construed to authorize or permit any public school entity to violate its collective bargaining agreement." The union then cites clauses in the contracts with both districts that require health insurance coverage to be a specific Blue Cross coverage or equivalent.

The court papers say the districts have not presented the unions with any specific alternative to the health trust coverage, so there is no way for the unions to approve or reject the change. Unilateral withdrawal from the trust would cause "immediate and irreparable harm" to the union and "disrupt the labor peace and disturb the status quo."

Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas Judge Mark Ciavarella signed the injunctions Thursday afternoon.

Two other districts, Pittston Area and Dallas, also withdrew from the trust, but in both cases the unions used that withdrawal as a bargaining chip in contract negotiations. The Dallas School Board gained union approval of the withdrawal by dropping an attempt to have the union members share in premium payments as part of a new contract. Pittston Area teachers won an extension of their contract two years before it expired (in 2009) by allowing withdrawal.

Both Northwest Area and Greater Nanticoke Area teachers are working with contracts that expired in 2005. While Greater Nanticoke's negotiations have been quiet and out of the public eye, Northwest Area's disputes have boiled over into school board meetings, legal action and a strike near the end of the school year earlier this month.

6/29/2007

Union secures injunction in health trust defections

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Luzerne County Judge Mark Ciavarella granted the teachers union a temporary injunction Thursday that stops Northwest Area and Greater Nanticoke Area school districts from leaving the Northeast Pennsylvania School District Health Trust. Ciavarella will preside over a hearing at the Luzerne County Courthouse at noon today. The judge has been asked to rule on whether the districts can leave the trust without teachers union permission, Pennsylvania State Education Association spokesman Paul Shemansky said. "It was pretty much a given that the injunction would be granted," Northwest Area school board member Daryl Morgan said. Dallas, Greater Nanticoke Area, Northwest Area and Pittston Area voted to pull out of the trust effective June 30. All four districts retained Elite Brokerage Services to help them start self-funded health insurance plans. Pittston Area teachers and support staff agreed to allow the district to pull out in exchange for a four-year contract extension. Dallas' teachers union dropped unfair labor practice charges against its school board as part of a new contract settled last week. PSEA gave the following reasons for filing the injunction:

Since the union and district are equal partners in the trust, the district may not withdraw unilaterally.
The union was not given documentation to show Elite will provide equal coverage, as required by contract.
Since teachers are working under the terms of their expired contracts, the district has to maintain the status quo, or it constitutes an unfair labor practice under state law.
Health insurance must be bargained, under law, and union representatives have been available and willing to meet with the district to reach an agreement.
There are no guaranteed mid- or long-term savings with the new plans.
There is no guarantee as to the stability or efficiency of the new plans, which means there is a major risk.
"The union met with the Elite group and they were told the provider stays the same and the coverage stays the same. I just don't understand their beef," Greater Nanticoke Area school board member Robert Raineri said.
The Nanticoke Area teachers contract expired June 2005; Northwest Area's in August 2005.
"We're going to wait to see what happens with the injunction to meet again," Raineri said.
Northwest Area's school board hasn't met with the teachers since the end of the school year, due to scheduling conflicts, Morgan said.
The health trust was formed in 1999 by 13 public school entities in response to rising Blue Cross-Blue Shield costs.

6/28/2007

Nanticoke fun on the way

Editor's note: Staff writer Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens Voice is filling in for Nanticoke columnist Pamela Urbanski, who may be contacted at pamurb806@aol.com.

The second time could be the charm for three annual Nanticoke events coming up. Mark your calendars for some summer fun in the city.

Yard sale-ing away

Start cleaning out your closets, attics and basements for the second annual city-wide yard sale, to be held Saturday, July 14, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Last year's was a big success. It was interesting to wander around the city seeing (and buying) what people had for sale. The sale also gave residents a chance to do some housecleaning and make a little money. It also brought in lots of people from out of town to see the city and helped residents get to know their neighbors, organizer Yvonne Bozinski said.

To participate in the yard sale, call Nanticoke city hall at 735-2800, preferably before July 10. You can still take part in the sale without signing up, but you won't be listed on the map. Everyone is welcome to take part. Bozinski hopes that more people from the Hanover and Honey Pot sections of the city participate.

Check out <http://www.nanticokecity.com/yardsale.htm> for more details about the yard sale.

Metal rocks at the cabbage roll

Heads are going to roll on Lower Broadway on July 27 and 28.

That's when the Honey Pot fire company will hold its Cabbage Roll Festival. Like the city-wide yard sale, this is the second event. The festival, which the firefighters are hoping will raise enough money for a down payment on a new fire engine, is becoming a must-attend. Props to assistant fire chief Chet Kopco, a.k.a. "Father of Cabbage," who came up with the wonderfully offbeat idea.

Besides the downhill vegetable propulsion, the festival will feature fireworks, a DJ and live bands, and a visit by wrestling legend King Kong Bundy.

This year, local underground metal band Beyond Fallen will rock the opening ceremony. The boys in the band will have just returned from playing in Germany, where they have a pretty impressive following. They also have a record deal with Netherlands-based Melissa Records. I was recently hanging out with Beyond Fallen's bassist, Chuck Donahue of Plymouth, who says the band's excited about the European tour, as well as the release of their new CD, "Mindfire." Check these guys out at <http://www.beyondfallen.com/>.

For more information about the Cabbage Roll, check out <http://mysite.verizon.net/vze7gr1v/>.

Heritage days are here again

Linda Prushinski was telling me about this year's South Valley Chamber of Commerce Heritage Days festival, which she's hoping will be even bigger and better than last year's. It's also the second year for the festival, which will be held on Aug. 8, 9, 10, and 11 at the Lower Broadway Fairgrounds.

Wednesday is Polka Night, with music by Jolly Joe. It would be a nice night out for seniors, the Chamber believes, so the organization has arranged for free bus service to the festival from the high rises in Nanticoke and Glen Lyon on Wednesday, Prushinski said.

Thursday will be motor sports night, featuring local drivers and music by 40-lb Head. Friday is Firemen's Night, with music by Oz.

Saturday is bike night, with music by X-Country.

Saturday's events include a potato pancake eating contest. (Yes, it's modeled on the pierogie eating contest at this year's MusicFest, Prushinski said.)

For more information, call the South Valley Chamber of Commerce: 735-6990.

6/28/2007

Nanticoke yard sale returns for second year

Sheena Delazio - Times Leader

One man's trash is another man's treasure, they say.

And you can find those desired riches at Nanticoke's second annual yard sale, which is scheduled for July 14. The sale, which will be held throughout the city and involves many residents, is organized by the city's Civic Pride Committee.

"We wondered what we could do differently," said Yvonne Bozinski, director of special events for Nanticoke. "We wanted people to come to Nanticoke, to see Nanticoke and to experience what we have."

And so the committee organized the yard sale last year, which included 200 resident participants, and hundreds of household, personal and other items.

Residents of Nanticoke are asked to register for the event, and their name will be put on a list, along with a map of the city, letting buyers know where to go.

"People in town really loved it," Bozinski said. "Some of them even met their neighbors for the first time."

Bozinski said there is no limit to what residents can put out for sale on their property, and residents keep any money that they raise through sales.

"The only thing (the committee) does is pay for publicity," Bozinski said. "And we provide maps and lists of participants, too."

As of June 25, 100 people have signed up to participate in this year's yard sale.

"Since it was so successful last year, we decided to do a repeat for this year," she said.

In addition to purchasing yard sale items, Bozinski hopes those who attend will take a look around Nanticoke, at Patriot Park and the new trees and shrubs planted on the property, and the newly painted benches.

"We want to show people Nanticoke," Bozinski said. "A lot of things go on here, like the upcoming carnival."

Bozinski said the committee, which consists of about five or six members, organizes activities year-round for residents and visitors such as the annual Halloween party, or the Nanticoke Music Festival.

The yard sale is essentially all about being a community, Bozinski said.

"A lot of time and effort is put into it. And in the long run, it works out. People got to know each other, and that's what we're looking for," she said.

IF YOU GO

Second annual Nanticoke Yard Sale

Saturday, July 14

9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Throughout Nanticoke

6/26/2007

Nanticoke makes city-wide yard sale an annual event

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

In Nanticoke last July, people from Honey Pot to Hughes Street were selling items ranging from kids' toys to automotive supplies to 1950s pulp fiction paperbacks.

That first-ever city-wide yard sale went over so well, Nanticoke's Civic Pride and Special Events committees are making it an annual event.

"Everybody in town was saying it was one of the best things we ever had, and we're going to continue it," Mayor John Bushko said.

This year's city-wide yard sale will be held Saturday, July 14, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Last year's sale was a two-day event, but this year it will be for one day, with the probability of having another one in September.

"I guess it's going to be as successful as last year, because we already have 100 people signed up," event coordinator Yvonne Bozinski said.

More than 200 people took part last year. Bozinski remembers making 200 maps listing the yard sale participants' addresses, and by 10 a.m. they were all gone.

The reasons the city committees organized the sale were to get people into Nanticoke, and to drum up some community spirit, she said.

Bozinski believes both goals were accomplished.

"I didn't hear one negative comment," she said. "People said they got to know their neighbors ... and I think a lot of people from other areas got acquainted with Nanticoke."

Bozinski said she even got three thank-you letters from residents.

So, for this year's city-wide yard sale:

If you want to take part, call Nanticoke city hall at 735-2800 to sign up, preferably before July 10.

If you decide late to participate, you can still put out your tables, but your sale won't be listed on the map.

If you want to attend, maps will be available in Patriot Park the day of the sale or at a site determined at a later date.

For all Yard Sale Information click [here](#).

6/25/2007

Nanticoke forms rec board

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke City Council has re-started its recreation board after three years of dormancy. The volunteer board will organize programs and events and advise council on city parks.

Councilman James Litchkofski said since board members could be spending time around children, they should have criminal background and child abuse checks. Council agreed.

The board will consist of nine members. Council appointed the eight people who showed interest: Terry Acker, Mike Borowski, Robert Katra, Ron Kile, David Lane, James Samselski, Gary Smith and Frank Vandermark.

Under state law, recreation boards must have two school board representatives on them. Smith serves on the Greater Nanticoke Area School Board, and Vandermark received the Democratic and Republican nominations for it. He will be on the ballot in the November election. To be safe, Mayor John Bushko said he would ask another school board member to serve on the recreation board.

This year the recreation board won't have any money, but next year there will be a stipend in the budget the committee can use for projects.

6/22/2007

Nanticoke real estate options weighed by LCCC trustees

By Michael P. Buffer - Citizens Voice

The Luzerne County Community College Board of Trustees met Thursday afternoon in a closed session to discuss leasing or purchasing real estate in Nanticoke, board Solicitor Joe Kluger said.

Discussions during the closed session could lead to an official vote at a later date at a public meeting, Kluger said.

The college is considering a lease-purchase agreement with Nanticoke's municipal authority for the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street.

The college hopes to use the building as a life-sciences center. The site of the city-owned senior center building at East Main and Market streets is under consideration for a culinary institute.

6/22/2007

Nanticoke revenue collections not coming in fast enough

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The city should eventually have a sufficient amount of tax money to get by — but the trouble is, it's not coming in quickly enough to keep up with expenses, council learned Wednesday.

Certified Public Accountant John Bonita, who is part of Nanticoke's financial recovery team, said the city is facing a \$108,000 deficit so far this year.

The city took in \$1.1 million and spent \$1.2 million in the last five months.

Delays in enacting a higher earned income tax could cause cash problems, Bonita said.

"We think we might be a little short at the end of the year," city Administrator Kenneth Johnson said. He stressed that it is not a financial problem: there will be adequate revenue for the city's needs, but it is coming in too slowly.

"We don't have a hole in the budget. We have a cash-flow problem," Johnson said.

The plan by Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League, called for earned income tax to be raised from 1 percent to 2 percent.

Greater Nanticoke Area School District gets 0.5 percent, and the rest goes to the city.

The tax was supposed to start in January but didn't go into effect until May.

The city's tax collector, Berkheimer Associates, said in their experience, it takes almost a year to get caught up with new collection rates, PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said. The money will be in by next May, but the city needs it before then, he said.

Johnson, PEL and other city representatives met with the state officials Thursday to review the income tax issue.

"They listened to us, and they listened to us very well," Johnson said. He believes a solution will be found within a week or so.

6/22/2007

Nanticoke authority will require background checks of all adults living in its housing

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

A city authority has taken an extra step to ensure the safety of tenants in Nanticoke's public housing.

The Nanticoke Housing Authority board voted Thursday to revise admission policy to require that all adult household members, including live-in aides, have local and state criminal background checks.

“Obviously, people move in and out from everywhere, and the more knowledge we have of who’s coming into our facilities, the better off we’ll be,” authority solicitor Vito DeLuca said. “It’s better to have a space vacant than fill it with someone who’s dealing drugs.”

Nanticoke Housing Authority is responsible for 268 elderly high rise apartments and 149 low-income family apartments in five sites: Park Towers, Oplinger Towers, Nanticoke Towers, Nanticoke Terrace and Apollo Circle.

The authority, which is subject to regulations of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, also administers Nanticoke’s 51 Section 8 vouchers for housing owned by private landlords.

Local criminal background checks are already performed on tenants. If there is reason to believe the person has a criminal history, state and national checks are run, authority Executive Director Perry Clay said.

At the same time, the authority has to follow federal regulations and can’t discriminate, he said.

Repeat offenders can be evicted. However, only registered sex-offenders and people convicted of producing methamphetamine can be permanently barred from public housing.

“We try to be fair, but I will never put my families in jeopardy,” Clay said. “I take this very seriously.”

On a related note, Clay told residents to report any criminal activity they see. There have been a couple of thefts from one of the authority’s buildings recently, and graffiti is a problem.

Even so, based on police reports over the last six months, the housing authority’s buildings are “still one of the safest places in Nanticoke,” Clay said.

In other business, the authority has taken out a \$1.16 million loan for energy improvements and had an audit done to determine how the authority’s buildings could be made more energy-efficient.

Energy-saving measures include weather sealing the high-rise buildings, replacing the old boilers in Oplinger Towers and lower Nanticoke Terrace and using lower-electricity lighting. All the buildings’ 3.5 gallon toilets will be replaced with 1.6 gallon toilets, which Clay said would save “enormous amounts” of water.

The housing authority could save \$200,000 a year on energy, which would go to pay back the loan, Clay said. He plans to start monitoring Aug. 1 to see if the bills go down.

DeLuca said the Greater Nanticoke Area School District — for which he is also solicitor — has been very successful with a similar energy-saving program.

6/21/2007

Nanticoke spends \$100K more than it took in

New earned-income taxes lagging, too, but official says city actually on track.

Sherry Long - Times Leader

The city will have to keep a close watch on expenses throughout the remainder of the year.

The city spent \$108,483 more than originally budgeted in the general fund for this fiscal year, according to calculations by Certified Public Accountant John Bonita.

During Wednesday’s monthly work session, council members learned the city has generated \$1.11 million, but spent \$1.22 million as of May 31.

The city’s received about 89 percent, or \$372,504, in real estate taxes since January, but only 17 percent of the newly implemented earned-income tax has been received. Higher income taxes were estimated to generate \$1.7 million, but only \$293,561 was taken in as of May 31.

Collections of the earned-income taxes were started a month late as the city worked to ensure its payroll tax collector, Berkheimer Associates, was prepared to garnish the appropriate workers’ wages.

“It could cause some cash problems at the end of the year,” Bonita said.

The city began the year with money in the bank, but that figure was not calculated in with figures presented Wednesday. Bonita’s paperwork only shows year-to-date expenses and revenue as of May 31.

General fund balance figures for January were not immediately available.

City Administrator Kenneth Johnson acknowledged the city does have problems going over its budgeted amounts with some salary and legal costs.

Using cost projections to help budget expenditures through December the city will curtail its spending on overtime and other unnecessary purchases including special legal services, Johnson said.

The city administrator position was originally budgeted for \$40,000 annually. Johnson is paid \$65,000 annually and he requested one of the lowest salaries of all the people interviewed for the spot.

If the income-tax flow dramatically increases throughout the year the city might be able to safely offset the items running over budget.

Pennsylvania Economy League Executive Director Gerald Cross stressed city officials are actually on track with where they should be financially.

“So far the city has been living within its means,” Cross said. PEL is working to help the city recover from their financial problems after they were declared an Act 47 city last year by the state.

Fiscal years for counties and municipalities start in January and run through December.

6/18/2007

GNA starting own program

Greater Nanticoke Area School District is starting its own behavioral management program for emotional-support students. Six aides are being hired for the program, which will be based at the K.M. Smith Elementary School, Superintendent Anthony Perrone said.

The new program will save the district money: it costs \$17,000 per child for emotional-support education through the Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18, Perrone said.

In addition, the students, who are not severely disabled, can be brought back into their home district, he said.

6/18/2007

Meet the 'Father of Cabbage'

By Heidi Ruckno - Citizens Voice

Chet Kopco has always had an affinity for the offbeat. The assistant fire chief at the Honey Pot Volunteer Fire Co. is known in certain circles as "Father Cabbage."

The reason for the nickname? Kopco is the genius/mad man that came up with a bizarre fund-raiser called the Cabbage Roll.

The fund-raising idea, which his son Kevin said was conceived at the dinner table, was so outlandish that idol curiosity has drawn thousands to see or participate in the event.

Kopco only had to look as far as his sense of humor for inspiration.

He decided since East Market Street in Honey Pot was nicknamed "Cabbage Hill," why not roll a bunch of cabbages down it?

As it turned out, everybody was in on the joke.

"It takes one person to come up with a stupid comment, and it takes another one to say 'Why not?'," Kopco said.

When he's not fighting fires, the 52-year-old father of six is part of the management team at Kingston Commons Nursing Home. He's the budget and finance guy, an area of expertise his fellow firefighters appreciate.

"Honey pot is different. We pay our own bills," said Kopco, whose quirky fund-raisers have raised thousands of dollars for the company. Without the benefit of taxpayer subsidies, the company does whatever it takes to keep itself afloat. In 2005, the department needed money to refurbish its fire engine, so Kopco organized the cabbage roll in just three weeks.

Last year, he willingly put on a pair of tights and got into a wrestling ring. Their opponents were not fellow firefighters or amateurs; they were professional wrestlers.

The fund-raising event was organized to help Nanticoke native and former professional wrestler "The Executioner," now a wrestling promoter, get established.

"It was just one Nanticoke guy helping another Nanticoke guy get started," Kopco said.

Kopco has also put his signature stamp on an ordinary firefighter's convention.

He turned last year's six-county gathering into a three-day community festival, complete with fireworks and practical jokes.

Among the highlights was a joke he and his friends at Life Flight helped organize. The choppers circled the fire hall in a pattern similar to the opening sequence of the 1979 film, "Apocalypse Now," The display even included music from "The Doors."

Eccentricity like that is what makes his fund-raisers work, he said. People are always looking for something different, and those who attend never know what to expect, he said.

"If you turn it into a zoo, you'll get people," he said.

This year's "zoo" exhibit, the Cabbage Roll, will be held July 27 and 28.

6/16/2007

New book chronicles the story of Stanky

"Apples, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie: The Story of Stanky and the Coal Miners" is in bookstores now.

Michael Duncan - Times Leader

John Stanky and his polka band are local legends, delighting crowds at weddings, parties and picnics throughout Northeastern Pennsylvania.

But, the lively sound of the Coal Miners isn't limited to Wyoming Valley: The tall, affable John Stankovic has taken his musicians to all ends of the Earth.

This remarkable tale is told in a newly released biography, "Apples, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie: The Story of Stanky and the Coal Miners."

The book tells of a man, his band and their long career that has led them to every corner of the world. Stanky, wearing his trademark cowboy hat, held a book signing at Barnes & Noble Booksellers at the Arena Hub on Friday to promote the book's release and answer questions from his fans.

Stanky, 71, is an old-school performer, which is part of the charm that has his adoring fans from around the world coming back for more. Stanky and the Coal Miners have performed everywhere including half the countries in Europe, and China, Japan and South Korea.

"I like being called back to play again," Stanky said. "If [the venue] went in the hole, then I went in the hole."

And called back he was, performing on almost 150 cruises and everywhere in the states from Las Vegas to Alaska, where he traveled 25 times.

"We've played in an igloo in Nome," Stanky said. "I remember starting to play and the interpreter leaned over and told me to hold down the music because the walls were cracking."

Stanky traveled to China for the third time in 1989 when his trip was suddenly cut short by a man standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square. Stanky and the Coal Miners have seen and played it all, which comes with a certain celebrity status.

“One time we were playing at the back of an airplane on our way from China to Russia,” Stanky said. “The captain got on the intercom and told the passengers they had famous musicians on board, Stanky and the Coal Miners.”

Also on board was Billy Joel, his wife and their young daughter.

“Billy Joel thought, of course, they were talking about him,” Stanky laughed.

All this seems to be surreal for a man who started as a 9-year-old playing weddings with his accordion in Nanticoke.

More than six decades later, the amazing tale unfolds on the pages of a book that took three years of interviews with writer Bill Wagner. Stanky and the Coal Miners’ playing days are hardly over. The band, which includes two of Stanky’s children and two grandchildren, will continue to play around town and at international venues. In 2010, they plan to play the Oberammergau in Germany, a world-renowned Passion play which typically sells out two years in advance.

“Apples, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie,” named for one of Stanky’s more popular polkas, can be purchased for \$18.75 plus \$1.12 Pennsylvania sales tax, or may be ordered by mail for \$22, which includes postage and handling.

6/15/2007

GNA board OKs 2007-08 budget with no tax hike

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Greater Nanticoke Area School Board approved a final 2007-08 budget with no tax increase.

The \$22,163,555 budget keeps real estate taxes steady at 249 mills. A mill is \$1 on every \$1,000 of assessed value.

“We have a wonderful fund balance, we’re financially stable,” Superintendent Anthony Perrone said after Thursday’s board meeting.

Greater Nanticoke Area teachers have been without a contract for two years, so salaries in the budget are based on their expired contract. Hank Marks, president of the Greater Nanticoke Area taxpayers’ association, thanked the board for keeping taxes down. He also urged the board not to cave in to the teachers union during contract negotiations.

“They use the kids as pawns in their game of greed,” he said. “The union represents 130 teachers. ... You represent about 20,000 residents.”

There hasn’t been any movement on negotiations since last month, but next week the board plans to sit down with teachers and the attorneys for both sides, board member Robert Raineri said.

He said the teachers union filed a grievance against the board for voting last month to withdraw from the Northeast Pennsylvania School Districts Health Trust. The teachers might also file an injunction to stop the withdrawal from taking effect, Raineri said.

The board believes the district will save money by providing its own Blue Cross/Blue Shield coverage.

In other business, the board:

Appointed the Joyce Agency as insurance carriers for a period of one year, at a fee not to exceed \$92,590.

Hired seven new teachers. They are: Angela Paganucci, Shelby Wilczynski and Ronald Bruza Jr., all elementary; Kim Golumbieski and Meghan Torbik, special education; and Kristin Loszynski and Pamela Solano, reading specialists.

Accepted letters of intent to retire, effective in June 2008, from six teachers. They are: James Carey, high school English; Stephen Bilko, social studies; Mary Ann Kishbaugh, high school math; and Elementary Center teachers Henry Walters, Charlotte Jachimczak and Frances Stauffer.

Posted the position of high school Spanish teacher.

Heard from board member Ken James that a girls softball field is being fixed up at KM Smith Elementary.

“We wanted it here on campus, but there’s nowhere to put it,” James said.

It should be ready in time for next year so the high school team won’t have to play on the Little League field.

6/14/2007

Running city

Focusing on bigger Nanticoke ventures

Administrator concentrating on endeavors he believes may change the city’s outlook.

Sherry Long - Times Leader

Kenneth Johnson sees Nanticoke as a diamond in the rough.

The city’s new administrator began work last month and is the first person to hold the position on a full-time basis for more than a year – since Greg Gulick was fired in April 2006.

Paperwork is piling up on Johnson’s desk and on the rectangular table adjacent to his desk.

But, the paperwork can wait, he said, at least for now.

Instead, Johnson is focused on several projects that have the potential of shaping the city’s future, though he understands that it’s up to City Council to decide what projects must come first.

“I don’t make policy here,” he said. “I try to help them with their choice,” he said.

Johnson, 59, knows all too well about policy decisions facing local governing bodies; He’s a borough councilman in Milton, Northumberland County, where he lives with his wife.

His first project was cleaning up Patriot Square Park in preparation for the annual Music Fest in early June.

After taking a walk through the park, he authorized city crews to replace the tattered U.S. flags and add a fresh coat of paint to the picnic

tables and benches.

It was important to have the city looking nice to attract people to the area, he said.

City's big projects

But, Johnson is also paying close attention to larger issues facing the city, including the Kanjorski Center, repaving area roads and helping the city recover from its financial distress while working with the Pennsylvania Economy League.

Considering it one of the most important projects in Nanticoke, Johnson is excited about the prospect of revitalizing Main Street. A lot of that hinges on whether Luzerne County Community College moves into the Kanjorski Center on Main Street.

"If we can get the community college in there, I think that is going to be the kind of synergy that brings the downtown some economic development," Johnson said.

The college is also considering relocating its culinary arts program downtown, about a block from the Kanjorski Center. An undisclosed developer is considering opening an upscale restaurant at the site of the current Senior Citizens Center, while LCCC students would operate the facility.

A restaurant would pull students and older patrons into downtown, spurring economic development, Johnson said.

Nanticoke's Municipal Authority owns the Kanjorski Center, but in recent months, City Council members have authorized the transfer of \$30,000 to the authority, allowing it to meet its monthly expenses.

Given the city's fragile financial status, Johnson is closely monitoring all expenditures.

While he's not enthusiastic about having to pay the authority's bills, he knows it is necessary to keep the building in proper condition until a new tenant can be found.

"We are being very careful with any discretion purchase, including, even, my phone bills," Johnson said.

Fixing the roads

Last year, the city was declared financially distressed by the state because former administrations overspent their budgets.

Johnson doesn't think the city has as much of a financial problem, as a cash flow problem.

With the higher earned income taxes expected to start flowing in later this year, he believes the city will be able to get back on its feet by the middle of next year. He warned that cities usually don't get their taxes until three months after they were originally collected.

"My guess is we will not get anywhere near what was projected, but by the middle of next year, by the April 15 filing deadline, we should be in very good shape." Anyone driving through Nanticoke knows the roads need major work as this project has been put on the backburner as the city tries to become financially stable.

"Some of them are in really bad shape," he said. "They need total reconstruction."

Some roads, he said, might just need to be repaved and some will have to be scraped to the bottom near their curb lines, so they can be rebuilt properly when the new road surface is laid down. He did not say which streets would be the first to be fixed because the city will most likely wait until the taxes start rolling in to begin the work. Johnson has spent his entire career in public administration. His previous job was as a local government specialist for the Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance, an agency serving an eight-county region that helps local governments manage their economic developmental needs. Johnson has also served as city administrator in Kingston and Plains Township.

6/12/2007

Traffic woes trouble Nanticoke residents

cjones@citizensvoice.com

It's just a few short blocks, but it's enough room for speeders to let their lead feet stomp.

That's the case on East Union Street in Nanticoke, where speeders in the 200 to 400 block area have worried residents.

It's a residential area. The speed limit is 25 miles per hour, but cars travel much faster. Concerned residents have brought the issue to Nanticoke City Council.

"They gotta slow down," said Al Wytoshek, who is also Nanticoke's tax collector. "In the past five years, we've had a great influx of children. There's a lot of bicyclers and skateboarders. And these people go up and down the street like it's the Pocono 500. Everybody thinks it's a drag strip."

When the city repaved the street, some speed limit signs were taken down but not replaced, Wytoshek said. That's only part of the problem.

New speed limit signs will be put up within the next week, Mayor John Bushko said.

"We just have to buy them," he said. "Once they're up, that should help a bit."

Nanticoke's City Police Department has been monitoring the area the past weeks, too, Bushko said. With police presence, traffic has begun to slow down, he said.

"I just worry about those kids, now that school's out," Wytoshek said. "Cars can't be going that fast. It's not safe."

Truck traffic trouble

On the other end of Union Street, Nanticoke residents are having a different type of traffic problem.

Trucks turning from West Union onto Line Street are blocking traffic. Truck drivers sometimes have to ask residents to move their cars just to get by.

"It's really a sharp turn for a tractor-trailer," Bushko said. "If they cut it a little short, then it's a big problem. It's basically impossible for the trucks to get through with cars parked there, even if they're parked legally."

ABC Auto Parts, from where a lot of the truck traffic comes, is working with the city to address the problem, Bushko said. The city is

waiting for a police recommendation in the coming weeks to move forward with fixing the problem.

“(ABC) has been very cooperative,” Bushko said. “This has been there for three years and has been a problem. I appreciate people’s concerns.”

No means ‘no left turn’

6/8/2007

Nanticoke to get much-needed government funds

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Council received some good news Wednesday about money the city desperately needs for road repairs, fire equipment and other important things.

It looks like the city will soon get \$358,460 in state Department of Community and Economic Development Community Development Block Grant funds for 2007, \$381,267 in CDBG money for 2006, and \$190,000 in other grants that were on hold.

The state held the money because of the city’s previously poor financial management and its failure to follow state rules for administering grants.

The issues with the CDBG funds have been cleared up, but Nanticoke can’t get the money until two other grants are resolved, according to Matthew Domines of DCED’s Northeast Regional office. He said the funds may be released by some time next week.

Council also agreed Wednesday to apply for a \$202,500 state grant on behalf of the Nanticoke Housing Authority. The money will go toward a \$1.9 million project — converting the former Susquehanna Coal building at East Main and Market streets into moderate-income senior housing.

The housing authority will administer the grant, but city administrator Kenneth Johnson said he is asking for “every piece of paper,” so he can make sure it is properly documented.

“That’s why I’m being careful with the housing authority grant — I don’t want this to happen again,” Johnson said, referring to the past problems.

6/9/2007

GNA grads honor principal with pink ribbons

By Erin Moody CV

Graduating seniors proudly sported little pink ribbons on their white and blue gowns as they marched across the stage Friday night to accept their Greater Nanticoke Area Senior High School diplomas.

After the last student finished, they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, together for the last time, proud to be alumni and proud to support their principal in her fight against breast cancer.

“There is power in positive thinking,” Class President Amy Bieski said. “It gives us the power to excel.”

The 175 students graduated in front of a full house that included not only a packed auditorium but overflowed into the cafeteria where family and friends watched the ceremony on TV. Many had flowers and balloons for their graduates, and some audience members had air horns tucked away that they tooted as the seniors’ names were read.

Principal Mary Ann Jarolen said the students intended to surprise her with the breast cancer ribbons, but some of the teachers leaked the news before the ceremony so she wouldn’t be too overwhelmed.

“I cried my eyes out, to be honest,” she said. “The emphasis tonight it not that I’m sick, it’s that my kids can do really great things.”

Seniors Janelle Adams and Lauren Gorney organized the ribbon-wearing, and Jarolen thanked them in her speech. Those ribbons and the student support show why the class of 2007 was ready to graduate, she said, because they were a “class act.”

Most of the students already have plans for after high school, she said. About 25 percent will attend a four-year college, 45 percent plan to enroll at a two-year or trade school and 9 percent are enlisting in the military. In addition, more than \$2.6 million in scholarships have been offered to the students.

Valedictorian Michael Kmietowicz told the seniors that life is a series of graduations, and this one meant it was time to go out into the world and make a difference.

6/9/2007

Greater Nanticoke Area: Graduates told to reach for stars

slong@timesleader.com

Although Greater Nanticoke Area’s colors are blue and white, several graduating seniors also sported pink on Friday night.

Small pink ribbons on their robes as a show of support for Nanticoke Area High School Principal Mary Ann Jarolen, who is battling breast cancer.

“I have to tell you, you made me very proud,” Jarolen said. She had not planned to disclose her illness during the ceremony because she didn’t want to dampen the happy spirits of the day, she said.

As the 177 students began to prepare for life after high school, Jarolen encouraged them to not be afraid to overcome obstacles that life will present them. Obstacles are inevitable, but there are ways to overcome even the most challenging ones.

“Just try to do your best and don’t be afraid to fail,” she said. “Make the very best of it and try to live life to the fullest.”

Of the estimated 100 billion stars in the Milky Way, salutatorian Lisa Zaverack asked her classmates which star they were reaching for – the brightest star several light years away or the closest star because it would be easy.

She told her classmates it was OK if they didn't know which one they wanted.

"If you have the love and support of those around you it doesn't matter which star you reach for," Zaverack said as a standing room only crowd watched commencement ceremonies in the school auditorium.

This is the fourth year the school held ceremonies inside due to the threat of bad weather. Normally graduations are held on the school's football field.

While some students will attend college this fall, others may be sent overseas as they serve in one of the U.S. military branches.

Twenty-five percent of Nanticoke's graduates will attend four-year universities, 45 percent will go on to a two-year or technical college and 9 percent are poised to join the military, Jarolen said.

Valedictorian Michael Kmietowicz reminded classmates no matter where the future takes them, whether it's down the street or around the world, they should always remember their roots. They will always be Nanticoke Trojans.

"Be a flame. Shine a light on the world," he said.

The Trojan class of 2007 received \$2.6 million in scholarships.

6/7/2007

High cost of keeping up Kanjorski Center prompts Nanticoke to transfer \$15,000

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The lease-purchase of the Kanjorski Center would not only help revitalize downtown, but it would allow the cash-strapped city to get an informal loan back, city officials believe.

Council voted Wednesday to transfer \$15,000 to the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority for maintenance of the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street, as well as its other properties.

Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League, budgeted \$45,000 in 2007 for upkeep of the authority's assets. But costs are significantly higher: close to \$70,000, city administrator Kenneth Johnson said. It's money the financially distressed city doesn't have.

Luzerne County Community College is considering a lease-purchase of the mostly vacant Kanjorski Center to use as a life sciences center. The building can't be sold outright just yet, or the authority will have to pay back a \$1.3 million grant used to build it.

The state Department of Education is reviewing LCCC's revised master plan to ensure the project is eligible for state funding.

Mayor John Bushko said there are "serious negotiations" going on for the building. If they go through, the city should ask for its money back from the authority, he said. PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross agreed, comparing it to a no-interest loan.

"If the building is sold and we acquire some funds, and it's approved by the solicitor, I don't see why not," authority board member Hank Marks said, when asked if the municipal authority would be willing to reimburse the city.

In other business, council:

Hired Scott Paveletz of Nanticoke as code enforcement officer at a salary of \$35,000 a year.

Sold the Washington Street fire station, appraised at \$87,500, to Nanticoke Community Ambulance for \$47,500 and a \$40,000 rescue vehicle which, with equipment, fire chief Mike Bohan said is worth \$100,000.

Allowed by a 4-1 vote the transfer of a liquor license from the former Desi's Pizza in Dallas Township to 24 E. Spring St., where Philadelphia-based Las Vegas Lounge plans to open a "moderately upscale pub."

Councilman Bernard Norieka objected on the grounds there is another bar half a block away, the youth anti-drug center is nearby and the site is in a residential area with no parking.

6/7/2007

LCCC nears deal for the Kanjorski Center

slong@timesleader.com

Luzerne County Community College officials are one step closer to receiving funds to lease-purchase the Kanjorski Center in downtown Nanticoke.

College officials met for about two hours with representatives of the state Department of Education's budget office and Pennsylvania Economic Development board Tuesday afternoon in Harrisburg, LCCC Interim President Thomas P. Leary said.

"It seemed to be a very favorable and positive meeting," he said, noting state officials gave the impression the funding request would be approved.

College officials met with officials from both agencies because the city of Nanticoke and LCCC are working on a collaborative project to bring education services to downtown while providing economic development for the city.

The college had originally planned to construct a new building to house its growing health sciences program as part of a \$20 million campus capital projects plan, but then decided it would be more cost effective to purchase the vacant Kanjorski Center.

Since the college receives funding from the state, all changes to LCCC's capital project plan must be approved by the state Board of Education.

"We estimate a cost savings of \$5 million," Leary said.

Next week the college plans to submit the information requested by the state agencies detailing the building's renovated architectural plans and the exact financing required for the Kanjorski project, Leary said.

6/7/2007

Nanticoke hires Paveletz as code enforcement chief

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For the first time in four months the city has a new code enforcement officer.

During Wednesday's city council meeting council members unanimously approved hiring Scott Paveletz at an annual salary of \$35,000. Paveletz will start work June 25. As code enforcement officer he will be responsible to work with residents and business contractors to ensure all building, zoning, occupancy and construction permits are properly filed as required. He will also be responsible for contacting owners of dilapidated buildings to get them razed.

Although Paveletz is not currently certified as a building code official, City Administrator Kenneth Johnson doesn't anticipate Paveletz will have any problems passing the exam.

"If we do pay for his certification with the building code official he is going to be obligated to stay with the city for a certain specified period of time or pay us back for that certification," Johnson said.

It was not known how much the certification would cost.

After getting certified as a building code official, Paveletz will also be responsible for ensuring all structures meet the necessary building and fire code standards.

Johnson interviewed four candidates for the job with the help of Tom Sauers, a code enforcement officer from Union County. While Paveletz does not have a background in building inspections, Johnson said, he was Occupational Safety and Health Administration and state Department of Environmental Protection certified.

City officials also transferred another \$15,000 to the Nanticoke's Municipal Authority allowing them to help pay bills on the Kanjorski Center. In late March, city officials agreed to transfer \$15,000 to keep the center operating until a buyer could be found.

However, this time the city attached strings to the money.

When the authority gets financially stable it must pay the money back as a no-cost loan.

The Luzerne County Community College is currently in talks to lease-purchase the building. This would allow the college to expand its health science curriculum.

5/31/2007

Pierogi eating contest scheduled for Nanticoke Music Fest

Eating contest, parade are new additions to Nanticoke festival's 10th year.

Kelly Leighton For the Times Leader

While Mayor John Bushko does not plan on participating in the first-ever pierogi-eating contest this weekend at Nanticoke Music Fest, he will be on hand to open the festival.

The festival, which is celebrating its 10th year, will get under way at 5 p.m. Friday at Patriot Square, which is located at Market and Broad streets. Additions to this year's festival include the pierogi-eating contest and a parade through the city. Both events are Saturday.

The pierogi-eating contest puts a local touch on a long-standing fair tradition of eating competitions. Yvonne Bozinski, director of special events, said one of the vendors and former committee member, John "Yogi" Jagodzinski, arranged the competition, in addition to donating the pierogies.

The committee hopes to turn the contest into an annual event, Bozinski said. There is a \$10 entry fee and contestants will have five minutes to eat as many pierogies as they can. First- and second-place winners will be awarded a cash prize.

Before the competition, a parade will march through the city, beginning on the corner of East Ridge and College streets and ending at the bottom of Prospect Street, committee member Karen Dougherty said. In addition to local groups walking, there will also be bagpipers.

It will be a "prideful but not big parade," Dougherty said.

Later Saturday, the Dancing Dogs will put on a performance. The organization trains dogs to dance, Bozinski said. Any donations to the Dancing Dogs will be given to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Additionally, there will be vendors offering food and crafts, games and several amusement park rides. Entertainment will be provided throughout the weekend. Starting off the festivities will be 4given Judgment, a rock band, directly after the opening ceremony. Picture Perfect, a band specializing in Top 40 and disco, will follow at 6 p.m. Friday.

On Saturday, Hickory Rose, a country and western band, will take the stage at 6 p.m., followed by the '80s tribute band Bad Hair Day at 8 p.m.

The Kerry Dancers, an Irish dancing group, will perform at 4 p.m. Sunday. Following them will be John Stevens' Double Shot, specializing in polka, at 5 p.m. Crazy Chester will close the festival Sunday, beginning at 7 p.m., with Top 40 and oldies tunes.

The festival is free and open to the public.

A Children's Festival, featuring magicians, puppeteers and clowns, is tentatively scheduled for late summer, Bozinski said. Halloween and Christmas parties are also in the works, she added.

Check out the 2007 Music Fest page

5/31/2007

Music Fest noting 10th anniversary: Three-day event begins Friday night

The planning has been going on for months, since the beginning of January. Details have been worked out, vendors have been booked, the park is in tip-top shape and the Music Festival Committee announced the annual Nanticoke Music Fest will be held Friday, Saturday and Sunday in Patriot Park, located in the center of the city.

Festivities begin Friday at 5 p.m. with opening ceremonies featuring the U.S. Army color honor guard from the 109th Field Artillery. Nanticoke resident David Yezefski will sing the National Anthem and Mayor John Bushko will deliver the welcome. This is a special year for the event. "It's hard to believe, but this is our 10th anniversary," said Yvonne Bozinski.

Yvonne is not only director of special events for the City of Nanticoke, but she has been on the Music Fest planning committee for many years. "We keep it going because we know how much the people enjoy all the activities. We like bringing people together as a community to Patriot Park. It really is a nice family event."

This three-day event will feature some of the area's favorite bands. On Friday from 5 to 6 p.m., 4Given Judgment will take the stage. The band members are young adults who hail from Nanticoke. They will belt out tunes from such popular groups as Creed, Nirvana, Stone Sour, Hinder, 3 Doors Down and Nickelback. From 6 to 10 p.m., Picture Perfect will play top 40 and dance music.

On Saturday, the day kicks off with a parade that will start on East Ridge and College Streets, wind through town and end at Patriot Square.

Parade coordinator Karen Dougherty is looking for a nice turnout. "We invite everyone to come out and enjoy the parade," she said. Bagpipers, scouts, youth groups and, of course, fire trucks are just some of the scheduled marchers. "This is a good time to meet up with some old friends," Dougherty said.

Following the parade will be the fest's first pierogie-eating contest. Can you eat the most in the least amount of time?

Dancing Dogs will take the stage from 5 to 6 p.m. Yvonne tells me this is an act with all types of dogs that like to dance. The country and western band Hickory Rose and Bad Hair Day finish out the night's entertainment.

On Sunday, the Kerry Dancers will perform and then it's John Steven's Doubleshot putting out the polkas and Crazy Chester closing out the night and the festival.

For all three nights there will be rides and games for the kids. There will be a wide variety of foods and drink. Admission is free. For more information, call 735-2800.

Youth group coffeehouse set

Something new: A youth group coffeehouse will be held tonight from 7 to 10 at the Pope John Paul II School cafeteria. Brenda Wenner and Soul Searching will be the featured band. Brenda is a parishioner of Holy Trinity Church and also a fourth-grade catechist.

"This talented group of musicians will offer inspirational and thought-provoking music" said youth director Bill Borysewicz.

The Nanticoke Catholic Youth Group will sell refreshments. Admission is free, but a free-will offering will be taken.

Pierogie sale at St. Mary's

St. Mary's Catholic Council will conduct a pierogie sale Tuesday and Wednesday. Friday is the last day to order. Call Helen at 735-2542 or Mary at 735-4653. Cost is \$6 per dozen.

Bingo at St. Joseph's

Parishioners of St. Joseph's Church invite you to their monthly bingo Sunday in the church parlors on East Noble Street. Doors open at 12:30 p.m. Early birds at 1:45. Regular games begin at 2.

There will be cash prizes, door prizes and refreshments available.

Society holding bake sale

Altar and Rosary Society of St. Francis Church will hold a bake sale Saturday and Sunday, June 9-10, in the parish center after all masses. Anyone wishing to donate baked goods can bring them to the parish center on Friday, June 8, from 3 to 6 p.m. and Saturday before the 4 p.m. Mass.

Pam Urbanski's column appears every other Thursday. Please email announcements to pamurb806@aol.com

5/26/2007

GNA teachers will file grievance if district pulls out of health trust

By Denise Allabaugh and Elizabeth Skrapits

If Greater Nanticoke Area School Board pulls out of the Northeast Pennsylvania's School District's Health Trust, teachers will file a grievance, an unfair labor practice or a lawsuit, said Attorney John Holland of the Pennsylvania State Education Association.

The board has a contractual obligation to meet with the teachers to bargain before pulling out of the trust since health care is a mandatory subject of bargaining under Act 195, the Public Employee Relations Act, Holland said.

By a 7-1 vote, the board voted Thursday to pull out of the health trust, which was formed by 13 public school entities in 1999 to combat rising Blue Cross health insurance costs.

“They may have voted to do that, but by law, they don’t have the authority to do that,” Holland said, adding that one party cannot “unilaterally” vote on health care without negotiating with the teachers’ union. “The trust has saved the parties involved significant amounts of money.”

GNA School Board member Bob Raineri denied that the trust is saving money. He said the district will save money by pulling out of the trust June 30 and the teachers’ coverage will stay the same.

“If their coverage does not change, why not pull out if we can save money and get the same coverage?” Raineri asked. “It’s going to cost the district a lot less money and we’re here for the taxpayers. If they can get the same coverage for a lot less, I don’t see why anyone should argue about leaving.”

There is currently about \$15 million in the trust reserves. Holland charged the Greater Nanticoke Area School Board wants to get their hands on their share of the money.

GNA School Board has retained the law firm of Rosenn, Jenkins and Greenwald LLP to attempt to get back what the district considers its fair share of the surplus — money paid into the trust but never used.

“They saved a lot of money and they want to get their hands on the reserves, which are needed as a back-up to pay for health care claims,” Holland said.

Instead of being stored, Raineri said the reserves should be used to provide employees a discount on health care costs.

“Originally, it was supposed to save us money, but they didn’t say anything about excess funds,” Raineri said. “As long as they’re not spending the money, your contributions should be lower and apparently, that’s not the case, so the contribution should be returned to us in the form of cheaper contributions.”

Dallas School Board pulled out of the health trust and teachers filed two unfair labor practices against the school board. Northwest Area and Pittston Area are also considering withdrawal. A study done by Sovereign Benefits Consulting of Pittsburgh stated the districts could save money by providing their own health insurance to employees.

Pittston Area will meet Tuesday at 7 p.m. to discuss the health trust. The board is divided on whether to extend the teachers contract to 2013 in exchange for being allowed to pull out of the trust.

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5/26/2007

In Nanticoke, teen follows Barletta’s lead on illegals

Reform not amnesty, just like in Hazleton’s plan, is result Nanticoke wants, Bieski says.

slong@timesleader.com

Nanticoke resident Eric Bieski is already concerned about the outcome of the challenge to Hazleton’s Illegal Immigration Relief Act. The 19-year-old pre-law student feels that a decision to uphold the controversial act would force illegal immigrants to migrant elsewhere – possibly Nanticoke.

And, he wants to stop the problem before it starts.

While working at the polls last week for his mother, Pattie Bieski, who is seeking re-election to the Greater Nanticoke School Board, Eric conducted an unscientific survey.

He randomly asked residents how they felt about immigration reform and discovered an overwhelming number favor reform – not amnesty.

“Whether you’re Polish, Italian, Irish, illegal means illegal,” Bieski said. “There is no racism involved.”

Hazleton plan called racist

But, Anna Arias, a member of the Hazleton Area Latino Taskforce, strongly disagrees. She feels racism is at the heart of Hazleton’s illegal immigration issue.

“People feel with this ordinance they have a right to hate and discriminate,” she said. “We refuse to believe we (as humans) are all created equally in the image of God.”

Bieski, who says the proposal by Congress is a form of amnesty, asked Nanticoke City Council at a meeting this month to consider enacting an ordinance similar to the one that vaulted Hazleton into the national limelight and federal court. The Hazleton measure was passed in July and was later revised. Under the law businesses and landlords would be penalized if they employ or rent property to illegal immigrants.

Hazleton’s ordinance was challenged in federal court in March. U.S. District Judge James Munley has not yet made a ruling.

Bieski says that any form of amnesty would be a slap in the face to immigrants who filed the proper paperwork to come to America.

“If you are illegal you are stealing from Americans,” he said, adding that America needs to crack down on its borders.

“We have enough problems on our own soil first before taking on other places,” Bieski said.

Arias, who was born in the Dominican Republic and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1980, sees another side to the issue.

Illegal immigrants just want what every other person migrating to America has wanted - to provide a better life for their families by

working hard, she said.

“They are coming here illegally to feed their children,” Arias said. She said that illegal immigrants are not eligible for food stamps or medical assistance, but said that they pay taxes.

Since 1996, non-resident aliens who are not eligible to obtain a Social Security card but who need to file taxes can apply for an individual tax identification number, according to the Internal Revenue Service’s Web site.

Uniting against illegal aliens

Bieski vows to conduct a door-to-door campaign and aims to speak to every Nanticoke resident about his concerns. He plans to circulate a petition that would ask city officials to consider such a law.

He acknowledges that Nanticoke could not afford to mount a legal battle over the issue. The city is trying to recover from dire financial problems.

Bieski is working with a Hazleton group, Voice of the People, which supports Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta’s fight against illegal immigrants.

Voice of the People will hold an illegal-immigration rally June 3 in Hazleton.

Voice of the People founder Dan Smeriglio said his volunteer organization had planned to distribute petitions to officials of other cities after the rally.

While an influx of illegal immigrants would strain city services, it might not be possible for the city to limit where people move, Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko said.

The federal government should step up to the plate to enforce current immigration laws, he said.

“I don’t know why Barletta’s got to fight this,” Bushko said.

Realizing immigrants, like his Irish and Polish ancestors, built America through hard work, Bieski is not against foreigners settling in America. He welcomes it but feels they should do it legally.

WHAT’S NEXT?

FOR MORE INFO

ON THE WEB:

Illegal-immigration rallies will be held at 2 p.m. June 3 at Hazleton City Hall and at 7 p.m. June 15 at the Federal Courthouse in Scranton.

To contact Bieski, e-mail him at Gnaball32@aol.com.

For more information: www.voiceofthepeopleusa.com

www.voiceofthepeopleusa.com

5/25/2007

GNA votes to withdraw from health trust

By Elizabeth Skrapits- eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Greater Nanticoke Area School Board voted to withdraw from the Northeast Pennsylvania School Districts Health Trust Thursday, making it the second district to do so.

By a 7-1 vote — member Ken James was absent — the board voted to pull out of the trust effective midnight June 30. The board then authorized business manager Albert B. Melone to open a benefit trust account for the district, to set up health insurance for district teachers, support staff and other employees.

The health trust was formed in 1999 by 13 public school entities to combat rising Blue Cross-Blue Shield costs. GNA, Dallas, Northwest Area and Pittston Area discovered through a recently completed study the four districts commissioned through Sovereign Benefits Consulting of Pittsburgh that they could save money by withdrawing from the trust and providing their own insurance.

“They didn’t give a definitive figure, but it’s in the hundreds of thousands of dollars,” superintendent Anthony Perrone said.

Dallas School Board voted in April to pull out of the trust and hire Elite Brokerage Services Inc. of Lewisburg to administer a self-funded insurance plan. More recently, Dallas hired the law firm of Rosenn, Jenkins and Greenwald LLP to try to get back what the board believes is the district’s share of the health trust’s \$15 million surplus.

The GNA board also hired Elite and the same law firm, for the same reasons.

GNA teachers are working under the terms of their contract, which expired in June 2005, while a new one is negotiated.

“The teachers aren’t getting any variations in their benefits,” Perrone said. “I worry, because benefits are a very, very important part of your package when you negotiate. You have to make sure contractually they’re getting the same benefits.”

School board members Gary Smith and Robert Raineri, who are on the negotiating committee, said the board did not discuss the health trust with the teachers’ union. Elite will contact the union Friday to explain the change, Raineri said.

GNA teachers’ union Barbara Zaborney could not be reached for comment, but previously stated that the union did not want to leave the health trust.

“I think it was pushed too fast without discussing this with the unions,” board president Jeff Kozlofski said when asked why he voted against leaving the trust. “Without meeting with them, I don’t think it’s fair to assume they would support this.”

Kozlofski also believed the board should look around to see if there are alternatives for providing health insurance, such as one suggested by Robert Fountain, an independent consultant from Wilkes-Barre.

Fountain told the board the district could save money by self-funding their insurance through a new total benefit strategy from Blue Cross-Blue Shield. In the plan, deductibles are lower — about \$3,000 for an individual, \$6,000 for a family, as opposed to \$75,000 to \$100,000 — so district liability is less, Fountain said.

The board is contracting with Elite on a month-to-month basis, so can leave at any time, Perrone said.

5/23/2007

Districts consider leaving Health Trust

By Elizabeth Skrapits - eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nearly a quarter of the 13 local school districts that joined the Northeast Pennsylvania School Districts Health Trust to save on employee health care costs are having second thoughts about staying in the consortium.

However, teacher contract obligations and uncertainty about refunds for money already paid into the trust might keep them in it, at least for now.

One district — Dallas — has already pulled out. Three others — Greater Nanticoke Area, Northwest Area and Pittston Area — are weighing the benefits and drawbacks of defection.

The four districts' school boards recently commissioned Sovereign Benefits Consulting of Pittsburgh to help them perform a cost benefit analysis of remaining in the trust. Sovereign concluded all four districts could save money by leaving it and becoming self-insured.

As the deadline nears for districts to adopt budgets for the coming school year, the discussions are taking on new urgency. Greater Nanticoke Area, which pays \$250,000 a month to the trust, will meet Thursday at 6:30 p.m. to explore what it might save by providing its own health insurance.

"We have to make our decision by June 1, so we have to decide what we want to do," GNA board member Robert Raineri said.

Northwest Area meets Thursday at 7 p.m. to adopt its preliminary budget. President Charles E. Brace Jr. expects there to be discussion about withdrawing from the health trust, one of several options the board is considering.

"We still need some firm numbers brought back before we can make a decision," Brace said.

Pittston Area board member Bob Linskey said Elite Brokerage of Lewisburg estimates it could provide his district with the same health benefits teachers are receiving now, for \$300,000 a year less. But the Pittston Area board is split on whether to withdraw from the trust, and plans to meet on May 30 for more debate.

When the Dallas school board voted in April to withdraw from the health trust effective midnight, June 30, the board retained Elite to administer the district's health insurance program.

The health trust was created in 1999 by 13 area public school entities to save money on rising employee health insurance benefits costs through Blue Cross of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

The teachers contract issue

One issue the districts must consider is whether their teachers contracts allow them to leave the health trust.

Dallas teachers have been without a contract since August 2006, Northwest Area since August 2005 and GNA since June 2005.

Dallas' teachers union already has filed two unfair labor practices against the school board for withdrawing from the trust.

Pittston Area's contract does not allow the board to leave the health trust without teachers' permission. Pittston Area teachers have asked for a four-year contract extension in exchange for allowing the district to pull out of the trust, Linskey said.

Instead of extending the contract, which he said has remained essentially the same since the 1990s, Linskey would rather negotiate a new one and stay in the trust. The contract allows health insurance coverage for retirees and spouses, which will cost \$1.3 million in 2007-08, he said.

On the other side, Pittston Area School Board member Joe Oliveri thinks extending the contract and leaving the trust makes financial sense.

"When we ran up the numbers, we still come out \$300,000, \$350,000 to the good," he said. "That's definitely a win-win situation for the taxpayers."

Northwest Area school board and the teachers union informally discussed leaving the trust during a contract negotiation session Monday, Brace said. He wants the union to be in agreement with any decision the board makes.

"We asked (the teachers) to come back with any questions," Brace said. "We're going to give them some opportunity to digest that, and for the board to have good solid information."

Raineri said he doesn't believe GNA teachers will have a problem if the district opts for self-insurance. The teachers are working under their expired contract, which allows a change in health insurance as long as coverage stays the same, Raineri said.

"I don't really understand why they would go against us. If it's the same coverage, what difference does it make, if we're saving money?" he said.

The surplus question

Another withdrawal pitfall districts could face is forfeiting money they have vested in the trust. There is currently about \$14.5 million in the trust reserves, Linskey said.

"There's a clause in the agreement if any school district pulls out, they're not entitled to any of that," he said.

Dallas retained the law firm of Rosenn, Jenkins and Greenwald LLP to try to get back the approximately \$2 million the board believes the district contributed toward the surplus.

There's a legal opinion Pittston Area might be able to successfully sue to get back the \$1.5 to \$2 million it has in the reserves, but it's a gamble, Linskey said.

5/21/2007

Team effort in Nanticoke

By Elizabeth Skrapits - eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Whether it's sports or business, it takes time and effort to put together a team of the most effective people for the job.

Nanticoke officials have been working on it since the city was declared Act 47, or financially distressed, by the state on May 26, 2006. By the first anniversary of that declaration, they will have assembled people they believe are best qualified to help with all aspects of recovery, including a city administrator to head the team.

"I think now our team's in place, and we're ready to move forward," Mayor John Bushko announced at last week's council meeting. The state appointed the Pennsylvania Economy League as Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, along with the Joint Urban Studies Center and the accounting firm of Albert B. Melone and Co. They put together a financial recovery plan for the city.

"I think it's pretty much following the recovery plan schedule to have a management team in place by June," PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said.

The city has responsibilities to its residents, and city officials need that team to work together to ensure the obligations are met, Cross said. Starting lineup

Bushko and councilmen Joe Dougherty, Jim Litchkofski, Brent Makarczyk and Bernie Norieka are the city's policy makers. They will be advised by an experienced new solicitor, William Finnegan. He is also solicitor for Edwardsville Borough, and was Wilkes-Barre City's attorney for eight years.

Last August, council hired Holly Quinn as fiscal manager, to keep the city's books and financial records in order.

Donna Wall and Betsy Cheshinski are vital in the clerical side of city business.

"They're a very big part of the team. They're the lifeblood of the city," Bushko said.

Council recently asked Cheshinski to help with code enforcement paperwork. She whipped the office into shape, organizing and filing everything, Bushko said.

"And she does that between her other duties," he said. "If everyone could have an attitude like that and cooperate, we could make big strides."

To complete the team, council will soon hire a code enforcement officer.

But the main addition is Ken Johnson. Council recently hired him as city administrator, a position required by PEL's recovery plan to supervise day-to-day operations. It's a complex job, but city officials are confident Johnson is right for it.

"He's a professional. He's been through this before. He knows what needs to be done," Bushko said. "I'm so happy he's there."

No 'no' for Johnson

Johnson found the professional challenge Nanticoke presented to be attractive.

Previously, he worked for the Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance, neighboring Plymouth Township's financial recovery coordinator.

His job with the non-profit community and economic development organization was his first since college that wasn't in local, state or federal government. Past workplaces include the state Department of Community and Economic Development and Kingston, where he was administrator.

Besides 30 years of government experience, Johnson spent 37 years in the military. The lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force hasn't been on active duty for a while, but he is in the reserves.

In Nanticoke, Johnson is proving to be a leader who is "compassionate, but has authority," Bushko said.

"The word 'no' is not in my vocabulary. If someone has a reason they can't do something, that's OK ... I can be flexible," Johnson said.

"But in the end, the task has to be done, so the word 'no' doesn't work with me."

Nearly \$900,000 in state grants for the city are on hold due to previous mistakes. Johnson frowns at the subject; placing blame is counterproductive, he believes. Look forward, not backward.

"This will not happen again," he said.

Johnson is working with DCED to get additional grants after the others are released — which should be soon, he said. A \$25,000 grant is for computers to make city operations more efficient.

Although he lives an hour's drive away in Milton Borough, Northumberland County, Johnson chose to start work at 8 a.m. and leave at 5 p.m. instead of the usual 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Bushko said.

"This is my city. I may not live in it, but it's my city," Johnson said.

Sprucing up the Square

Nanticoke's 10th annual Musicfest is coming up the weekend of June 1-3. It's a big event, bringing in people from all over to enjoy bands, food and entertainment.

One of the first things Johnson did as administrator was assess Patriot Square, where the festival is held. He's sending the public works department to clean up the park, put some mulch around the flagpole, do a bit of painting.

"A little elbow grease, a little soap, a little paint — spend as little as possible, but we have to spend some money," he said. "I want to put a good face on the city for visitors."

Johnson immediately noted a neglected American flag hanging in faded tatters.

"That does not make me very happy, given my background," he said.

Bushko said Johnson drew attention to the condition of the flag, and as a result, the office of State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, will get new ones from Harrisburg.

"I think Ken's going to instill a little pride back in our town," Bushko said.

5/21/2007

Honey Pot Fire Company will hold its second annual Cabbage Roll Festival on July 27-28 at the Lower Broadway fairgrounds in Nanticoke.

The festival is a fund-raising event for many non-profit organizations of the lower Luzerne County area. The fire company hopes to raise enough money for a down payment on an upgraded fire engine. The current engine was built in 1965 and has to be replaced. The cabbage roll is an off-the-cuff sporting event for all ages, in which participants roll cabbages down Cabbage Hill in the Honey Pot section of Nanticoke for distance and prizes. The cabbage roll will be held Saturday, July 28 at 2 p.m. with opening ceremonies at 1:30. On Friday, the festival begins at the fairgrounds at 6 p.m. Opening Band will be Beyond Fallen (a local metal band returning from a European tour. At 8, 40-Lb. Head takes the stage. Special guests at Cabbage Roll include WWF Legend King Kong Bundy, star of Wrestlemania 2 (Bundy versus Hulk Hogan). King Kong Bundy will meet and greet fans. On Friday night, the Cabbage Roll will feature the Coal City Rollers roller derby team) in a Cabbage Roll challenge match against the NEPA minor pro football team, its coaches and cheerleaders. The night will continue with a fireworks display by Celebration Fireworks, Inc. On Saturday, festival will open at noon with music will by Jolly Joe and the Bavarians. A shuttle bus will be provided between the fairgrounds and the cabbage roll site on Cabbage Hill. Opening ceremonies will be at 1:30 p.m. and cabbage rolling begins at 2. Music will be provided on Cabbage Hill by DJ Iceman. At 6:30, RSO will perform at the fairgrounds. Awards ceremony for the winning cabbage athletes will be at 9. Event will feature rides for children, horse-drawn wagon rides, food by local restaurants, home-cooked meals from church groups, an arts and craft fair and bingo.

5/18/2007

Nanticoke attempting to end some post-retirement benefits
By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City officials won't try to pull the police and fire chiefs out of their unions. However, they will move forward with attempts to end post-retirement benefits for former employees' children. Council voted on Wednesday to allow fire Chief Michael Bohan and police Chief James Cheshinski to remain in their unions until contract negotiations in 2008, revoking council's Feb. 21 decision to remove them earlier. Previous chiefs were non-union because it was difficult for them to represent both employees and management, council said at the time of the earlier decision. Mayor John Bushko said it is more economical for the city and fairer to the employees to wait. Nanticoke's financial recovery plan, drawn up by Pennsylvania Economy League, recommended both chiefs be removed from their bargaining units, but not until after their current contracts expire. To do so before that could result in an expensive legal battle, including a hearing before the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board. Bohan and Cheshinski are working chiefs who respond to calls alongside the others in their departments. The recovery plan states that they are to be given new job descriptions. Removing the chiefs from the unions at this time could result in significant overtime costs, city administrator Ken Johnson said. On the other hand, city officials will continue fighting to prove they don't have to provide health care to retirees' children until they turn 18, or 23 if they are in school. "It's absolutely on the radar screen," city attorney William Finnegan said of the issue. Council voted on Feb. 21 to stop city-paid health care benefits to the children of retired police officers Leonard Nardozzo, Edward Grabinski and Bill Brown and public works employee Henry Levandowski. Attorneys with Reed Smith LLP, a law firm hired by the city, say police officers and their spouses are entitled to health insurance for the rest of their lives under the contract, which says nothing about their children. The firm determined Levandowski's contract did not award post-retirement health care. If the contract calls for health care benefits or council previously amended it to provide them, the city should honor its obligation, Johnson said. If that's not the case, given its financial condition, the city needs to take the next step, which could be arbitration, he said. "We can't justify anything that we're not obligated to do," Johnson said.

5/18/2007

New earned income tax rate in effect
By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke residents are reminded to tell their employers about the new earned income tax rates so they don't face a high bill at tax time. The new earned income tax rate of 2 percent, raised from 1 percent, is in effect. Greater Nanticoke Area School District gets 0.5 percent, and the rest goes to the city. People who work in Nanticoke but don't live there will now pay a 0.33 percent non-resident earned income tax, also called the "commuter tax." Nanticoke Administrator Ken Johnson said if the money isn't deducted from paychecks by employers, residents will have to pay the taxes themselves either quarterly or by tax day, April 15. "Employees don't think about the implications of that, and don't contact their employers," Johnson said. City officials expect new revenue from the increased income tax to start coming in slowly. But bills, payroll and other city expenses still have to be paid. Because of that, council voted Wednesday to take out a tax anticipation loan of \$250,000, to be paid back in November. The

original \$250,000 loan council approved in April had a lower interest rate, but was due in August.

5/19/2007

His future's full of science

Greater Nanticoke Area senior excited about any chance to perform research

By Janine Ungvarsky Times Leader Correspondent

How many people do you know who get excited about glow-in-the-dark bacteria? If the answer is none, you don't know Michael Kmietowicz.

The Greater Nanticoke Area science whiz really comes alive when he's talking about this or any of the many science experiments he's tackled over the years.

Kmietowicz gets especially animated when he explains his 11th-grade Pennsylvania Junior Academy of Science experiment, which tested the effect of pollutants on photosynthesis. "I used spinach leaves and treated them with different pollutants like motor oil, weed killer and window cleaner," he said. The experiment, which showed a severe effect on the leaf condition with each pollutant, was so well-done that it was turned into a poster presentation for a state science teachers' convention.

Another science project on determining the vitamin C content of orange juice garnered Kmietowicz first place honors regionally and an opportunity to compete at the state level when he was only in seventh grade. Science Olympiad brought more awards, including several gold medals in diverse topics such as crime busting and "naked egg drops."

But if you really want to hear pure excitement in his voice, ask Kmietowicz about the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity he had to attend the Pennsylvania Governor's School for the Sciences at Carnegie Mellon University. He spent five weeks among the 100 most talented science students in the state, taking advanced science courses.

"The course outline for the biology lab detailed that I would use such techniques as polymerase chain reaction and gel electrophoresis, which excited me," he said. "I performed high school experiments tracking dyes on a gel but had never actually extracted DNA and performed tests on it. That all changed during my lab course.

"In the most exciting experiment," he added, "we incorporated fish genes into bacteria to make them bioluminescent."

Kmietowicz patiently explains what that means for the scientifically impaired. "We took a gene from a glow-in-the-dark fish and put it into bacteria in a petri dish and made the bacteria glow." The point, he said, is to show that genetic engineering is possible between species – something he knows will result in far-reaching benefits.

"It was the best five weeks of my life, from the relationships I formed to what I learned," Kmietowicz said. "It guided me to the future I want in bioresearch."

He credits his dad with initially awakening his interest in the sciences. "When I was really small, my dad, who is a teacher, would come home and do kitchen science experiments with me," he said. From those early days of making, for instance, "soda bottle tornados,"

Kmietowicz has developed a passion and life mission.

"Biotechnology is growing," he said, sounding eager to dig right in. "I was probably born at just the right time for what I want to do. The advancements in biotechnology in the next 10 to 20 years should be amazing. I want to develop vaccines, to find a vaccine against HIV or whatever else is out there."

Until the day he's ready for that, Kmietowicz spends some of his time tutoring others in science. "By teaching them I help refresh my own knowledge," he said, "and when I see the light click on behind their eyes, that's a great feeling."

It is important to Kmietowicz to continually hone his knowledge and to learn new skills. "I want to know how to do everything and I want to do it properly," he said. For instance, a juggling set he received as a Christmas gift resulted in three days of relentless practice and a few near-misses with breakables before he could rest. "I had to know how and I had to do it right," he said.

He also admits to being a self-proclaimed "insufferable know-it-all." Whether it is a "Scholastic Bowl" competition or a game of Trivial Pursuit with friends, Kmietowicz said he has a reputation for knowing the most obscure bits of information. "I just somehow pick up information on everything – general knowledge, movies, literature, whatever. I just need to know."

Someday, Kmietowicz hopes to take that need to know into a lab where he can do medical research. "I want to work somewhere where I can't wait to get to work in the morning to see what's going on, to see what's growing in that dish – maybe I found the cure for cancer or AIDS."

5/17/2007

Nanticoke man wants illegal immigration ordinance

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

A young resident spoke up Wednesday about his concern illegal immigrants would create a burden for the financially troubled city.

Eric Bieski told council and Mayor John Bushko he is starting a petition drive for the city to pass an ordinance, similar to one in Hazleton, opposing illegal immigrants.

"I just felt if I didn't do something about this, I couldn't live with myself," the 19-year-old said.

Of the approximately 150 to 200 residents Bieski has spoken to recently, none opposed the idea, he said.

In July 2006, Hazleton Mayor Lou Barletta and council passed the Illegal Immigration Relief Act to punish landlords who rent to and employers who hire illegal immigrants.

Bieski said he has been passionate about the subject since last summer when he saw Barletta on television talking about how he had to have

police guard his home.

Bieski immediately called Barletta to give his support for the mayor's stance against illegal immigrants. Like Barletta, Bieski doesn't believe federal government has done enough to address the problem.

Bieski plans, with help from a group of three young men calling themselves the "Voice of the People," to draft an ordinance for Nanticoke. Several attorneys and Hispanic groups allege the Hazleton ordinance is unconstitutional. U.S. District Judge James M. Munley heard the case in federal court in March, but hasn't given a verdict yet.

City Administrator Ken Johnson advised Nanticoke officials to wait and see what happens with the Hazleton case before taking action. "Court costs could be prohibitive," Johnson said.

5/17/2007

Road, sidewalk repairs under way on Main and Kosciuszko streets

Pamela Urbanski, Nanticoke Area Notes

If you are a motorist and use Main Street or Kosciuszko Street to leave or enter the City of Nanticoke, you know road work is under way. Originally, the plan was just to improve the turning lane, trimming off the corners allowing traffic to keep moving. But things changed when workers arrived in Nanticoke to scope out the area.

According to Karen Dussinger, community relations coordinator for PennDOT, crews discovered drainage problems. "We want to make sure things are done right and alleviating the flooding around the Main Street area was necessary."

Dussinger also said the lack of sidewalks on the library side of Main Street was a safety concern for children who walk to school. New sidewalks will be put in. This project is being funded with Safe Route to Schools money. It is money used for exactly what it says. "The goal is to provide students with a safe route to school. These routes are in proximity to schools," said Dussinger.

Road work will slow down for a few weeks to give utility companies time to move the poles and place new equipment on them. "For a few weeks the contractor, Don E. Bower, will work mainly on sidewalks," she said.

In case you're wondering if the sign directing drivers not to turn right on red from Kosciuszko Street to Main is permanent, it is not.

When I first learned the busy intersection of Main and Kosciuszko streets was going to be under construction, I thought it was going to be a nightmare. I think the people who are directing traffic are doing a great job. Traffic backups seem to be limited. I look forward to the day when buses can make the corner without running over the curbs, and cars that want to turn left onto Kosciuszko Street from Main Street won't have to put it in reverse and back up to make room. Talk about a safety issue!

Wrestling clinic to be held

Registration is under way for the wrestling clinic sponsored by the Nanticoke Wrestling Booster Club. Clinic will be held June 21-24 at the Nanticoke Junior-Senior High School gym and is open to children in grades 2 through 8. Clinic will be held Thursday and Friday from 5 to 8 p.m., Saturday from noon to 3 p.m. and Sunday starting at noon with an undetermined ending time because there will be an actual competition and a final celebration parents are invited to attend.

Participants will be taught the basics of wrestling and will be exposed to competition. Each pre-registered wrestler will receive a T-shirt and a pass to a GNA wrestling meet. Cost is \$45 per child and \$15 per additional child in a family.

The clinic will be run by Ron Bruza, assistant wrestling coach at GNA. To register or for more information, call Joann at 735-2376 or Bob at 735-1434. You can also send an e-mail to gnawrestling@hotmail.com.

Registration will end June 7 and checks can be made out to and mailed to GNA Wrestling Booster Club c/o Joann Mavus, 132 Hillcrest Drive, Nanticoke, PA 18634. Walk-in registration will be taken June 21 starting at 4:30 p.m.

Knights holding breakfast

Knights of Columbus, St. Dennis Home Association will hold an egg and sausage breakfast Sunday from 8 a.m. to noon at the former St. Denis Church, Glen Lyon. Cost is \$6 for adults and \$3 for children ages 6 to 12.

5/17/2007

Nanticoke urged to consider illegal immigrant crackdown

slong@timesleader.com

Council members were asked Wednesday to consider cracking down on illegal immigrants in the city before it becomes a problem.

During the public comment section of the meeting, Eric Bieski, 19, said he fears illegal immigrants might start pouring into the city if the federal court rules in favor of Hazleton's Illegal Immigration Relief Act, which would fine landlords who rent to illegal aliens and suspend licenses of businesses that employ them. A lawsuit challenging the law went to trial in March.

Bieski plans on circulating a petition, asking people to support something he said he felt very strongly about.

"In this case because of the financial condition we need to be deliberate," Nanticoke City Administrator Kenneth Johnson said. "In reality wait and see what the courts are going to decide. What's the rush at this point to decide this now?"

Fire Chief Mike Bohan and Police Chief James Cheshinski will be allowed to remain in their respective unions for at least a few more months.

At Johnson's recommendation, council members decided to not remove the two departments heads from the unions until next year's contract talks start.

Although considered management officials as department heads, Bohan and Cheshinski's work hours are also calculated into each department's total manpower hours.

The labor contracts for both departments stipulate the number of hours and officers/firefighters which should be available for each shift. "As a result of that, if we pull them out of the union now we may and probably will incur higher labor costs for the remaining of this contract," Johnson said. "To me it didn't make sense to do it at this time."

If they are removed now the city would have to hire additional personnel, which is not feasible, Mayor John Bushko said.

Once the process begins it could take up to six months to decertify Bohan and Cheshinski from the unions by the state's labor relations board.

The Pennsylvania Economy League in the city's Act 47 recovery plan recommended the chiefs be removed from the unions, which serve as a bargaining power for police officers and firefighters, because they are in management positions.

Both unions have been fighting to keep the chiefs on the unions.

5/11/2007

No tax increase planned for GNA

School board approves first reading of budget plan which keeps taxes at 249 mills.

Janine Ungvarsky Times Leader Correspondent

No tax increase is expected in the Greater Nanticoke Area School District, according to the proposed final budget approved Thursday. The school board approved the first reading of a \$22,154,419 plan that holds taxes at 249 mills. A mill is a \$1 tax on every \$1,000 of assessed property value.

The budget, which will be finalized in June, includes a projected increase in revenues of \$686,724, based in part on an estimated 2 percent increase each in state and special education subsidies, according to Business Manager Al Melone. It also allows the district to replace capital funds used for paving and other renovations, he said.

Melone said the budget includes salary and benefit increases totaling \$133,110 for administrators and support staff but does not include an allowance for any increase in the teachers' contract currently under negotiation. Melone said it is not appropriate to include an increase for an unsettled contract because it affects negotiations. Salaries and benefits account for more than 58 percent of the district's total operating budget, Melone said.

Hank Marks, president of the Nanticoke Area Taxpayers Forum, addressed the board with comments about the teachers contract. Marks said he recently saw teachers demonstrating outside the schools with signs reading "Let's get it settled."

"Their own union leaders are holding it up by not accepting health care co-pays," Marks said. He said the average family in the area makes \$26,000, and teachers receive more than that in benefits. "Teachers receive excellent wages and benefits, better than the average taxpayer. Let's not get greedy."

In personnel matters, the board approved tuition reimbursement totaling \$3,640 for eight teachers and salary increases for four teachers based on credits accumulated. A letter of retirement from science teacher Gary Williams was accepted, as well as a letter of resignation from cleaner Carrie Konetski. Cindy Siergiej was named to a temporary part-time position as federal program Reading First data entry person at \$11.73 per hour. Jennifer Wozniak was hired as a cleaner.

Sports appointments included: Jerry Bavitz, athletic director; football – head coach Robert Colatosti, assistants Scott Dennis, Jason Colatosti, Henry Turoski, Leigh Bonczewski, Richard Kreitzer and Ryan Stetz; field hockey – head coach Jamie Spencer, assistant Kelly Brzozowski, volunteer Shawna Spencer; cross country – head coach Edward Pascoe; boys soccer – head coach Mark Matusek, assistant Ryan Amos; co-ed soccer – head coach middle school Joseph Keene Jr.; golf – head coach Nina Matzoni, assistant John Beggs; girls volleyball – head coach Deborah Krupinski, assistant James Gavin Sr.; weightlifting – Robert Colatosti; basketball – head coach Ken Bartuska, assistants Alan Yendrzejewski, Ryan Stetz and John Beggs; girls basketball – head coach Jack Rentko, assistants Jim Zubritski, Gary Williams and Joe Miller; swimming – Anngnette Norieka; wrestling – head coach Joseph Ebert, assistants Ronald Bruza and Harold Shotwell, volunteers Kenneth Kasprzyck and Joseph Sheruda, scorekeeper Ronald Bruza Sr.

5/11/2007

No hike for Greater Nanticoke taxpayers

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

There was good news for taxpayers at Thursday's Greater Nanticoke Area School Board meeting.

"It is anticipated — virtually guaranteed — there will be no tax increase for the 2007-08 school year at Nanticoke Area," business manager Albert Melone said.

The \$22,154,419 budget holds property taxes steady at 249 mills. A mill is \$1 on every \$1,000 of assessed valuation.

The budget contains money to pave and do other improvements around the school district, Melone said.

During Tuesday's primary election, district residents will vote on whether to impose an additional 0.5 percent earned income tax, bringing the district's total income tax to 1 percent, in exchange for a property tax reduction of \$213 per qualified homeowner.

Even if residents pass the referendum, it won't affect the budget, Melone said. The district would receive approximately the same amount of money, but part of it would come from the higher income tax instead of property tax.

GNA receives 53.7 percent of its funding from the state, because the district qualifies for some poverty and low-income stipends, Melone said.

Teachers contracts are being negotiated, so the salaries in the budget reflect figures under the old contract.

Asked how negotiations were proceeding, school board member Robert Raineri said, "We're getting closer."

The board's committee has been meeting with the teachers union every two weeks, he said. Health care and salaries are the main holdups. GNA Taxpayers' Association member Hank Marks told the board the contract should not be settled without teachers having to make health insurance co-payments.

"We live in a poor district. The average family income is \$26,000 a year," Marks said. "Teachers receive an excellent salary and benefits — much better than the average taxpayer receives."

In other business, the board:

Accepted the retirement of chemistry teacher Gary Williams, who Superintendent Anthony Perrone described as "probably one of the best science teachers in the county."

Recognized student Christopher Smith, who was a top winner in the regional Rotary Club essay contest.

Posted seven open teaching positions: three elementary teachers, two reading specialists and two special education teachers.

5/11/2007

LCCC seeks culinary expansion

College, developer may join forces for downtown restaurant project.

slong@timesleader.com

Students majoring in culinary arts at Luzerne County Community College may get a new building to perfect their cooking and restaurant-management skills.

A private developer, whose name was not released, was considering purchasing the Nanticoke Senior Citizens Center at Main and Market streets to locate a new restaurant in downtown.

LCCC is looking to partner with the developer to expand its culinary arts program and allow more students to enroll, LCCC Interim President Thomas Leary said.

"We are going to be part of a business enterprise allowing us to be a part of the educational training," Leary said. The college would not purchase the center or manage the restaurant.

Anticipating the move as a way to ignite downtown revitalization, Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko said the developer plans to renovate the area into office spaces and retail shops.

On Wednesday, LCCC officials expressed interest in buying the Kanjorski Center through a lease-purchase agreement for its health sciences classes.

"You are definitely going to create new businesses," Bushko said. More college students would attend classes in the downtown area.

Students, staff and faculty would need a place to get lunch or shop between classes.

Bushko said he would approve selling the city-owned structure, but wanted to make sure the senior citizens would not be left out in the cold.

Joe Lach, spokesman for South Valley Partnership, said the developments announced this week would develop a working partnership between LCCC and the city. The college main campus was originally built on the outskirts of Nanticoke.

The culinary arts and health sciences projects in downtown Nanticoke are just two parts of the \$20 million master plan for LCCC.

LCCC's Board of Trustees and the state Department of Education must approve all changes to the master plan before state funding can be approved.

"Right now the funding application is in a hold pattern" said Michael Race, Department of Education spokesman. "Their approval amount will now depend on the revised application."

It is unknown when the college will submit an amended capital improvements plan to the state.

At least one county commissioner would support using a portion of the state community development money to help spur economic development projects in Nanticoke.

"It's a much-needed shot in the arm for downtown Nanticoke," Luzerne County Commissioner Stephen A. Urban said.

5/10/2007

LCCC mulls Kanjorski Center purchase

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Luzerne County Community College is considering expanding into downtown Nanticoke, a move officials say could spur revitalization of the city, as well as benefit the college.

State Sen. Raphael Musto, D-Pittston, State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, Luzerne County Commissioner Chairman Greg Skrepenak — who also sits on the LCCC board of trustees — and college president Thomas Leary have been negotiating with city officials for a lease-purchase of the Kanjorski Center, to use it as a life sciences center.

The site of the city-owned senior center building at East Main and Market streets is also a potential location for LCCC's culinary institute and private-sector restaurant.

"It's preliminary discussion; there are plenty of pieces that still have to be put in place in terms of funding and other issues," Yudichak

said. "It is too early to cut a ribbon, too early to say we are complete, but a lot of work has been done."

The creation of a life sciences center and culinary institute is part of the \$20 million first phase of LCCC's master plan, Leary said. It includes constructing the Safety Training Institute on Middle Road and renovation and maintenance of buildings on campus, he said.

"I have to emphasize that at this point, this is at the exploratory phase in regards to negotiations. It requires the approval of both the board of trustees and (state) Department of Education," Leary said. "There are a number of advantages for the city and the college, and most of all our students. That's the focus of our plan: how we can provide better opportunities and services to our students."

The state is in line to give LCCC \$10 million for implementing the master plan, which is intended to enhance education possibilities for a diverse student population.

The college initially submitted its application to the state for funding a new construction project, Department of Education spokesman Michael Race said. The \$10 million in state money is "in a holding pattern" until the college submits an application with the new project, he said.

"The department is waiting for the receipt of the revised application, because at this point we don't know what it's going to cost to buy and renovate the building," Race said.

The county has agreed to provide a matching \$10 million toward the plan. Now, Skrepenak wants that money to go toward acquisition and renovation of the Kanjorski center.

"I think the proposal addresses the needs of the college, but also gives Nanticoke a shot in the arm and helps bring people into their downtown," Skrepenak said. "If there wasn't this project that includes the collaboration between the state, the county and the college, the county would probably be looking to help downtown Nanticoke in some other way. This allows us to use one project to benefit two entities rather than just the college."

Skrepenak said he let the Department of Education know the college wasn't changing the scope of the master plan, just the location of the facilities. It would mean the college would not have to go through the tedious process of new construction, and would fill a building "long overdue for a tenant," he said.

"We're asking the department of education for a reallocation of funds," Skrepenak said. "I think they'll comply. I believe this scenario is more time-efficient, allows us to get in a building sooner and enhance enrollment in the process. Plus, I think it falls in line with Gov. (Ed) Rendell's mission of revitalizing downtowns."

The Kanjorski Center has been 80 percent vacant since its main tenant left in Oct. 2005, taking its \$32,000 monthly rent with it. The state Department of Labor and Industry rents on a quarterly basis for \$5,028 per month.

Building the 32,000-square-foot Kanjorski Center in 1994 was meant to be the first step in a \$12 million downtown revitalization effort. It never happened.

That is one of the reasons officials hope the deal with LCCC can go through: the project has the potential for millions of dollars in investment in the city.

"It's going to breathe life into the downtown again," Mayor John Bushko said. "You'd have students coming downtown. All the businesses down there would build up."

He added, "That's a beautiful building, too. For a school it would be perfect."

Bringing LCCC into the city's downtown revitalization is part of a plan drawn up by Facility Design and Development Ltd. last year on behalf of the South Valley Partnership, a non-profit community development organization Nanticoke is a member of, Yudichak said.

City officials believe the LCCC project would attract other development. Some private developers are looking at sites, and a few projects are already spinning off, Yudichak said.

"I really believe this is the best relationship for the city, that we embrace the community college as an asset," he said. "There are 7,000 students coming into Nanticoke, but we rarely draw them downtown. They're in an isolated section of the community."

James Conmy, staff writer, contributed to this report.

5/10/2007

Kanjorski Center timeline

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January 1993: Travelers Insurance Co., announces it will be first major tenant.

Sept. 7, 1993: An agreement is signed giving the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority responsibility for management of, and exclusive right to lease, develop, and supervise the new office building.

Sept. 17, 1993: Ground broken for a new three-story, 32,000 square-foot office building.

Oct. 25, 1994: The Kanjorski Building is officially dedicated.

Mid-1990s: Connecticut-based Uniprise buys Travelers Insurance.

2002: HealthNow fills the Kanjorski Center to capacity.

May 29, 2003: Kanjorski Center named a Keystone Opportunity Expansion Zone, making it exempt from state and local taxes until Dec. 31, 2013.

May 10, 2005: The municipal authority hires Impact PA as its sole developer for downtown.

Oct. 31, 2005: HealthNow moves out of the Kanjorski Center.

Jan. 14, 2006: Impact PA unveils its \$23 million downtown revitalization plan.

June 8, 2006: The municipal authority hires Lewith and Freeman to market the Kanjorski Center.

Aug. 28, 2006: The municipal authority votes to give back the \$1.5 million federal grant.

October 2006: The municipal authority uses a \$15,000 federal grant to clean up the Kanjorski Center.
November 2006: The municipal and redevelopment authorities vote to cancel the contract with Impact PA.
March 26, 2007: The municipal authority is officially broke.

5/10/2007
LCCC eyes vacant Kanjorski Center
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Luzerne County Community College wants to purchase the Kanjorski Center in downtown to house its health sciences program. Stressing the deal is in the preliminary stages, LCCC Interim President Thomas P. Leary said the 32,000-square-foot building would provide a space for the program, while boosting badly needed economic growth in Nanticoke.

“We are tying the city and college together to provide a contribution to economic revitalization and quality academic programs,” Leary said.

Bringing one of the college’s most successful and prominent course offerings downtown would increase the foot traffic along Main Street as students, faculty and staff would be working in the Kanjorski Center.

“It really has the potential to transform Nanticoke and the South Valley Region,” state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke said. Before the deal can be formalized, the state Department of Education and LCCC’s Board of Trustees must approve the changes to the college’s master plan and provide funding for the purchase, Leary said. A meeting with the state has not been scheduled. City and Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority officials declined to discuss the deal.

“There are talks going on, but it is too early to discuss it,” Nanticoke Mayor John Bushko said.

In March the Nanticoke Redevelopment Authority, which owns the Kanjorski Center, received \$15,000 from city officials to help meet daily operating expenses.

Built about 13 years ago, the Kanjorski Center was constructed using national, state and county funds with the understanding the city would maintain ownership for at least 20 years. It has been vacant since October 2005 when a Medicare claims processing company relocated to Dallas.

“The building is supposed to pay itself off, but as a tenant we are in a bind,” Bushko said.

Excited about the redevelopment of downtown, Bushko was worried about financial issues regarding the deal. A sale would break the ownership agreement, which would require the city to pay back money to the federal government that it doesn’t have, Bushko said.

“If they sell it, the city has to pay back a \$1.9 million loan to the federal government,” Bushko said.

Plans are being developed to ensure the city will not be put in more debt, while allowing the college to own the building.

“We want to make sure the city will come out ahead,” Yudichak said.

A sale price has not been determined.

5/8/2007
OUR OPINION - Times Leader Editorial
Nanticoke’s battle against scourges deserves boost

GIVE CREDIT TO the Nanticoke residents who just said “No.”

No, we won’t deny that drug and alcohol abuse is a rampant problem in our community, they said.

No, we can’t ignore that overdoses, sometimes fatal ones, happen here all too often.

No, we don’t dare wait for outside help; we need to do something.

Led by a city police officer who recognized the extent of the crisis, the residents rallied in 2003 to start a group called the Greater Nanticoke Area Drug Task Force. On Saturday dozens of task force members and guests ceremoniously sliced the ribbon on a newly completed youth recreation center.

The center – tucked inside a former fire hall at 24 S. Prospect St. – is a place where teenagers can go to escape street temptations, and where people of all ages can get facts about addictions, intervention and recovery. It’s a great addition to this worn-down city, where healthy diversions for young people can be hard to find.

The task force’s project has been generously aided by city officials, law enforcement agencies, churches and the area school district. But now it deserves even broader support.

If more adults volunteer to supervise activities here, the hangout for high school and middle school students can open on most weeknights instead of a mere two hours on Tuesdays.

Likewise, area businesses ought to back the effort with contributions of snacks and material goods that make the center more inviting. By joining in this grassroots undertaking, people throughout Greater Nanticoke will be helping to make an important statement.

No, we haven’t stopped caring.

GET MORE DETAILS

For more information, visit www.nanticokecity.com and click on “GNA Drug Task Force.”

Or call 762-4009.

5/7/2007

State holds up Nanticoke grants

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com Nearly \$900,000 in desperately needed grant funding is on hold while state and city officials sort out a tangled mess of improperly handled grants and years of financial mismanagement.

Nanticoke has coming to it \$358,460 in state Community Development Block Grant money for 2007 and \$381,267 from 2006, which will be used to pave roads and make payments on a fire truck.

Also in place is a \$100,000 grant for public works, \$50,000 for a police car and general use, and \$40,000 for the Greater Nanticoke Area recreation park — including a long-awaited skate park.

However, the state Department of Community and Economic Development won't let the city have any of the money until city officials prove there is a financial management plan in place.

"The city has traditionally been irresponsible in handling grant funds. That's why we're under the microscope right now," Nanticoke fiscal administrator Holly Quinn said. "We have to show the state we made the adjustments to our systems and our processes."

She believes the grants could be released by the end of May.

City officials are trying to show the state they are making a good-faith effort.

The Pennsylvania Economy League, Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, has drawn up a plan city officials must follow to eventually bring the city to stability. To help the city reform its accounting procedures, PEL brought in the firm of Albert A. Melone and Associates.

"Hiring Holly Quinn, the city administrator ordinance, the hiring of (new city administrator) Ken Johnson all speak to the fact that the mayor and council are concerned with spending tax money properly and wisely," Councilman James Litchkofski said.

PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said the city administration has been cooperating with the state. He believes the city is starting to re-establish its credibility.

"We worked with this current administration and Mayor (John) Bushko to go out and secure grants. There were needs for the city — including for roads — so we can be out there paving streets and getting new equipment for city workers," state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, said. "But those road projects are being held up."

Yudichak believes city officials are being penalized for the previous administration's lack of accountability.

"You have a pattern here where we're not being responsible with tax dollars in the form of grants to the city," he said. "The current administration that's trying to move the city forward, and taxpayers, are being hurt because these laws, these regulations, were not being followed."

The 2004 and 2005 audits show the city disobeyed state rules with its CDBG funding.

But it was the Lexington Village grant that really caused the problem.

Unpleasant findings

The letter from DCED mystified city officials.

The Feb. 5 letter stated the city never submitted a required audit for a \$261,000 grant, contract C000004168, that ran from July 1, 2003, through June 30, 2006.

"As a result of this non-compliance, the (city) is ineligible to receive additional funding assistance from this Department," the letter states. It goes on to say the city will remain ineligible until DCED receives a satisfactory audit.

When a grant is not closed out properly, DCED withholds other funding.

"We had to call DCED and ask what this grant was for," Quinn said.

Yudichak said he and state Sen. Raphael Musto, D-Pittston, helped get a Communities of Opportunities Housing and Redevelopment Assistance grant for Lexington Village, a senior housing project on Kosciuszko Street. It was mostly meant for land improvements, such as construction issues that might impact a stream on the property, Yudichak said.

Although it was for a private project, the city was the applicant and responsible for the administration of the grant, Yudichak said.

DCED told Quinn the city had to have an audit because the project was more than \$100,000. On hearing this, Nanticoke office staff searched for, and finally found, a file on Lexington Village.

What they found in it took city officials aback.

"The bank account wasn't reconciled. The checkbook for the grant was in the folder, not in a safe," Quinn said. "It basically was a bunch of papers in a file folder. The cash disbursements were written on the file folder, not on the computerized accounting system."

The only public mention of the grant after it was obtained was at the Feb. 25, 2004, meeting, when council authorized the city administrator and treasurer to pay out funds to the developer, according to minutes.

Quinn, interim city administrator Robert Sabatini and Bill O'Malley — who was finance director from his appointment to council on Jan. 3, 2006, until his resignation from council March 7 — spent hours trying to piece together enough information to satisfy the state.

When CPA J.R. Mazzoni finished auditing the Lexington Village grant, his firm found five improprieties:

The grant was not on the city books and no formal accounting process was used to track it, resulting in it being omitted from the 2004 audit.

Expenditures were not approved by council or documented by engineers to prove the work was being done.

There was no written agreement between the city and the developer, to whom the grant funds were given.

The city administrator, who co-signed the checks, was not bonded for the \$261,400, as required by the contract.

There was no evidence the city submitted project and financial status reports to the state, as required.

The Lexington Village audit was bad, but it wasn't too much of a surprise: the city had been getting dire news in its annual audits for years.

However, nothing was ever done about it before.

Fixing the problems

For the last five years, Nanticoke's audits have had the same story to tell: deficits, no separation of duties, making sure not just one or two people follow an entire transaction, and a lack of policies and procedures to make sure money was spent properly.

"Our concerns were revolving around a very weak financial system. It leads for things to occur," said Donna Enrico, DCED acting division chief of community development operations. "Each year they put a corrective action plan together, but they didn't follow it."

The city must put together — and follow — an action plan to ensure the same mistakes don't happen with future grants, she said.

DCED sent an auditor from the state comptroller's office to Nanticoke on April 16 to see how far along the city was in putting into practice the recommendations in PEL's financial recovery plan.

During the three days he stayed, the auditor received everything from organizational charts and lists of job duties for employees to copies of the city's purchasing policy and requisition forms, information on oversight of petty cash accounts, and samples of monthly financial reports.

"He spot-checked our general ledgers, he looked for things like timeliness of bank deposits and account reconciliations," Quinn said.

"Basically, it was anything that had to do with the policy regarding the handling of city funds. He wanted to confirm we were doing what we said we were doing."

DCED spokesman Greg Morgan said he wasn't sure of a date when the state grants would be released, but noted, "From everything I've heard, there's progress being made."

5/6/2007

Hard work pays off for youths

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Only the ceremonial ribbon cutting was left for the Greater Nanticoke Area Drug Task Force community center to officially open Saturday.

That step was seemingly overlooked, as the vanity, over-sized scissors couldn't slice through the three-inch wide red ribbon.

No matter, the hard part — securing thousands of dollars in funding from private and public sources, hours of work by dozens of volunteers to turn the old Stickney Fire Co. headquarters into a youth center — had been completed during the past several months.

"It's great," said Angela Smith, 16, and vice president of the task force. "I tell people to bring their friends. Everyone's welcome. There's always something to do."

The task force, a youth group that works to encourage kids to avoid drugs and alcohol, has been using the building since fall, as painting and other repairs were finished. Organized about three years ago, the group started meeting in the basement of the St. John's Church before moving to St. Francis Church on East Green Street. Neither location was big enough. Students involved asked Nanticoke's City Council for help and in June 2005, the council leased the fire hall to the task force.

Funding for the community center got a boost in December when the Luzerne County District Attorney's office donated \$10,000 confiscated from drug dealers.

Smith, a sophomore at Nanticoke Area High School, has been involved since the group's inception. With red and blue painted fingernails that matched the tie-dyed task force shirt she wore, Smith painted faces during Saturday's grand opening festivities.

When she first started coming to task force meetings, there were only four other students. Now, on Tuesdays, there are more than 40 students who show up. About 100 middle and high school students in the area participate at times, said Frank Vandermark, president of the task force. He helps organizes most of the activities for the students, such as Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins games and an annual summer fishing trip.

"We try to do whatever we can to get the kids out of here and into the community," Vandermark said.

In addition to giving kids an alternative place to hang out, the task force has group discussions for teenagers. Parents and other adults can stop by too, to talk with volunteers about concerns they have, Vandermark said.

The students want to help their communities in a lot of ways, Vandermark said, from park cleanups to drug prevention programs..

"You'd be surprised," Vandermark said. "All we do is ask and they come. These kids want to help their community."

5/5/2007

Repaying of loan concerns Nanticoke

New tax revenues not coming in as quickly as expected for the Act 47 financially distressed city.

SHERRY LONG slong@timesleader.com

Officials are worried they will not be able to pay back a short-term \$250,000 loan taken out last month.

The anticipated \$1 million revenue from the new commuter tax and 1 percent higher earned-income tax for all working Nanticoke residents effective April 30 was expected to help the city recover from its Act 47 financial distress. Earned income tax for working Nanticoke residents is now 2 percent.

Nanticoke might experience a financial shortfall if employers do not withhold the higher taxes.

Thinking the additional tax money was originally going to start coming in by late spring, the city decided to take out a loan from PNC Bank during its April 19 council meeting to help meet daily operating expenses. The loan's terms required it be repaid by Aug. 31 at a 4.04 percent interest rate.

"It's questionable when the money is going to hit our banks," Nanticoke Fiscal Officer Holly Quinn said.

During a meeting with city payroll tax collector Berkheimer Associates, the Pennsylvania Economy League and city officials discovered the city will not start receiving any of the additional tax revenue, which is paid quarterly, until at least late July.

PEL officials, a state-mandated recovery agent helping the city get back on firm financial footing, suggested the city cancel the loan.

The city has enough funds to operate until the additional money is received, but if the additional taxes are not taken out by employers, then the city could run into a financial crunch around September/October, said Harry Miller, PEL's senior research analyst.

Interim City Administrator Bob Sabatini agreed.

"As it stands now I would have serious doubts about our ability to repay \$250,000 by the end of August based on cash-flow projections after talking to Berkheimer," Sabatini said.

Some Nanticoke residents might be impacted with a higher tax bill next year if their employers don't withhold all the appropriate funds. City employers are required by law to take out the higher taxes. But if employers outside the city do not withhold the additional taxes, their employees might be faced with an additional tax bill next winter.

Employers only have to take out the minimum of 1 percent earned-income tax, half of which goes to the Greater Nanticoke Area School District and the remaining portion to the city. They can choose to take the additional 1 percent fees out if they wish, but few do because of the extra costs involved.

"If they do it for one employee, then they have to do it for all employees," said Jim Hunt, director of sales and client services for Berkheimer Associates.

Employees can make quarterly deposits to ensure they pay enough taxes during the year if their employers choose not to withhold the full amount, Quinn said.

Officials must now seek bids for another short-term loan with a possibly higher interest rate because the repay date has been extended. The next loan must be repaid by the end of November, according to PEL guidelines.

5/4/2007

Offering alternatives

Mark E. Jones | Community Advocate | Times Leader

They lost too many teenagers to drugs and alcohol in this city, heard about too many overdose deaths.

So concerned adults banded together about four years ago and formed what became known as the Greater Nanticoke Area Drug Task Force. This weekend, members of the grass-roots group will show off their newly completed youth recreation center – a place where teenagers and others can go to escape temptations of the street and, if needed, get help for addictions.

A grand-opening celebration is set for 1 p.m. Saturday at the former Stickney firehall, 24 S. Prospect St.

Billed as a recreation and community resource center, the two-story brick building houses a hodgepodge of pool tables, dartboards, exercise equipment and other diversions intended to allow school-age children to fritter away their free time without falling into trouble. "If we don't show them things to do, keep them away from (destructive habits), our future's going to be pretty bleak," said task force president Frank Vandermark.

Initially the recreation center will be open for games only one night per week – from 7 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays. However, organizers aim to recruit volunteers willing to supply adult supervision on other weeknights, giving young people more access to the hangout.

Meanwhile, the center's upstairs meeting rooms are being used for weekly programs such as "Straight Talk." This session on Monday nights is intended to let parents or children get facts about substance abuse, addiction, intervention and recovery.

Plus, two programs – one for teenage girls and one for teen boys – allow young people to chat with their peers about all sorts of serious issues and get support. Neither program is a substitute for formal counseling, Vandermark and other task force members said.

They added that young people might be referred to professional counselors or agencies. "If we can't help them right there, we tell them where to go," said Vandermark, 44, a Newport Township resident.

The task force had been running its programs out of nearby St. Francis Church. It outgrew that basement space and, with backing from city officials, slowly began renovating the fire station located within eyesight of the Kanjorski Center on Main Street.

The task force pays the city \$1 a month for use of the building, Vandermark said. It will rely on donations to cover utility and other expenses, estimated at about \$5,000 a year.

The new center – part kids' clubhouse, part community hub – is expected to serve as a kind of rallying point for area residents determined to confront society's drug problems with action, not apathy.

"You can't sit back and say, let the government solve the problem, let the school solve the problem," said Don Williams, chairman of the task force's outreach committee. "It's a communitywide problem. And it requires a community-based response.

"You just can't push it off on other people."

Dealing with dire situation

A handful of people, including Nanticoke police officer Kevin Grevera, spearheaded the task force's creation in response to a looming crisis.

They recognized that illegal drug use had inflicted emotional and financial hardships on many families in this city of fewer than 11,000 residents. "There have been at least 100 instances of drug overdoses over the last four years," Grevera wrote in a letter published in the Times Leader during November 2004. "To wit, 37 have resulted in death."

Since then, the task force has received acclaim for the way it mobilized to confront drug abuse. WVIA-TV, the region's public broadcasting

station, focused one of its "Call the Doctor" programs on the group's efforts, and other communities have asked task force members for advice.

Debbie Reddy, a prevention specialist with Wyoming Valley Alcohol and Drug Services Inc., belongs to the group, as do clergy members and public school officials. Williams, who has been with the group almost from the outset, is a Nanticoke resident and executive director of Clear Brook Lodge, a Shickshinny-area treatment center for young people with addictions.

But even with their range of expertise, task force members "are not 100 percent certain of what we're doing," Williams said candidly. He stressed that the group is "trying to deal with Nanticoke and not be the model for Northeastern Pennsylvania."

Nevertheless, its anti-drug efforts probably deserve a closer look by other Luzerne County cities and boroughs.

The task force has succeeded in connecting several people with treatment and recovery programs, Vandermark said. And, although sources couldn't provide figures to back the claim, they said overdoses probably dipped when the task force's programs got under way.

"It may or may not be attributed to our programs here," Vandermark said, "but we'd like to think we had something to do with it."

Gaining wide support

On a recent Tuesday night, 13-year-old Brett Schenck banged out "Chopsticks" on the recreation center's piano.

The eighth-grade student had been told about the center while at school. "I came down by myself (a few weeks ago) and saw how nice it is, so I brought my friend with me."

The center's public debut this spring coincides with other notable projects in Nanticoke, all striving to give young people more safe, healthy options. A proposed skate park, for example, is expected to be built soon.

Separately, Luzerne County Community College officials recently announced plans to establish a substance abuse education and training institute.

Task force members, meanwhile, proudly noted that they get enthusiastic responses from area businesses and residents when they ask for support. About \$8,000 was contributed during a mail campaign conducted more than a year ago.

More recently, area residents donated labor and skills to improve the building's plumbing and electrical systems. Volunteers also painted walls and then added kid-friendly games and gadgets, including a row of used computers.

The biggest donor to date has been the Luzerne County District Attorney's Office, doling out money seized in drug arrests. It presented a \$10,000 gift to the program in December.

Making good choices

In the future, task force members said they hope tutoring will be offered at the center by National Honor Society students. They also plan to schedule educational programs for the public at large and get teens involved in more community-enhancing volunteer activities.

For now, however, the emphasis is on helping young people avoid adolescent temptations, some of which seem to be woven into modern culture. Beer signs, for instance, glow in a café's windows directly across the street from the recreation center, which is squeezed between a beauty salon and a funeral home.

"There are temptations everywhere," said Jim "Sam" Samselski, 45, of Nanticoke. "It's up to the kids to make the right choice. We have to educate them on the right choice. And we have to pick them up when they fall down."

Samselski emphasized that the center won't turn away someone who previously used poor judgment and had a substance abuse problem.

"Nobody's banned from the place," he said. "Everybody makes mistakes; I just hope they aren't fatal ones."

Get involved

Area residents can lend support to the Greater Nanticoke Area Drug Task Force in many ways.

Attend the recreation center's grand opening. The event will be held from 1-4 p.m. Saturday at the Stickney building, 24 S. Prospect St., Nanticoke.

Donate material goods or money. Contributions to the nonprofit organization are tax-deductible.

Enter its golf tournament. The event is set for July 9 at Wyoming Valley Country Club, in Hanover Township. Cost per team is \$340. For more details, call 814-9002 or 762-4009.

Learn more about its mission. Go to www.nanticokecity.com, click on "GNA Drug Task Force."

Volunteer

Adults are needed to supervise the recreation center on weekday evenings. Call 762-4009.

"IT'S A COMMUNITYWIDE problem. And it requires a community-based response. You just can't push it off on other people."

Don Williams Chairman of the task force's outreach committee

5/3/2007

Youth task force hosting open house of new digs, seeks volunteers

Pam Urbanski - Nanticoke Area Notes

It was about four years ago when a group of Nanticoke residents, concerned about the growing drug problem, formed the Greater Nanticoke Area Drug Task Force.

The group's aim has been to raise awareness of the drug problem by reaching out to the citizens and institutions of Nanticoke such as schools, youth groups, civic and religious organizations, and the business community. They seek out successful programs of recovery to serve the needs of the community, and they are a great resource, directing those in need — adults and teens — to find appropriate services. And, finally, they provide programs and activities that offer young people healthy alternatives to alcohol and drug abuse.

From the adult task force came the youth task force. It has an elected board made up of Nanticoke High School students. The youth task force will hold an open house Saturday from 1 to 4 p.m. at its brand new recreation center at the site of the former Stickney Firehouse on South Prospect Street. Students and adults say they are thrilled to have a bigger and better facility to accommodate more students and activities. "We are really excited about our recreation center," Cassie Samselski said.

The group originated with a recreation center in the basement of St. Francis Church. When more young people started using the facility, the group needed to find a bigger, more permanent center.

The new facility has three floors, Samselski said, including a basement, which houses comfortable bean bags ideal for watching TV, playing video games, or listening to music. The first floor features gaming tables including billiards, foosball, hockey and ping pong.

Youth task force secretary Shannon Provenzano can't wait to show off the center. "So many of us have worked so hard ... The place was really dirty and messy," Provenzano said. "We had to clean up a lot of stuff before we could even start to paint ... Painting was not easy either."

All three floors have been painted attractive colors. "I think fellow students will find this a welcoming place," she added. One of her favorite programs at the center is Girl's Night Out, held Wednesdays at 7 p.m. "This night gives us an opportunity to talk about things going on in our lives.

"It helps to know that girls your age face the same problems," she added.

She urges high school students to give the recreation center a try.

Kaila Sakowski, youth task force president, said the recreation center will benefit the entire community.

"This is a great place for high school students to get together to talk, hang out with friends, or join in some of the games and activities we have here," Sakowski said.

Founding father and long-time task force adult leader Don Williams said with the facility completed, the group can focus on other business. "We became bogged down when we had to deal with the issue of the building. I think people began to put distance between themselves and the programs, and we weren't as close-knit as we were before," Willilams said. "This grand opening puts a formal end to the transition."

His hope is that they now will be able to attract more high school students in and around the community.

The call continues to go out for more adult volunteers.

"We have had a lot of support from the community. People have stepped up to help financially, to offer their assistance in getting the building ready and for agreeing to supervise during programs," he said. But more adult volunteers are needed so programs can be added. Also, the center currently is open only on Tuesdays from 7 to 9 p.m. He would like to see hours expanded to two or three days.

The grand opening will be celebrated with refreshments, music, and face painting. For more information or to volunteer, call the center at 762-4009.

St. Stan's spring breakfast

The parishioners of St. Stanislaus Church invite all to their spring breakfast Sunday from 9 a.m. to noon in the church hall. The buffet will include ham, sausage, bacon, eggs, home fries, french toast, pastries, coffee, tea and juice. Cost is \$6 for adults and \$3 for children.

Pam Urbanski's column appears every other Thursday in the Citizens' Voice

Nanticoke Webdesign note: Political stories or stories that have to do with elections will be omitted from the Nanticoke City Website.

5/3/2007

Nanticoke hires administrator unanimously

Kenneth Johnson to begin work in a few weeks at a salary of \$65,000.

slong@timesleader.com

Kenneth Johnson was hired as the newest city administrator Wednesday night by a unanimous vote of city council during a regularly scheduled council meeting.

"We figure he is the most qualified person for the city," Mayor John Bushko said. Only half of the 20 applicants had adequate experience, officials said.

Johnson brings almost 30 years of experience in local and state government. He will serve full-time and earn \$65,000 a year plus benefits.

Johnson is expected to begin work within the next few weeks after he resigns from his current job. In late October, he began working as a local government specialist for the Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance, an agency helping cities and counties within an eight-county region manage their community and economic development needs.

Johnson's salary is \$15,000 more than the city originally budgeted for, but still less than other candidates wanted.

"We've discussed this all with the Pennsylvania Economy League, but that is stretching it as far as it would go," Bushko said.

Knowing he has his work cut out for him given the city's financial status, Johnson said he is ready to get with the interim city administrator, Bob Sabatini, to get a handle on things.

The city recently adopted an Act 47 recovery plan to help it recover from record deficits.

“This is a great challenge. This is a challenge for all of us,” Johnson said. “I will do my utmost to produce for this city on what needs to be done and bring it back to the classy city that Nanticoke can be.”

Johnson, 59, is the fourth person to serve as the city’s administrator within the last year.

Former full-time Nanticoke city administrator Greg Gulick was fired in April 2006. Anthony Margelewicz, who was hired as city clerk in February 2006, also served as city administrator until Sabatini of Keystone Municipal Services in Harrisburg was appointed interim city administrator this February.

Johnson told city council during an interview last Friday that he planned on staying with the city for several years.

Johnson retired last year from the state’s Governor’s Center for Local Government Services. He also served as an administrator in Kingston, Plains Township and Milton, Northumberland County.

5/2/2007

Nanticoke must re-advertise many ordinances

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

A disorganized administration is the reason Nanticoke officials have to re-advertise many city regulations or they won’t be legal.

Shortly after attorney Keith Saunders took over as city solicitor in January, he discovered several ordinances from 2006 had never been advertised as required by state law, essentially making them invalid.

Saunders and interim city administrator Robert Sabatini surveyed what was advertised and what wasn’t.

“There was a significant list of ordinances when we started digging,” Saunders said.

During the March 7 meeting, Sabatini told council several ordinances, including ones for residential and commercial permit fees, police and fire pensions, pave cuts and realty transfer tax, needed to be advertised properly.

Council passed a motion to re-advertise the ordinances — which wasn’t done either.

Under third-class city code, cities must publish notices for any ordinance they plan to pass or change significantly, said Teri Henning, general counsel for the Pennsylvania Newspaper Association.

“What I would say is they are subject to challenge,” Henning said when asked what would happen if ordinances weren’t published. She added, “There’s a question about what the court would do, ultimately.”

The state Department of Community and Economic Development’s municipal secretaries manual states that “Pennsylvania courts have held that the advertising requirements of the municipal codes are mandatory. Ordinances adopted without strict compliance to the advertising requirements are void, even if there has been substantial, but incomplete compliance.”

The manual further states that the secretary is responsible for doing the publishing and posting.

Attorney Joseph Lach, who was Nanticoke’s solicitor through 2006, said he would be contacted, usually by city clerk Anthony Margelewicz, about the need for an ordinance. Lach would then prepare it and send it to Margelewicz, who created council meeting agendas.

Lach said his duty was to draw up ordinances, not to publish them.

“It’s simply not our (solicitors’) job to do the advertising, and I think that’s true in most municipalities,” Lach said.

Saunders said it was hard to point the finger at any one person for the failure to advertise. Responsibilities for hired and appointed city personnel — like the clerk — were never officially designated.

Margelewicz admitted things in the city administration were “in disarray.”

“Nothing was done according to a system, and that was my problem with it,” Margelewicz said. “We have a system in place now.”

Saunders said the ordinances were re-drafted and given to Nanticoke’s new solicitor William Finnegan. They will be voted on by council in batches at upcoming meetings, starting tonight. A number of ordinances were already sent to be advertised, Finnegan said.

“A proper process is being implemented, and we’re going to see to it that these ordinances get promptly advertised going forward,” he said.

5/1/2007

Two furloughed public workers rehired in Nanticoke

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

With pothole-patching season in progress and overgrown weed season fast approaching, Nanticoke needed help.

The six men remaining on the road crew can’t do it all, so council and Mayor John Bushko opted to re-hire, for now, the two public works employees they laid off last year.

“We have potholes that are the size of moon craters,” said Councilman Jim Litchkofski, who heads the public works committee. “We have to get the city clean, we have to get potholes patched, we have to get catch basins repaired. There’s a lot of work to be done.”

Council voted 4-1 on Nov. 15 to lay off the two of the eight road crew employees, saying at the time that the city had to make cuts to help fill a \$400,000 hole in the 2007 budget. Litchkofski was the “no” vote.

The city’s financial recovery plan allows re-hiring the two men — but only temporarily.

In the plan, public works department salaries were kept the same for 2007 as in 2006, said Gerald Cross, executive director of the Pennsylvania Economy League, the financially distressed city’s recovery coordinator.

However, any decisions council makes about the department will only be short-term, Cross cautioned.

The financial recovery plan calls for a review and re-evaluation of the department in early 2008, with the help of a peer consultant who will

be brought in by the state Department of Community and Economic Development. One option to be considered is contracting out services. Council decided to re-hire the two employees during a private conference, or executive session, at the April 18 meeting. Although elected officials can discuss personnel matters in private, under the state Sunshine Act, hiring and firing must be done in public. Interim city administrator Robert Sabatini said he believed council did not violate the Sunshine Act as long as it votes to formally approve its decision at a public meeting. There will be an item on the agenda for Wednesday's meeting, he said. "I don't think it is inconsistent with the law," Sabatini said. "You don't know if the people are available, if they want to come back. So you ask them first, and if it's acceptable to everyone, you ratify the decision." Nanticoke's new solicitor, William Finnegan, said he was not involved in council's decision — he was only hired at the April 18 meeting — but his assessment of the situation was similar to Sabatini's.

4/29/2007

Parent-teacher (P.T.S.A.) group may disband
Lack of volunteers could affect future of Nanticoke Area parent association.
slong@timesleader.com

The Winter Semi-Formal, Senior Class Day Breakfast and monthly dances for sixth-through-eighth-graders might not be offered next year to students at Nanticoke Area junior and senior high schools. For years the Greater Nanticoke Area Parent Teacher Student Association sponsored these and other events for students, but the group may dissolve at the end of this school year if more parents don't start volunteering. "The same people just burn out after a while," PTSA Vice President Sharon Warren said. Of 150 members, only eight attend monthly meetings regularly, volunteer to chaperone events or serve as chairmen for various committees. "You hate to see them (students) miss out because parents don't get involved," Warren said. Volunteers are not needed every day or all day, just a few hours on occasion, maybe to help decorate or serve as a chaperone for the monthly dances. "You don't have to do everything here – just come and help," Warren said. The non-profit PTSA also purchases gifts for students the district can't provide because of budget restraints. Class valedictorians receive \$100 annually and for the last two years seniors were given engraved 5x7 picture frames. Earlier this year the association purchased a GNA navy blue hoodie for every student in sixth through 12 grades. "Half our kids don't have coats," Warren said, adding that she has noticed several teenagers wear the hooded sweatshirts constantly, almost as if it was a uniform. Nanticoke Area Superintendent Tony Perrone said he believed parents are instrumental in helping educate children. "You don't want parents of just the good kids, you want parents of the not-so-good kids to get involved too," Perrone said. To volunteer Contact an association member or visit the high school's Web site at www.gnasd.com. Meetings are held at 6:30 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month in the high school cafeteria. The next meeting is on May 3.

4/29/2007

Nanticoke park seen as visual/play site plus
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As the spring thaw rolls down the murky Susquehanna, the shores near and around the city of Nanticoke are awaiting a facelift. BMX riders, skateboarders and rollerbladers who are looking for a place to do their thing may find slim pickings in the area, but this Luzerne County city is growing with the times. The South Valley Regional Park, a 138-acre recreational hub soon to be under construction along the Susquehanna River near Broadway Street in Nanticoke, will feature one of the area's first public skateparks. State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, who secured \$100,000 in state funding for the park, said the site will have two benefits: It will provide much-needed recreational space and will spruce up the unsightly area. According to the South Valley Region Park Plan, the cost of the land acquisition and three-phase construction is expected to exceed \$6 million. The majority of the construction costs are being funded through federal grants. The recreational site also will include multiple sports fields, picnicking areas, and other natural park-type facilities, and is being touted as a major improvement for the region. "I am hoping that the park will be a regional attraction," Yudichak said. "I know what it can do for our region. You have to recognize the non-traditional, alternative sports and we need to give options for our students and citizens. I think this project will be a great asset for us." More than 60 homes once dotted the now barren landscape, Yudichak said, but most of those residences were abandoned after the 1972 flood. "As of now, there is the unsightly entrance into Nanticoke coming over the river." Yudichak said the park will directly affect residents of the city, Newport Township and Plymouth Township, and overall would benefit the entire county. Yudichak, along with his chief of staff Tom Ruskey, and attorney Joe Lach, recently toured the site to discuss the layout. Initial construction and development will begin as soon as the land rights have been authorized to the regional planning committee – a nonprofit

organization responsible for gaining interest and federal funds into the project.

The idea grew from the persistent pleas of Nanticoke youngsters who were tired of being cited for riding and skating around the city. The requests of parents who showed up at City Council meetings and complained about citations issued to their children eventually convinced the council members that there is a need for an area for the children to skate and ride freely.

Lori Mulhern, a Nanticoke mother of two, was one of them. She attended some meetings to talk about the need for a skatepark for her sons, Austin and Aaron.

“My son who skateboards, Austin, has been cited for skateboarding in the city between eight to 10 times in two years, but I tell him to continue skating and be courteous,” Mulhern said. “Both my sons are high honor students at Nanticoke, but since they skate, people see them as something else; more like a nuisance.”

The skatepark portion of the park would feature ramps that have been purchased from Rich’s Golf Center, Wyoming. The opening ceremony will be held sometime this spring.

Lach, the attorney handling the land transaction and insurance policies for South Valley Region Park, said bids are being accepted for liability coverage on the park but none have been put in place yet.

The South Valley Region Park is sponsored by the South Valley Partnership, the Greater Nanticoke Development Corporation and PNC Bank.

4/29/2007

Story of Stanky and the Coal Miners is now a book

Citizens Voice

Locally born and internationally known, Stanky and the Coal Miners are hitting a bookstore near you.

“Apples, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie, The Story of Stanky and the Coal Miners,” a book detailing the history of the group, has been written by John Stanky and Bill Wagner.

Stanky, a native of Nanticoke, has been associated with music and bands, particularly polka music for more than 50 years. The book is filled with anecdotes drawn from the Coal Miners’ long career.

Wagner is resident of Pittston and is a former newspaper editor who worked for area newspapers including The Scranton Times and The Sunday Times. He continues to contribute to The Sunday Times veterans column and to Good Times for Seniors magazine.

The book recounts how the group started back in the 1950s and chronicles the group’s activities through today. The book also includes some great features such as a list of where Stanky and the Coal Miners have performed over the years and who has been in the band over the years.

4/27/2007

Non-profit organization will lend its band shell for Nanticoke Musicfest

By Elizabeth Skrapits - eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke Musicfest committee members were devastated by the destruction of their band shell over the weekend, and worried they wouldn’t be able to find a replacement by June 1.

A local non-profit organization, appropriately named Valley with a Heart Benefits, stepped in to lend them one.

“They were the first ones on the phone, calling us,” Musicfest committee member Yvonne Bozinski said. “We really appreciate it.”

“I’m glad we could help,” said Valley with a Heart Benefits President Rick Temarantz, who owns a business in Nanticoke. “There aren’t a lot of band shells out there.”

Valley with a Heart Benefits made the band shell to use as a fundraiser.

“Our intention is to rent it out and put in some advertising space, to generate money that way,” Temarantz said.

The Musicfest committee can use it for free, he said.

Nanticoke’s band shell was left in Lower Broadway by a previous user. On Sunday, Bozinski noticed it was badly damaged. She believes kids smashed the lights, tore off the stage apron and generally trashed the band shell to an extent the committee didn’t think it could be fixed in time for Musicfest.

“It’s (Musicfest) the biggest thing we have in Nanticoke, and it’s so well attended, to think it might have been in jeopardy because of this was disturbing,” Bozinski said.

Since 1991, Valley with a Heart Benefits has raised more than \$85,000 to help seriously ill local children and their families through events like motorcycle rides and golf tournaments, Temarantz said. The money goes for things such as gas cards for hospital trips, or helping to pay bills, he said.

“This year we put in a central air conditioning system for a family in Dallas. Both their kids have cystic fibrosis,” Temarantz said.

People have also called offering to fix Nanticoke’s band shell, Bozinski said. Newport Township’s fire company might be interested in buying it and fixing it up, she said.

4/26/2007

Nanticoke authorities will return \$1.5 M

By Elizabeth Skrapits - eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke's General Municipal Authority and Redevelopment Authority are finishing paperwork to finalize the return of a \$1.5 million grant, municipal authority chairman Ron Kamowski said.

The municipal authority voted in August 2006 to return the federal Economic Development Agency grant, which was obtained several years ago for expansion of the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street.

The financially distressed city and its municipal authority didn't have money to match the grant, which had to be used for a specific purpose: a 54,000-square-foot office building to create 100 jobs.

Additionally, the Kanjorski Center has been about 80 percent vacant since October 2005, and the municipal authority didn't want to construct another building and risk not having a tenant for it, either.

4/26/2007

Get Nanticoke a bandshell

Viewpoint - OUR VOICE - Citizens Voice

Here's hoping Nanticoke's bandshell is insured.

Over the weekend, a vandal or vandals caused extensive damage to the city's bandshell, which was to be the centerpiece of the Nanticoke Musicfest June 1 through 3.

The vandals ripped down the apron on the bandshell, destroyed the steps, ripped off a door and broke all the lights.

The damage is so extensive, it is not known whether it can be repaired in time for Musicfest.

We would hope the city, with many qualified and spirited volunteers would get insurance money and repair the bandshell before June 1.

In the interim, the city is asking any other community with a bandshell that it might borrow for Musicfest to come forward.

We too would encourage any municipality that has a bandshell and is not using it June 1 to 3 to lend it to Nanticoke.

We greatly want the show to go on.

4/25/2007

Nanticoke Musicfest suffers setback

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com - Elizabeth Skrapits , Staff Writer

Dates were set, bands were booked, vendors were signed up: the Nanticoke Musicfest committee had preparations well in hand for the annual festival.

Then the band shell bombshell hit.

During the weekend, someone — probably kids, committee members say — trashed the portable stage used each year for the event.

Committee members are worried they might not be able to fix the band shell or find a replacement in time for Musicfest's kickoff on June 1.

The Nanticoke band shell belongs to the Nanticoke Area Development Corp., according to its chairman Ron Kamowski. The Stickney fire company built it with donated materials about 18 years ago, he said.

Normally, the band shell is stored at the Regional Equipment Center in Newport Township, but someone left it in the Lower Broadway grounds.

Musicfest committee member Yvonne Bozinski said her sister saw the band shell on Saturday and it was fine.

But on Sunday, Bozinski noticed the destruction on her way home from a game of golf.

"The whole apron was knocked down," she said. "They destroyed the steps. It was all broken apart, the door was gone, glass all over the place — they broke all the lights in there."

The stage apron was used for a skate ramp, but "the other destruction was just malicious," Bozinski said.

There were a bunch of kids hanging around the band shell, some with in-line skates and bicycles, but they claimed they weren't responsible for the damage, she said.

Bozinski reported the situation to city police, who are investigating.

"I don't think the kids realize what an expense it is and how important that was for Musicfest," she said.

It could cost thousands of dollars to repair the band shell or buy a new one. Mayor John Bushko said he would see if the city's liability insurance covers the damage.

Committee members don't think the band shell can be fixed in time for Musicfest, so they're frantically searching for one they can borrow.

The committee asked to use Wilkes-Barre City's Jacob Sauer band shell, but it was already booked, Bozinski said.

"I don't know what we're going to do," she said.

4/25/2007

Plans set for Susquehanna Coal building

NANTICOKE: Building to hold 11 apartments reasonably priced for elderly.

Sherry Long - slong@timesleader.com The three-story approximately 15,500-square-foot Susquehanna Coal Company building is due for a \$2.7 million renovation.

Currently, the Susquehanna Coal Co. building sits across from restaurants, a pharmacy and steps from downtown — a boarded-up shell of its former self. Local and state leaders working together see new promise in the three-story brick-and-stone structure which once housed

once of the county's most famous coal companies.

Upon completion of the \$2.7 million renovation project, the building will house 11 new one- and two-bedroom apartments, a community room, central laundry room and elevator. Two of the apartments would be handicapped accessible.

The Susquehanna Coal Co. building, at the corner of Nanticoke Avenue and Main Street in Nanticoke, will be turned into affordable housing for elderly residents with rents ranging from \$425 to \$600 a month, said Perry Clay, Nanticoke Housing Authority's executive director.

"This will provide more affordable housing in downtown," Clay said.

"It is close to everything."

Vacant for the last 30 years, supporters hope the project will jumpstart other renovation projects in Nanticoke.

"It really has just fabulous potential for the catalyst in downtown," said Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke.

Purchased by his father several decades ago, Ken Pollock of Ken Pollock Chevrolet donated the building to New Horizons Development Corporation of Nanticoke, a non-profit group.

After Yudichak was elected, he began working with Pollock to discuss possible ways to bring new businesses into the structure, including making it a restaurant and an office building.

"We found an innovative approach of saving that building," Yudichak said.

Planning to maintain the structural and architectural integrity of the building, an architect, developer and contractor with extensive experience in rehabilitating older structures have already been hired.

Tippetts Weaver Architect, Inc. of Lancaster County is handling all the architectural details.

Mullin and Lonergran Associates of New Cumberland are the developers. Grimm Construction, Inc. of Waypart, Penn. will be the contractors.

Grant money must now be secured to fund the project.

Knowing the federal housing agency was not funding the construction or renovation of new housing units, Clay formed New Horizons, the non-profit agency, to spearhead the historic revitalization. Non-profit agencies can apply for grants not available to federal housing authorities.

Renovation work was originally planned to begin in September, but due to a technical glitch, paperwork for the state's tax credit grant and PennHomes Program was not approved the first time, Yudichak said. He's confident the grants will be approved when it is submitted again in October. Work is expected to begin next March if state funding is received.

Renovations should take an estimated nine months to complete.

The estimated 15,500 square foot building will be managed by the authority, allowing residents to have access to the same services as other Nanticoke housing tenants.

During its heyday, the Susquehanna Coal Co. employed more than 35,000 area coal miners, Yudichak said.

"It (the building) was the crown jewel of the (company)," Yudichak said.

Last week, the city sold a vacant lot adjunct to the building to the non-profit agency for \$1. Under government regulations, the city could not give it away. The lot will provide parking spaces for the building.

4/24/2007

Former Nanticoke official acknowledges Sunshine Act violation

Former Nanticoke officials violated state law by neglecting to hold public votes on employees' contracts.

By Elizabeth Skrapits - eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

It recently came to light that residents of the cash-strapped city never had the opportunity to comment on the contracts before they were signed by council and the mayor.

The city's financial recovery plan notes previous officials "entered into multi-year contracts for which they did not have adequate financial resources." The police contract in particular is the subject of controversy.

Former council members Bill Brown and Yvonne Bozinski recalled signing the contract in the back of the municipal building before a meeting. Mayor John Bushko, who was a councilman in 2003 and 2004, couldn't remember a public vote, either.

"I think that was the problem with not having more legal involvement with (the police) contract," Bozinski said.

Under the state Sunshine Act, council must have a public vote on a contract, Pennsylvania Newspaper Association legal adviser Melissa Melewski confirmed.

"Official action has to take place in public, and there had to be an opportunity for public comment before that action," she said.

The police contract, effective Jan. 1, 2004 through Dec. 31, 2008, has no dates on the signature page or anywhere else to indicate when it was passed.

A reporter searched Nanticoke meeting minutes from January 2003 through December 2005 and found nothing in them to show council ever voted on the police contract.

There was no record of public votes on other contracts.

In the April 2, 2003, minutes, Bozinski said negotiations had begun on clerical, police and fire contracts. The minutes for the Nov. 3, 2004, meeting state, "council approved fireman's contract." There is no record of the required roll-call vote.

There were no minutes indicating public votes were taken at a later date to fix the violations. Bozinski said she didn't remember a public vote being taken on the firefighters' contract. The contract for the public works department and office staff was probably not voted on in public either, Brown said.

Since there is a one-year statute of limitations on Sunshine Act violations, it is too late to sue, Melewski said.

"Unfortunately, the law doesn't have a lot of teeth," she said.

Attorney Joel Barras of the Philadelphia branch of Reed Smith, LLP was hired by council in February to deal with police contract issues. Barras said whether there was a Sunshine Act violation by council or not, the contract is in place and enforceable because the police union passed it. The former council members said they didn't know they had to vote on contracts in public.

"Being a cop for 20 years, I never remember roll call votes being taken," Brown said.

Brown retired from the Nanticoke Police Department in 1999. He would be subject to the terms of the contract that was in place when he retired, so it was not a conflict of interest to sign the new one, Barras said.

4/19/2007

Nanticoke officials OK \$250K loan

Money will be used to cover expenses until new tax kicks in.

Sherry Long - slong@timesleader.com

City officials approved taking out a \$250,000 short-term loan to ensure there is enough money to handle daily operating expenses during Wednesday night's monthly work session.

PNC Bank was one of two banks submitting bids, but had a lower interest rate of 4.04 percent, City Interim Administrator Bob Sabatini said. The money must be paid back by Aug. 31 with \$3,001.94 in interest. The name of the other bank and its interest rate were not immediately available.

"We believe we must proceed," Sabatini said, noting if the anticipated revenue from the city's new taxes starts coming in sooner than expected, the loan can always be canceled.

Residents and commuters will begin seeing the commuter tax and higher earned income tax money taken out of their paychecks in early May after both become effective April 30. However, it is unknown exactly when the money will start pouring into the city's general fund, said Harry Miller, Pennsylvania Economy League's senior research associate.

Less than two weeks with its current solicitors, the city now has new legal representation from Mahler, Shaffer, Pugliese and Finnegan of Kingston. William T. Finnegan Jr. will serve as the city's main solicitor.

Earlier this month the Wilkes-Barre law firm of Wetzel, Caverly, Shea, Phillips and Rodgers was hired as the city's solicitor. That firm replaced attorney Keith Saunders, who cited an overwhelming work load from city business was keeping him from serving his other clients. Saunders began serving as the city's solicitor at the beginning of the year.

The Wilkes-Barre firm removed itself from representing the city because of a conflict of interest. The firm represents an unnamed client suing the city.

"His other client didn't approve a waiver," Sabatini said, refusing to comment on the lawsuit. After refusing, the city was required to find new legal representation.

Council members also sold the Nanticoke Housing Authority the vacant lot where the city's former city hall sat for a \$1. The authority needs the space for a parking lot because it is planning on purchasing the Susquehanna Coal Co. Building to turn into middle-income housing, Mayor John Bushko said.

Calling it a "housekeeping issue," council members reapproved accepting the \$700,000 loan from the state last September. While reviewing previous council meeting notes from last year, the original resolution could not be found, Sabatini said.

Councilman Bernie Norieka was appointed as the city's newest director of administration and finance. He was selected April 4 to serve the remainder of the seat left vacant by Bill O'Malley's resignation in March.

4/16/2007

Districts in no hurry to impose dress codes

By hruckno@citizensvoice.com

The Wyoming Valley West School Board gave area educators something to talk about last week when it radically overhauled its dress code. The district became the second in Luzerne County to adopt a structured dress code, joining Hazleton Area, as well as several schools in Lackawanna County.

Citing safety concerns, Wyoming Valley West school directors unanimously adopted a dress code that bans denim and loose clothing.

Pants, shorts and skirts can only be tan, beige or navy blue. Shirts must have collars and be a solid color.

Supporters say structured clothing improves the school climate and cuts down on discipline issues, but data to support their claims has been hard to come by. When asked if they found any hard evidence to support their argument, Valley West administrators told the board all the evidence was "anecdotal."

Greater Nanticoke Area Superintendent Anthony Perrone said he wishes the Pennsylvania Department of Education had done a study on dress codes.

Perrone said a study like that would help him decide what is best for his district. Nanticoke Area might implement a structured dress code next year, and a committee was formed to research the issue.

"It may happen," said Perrone. "We have enough information together that we can do it, but it's something that I would like even the kids to be involved with."

Currently, most county school districts have only a basic dress code. The codes ban offensive, sexually suggestive or disruptive clothing.

Most students come to school dressed appropriately, but there will always be students who push the envelope, local administrators said. "Any dress code, what it's trying to do, with the recognition of personal style and individual preference, is to promote neatness and modesty," said Lake-Lehman Superintendent Jim McGovern. "I find it to be the minority that really goes against the spirit of the dress code,"

For that reason, McGovern has no plans to change the dress code at Lake-Lehman.

Hanover Area schools also are happy with that type of policy. School directors discussed a more structured dress code, but the movement never really moved past that point, superintendent Anthony Podczasy said.

Dallas Area Superintendent Frank Galicki said his district hasn't even discussed changing its dress code. He wondered if a structured dress code or uniform policy would really cut down on vandalism or competition.

"It does remove the individualism from high school. Every generation has its fads and modes and styles, and all of that gets removed," Galicki said. "Is that good or is that bad?"

While he personally likes the structured dress code, Wilkes-Barre Area Superintendent Dr. Jeffrey Namey said his district is not likely to implement one.

The district had planned a pilot project at Dodson Elementary a few years back, but Namey said it never happened. Parents who were initially in favor changed their minds at the last minute, he said.

"There is no major push at the present time to do something like this, but obviously we're reading, with interest, what's going on around us," Namey said.

The Wyoming Area School Board even considered changing its dress code, but the board ultimately decided against it.

"Some people ran with it a little bit, even to the point of looking at uniforms," board member Tom Vaxmonsky said.

Officials from Pittston Area, Northwest Area and Crestwood schools could not be reached for comment.

4/13/2007

Parents warned roadwork will affect transportation at Nanticoke schools

By Elizabeth Skrapits , Staff Writer - eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Roadwork at a main intersection near Greater Nanticoke Area schools will affect transportation, so parents and students should be prepared, the school board learned Thursday.

Improvements at Kosciuszko and Main streets — including signs, curbs, sidewalks, drains and paving — will begin April 16 and continue until October, according to PennDOT.

When work starts Monday, parents and students should allow extra time in the mornings and expect delays, superintendent Tony Perrone said.

Most buses will use Middle Road to get to Kosciuszko Street. Adjustments to bus routes will be made as necessary, Perrone said. He asked parents and students to avoid left turns from Church Street, and to drive around the back of the high school and use Meade Street to Grand or Washington streets.

Parents shouldn't park in the traffic circle in front of the high school, because it is dangerous for children walking between cars, Perrone said.

"We'll do everything we can to keep buses off Main Street," Perrone said. "Parents, please do everything you can to cooperate with parking, so no kids get hurt."

In other business:

The board accepted the retirement of special education teacher Theodore Wiaterowski.

The board voted to post all sports positions. Coaches have to re-apply every year, board president Jeff Kozlofski said.

"Everybody gets a fair chance," he said.

Fall sports positions are athletic director; camera person; football coach and three assistants; middle school football coach and assistant; field hockey coach and assistant; middle school field hockey coach; cross-country coach; boys soccer coach and assistant; middle school co-ed soccer coach; golf coach and assistant; girls volleyball coach and two assistants; and a weightlifting coach.

Winter sports positions are boys basketball coach, three assistants, a camera person, a scorekeeper and a timer; girls basketball coach, three assistants and a scorekeeper; wrestling coach, two assistants and a scorekeeper; and a girls swimming coach and assistant.

4/11/2007

Nanticoke Musicfest Committee meet to plan Musicfest 2007

The 2007 Nanticoke Musicfest Committee met to plan Musicfest 2007, taking place June 1, 2 and 3. This year, crafts made in the city of Nanticoke will be featured. The event will include a variety of bands, pierogi-eating contest and other entertainment. As a part of Musicfest, a parade will be held at 2 p.m. June 2. Any food vendors, crafters or people interested in participating in the pierogi-eating contest or parade can contact Betsy at 735-2800. From left: Karen Dougherty, Yvonne Bozinski and Joan Prestash. Second row: Jim J.D. Verazin, Mayor John Bushko and Doc Halliday. Absent from photo: Theresa Sowa, Eric Grohowski, Joseph Walters and Tony Margelewicz. Visit the Musicfest webpage to download forms for parade, crafters/vendors and pierogi-eating contest....

4/11/2007

Nanticoke project set

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For the next six months major delays are expected at the intersection of Main and Kosciuszko Streets, the city's main traffic artery. Starting Monday and continuing through October, the intersection will be torn up as construction crews from Don E. Bower Inc., Berwick, perform work to improve the water flow between Kosciuszko and College streets by installing a new drainage system, Pennsylvania Department of Transportation spokeswoman Karen Dussinger said.

After the \$815,000 project is completed and the roads are widened, school buses will have more room to make turns. A combination of federal and state funds will pay for the project.

Barricades will be installed at the intersection to prevent drivers from using turning lanes on Main or Kosciuszko streets.

With Nanticoke's public schools on one end and the Luzerne County Community College on the opposite end of Kosciuszko, some concerns have been raised about the vehicle congestion on the two-lane road. Once the barricades are set up, no turns will be allowed at the intersection.

Middle Road, the city's main southern traffic artery is expected to handle more traffic during the construction project – so much so that PennDOT received requests from area lawmakers requesting a temporary traffic light be installed at Kosciuszko Street and Middle Road. Transportation officials have to consider the cost for installing a traffic fixture, which in this case could be an estimated \$150,000 or up to 30 percent of the entire project, Dussinger said.

"We just want everyone to understand there is going to be a lot of congestion and delays," state Rep. John Yudichak said. "There is going to be a little bit of pain for a lot of good."

Greater Nanticoke Area School District officials are taking extra precautions to ensure students walking to and from school or being picked up by their parents will be safe despite the added traffic.

"We are trying to make it as safe as possible," Superintendent Tony Perrone said.

After meeting with the district's transportation director on Tuesday, Perrone said he planned to unveil the district's finalized transportation plans at Thursday's school board meeting.

LCCC staff and students, in a March 23 e-mail, were encouraged to allow additional travel time to get to class while using alternate routes, including Middle Road and Prospect Street.

Last month City Council authorized public works employees to install two temporary stop signs at the intersection of East Green and College streets to create a four-way stop in hopes of easing traffic congestion as more people will be using side streets.

New signal lights, curbs and extending a sidewalk along Main Street next to the Mill Memorial Library are also included in the project.

4/11/2007

Pioneers' Bargella lives up to word

Former Lackawanna College standout enjoying second career in arena league.

Joe Petrucci For the Times Leader

Former Nanticoke Area standout Todd Bargella takes a break during the Pioneers' preseason camp. The lineman is happy to be part of the team again.

Times Leader File Photo/Clark Van Orden

Nearly every player in arenafootball2 will respond the same way when asked why they're playing for \$200 per game: They want to move up to the next level of pro football.

Then there's Todd Bargella. The 6-foot-6, 285-pound lineman spent the better part of a season with the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Pioneers in 2005. After taking 2006 off, Bargella, a Greater Nanticoke Area High School graduate, had convinced himself he was done playing and had looked forward to a coaching career after assisting former NFL player Mark Duda at Lackawanna College.

All that changed, though, when Bargella gave the undefeated Falcons a pre-game speech prior to their Valley of the Sun Bowl appearance against defending junior college national champion Glendale Community College in Arizona on Dec. 2.

"I told them I lived that season through them and they were my inspiration," Bargella said. "I promised them if they went out and won that game I would strap on the pads again and play one more year.

"The minute we won that game, they were all running up to me telling me, 'That was for you Coach' and 'You better play again.'"

It seems perfectly normal that such a naturally gifted athlete like Bargella, who possesses a rare combination of size and agility, would continue to pursue pro dreams after a stellar career at NCAA Division I Western Carolina University. There, Bargella was an all-Southern Conference tight end in 2002 and 2003.

But Bargella, who played at Lackawanna himself prior to transferring to Western Carolina, sounds like a man living his dreams already.

"I'm not here to move on to play in (the parent Arena Football League)," Bargella said. "I've got a good job here. I've got a girlfriend. I have everything set for me.

"I'm just doing it for the love of the game, to get it out of me, to leave on my own terms."

The game-day promise was a nice touch, but to fulfill it, Bargella still had to be signed by the Pioneers. So he called second-year head coach Rich Ingold during the winter and explained his situation. That was no easy task, considering Ingold signed Bargella the previous season only to see Bargella unable to play because of his work commitment as a second-shift guard at the Luzerne County Correctional Facility.

"He called me out of the blue and I could hear the sincerity in his heart that he wanted another shot and he felt like he let us down last year," Ingold said.

Bargella's previous stint with the Pioneers in 2005 started well but ended abruptly. He tore ligaments in his hand at the midway point of

the season. The injury required a soft cast and by the time it had healed enough for him to play, the season was almost over. In seven games, Bargella totaled 5.5 tackles and a pair of pass break-ups.

“That was emotional because I had high expectations. I was counting on that year,” Bargella said. “It was just the luck of the draw.” Bargella’s luck improved this time around. Ingold needed another big lineman, specifically one that could play both sides of the ball with equal prowess. This time around, Bargella’s work situation was far more accommodating. He is the assistant athletic director and director of intramurals at Lackawanna and coaches tight ends and special teams for Duda.

“I love it. It’s what I went to school for,” Bargella said. “It’s pretty cool, coaching with Duda and having a good old time.” Coaching at Lackawanna might be the perfect gig for Bargella, who saw a scholarship offer from then-coach Nick Saban at Michigan State taken away when Bargella’s grades weren’t up to snuff. It’s the same situation many of the Lackawanna players find themselves in. Lackawanna is their last choice, but Bargella made the best of his time there and has continued to do so, even in af2.

“He’s been a great surprise,” said Ingold. “Every day he’s been going pretty good. He’s a much better player than he was last year.” Bargella had flu-like symptoms on the day of the Pioneers’ season-opener against Manchester on March 31. Seeing limited action, he had two tackles in the Pioneers’ 50-36 victory.

A case of pancreatitis has kept Bargella away from the practice field the past two days since the Pioneers returned from their bye week. Ingold will likely decide by today whether Bargella will remain on the suspended list for the rest of the week or go on the injured reserve list for four weeks.

“The old Todd would’ve probably been flipping out,” Bargella said.

The “new Todd,” though, is taking it in stride. He’s living up to his end of the deal with last fall’s Lackawanna team, and he’s enjoying every bit of it, minus any pressure of trying to make the big time.

“The only way I’d consider coming back is if I had a shot at being a fourth-string tight end in the NFL,” Bargella said, only half-joking. “I’m content where I am now. Whatever happens, happens.”

4/9/2007

Four local school districts may save money by pulling out of Health Trust

By Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens Voice

A consultant discovered four area school districts — all members of the NEPA School Districts Health Trust — might save money if they find another way to provide health insurance to their employees.

However, three of the districts might not be able to pull out of the trust because their teachers’ contracts have expired and are in negotiations.

And if they withdraw from the trust, they might not get back their share of the excess funds they paid in.

Dallas, Greater Nanticoke Area, Northwest Area and Pittston Area hired Sovereign Benefits Consulting of Pittsburgh to study whether it would save them money to drop out of the health trust.

William Hartz, senior vice president of benefits at the firm, presented his findings to the Dallas School Board last week and is giving the other districts theirs. Although he wouldn’t give specifics, the results were essentially the same, he said.

“I think it was pretty universal for these four that there would be advantages to being out of the trust,” he said.

Based on trends, Dallas could have saved \$670,000 last year if the district was self-insured, Hartz estimated.

All four districts have varying levels of risk associated with pulling out, and the same questions about refunding surplus money, Hartz said. Each of the 13 participating districts pays its own specific amount each year to the trust. If a district’s claims go over that amount, the costs are absorbed by the trust. If they are under, the money goes into a reserve fund. The ownership of the reserve is not specifically addressed in trust documents, Hartz said.

For the past two years, Dallas paid more into the trust than it took out in claims and administrative costs. Hartz estimates \$1.5 million to \$2 million of the surplus should go back to the district, he said.

But health trust executive director Andy Marko said the extra money is a reserve, not a surplus, used for emergencies and backing up claims. He also said the trust documents do address the situation: if a district withdraws, it doesn’t get a portion of the reserve.

“Everyone in the trust is aware of that,” Marko said. “The trust document states that if you withdraw from the trust, the money remains in the trust.”

Marko said the trust’s accountant was not available and the reserve amount varies. Asked to estimate, he said it “probably contains about \$4 (million) or \$5 million.”

Not so, GNA school board member Robert Raineri said.

“From what I understand, they have \$18 million in cash and \$3 million accounts payable. That leaves them with \$15 million. What are they going to do with that?” he said.

The reserve comes from a combination of factors: rates going down, claims going down, people getting healthier, Marko said. If the money in the reserve is not used, it goes back to districts in the form of lower rates, Marko said.

Raineri disputed that.

“They keep saying they need it for the bird flu. If the bird flu came, we would pay it anyway,” he said.

Last year, districts asked for a one-month break in rates due to the growing reserve, Raineri said. Each only got half a month’s premium back: GNA paid \$125,000 instead of the usual \$250,000.

The districts have until June 30 to opt in or out of the health trust. Raineri said the four districts are looking into forming a trust of their own.

But three of them — Dallas, GNA and Northwest Area — might have to stay status quo for a while longer. Their teachers' contracts are expired and they are in negotiations.

Pennsylvania State Education Association attorney John Holland, who represents several area teachers unions, said districts with contracts that aren't settled must remain in the health trust.

"Our position is, by law they cannot withdraw. It's a joint entity and it would require union consent," he said. "What the courts have said is that while contracts are pending, the board cannot change any terms or conditions. Everything remains as-is until a successor contract is agreed to."

Both the teachers union and the school board have to agree on withdrawing from the trust even when there is a contract in place, Holland said.

If a district pulls out while its teachers contract is not settled, it is considered to be similar to locking the teachers out of their schools, he said. Withdrawal from the trust without teachers' consent could also be considered an unfair labor practice or violation of the contract, which means a grievance can be filed, he said.

Even if all four districts withdraw from the trust, it will survive, Marko said.

"Certainly no one wants to see anyone pull out of the trust. We think it's the best possible thing for the area, for the taxpayer," he said.
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4/8/2007

Districts deal with new security measures

By Sarah Hofius - Citizens Voice

All prospective school employees must be fingerprinted and undergo federal criminal background checks under a new requirement from the state Legislature.

The requirement, which went into effect last week, does not affect current employees, unless they lived outside of the state for at least two years immediately before being hired.

Local school officials said they are prepared to handle the new background checks, which will give administrators a more complete idea of a person's past.

The state criminal history record and child abuse history clearances that applicants must have will still be required, state Department of Education spokeswoman Nicole Rob said.

But those checks did not give adequate information on a person's criminal activities in other states. The FBI check will find it all, Rob said. People must register online so they can be electronically fingerprinted. The applicant will have to pay \$40 for the clearance.

The site will be at the Luzerne Intermediate Unit in Kingston for prospective employees in Wyoming and Luzerne counties.

Greater Nanticoke Area Superintendent Anthony Perrone is in favor of the new law. He thinks it will allow district officials to better screen job applicants.

But the superintendent has some reservations about the cost.

Even entry level employees will have to pay \$40 to get fingerprinted, he said.

"It's going to be difficult because we're going to have to see whether the school is going to have to incur all those expenses," Perrone said.

"I wonder if even a support staff worker is going to have to pay all that money just to get a position."

Wilkes-Barre Area Superintendent Dr. Jeffrey Namey is also concerned about the cost. He said some of his employees have trouble paying \$20 for two state clearances, so a \$40 bill on top of that could create a real hardship.

"In spite of that, I think obviously the positive end is that it provides another layer of security for the people we bring on board," he said.

Namey has one other concern — time. It takes eight weeks to get FBI clearances processed, he said, and the district often needs to fill positions quickly.

Heidi Ruckno, staff writer, contributed to this report.

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4/7/2007

Nanticoke considers temporary loan

Officials have worked to pull city out of Act 47 status since it was declared financially distressed.

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To cover daily operating expenses, city officials are considering getting a \$250,000 loan during the next few weeks.

Pennsylvania Economy League officials recommended the city apply to local banks seeking a short-term loan until money starts coming in from property taxes, the new commuter tax and a higher earned-income tax. The commuter tax and higher earned-income tax go into effect on April 30.

During Wednesday's meeting, city council approved getting bids from area banks to see which would offer the most competitive interest rate. The city will not apply for an actual bid until interest rates can be reviewed.

"Now we have to get some alternative means to pay payroll and insurances," Councilman Brent Makarczyk said. "We want to make sure we have enough just in case anything else arises."

By passing a city administrator and new tax ordinances in the last few weeks, officials have worked hard to pull the city out of its Act 47 status since being declared financially distressed last year by the state, said Gerald Cross, Pennsylvania Economy League's executive

director. Now the city will look more desirable to area banks than they would have last December, he said.

Nanticoke's had several city administrators during the last few years, but their job description was never detailed explaining exactly what was expected and demanded of a person in the position. Now the city has an ordinance clearly describing the job's duties.

Cross said it is not uncommon for cities to use short-term loans in December to cover basic operating expenses until property tax money arrives usually around early May. Most cities have until the end of the year to pay the loans back, but Nanticoke must pay off its loan by August.

"Act 47 puts stricter limits on Nanticoke because we don't want them to fall back into bad habits," Cross said. "The important thing with Nanticoke is the banks will get paid back."

Treasurer Al Wytoshek recommended the city borrow money from one of its other funds rather than going through a bank and having to pay a high interest rate.

"That way we could keep it in-house and keep it in control," he said. "If we stay on top of this we can pay it back as quick as we get it."

In the past council has borrowed money from other city accounts, but had not paid back the funds, Mayor John Bushko said.

Last fall the city received an interest-free \$700,000 loan from state officials to cover a 2006 deficit and some capital work needing to be completed at city hall.

Council members voted to pay off a 1998 loan last month using money from the city's debt services fund at a cost of \$121,540.

"We haven't defaulted on anything," said Holly Quinn, the city's fiscal officer. "We've managed to pay all our loans."

Outstanding loans

March 2004: \$1 million loan. 10-year payback with monthly payment at \$10,529.13. Total interest on the loan is \$263,495.60. So far the city has paid \$379,048.68 on the loan.

June 2005: \$700,000 loan. As of April 1, the city owes \$592,621.09.

February 2006: \$3.15 million sewer loan. The city pays \$16,000 monthly and including interest the entire payback is expected to be \$4,287,699.17.

September 2006: \$700,000 interest-free loan from the state. Must be paid back within 10 years.

- Information from Nanticoke Fiscal Officer Holly Quinn

4/7/2007

Solemn end to school tradition

Janine Ungvarsky Times Leader Correspondent

The mood was solemn in Holy Trinity Church Friday night as students from Pope John Paul II School performed the Living Stations of the Cross together for the final time.

The event calls for solemnity as 45 students in second through eighth grades re-enacted the final hours of the life of Jesus on the day Christians set aside to reflect on his death. But this time was different from the Living Stations the school's students performed the past 15 years, different even from the 12 other times they performed them this year.

This was the last chance the school's students will ever have to re-enact the Passion together. The Diocese of Scranton will close the school at the end of the year.

"I don't think it's hit them yet," said eighth-grade teacher and program director Mary Ann Yendrzejewski. "The adults are much more emotional about it than the children. The students will realize it next year when they aren't getting ready to do this again."

The Living Stations tradition has been so strong at the school that Yendrzejewski said the children don't have to be told what to do when rehearsals begin.

"They have seen it so many times throughout their school career and from a lifetime of seeing their brothers and sisters in it that I put this together in two weeks," she said, with only one full rehearsal for the hourlong event. "They know where to stand, what to do, when to move. I can just show up here at 7 p.m. and watch," she said.

Seventh- and eighth-graders usually make up the cast, Yendrzejewski said, but "because this was the last time, it was the first time we let anyone in the school in grades two through eight participate. Anyone who wanted a part, we found a part for them."

One of them was 12-year-old Michael Fox. "I wanted to be in it last year but there weren't enough spots," he said. Wearing a toga and robe from his role as a guard, the sixth-grader said he was sad it was the last time his school would get to do this. "I thought it was nice for people to watch it and it was for God," he said.

Fox's father, Charlie Galinski, said, "It's very important for him to be in this. I think it brings him closer to God, closer to what his religion is about."

The audience of about 200 included a number of former participants in the Living Stations, including last year's narrators, Gabrielle Badowski and Kaitlin Eckrote, both 15, and Dana Argento, 14. Argento, who played Mary Magdalen, said the kids never minded giving up their Friday nights for performances. "It's really sad and depressing that this is the last time," she said.

Her friends echoed her feelings. "It's so rewarding to do, and it's so sad we'll never see it performed by our school again," Badowski said.

"We got to really explain the story so everyone could understand it," Eckrote said. "It's weird and sad that it won't happen again."

This year's cast performed flawlessly despite extra media attention and television cameras. Though Yendrzejewski hovered nearby, the children hit their marks and stayed in character without prompting. "They do it with such sincerity that people have commented on it," she said. "They don't crack a smile and they do it so prayerfully."

After re-enacting Jesus' death amidst thunder and flashing lights and his resurrection with joyful hallelujahs, the young cast received a standing ovation and praise from the Rev. James Nash, president of the school's board of pastors. He called the last performance a

bittersweet moment — sad because it was the last but “a happy moment because they will carry this moment with them and it will sustain them.”

Said Nash, “They will always be Pope John Paul students and they will always have Pope John Paul School in their hearts.”

4/6/2007

Holy Spirit Academy organizers face plenty of homework

By Elizabeth Skrapits Staff Writer - Citizens Voice

A lesson the creators of Holy Spirit Academy are learning is that starting a new school involves a lot of homework. They will have to fill out forms A, B, C and D if they want to get the non-profit Christian school ready for pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students by September.

Jean Ditzler and other Holy Spirit Academy representatives met with the state Department of Education’s board of private academic schools in Harrisburg this week.

The Holy Spirit group must show the state they are meeting all requirements, from the curriculum to field trip policies to a written plan for monthly fire drills and school bus evacuation.

When Bishop Joseph Martino announced the Diocese of Scranton would close Pope John Paul II elementary school in Nanticoke in June, parents and supporters decided to create a new venue for Christian education.

The first thing needed to open Holy Spirit Academy is a state license, which must be renewed annually.

Teachers have to have all the background checks required by the state and federal government. Some teachers and a principal are already lined up. The Holy Spirit board expects to start advertising for more teachers within the next few weeks, Ditzler said.

The Holy Spirit group has an accountant and architects figuring out exactly what start-up costs will be, Ditzler said.

The state has to approve the building the group hopes to buy for the new school. However, the former Penn Footwear factory on Line Street needs a lot of transformation first.

Nanticoke officials will work on eliminating a potential obstacle on their end. Interim city administrator Robert Sabatini, who is helping the Holy Spirit Academy group with matters such as finding grants, discovered the zoning ordinance does not have any provisions for creating private educational facilities.

4/5/2007

Water boil advisory lifted

Pennsylvania American Water customers in areas of Nanticoke and Newport Township no longer have to boil their water before use.

Results of water quality testing have confirmed that water quality meets drinking water standards, and that there is no further need to boil your water prior to use for consumption.

This notice applies to customers in the following areas:

- Hanover Section of Nanticoke
- Elevated areas of Nanticoke
- Sheatown
- Alden
- Parts of Wanamie

4/05/2007

Nanticoke fills empty council seat

By Elizabeth Skrapits - eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City officials found a new councilman.

Now they have to look for something that could be more difficult to find: a bank willing to give the financially distressed city a short-term loan.

Council and Mayor John Bushko unanimously appointed Bernie Norieka as the fourth councilman Wednesday, filling the seat vacated by Bill O’Malley on March 7. Norieka will finish the term, which expires at the end of 2007. He is not running for office.

Norieka, 60, has been involved in several community organizations in the last 32 years, including the Nanticoke Community Ambulance Association. He was an active firefighter for 24 years and at one time served on the Nanticoke redevelopment authority.

He resigned from the zoning hearing board, where he was a volunteer, before he could be sworn in by city clerk Tony Margelewicz.

Norieka’s first vote with council was to hire the Wilkes-Barre law firm of Wetzel, Caverly, Phillips and Rodgers to replace city Solicitor Keith Saunders, who resigned March 7.

Then, on the advice of Pennsylvania Economy League, the city’s financial recovery coordinator, council voted to solicit quotations from banks for a tax anticipation note, a short-term loan for city expenses. They want a \$250,000 loan, to be repaid by August.

“This is just to carry us over until our earned income tax starts coming in,” Bushko said.

Treasurer Al Wytoshek asked why council didn’t borrow from one of the city’s own funds instead of a bank.

“That’s the problem with council. We don’t pay it back,” Bushko said, referring to the past practice of raiding the sewer fund and other specialized accounts for bill and payroll money.

This time, the economy league suggested borrowing internally — and for the city to charge itself interest until the money is repaid, Bushko

said.

That could be an option if the city can't secure a loan. Before the state declared Nanticoke financially distressed in 2006, the city had a bad track record with tax anticipation notes.

Former city officials failed to repay a \$500,000 note in 2001 and a \$50,000 note in 2003. They took out a \$1 million loan in 2004 to repay both loans. A previous administration finally got a \$300,000 tax anticipation note in February 2005 after being turned down by 17 banks.

4/5/2007

Planning and zoning board member named to vacant council seat

Sherry Long - slong@timesleader.com

A planning and zoning board member was appointed Wednesday night to fill the unexpired council seat left vacant when former council member and Finance Director Bill O'Malley resigned last month.

Bernie Norieka was approved unanimously to serve as the newest council member through December. He had to resign from the city Zoning Board before he could be sworn onto the council.

Norieka said his one goal is to help get the city back on its feet: "To get the city up and running again and being in a solvent position so they don't have to keep paying back debt," he said.

As a sales and marketing director for an industrial manufacturing company, Norieka said he has the experience to lead the city's Finance Department.

"I've got an extensive business background reading financial statements," Norieka said, "I've done it before so it's nothing new to me."

Norieka, a 32-year resident of the city, has served on the redevelopment board, hospital board, zoning board and is still an active volunteer firefighter.

"I've volunteered for many different city functions and committees, and the city needs help," Norieka said.

Because O'Malley's seat is up for re-election, a new councilman will fill the spot in January. Norieka will not be on the ballot. O'Malley resigned after the deadline had passed for candidates to sign up for office.

Three Democrat candidates -- former councilman Bill Brown, councilman Joe Dougherty and John Metta -- are running for two council seats in November.

Council also voted to hire new legal representation for the city.

After reviewing the qualifications of four law firms, Wetzel, Caverly, Shea, Phillips and Rodgers of Wilkes-Barre was hired.

"What was most attractive with the firm was they have a team of attorneys who have municipal experience and they have different expertise in all areas," Councilman Brent Makarczyk said.

It is unknown exactly how much the firm would be paid as a retainer, but Makarczyk said it was comparable to what former solicitor Keith Saunders was paid. Saunders, who resigned last month, said he could not keep up with the work load needed to efficiently serve the city while representing clients in his private practice.

In other business, council approved the second reading of a new commuter tax and an increase in the earned income tax. They take effect April 30 and are expected to generate more than a \$1 million for the city.

4/5/2007

3 WVC girls on all-state teams

Nanticoke's Byorick and Acker receive honors.

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The Greater Nanticoke Area and Bishop O'Reilly girls basketball teams fell just short in their bids to capture a state championship.

However, on Tuesday three of their players received statewide recognition.

Nanticoke's Aly Byorick was named Class 3A all-state first team by The Associated Press for the second consecutive year. Teammate Sarah Acker was named to the 3A second team, and Queenswomen star Marissa Chesnavich won third-team honors in Class A.

"I'm excited about it, especially because I went through so much at the end of the year," said Byorick, who suffered a serious foot injury during the Trojanettes' win over Bishop Hoban in the District 2 championship game. "The injury made me forget about all the good things I've done in the past."

Byorick, a 6-foot senior guard who averaged 20.2 points per game, said being named all-state again helps soothe the disappointment of not winning a state championship. Nanticoke (28-1) lost to Mount St. Joseph in the quarterfinals.

"It made me feel good about myself because it's a great goal to accomplish. I can't even put into words how I feel."

Byorick, who is bound for Xavier University, was on the computer when she learned the good news.

"My dad gave me a big hug and my mom got tears in her eyes."

A four-time Wyoming Valley Conference Player of the Year, Byorick is the all-time leading scorer in Nanticoke history. She finished with 2,272 points, eclipsing Paul Guffrovich's previous mark of 2,259 points.

What she's going to miss most are the "stupid little things" that she and her teammates conspired to do, Byorick added.

"We'd destroyed our coach's house after winning the district championship. He'd wake up in the morning and see all 10 of his players lying on the living room floor."

Acker, a 6-4 senior center, averaged 20.6 points, 16 rebounds and 10 blocked shots. She expressed mixed feelings about being named to the second team.

“It’s a big honor, but I’m actually a little upset,” said Acker, who’s headed to St. Joseph’s University. “I expected to be on the first team all-state squad.”

According to Nanticoke coach Jack Rentko, Acker is in a league of her own.

“In my eyes, she was the best big player in Pennsylvania. She’s so athletic that she can do anything on the court. Sarah has great court awareness and knows what has to be done.”

Acker improved by leaps and bounds in her junior and senior years, Rentko added.

“Her maturity really showed. Her presence on the court was great for our program.”

4/3/2007

Boil advisory issued in Nanticoke, Newport Township areas

Elizabeth Skrapits - Citizens Voice

A water main break closed the Greater Nanticoke Area schools Monday and led to a boil advisory for parts of Nanticoke and Newport Township that remains in effect.

A 16-inch main at Locust and East Broad streets broke some time before 3 a.m.

When GNA Superintendent Anthony Perrone heard about the problem, he sent district Building and Grounds Supervisor Frank Grevera to check out the schools. There was no water in the elementary and high school early in the morning, Perrone said. He opted to close the schools.

Pennsylvania American Water has issued a boil advisory for: Hanover section of Nanticoke; Elevated areas of Nanticoke; Sheatown, Alden and parts of Wanamie in Newport Township.

Customers in those areas should boil their water before using it for drinking or cooking. The advisory will remain in effect until further notice.

For more information, call the Pennsylvania American Water customer service center at 1-800-565-7292.

4/2/2007

Getting into the new school spirit

Holy Spirit Academy organizers outline plans during enrollment meeting. mguydish@timesleader.com

The new private Christian school in Nanticoke will probably share its building with a cigar maker, but the building owner promises that won’t interfere with the school. Children will take daily religion classes, but Catholic students will have to attend church-sponsored Catechism classes to prepare for holy sacraments. And there is still a chance the building won’t be ready by September.

None of which deterred 15 or more people, including Ray and Sharon Kinney, from enrolling their children Sunday afternoon. The Hunlock Creek couple headed straight for the registration table after a roughly one-hour public meeting in the Nanticoke Municipal Building, where Holy Spirit Academy organizers outlined their plans and answered questions.

“I visited the other schools,” Sharon Kinney said, recounting her impressions from open houses held at St. Aloysius in Wilkes-Barre and what will be Good Shepherd Academy in the current Bishop O’Reilly High School building in Kingston. “They were too big and too far away for my daughter. We like the smallness of Pope John Paul II.”

That school, run by the Diocese of Scranton, will close for good in June, and a group of parents backed by some local politicians, businesses and community leaders hatched the idea of Holy Spirit to take its place. Even though many plans are still soft, their pitch Sunday seemed to convince some attendees.

“We know a lot of people involved in it through Pope John Paul,” Ray Kinney said, noting that he and his wife have not registered their daughter, heading for fourth grade next year, in any other school. “We have a lot of faith in them.”

Lori Antolik, with a daughter about to enter kindergarten, and Brian Waugh, with two graduates from John Paul and two still attending, did the presentation and fielded questions with some help from organizer Jean Ditzler. Waugh opened with an emphatic denial that the new school is in any way meant as criticism of the diocese. “We are very grateful for what they have done for our children,” he said.

Antolik stressed that one big reason the school is being created is the dedication of parents at John Paul. “It’s like a family in itself,” she said, “that’s how we want Holy Spirit Academy to be.”

Their key points included:

- The school will share an old shoe factory that currently houses a cigar maker, but the owner has promised the business will arrange its schedule to avoid any conflict with the students arriving or departing, or with other activities. The building owner is trying to find a new location for the cigar maker.
- There will be pre-kindergarten (ages 3 and up) three days a week at a cost of about \$1,295 a year, and full-day kindergarten through eighth grade at \$1,895 a year plus a mandatory fundraising amount that hasn’t been finalized. Plans drawn up by Borton-Lawson architects call for one room for each grade, two rooms for special classes, a library and a gym/cafeteria, but Antolik said the hope is that success will allow the school to expand to grade nine and higher.
- There will be intramural basketball for kindergarten through grade two and interscholastic for higher grades. A “Home and School Association” for parents and students will be formed, with plans to have students take part in running meetings so they can learn public speaking and management skills, Antolik said.
- Several teachers and a principal have already signed on to work at the school, and Antolik said that “there is no shortage of applicants.”

Waugh conceded that details of how they would be paid aren't worked out, but said the school is pursuing grants and has garnered support from area businesses, some of which already have their names on T-shirts that were sold at the meeting.

- Uniforms will be mandatory, with boys in navy-blue pants and maroon polo shirts with the school emblem in gold. Girls will wear similar colored "jumpers," Antolik said.
- Bus transportation must, by law, be provided by the school district a student lives in as long as Holy Spirit is within 10 miles of that district's boundaries. Greater Nanticoke Area will also make a school nurse available as needed.
- The school will have locked doors and require escorts for anyone buzzed in. All students will be given identification numbers and anyone who comes to see or pick up a student must know that number, Antolik said.
- Conceding there isn't much time to get the building ready, Waugh and Antolik asked for volunteers. They also said that a contingency plan is in place to teach students if the building isn't ready, but didn't detail those plans. Waugh said he is pretty confident the building will be ready.

While a preliminary curriculum is worked out, details remain unset. One of the trickiest is religion classes, Antolik and Waugh said. Because the school has not sought and did not get approval from Bishop Joseph Martino, it cannot bill itself as a Catholic school, and it wants to keep appeal broad enough to attract other Christian denominations. As a result, Catholic students planning to receive Sacraments such as First Holy Communion and Confirmation will still have to attend weekend catechism classes at their local church.

Most of the 60 or so people who attended seemed receptive. The school got "15 to 20" registrations by the end of the meeting, said Donna Redenski, one of the school supporters.

Rebecca Piestrak said she has two children in Pope John Paul II and will consider the new school for next year.

"I think it's a viable option," she said.

For more info:

www.holyspiritacademy.org

or

Holy Spirit Academy,

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Nanticoke, PA 18634

Phone 735-0296

4/1/2007

Nanticoke initiating work safety committee

Safety group will help save 5 percent a year for five years on annual workman's comp premiums.

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The city is working to save thousands of dollars while encouraging on-the-job safety after creating a safety committee last month. After six months if the committee meets all the standards set by the Department of Labor and Industry they could save an estimated \$5,845.30 or 5 percent a year for five years on their annual workman's compensation premiums.

"It sounded like a win-win situation," said Nanticoke fiscal officer Holly Quinn.

"We could save money on workers compensation premiums and enhance safety in the workplace."

Using free pamphlets, videos and other handouts from the state the committee hopes to teach employees to think about safety in all they do – from lifting heavy boxes, driving safely or properly working machinery.

"We want to make safer working conditions for employees," Councilman and committee member Joe Dougherty said.

"They can bring concerns to the table and make our council aware of it."

Committee members plan to attend a safety committee meeting in Hanover Township soon to get tips on how to make their organization more effective.

Since forming their committee last year, Hanover Township is already saving about \$40,000 a year on their workers compensation insurance, township manager John Sipper said.

When an employee gets sick or is hurt on the job productivity drops as a higher workload gets placed on fewer employees, costing municipalities more money in the long run.

The committee must meet at least once a month, make all decisions by a majority vote of the board, develop a written agenda for each meeting and have employee and employer members to be eligible for the insurance discounts.

All city employees, volunteer firefighters and volunteer ambulance members are covered under Nanticoke's workmans compensation plan. Nanticoke committee members include Officer Joe Kosch as chairman, Donna Wall, Walter Pazeletz, fire Chief Mike Bohan, Dougherty and Quinn as secretary.

"We want to make safer working conditions for employees."

Joe Dougherty Councilman and committee member

3/31/2007

First responders to train better

Groundbreaking held for site at LCCC, which will aid work of firefighters, cops, etc.

slong@timesleader.com

After decades of dreaming, a local state-of-the-art first responders training facility is finally becoming a reality. The Public Safety Training Institute at Luzerne County Community College will not only benefit emergency responders it will also benefit local citizens since their rescuers will be better trained, said state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke. State and local dignitaries along with LCCC officials jump-started the construction phase Friday afternoon for the estimated \$15 million to \$22 million institute with a bang. Literally.

Government officials used buried explosives to break the ground. The flames gave them a brief experience of a fire's intensity or what firefighters experience every time they enter a burning building.

"For the first time we now know it is going to happen," said Luzerne County Fire & Rescue Training Association president Jim Wills Jr., noting he sometimes thought he would never live to see the day a regional training facility would be built.

"It was all hype up until this point now, but now the ground is broken."

An estimated 4,000 first responders from a 10-county region in Northeastern Pennsylvania will receive state-of-the-art hands-on training for firefighters, police officers, emergency medical technicians and paramedics.

The 34-acre institute will be built using a mixture of private donations, state and county funds in a five-year time span with each phase scheduled to be completed in one year.

A five-story structured tactical burn building and drill tower, institute's headquarters with classrooms and storage facilities are scheduled to open next spring.

In the past some departments sent firefighters as far as south as Maryland to get the necessary training.

Portable projection screens and folding screens doubled as a classroom for most area fire departments.

All hands-on training was simulated because they could not just set a building on fire just for training.

"Now we are going to be able to actually do them where the students feel what is going on and actually do the things they need to do," Wills said.

"They are going to know what the real world is like and when we send them out for firefighting they are going to have some real experience.

Once completed the institute will have an indoor shooting range, driving course, gas exposure training, K-9 training area, helicopter landing pad, classrooms and collapsible buildings.

Institute statistics:

What: The state-of-the-art Public Safety Training Institute will be a place for "heroes to learn" as firefighters, emergency response technicians, law enforcement officials and paramedics learn the latest life-saving techniques. The institute will be built in five phases each scheduled to last one year. The institute will serve about 4,000 first responders in a 10-region area including, Luzerne, Wyoming, Bradford, Columbia, Northumberland, Pike, Sullivan, Susquehanna and Wayne.

Cost: Estimated \$15-22 million paid for from state and county funds. Private donors have contributed more than \$1 million, so far, to the project, according to Kathleen Dunsmuir, president of the LCCC Foundation Board of Directors.

Where: 34-acres on the northeastern corner of Middle and Prospect Roads on the LCCC campus in Nanticoke.

3/31/2007

Meeting set for Christian school debut

Likely pre-K through 8, Holy Spirit Academy in Nanticoke is response to closing of city Catholic school.

mguydish@timesleader.com

Interested parents and prospective students can get a closer look at plans for a new school during a 2 p.m. meeting tomorrow at the city's municipal building. The school, dubbed Holy Spirit Academy, will be licensed by the state as a private academic school with the curriculum tied to Christian values, according to Jean Ditzler, one of the organizers.

While private schools are not held to the same academic standards applied to public schools, opting to be a licensed academic school means Holy Spirit will be accountable to the state board of private academic schools under state law. To be licensed, the school must comply with regulations from that board and the owner or director of the school must attend an in-service seminar in Harrisburg. Ditzler said organizers will attend that seminar Monday.

Plans for the school were quietly developed by several parents after the Diocese of Scranton announced that Pope John Paul II elementary will close this June. John Paul is the only Catholic school in the city, and students are expected to transfer to Good Shepherd Academy, a new elementary school to be located in the current Bishop O'Reilly High School in Kingston.

Holy Spirit organizers did not seek support from Bishop Joseph Martino, and they cannot call it a Catholic school without his backing, so they are calling it a private Christian school. They plan to house the school in the former Penn Footwear building on Line Street across from the West Side Playground.

Those who attend tomorrow's meeting will get to see renovations proposed by an architect who volunteered to look at the building, as well as an overview of the curriculum, which must meet state standards to qualify for a private academy license. Several of the organizers plan to attend a meeting in Harrisburg on Monday regarding licensure, Ditzler said.

Tuition will be \$1,895, along with a \$50 registration fee, organizer Donna Redenski said, and there will be small discounts – probably between \$100 to \$200 – for additional children in the same family. The school is expected to teach pre-kindergarten through grade eight, and organizers want to turn it into a community center during non-school hours.

A board of directors will govern the school, Ditzler said, but is not yet in place. The group has done much of its preliminary work through volunteer work and donations, but has also been seeking grants.

IF YOU GO:

What: Holy Spirit Academy public meeting

When: 2 p.m. tomorrow

Where: Nanticoke City Municipal Building, 15 E. Ridge St.

More Info: Jean Ditzler, 735-0296

3/31/2007

A powerful performance

Matt Hughes Times Leader correspondent

Twenty-five students from the Greater Nanticoke Area will perform *The Living Way of the Cross* this Sunday at St. Stanislaus Church in Nanticoke.

The performance, which enacts the last days of the life of Jesus Christ from the Last Supper through the Resurrection, will be presented by members of the Nanticoke Catholic Youth Group Ministry and will begin at 7 p.m.

"This is somewhat different from the living stations," said Patricia Botsko, publicity representative for the combined parishes of St.

Stanislaus, Holy Trinity, Holy Child and St. Mary of Czestochowa.

The performance, which runs about an hour, will feature live acting, mute performance with narration, music by the Combined Catholic Choir of the Greater Nanticoke Area, stage lighting and sound effects.

"The pews actually vibrate with the sound effects, it's amazing," Botsko said.

This is the first year St. Stanislaus and the combined Nanticoke parishes will perform the play. The idea and script for the performance were brought to the church by its pastor, the Rev. James Nash. Nash directed the play in nine consecutive years at his former parish in Montrose, however.

"This is the first time so it's hard to tell, but we have the word out and we're hoping people will come," Nash said.

"We might try adapting parts of it next year, maybe even try writing our own," said choir leader and youth group director Bill Borysewicz.

The youth group putting on the play has been recently formed by the combined Nanticoke parishes and is made up of students from the greater Nanticoke area. Students participating were asked to perform and assigned roles by Nash and Borysewicz.

"Father Nash said he would like a senior to do it; I guess I was one of his top choices" said Kevin Luksh, who will play Jesus.

"I did grow the beard for the part, I can't grow the moustache though," Luksh added.

"The amazing thing is that he has so many young adults that are interested in doing this," said Waltraut Piontkowski, a choir member who helped sew costumes for the play.

"It's good to get involved with the church," said Sarah Sabulski, the play's narrator.

Parishioners made all of the costumes and props for the play, including a wooden cross and stand. They also donated all fabrics for the costumes and loaned some of the sound equipment.

"The people who see this are going to be in awe," Nash said to the performers at a dress rehearsal Sunday. "You're going to make their Lent."

If you go:

What: *The Living Way of the Cross*

When: Palm Sunday, April 1, at 7 p.m.

Where: St. Stanislaus Church, 38 W. Church St., Nanticoke

Who: Members of the Nanticoke Catholic Youth Group Ministry and the Combined Catholic Choir of the Greater Nanticoke Area

"You're going to make their Lent."

The Rev. James Nash Speaking to performers at a dress rehearsal

03/29/2007

Nanticoke passes initial reading on tax increase

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

During a special meeting Wednesday, council passed the first vote on an ordinance to hike the earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent.

With the 0.5 percent earned income tax already going to Greater Nanticoke Area school district, city residents will pay a total of 2 percent earned income tax.

The non-resident earned income tax, or "commuter tax" for people who work in the city will be increased from 1 percent to 1.33 percent.

City officials hoped Berkheimer Associates could begin collecting the increased taxes by April 1, but the tax collection firm won't be able to start until April 30 because of advertising requirements. The ordinance has to be advertised once a week for three weeks, interim city administrator Robert Sabatini said.

In other business, council voted to give the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority \$15,000 from a special account that rent money from

city-owned buildings is deposited.

The municipal authority, which is responsible for downtown economic development, owns and maintains several buildings in the city. When authority members met Monday, they discovered that after paying the utility bills, they had a mere \$279 left.

“I don’t think they can make it for another month with their existing bank account,” Sabatini told council.

Nanticoke’s financial recovery plan sets aside \$45,000 a year for maintenance of the municipal authority’s buildings, since the city is ultimately liable for them.

“(Although) the buildings are under the control of the authority, the financing of the buildings relied upon the backing and guarantee of the city,” the plan states.

Councilman Brent Makarczyk said he would like to meet with the authority board about plans for its properties, especially the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street. He wants to know what the authority is doing with the office building, which has been mostly vacant since October 2005.

Council approved three properties for active Keystone Opportunity Zone status: John T. Kozlowski, 112 Market St.; Creative Printing Services Direct, 65 Industrial Road; and Clemar Distribution Inc., 32 S. Market St.

KOZ sites, designated in 1999, must meet certain guidelines each year to maintain their status. Businesses in KOZs are exempt from most state and local taxes until 2010. The purpose of the state program is to foster economic growth on blighted or undeveloped sites.

3/29/2007

2 area residents get close to their Disney dream job

Luzerne man, Nanticoke woman are finalists in the national contest.

sdelazio@timesleader.com

Among a sea of 300,000 Americans, two locals recently found themselves as finalists in the Disney Parks and CareerBuilder.com Dream Job contest.

Ron Reino, of Luzerne, and Jennifer Nestorick, Nanticoke, found out a few weeks ago that they were two of 100 finalists for the national contest.

Nestorick heard about the contest while searching on the Disney Web site.

“There was an ad banner across the top (of the page) that said they (CareerBuilder and Disney) were doing something together to send people on a vacation.”

Participants entered by creating a 45-second video, showcasing why they should be chosen to work for a day in their “dream job” capacities of jungle cruise skipper, haunted mansion butler or maid, pirate, princess-in-waiting or Disney Park parade performer.

“I said, ‘What the heck, let’s try it, it might work,’” Nestorick said, and originally made a video to audition for the haunted mansion part.

“I love parades. That’s my favorite thing when I go down to the park. You laugh and smile, music is playing, I dance along with it. I want to make someone else feel that way,” Nestorick said.

So Nestorick, who is employed as a traffic assistant at Fox 56, entered a second audition video featuring why she should be a parade performer. “I’m a super huge Disney fan. And getting to work at Disney is one of the biggest dreams I’ve ever had.”

“I wanted to do something different,” Reino said. “All of the videos that are finalists are monologues. If you watch video, I’m not a pirate,” he said.

Although Reino took a creative approach, he’s hopeful that all the hits the YouTube video has gotten are an indication of success. “I really think it (the video) has a good chance because of its uniqueness.”

Reino, who found out about the contest while searching for information on a family vacation for him and his wife and two sons, got the idea for his video the second he decided to enter the contest.

“I wasn’t gonna be good at the parade performer one, pirate was just the easier character to go for. When I read it, I actually pictured the production piece in my head in about five minutes of what I wanted it to look like.”

Reino, whose real job is being broadcasting coordinator at Luzerne County Community College in Nanticoke, filmed the video on campus and said he is “pretty excited” about being a finalist.

Reino and Nestorick are staying positive about winning a trip for four days and three nights to the Disneyland Resort in Anaheim, Calif., in June for the grand opening of the Finding Nemo Submarine Voyage.

“I can’t forget my family and friends for voting. They’re a big part of this,” Nestorick said.

“I thought if it was creative enough, it would stand out and grab the judges’ attention,” Reino said. “I’m bugging all my friends and co-workers to support it. I would like to win this.”

PICK your favorite

Go to www.careerbuilder.com/disneydreamjobs to view videos of all finalists. Ron Reino is in the pirate category, “Disney Dream Job pirate Ron,” and Jennifer Nestorick is in the parade performer category, “Jennifer’s Disney Dream Job.”

3/27/2007

Nanticoke authority hopes city can help

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The Nanticoke General Municipal Authority is in worse financial shape than the city itself.

It's so bad the authority board plans to hit up the financially distressed city for money to maintain its properties. As the authority board wrote out checks Monday to pay for the utilities at the Kanjorski Center, member Dennis Butler wondered, "Do we have enough to cover the bills?"

"You won't bounce any checks," Nanticoke financial administrator Holly Quinn replied. But only barely: with the utilities paid, \$279.15 is left in the bank.

The authority will send a formal letter to city council asking for a loan, board chairman Ron Kamowski said. The money was already budgeted, Butler noted.

Nanticoke was declared financially distressed by the state in May 2006.

The city's financial recovery coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League, realized the municipal authority would be broke by early 2007. In its recovery plan, PEL sets aside \$45,000 for the municipal authority each year the plan is in effect. The money is to preserve and maintain the authority's buildings so city assets don't deteriorate.

The authority signed a contract with the real estate firm of Lewith and Freeman in June 2006 to sell or rent its main asset, the Kanjorski Center on East Main Street.

No takers so far, the authority board said.

The state Department of Labor and Industry still pays \$4,962 a month for its offices, but the center has been about 80 percent vacant since its main tenant moved out in October 2005, taking its \$32,000-a-month rent with it.

For the last 17 months, the authority's bank account was eaten away by expenses such as maintenance and utilities for the Kanjorski Center, pay for the board's accountant, solicitor and auditor.

At the authority's January meeting, solicitor Richard Hughes said he would work on as-needed basis so the authority won't have to pay him a retainer plus fees for each meeting he attends.

The board also let hired accountant Karen Hazleton go, and has been using Quinn as its bookkeeper.

3/25/2007

Nanticoke tightens purchasing procedure

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke officials didn't like the assault rifles, but it was the electric massage chair that really shook them up. City officials received the supply order form from the police department on Jan. 11. On it was written "leather desk chair," \$129.99, product 579082-AS.

Former councilman William O'Malley, who was director of finances at the time, looked it up on the Staples Web site. He saw what the department secretary wanted to order: a black leather "Massage Master" executive chair with four electric motors for massaging the back and thighs.

"I got that requisition and I was like, 'You've got to be kidding me,'" O'Malley said.

Since there is barely enough money to pay Nanticoke's electric bills, he pulled the plug on the request for the chair.

The fact that it was caught before it was bought is proof the city's new purchasing system is working, Mayor John Bushko said. Years of borrowing to cover growing annual deficits plunged Nanticoke into debt. The city was declared financially distressed by the state in May 2006. At the root of the problem is a lack of oversight with city finances, no continuity of management, and no purchasing or accounting policies in place, according to the city's financial recovery plan. There was little or no control over spending, and expenses were never accurately tracked.

"We have a lot of pressing needs. We have to be very careful where every dollar is spent," financial administrator Holly M. Quinn said. "Purchasing is just one aspect of financial control, but it's on the frontline of it, obviously."

The guns and ammo battle

O'Malley cited the purchase of 25 guns — and lots of ammunition for them — with the police officers' uniform allowance as an example of the city's chronic lack of oversight and accountability.

In the past 10 years, 10 officers bought a total of 25 guns, at a combined cost of more than \$16,500, according to city records. The most popular purchases were Sig Sauer .40-caliber semiautomatic handguns and Remington 870 pump-action shotguns, but three officers bought Bushmaster assault rifles at an average price of \$750 apiece.

One officer bought five guns in seven years. Another bought nothing but guns and ammo with his clothing allowance from 2001 through 2006.

The guns are purchased with taxpayer dollars, so they are city property, O'Malley said.

Nanticoke Detective Kevin Grevera defended the use of the uniform allowance to purchase the guns.

"The city has failed to provide assault rifles and shotguns in the past. Every single municipality's police force, including the state police, has to have patrol rifles," he said. "If somebody purchased five, six, seven guns, that's nuts. But rifles are a necessary piece of patrol equipment."

The police contract grants each officer a uniform allowance of \$500 in 2005, \$550 in 2006, \$600 in 2007, and \$700 in 2008. However, the contract does not define what it can be used for. One officer used his 1999 uniform allowance to buy a \$199 computer monitor; another used his allowance in 2000 for a \$399 typewriter, records show.

Grevera said in the past, when an officer was hired, the city did not provide him with a weapon, so he had to buy it with his clothing allowance. Officers also had to rely on the allowance for items such as mace, handcuffs and flashlights. Sometimes officers even had to pay for supplies such as sanitizer, rubber gloves, and a Breathalyzer out of their own pockets, Grevera said.

City officials say guns and other things should not be purchased with the clothing allowance, which is meant only for uniforms and related expenses. Instead, guns, ammunition, office supplies and other such purchases should come from the department's budget.

"A lot of stuff they shouldn't be buying out of their clothing allowance. That should be the city's responsibility, like buying their own bullets, buying their own guns," Bushko said.

"If they're changing the policy now, that's great," Grevera said.

Purchasing policy

O'Malley created a new purchasing system to prevent departments from buying frivolous items like the massage chair and to ensure funds were handled properly.

The new purchasing system was started when Tony Margelewicz was filling in as financial manager. Margelewicz, who was originally appointed city clerk, returned to the position after Quinn was hired in August 2006. He was not demoted.

Under the new system, local vendors with whom the city has accounts can no longer allow city employees to charge things to those accounts without a signed purchase order.

To obtain a purchase order, members of the fire, road, and police departments fill out specific details on a requisition form. They must have the form signed by police chief James Cheshinski, fire chief Michael Bohan, or roadmaster Anthony DiPietro and submit it to the finance office for approval.

The requisitions go to Quinn, who researches each item. If something looks expensive or unnecessary, she sends it to interim city administrator Robert Sabatini and the elected official in charge of the department it came from.

"I'm very hesitant to approve anything without a heads-up. Every little bit counts at this point," Quinn said.

"Holly's tough. If there's any doubt in her mind at all, she asks everyone," Bushko said.

If the officials refuse to authorize the request, it is stopped before the item is purchased. If a questioned purchase is approved, there is a record to show that the elected officials signed off on it.

Recently, police were denied use of clothing allowances to purchase a Mossberg 590 rifle for \$413 on Jan. 15, a Sony Hi-8 Camcorder for \$249 on Jan. 8, and a Garmin GPS for \$549 on Dec. 27, records state.

"Everybody asks why we need an administrator. Well, here's why. Nobody's watching the shop," O'Malley said. "Those are just the things we got. What about the things Holly and I didn't catch?"

More measures

The Pennsylvania Economy League, Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, recently required council to pass a city administrator ordinance before going to Luzerne County Court for an increase in earned income tax for residents and commuters.

PEL wanted to make sure someone keeps an eye on how the additional money will be spent, as well as provide a central coordinating entity for all the departments.

"Everyone was going and doing their thing," said Harry Miller of PEL. "I don't know if there was any coordination and interaction, and that is important when you're dealing with finance."

Since none of the departments ever had a true budget, it was hard to tell whether they spent more than they were allowed, O'Malley said.

"Without purchase orders, there was no way of tracking what was spent. It was all guesswork," he said.

Miller also cited a lack of accurate financial information until 2006 as a major problem. Numbers will be accurate for 2007, thanks to the efforts of Quinn and the firm of Albert B. Melone and Associates, brought in by PEL to do extra accounting, Miller said.

As a way of tracking expenses, the city finance office is now generating monthly statements that measure actual expenditures against the budget. These reports are given to council, as well as the department heads.

"One of the main responsibilities is we are trying to get council to look at the spending patterns," Miller said. "That's why we want these monthly financial statements. Until you see expenditures matched to the budget, you don't get a real feel for what is being spent."

To increase accountability, department heads are being included in putting together each year's budget. It is the first time ever the police and fire chiefs and roadmaster were included in the process, Quinn said.

"Prior to 2006, these guys never had actual budgets handed to them," she said. "But preparing a budget is only the first step. Now we need to stick to it."

3/23/2007

Remodeling funds available

Nanticoke Housing Authority says money can be used for public housing complexes.

slong@timesleader.com

During the monthly Nanticoke Housing Authority meeting on Thursday, residents learned the agency received money to remodel and repaint many of the various public housing complexes, Authority Executive Director Perry Clay said.

Commissioners expressed interest in rescheduling a meeting with the Apollo Circle's resident council president to find out what activities residents would like to see available for children living in the complex.

A previous meeting had been scheduled, but needed to be canceled because of a scheduling conflict.

"It would give them some activities for the kids," Commissioner Gerri Hopiak said.

Board commissioners also learned the group has received a 5 percent discount on the workers' compensation insurance since the authority started a security housing committee six months ago.

The purchasing, personnel, Section 8, and admissions and continued occupancy policies also must be updated, Clay said.

He said he hopes they will be ready for review at next month's meeting, but admitted it might take till May.

3/22/2007

Congratulations are in order for the Nanticoke Area girls' basketball team and the coaches
Pamela Urbanski

When it is time for a game no matter what the sport, players have a way of uniting a school and community.
Thank you for your hard work and dedication and for representing GNA so well!

Society spaghetti dinner

If it's spring, it must be time for the annual St. Francis Altar and Rosary Society spaghetti dinner.

It will be held Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. Delicious homemade sauce and meatballs are a tradition at St. Francis.

Since it is the season of Lent and most Catholics don't eat meat on Fridays. I wonder how the people preparing the homemade food can keep from sampling it. Cost is \$7.50 for adults \$3.50 for children. Children under 6 are free. Takeouts also are available starting at 11 a.m. and containers will be provided.

If you would like to help, call Andrea at 735-5381 or the parish office at 735-6903.

Spring fling at St. Mary's

It is time to shake the snow off our shoes and welcome the season of spring.

The parishioners of St. Mary's Parish invite you to their annual spring fling Sunday.

There are many activities planned throughout the day. A buffet-style spaghetti dinner will be held from noon to 4 p.m. Cost is \$7 for adults and \$3.50 for children under 12. Takeouts with containers provided also will be available. A Chinese auction featuring many beautiful theme baskets and gift certificates will be held.

If you haven't been able to get your hand on a Nintendo Wii video game system (valued at \$250), one is being raffled during the spring fling. Chances are \$3 or three for \$10. There also will be a coloring contest for children of different age groups and prizes will be awarded. Event is being held on both levels of the parish center on South Hanover Street.

Rummage sale at St. Stan's

A rummage sale to benefit the Lt. Alan Bogdan Memorial Scholarship Fund will be held Saturday and Sunday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the St. Stanislaus gym.

Items to be sold may be dropped off at the gym Thursday from 6 to 8 p.m.

Volunteers are needed to help with set up, working the sale and clean up. Confirmation students are encouraged to volunteer as service hours will be given for working and donating.

For more information, call Bill Borysewicz at 735-4833.

Ecumenical services continue

The midweek ecumenical services for the season of Lent continue.

On Wednesday the service will be held at the First United Methodist Church, 2167 Main St., Nanticoke. The Rev. Jim Nash from the combined churches of Holy Trinity, Holy Child, St. Mary's and St. Stanislaus will be the speaker.

The final service will be held April 4 at St. John's Slovak Lutheran Church, 600 Hanover St. Speaker will be the Rev. Phyllis Pelletier from St. John's and St. Mark's Lutheran Church.

Easter egg hunt set

The United Holy Name Society of Holy Trinity, St. Stanislaus, Holy Child and St. Mary's will hold its annual Easter egg hunt March 31 at 2 p.m. at the Holy Child grove in Sheatown. All children up to and including the age of 10 are invited.

Potato pancake, chowder sale

St. Mary of Czestochowa Church, Nanticoke, will hold a homemade potato pancake and clam chowder sale Friday, March 30, at St. Mary's parish center, 1030 S. Hanover St. Order pick-up time is 3 to 6 p.m. Advance orders are required, take-outs only, with containers provided. All advance orders must be placed by Thursday, March 29, at 5 p.m. Cost is 50-cents each for potato pancakes and clam chowder is \$5 per quart. To order, call Mary at 735-4653, Helen at 735-4668 or Carol at 779-3597.

3/22/2007

Nanticoke residents lose out, while printing business wins war of taxes

Council took care of business ranging from raising taxes for residents to removing them for a city business on Wednesday
eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

By unanimous vote, council passed the first reading of an ordinance raising residents' earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent, and the non-resident earned income tax — or "commuter tax" — from 1 percent to 1.33 percent.

Since city officials want to start collecting the tax in April, they must quickly pass the ordinance. A special meeting for a final vote is scheduled for Wednesday, March 28 at 7 p.m. in the municipal building, Mayor John Bushko said.

The financially distressed city received permission from Luzerne County Court on Monday to allow the tax increases. To get court

approval, council first had to create the position of city administrator. The administrator will oversee how the extra \$1.2 million in annual revenues from the tax increases will be spent.

Council voted 3-1 on Friday and 3-1 again on Wednesday to create the administrator position. Councilman Joseph Dougherty was the “no” vote both times. He believes parts of the ordinance take responsibilities away from elected officials.

In other business:

Council voted yes on an application to allow Keystone Opportunity Zone status for Creative Printing. Whitney Pointe, the industrial park in which it is located, was KOZ-approved in 1999.

Although the business will be exempt from most state and local taxes, its employees still must pay income taxes and the \$52 annual emergency and municipal services tax, interim city administrator Robert Sabatini said.

Council voted to deny a grievance filed by the local Teamsters union, which represents the Nanticoke public works department. The grievance is over the hiring of subcontractors — specifically, snow plow operators — by city officials during the Feb. 14 snowstorm, councilman Jim Litchkofski said.

The union objects to the use of subcontractors because two road crew employees were laid off in November 2006. At that time, council said the move was to lessen the 2007 budget deficit.

The union now has the right to arbitration, Sabatini said.

Before the meeting, council held a hearing for input on the \$358,460 federal Community Development Block Grant the city hopes to receive for 2007.

The annual allotment, which is administered by the state Department of Community and Economic Development, would be used for a lease payment of \$32,930 on a fire truck, city economic development director Donna Wall said.

Two streets can be repaved at a cost of \$261,016: Nanticoke Street from Market Street to Main Street and Slope Street from Main Street to Hill Street.

Additionally, \$64,522 of the grant would be used for administration, Wall said.

Wall said she and other city officials will meet this week to see about getting \$381,267 in CDBG money from 2006.

DCED put the grant on hold until the city improves its financial management system. Officials are optimistic the hold will be released soon.

3/22/2007

Nanticoke council OKs tax increases

New rates to go into effect on April 1 are expected to generate \$1.15 million for the distressed city.

slong@timesleader.com

Beginning April 1, residents and commuters will start paying higher city taxes, after council members unanimously approved new rates during Wednesday’s council meeting.

The taxes will generate much-needed funds for the city, which was declared financially distressed last year by the state.

A 2 percent earned income tax and 1.33 commuter tax will generate an estimated \$1.15 million, former Director of Finance and Councilman Bill O’Malley previously said.

The increase will help the city to pay for basic municipal expenses and capital improvements.

In a 3-1 vote the city administrator ordinance detailing the administrator’s duties was accepted. Bob Sabatini of Keystone Municipal Services is serving as the interim city administrator until a full-time administrator can be hired.

Councilman Joe Dougherty disagreed with the ordinance’s limitations of power on elected officials.

The ordinance does not allow the mayor or city council members, except through the administrator and for only “inquiry and oversight” purposes, to order city employees to do certain jobs.

“If I am the director of buildings and grounds, which I am, I should be able to give my department direction,” Dougherty said.

The administrator ordinance and taxes are part of the recovery plan recommendations presented by the Pennsylvania Economy League officials.

The city saved about \$50,000 in interest fees by paying off a \$121,540.31 bond early using money from the city’s debit services fund, Sabatini said.

City officials have a little more than two weeks to find someone to fill former Councilman O’Malley’s seat.

O’Malley and solicitor Keith Saunders resigned at the March 7 council meeting.

By law, the mayor and city council have 30 days to appoint a new council member.

Residents interested in serving on the council to fill the term, which expires in January, should submit their resumes to Sabatini, 15 E. Ridge St., Nanticoke, PA 18634.

3/20/2007

Nanticoke Area teachers vote down contract proposal

Elizabeth Skrapits

Greater Nanticoke Area teachers voted down a proposed contract last week, according to a representative of the statewide teachers union. “The (school) board did make an offer, but it was turned down by the teachers association,” Pennsylvania State Education Association spokesman Paul Shemansky said. “They are going to return to the bargaining table because there were numerous issues that remain unresolved.”

Salaries and health care benefits are two of the main sticking points.

There were other issues also, according to the Nanticoke teachers PSEA representative Jane Brubaker, Shemansky said.

Brubaker was out of town and unavailable for comment on Monday.

Messages left with two school board members on the contract negotiating committee and the teachers union president were not returned Monday.

There are 131 teachers in their bargaining unit, the Greater Nanticoke Area Education Association.

The teachers have been without a contract since June 30, 2005.

3/20/2007

Court approves hikes in two Nanticoke taxes

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Most people who live or work in Nanticoke should see more earned income tax coming out of their paychecks, beginning April 1.

Luzerne County Judge Ann Lokuta granted the financially distressed city an increase in residents' earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent. She also granted the city an increase in non-resident earned income tax, called the commuter tax, from 1 percent to 1.33 percent.

Nobody spoke out at Monday's hearing, Councilman Brent Makarczyk said.

"We were there for 10 minutes, I think," he said.

Council has to approve the tax on first vote at Wednesday's meeting, Makarczyk said. A special meeting has to be scheduled for a second vote, in time to begin collecting the taxes by April 1, he said. The taxes will still be collected by Berkheimer Associates, which handles the city's earned income tax. "The only thing that will change is the rate," said Gerald Cross, executive director of Pennsylvania Economy League, Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator.

City officials have to go to court each year to renew the higher rates.

Earned income tax should bring in about \$1 million extra this year, then an additional \$1.2 million each full year it is collected, Cross said. It will fill in the city's growing annual deficit, caused by debt and too many expenses. Leftover tax money goes into a capital improvement fund for things like road repairs.

The commuter tax might only be in place for a few years, Cross said. He estimates it should bring in \$200,000 to \$220,000 a year.

"There's not a really good way to know until you've collected it," he said.

The commuter tax can only be used for improvements that benefit commuters. For example, it can't be used for police or road crew salaries, but it can be used to buy police equipment or for road paving.

Not all the 2,200 people who work in Nanticoke but live elsewhere will pay the commuter tax, Cross said.

They are exempt if they pay more than a 1.33 percent income tax to their home community, like the 197 people who live in Wilkes-Barre, the 96 from Kingston, the 75 from Plymouth Township and the 44 from Kingston Township employed in Nanticoke.

Before city officials could get the tax increases, they had to give proof of good intentions by passing an ordinance formally creating the position of city administrator.

"The extraordinary ability to increase taxes means the extraordinary responsibility to make sure they are spent properly," Cross said.

Council passed the ordinance on final reading Friday by 3-1 vote, Makarczyk said.

Councilman Joseph Dougherty voted against the ordinance. He didn't like the idea that council and the mayor could only deal with city employees through the administrator.

"I'm not looking for power. I run for city government because I want to be responsible," Dougherty said.

He said he'd rather tackle problems himself than pass them to an appointed official.

3/20/2007

Nanticoke raises taxes as part of recovery plan

Judge approves 2 percent earned income fee and a new commuter tax for ailing city

slong@timesleader.com

City officials are raising payroll taxes to help pay the city's bills as they continue implementing procedures outlined in the Act 47 recovery plan from the Pennsylvania Economy League.

During a five-minute court hearing Monday morning, Luzerne County Judge Ann Lokuta approved Nanticoke's request for a 1 percent increase in the earned income tax and the establishment of a commuter tax.

When the jurist asked if anyone objected to the taxes, no one stood up.

Residents working inside Nanticoke or another community will now pay a 2 percent earned income tax, instead of 1 percent.

People working inside the city limits, but residing in another community, will pay a 1.33 percent commuter tax for the remainder of 2007.

The city can continue to collect a commuter tax in 2008 and 2009 -- only with Luzerne County court approval.

If a commuter lives in a community with city taxes higher than 1.33 percent, he or she will not be affected by Nanticoke's commuter tax.

The earned income and commuter tax will be deducted from paychecks starting April 1, if council approves the increase at a meeting tomorrow.

Nanticoke retirees or people living on disability will not be affected because the taxes will be levied only on residents receiving paychecks from a full- or part-time job in which W-2 forms are distributed every January, said Gerald Cross, PEL's executive director.

“The rule of thumb is if you are paying 1 percent now, you will pay 2 percent,” Cross said. “If you don’t pay it now, you won’t pay it in the future.”

Half of the earned income tax collected will go to the Greater Nanticoke Area School District.

No one likes paying higher taxes, Mayor John Bushko said, but the city does not have a choice.

“We are doing \$300,000-\$500,000 in the hole handling day-to-day business,” he said.

From 2001 through 2005 the city routinely overspent hundreds of thousands of dollars. In 2004, the city spent \$457,125 more than it collected, the worst of a five-year period.

Last September the state provided Nanticoke a \$700,000 emergency interest-free loan to cover operational costs for 2006.

This money will be paid back at \$70,000 a year during a 10-year period.

Last month the city made its first payment of \$35,000 to pay back the debt, according to Nanticoke fiscal officer Holly Quinn.

Using money generated from the earned income tax, the city must establish an ordinance to budget at least \$240,000 in 2007, \$430,000 in 2008 and \$325,000 in 2009 to a capital improvement plan, as stated in the recovery plan.

The balance would be held in the general fund, allowing the city to pay daily expenditures or place in a reserve balance for emergencies.

A 1 percent increase in the earned income tax is expected to generate an additional \$1 million in 2007 and \$1.4 million next year for the city’s general budget, according to former finance director and Councilman Bill O’Malley.

PEL’s recovery plan, presented in January, estimated the higher earned income tax would generate about an additional \$680,000 annually.

A third, or .33 percent, of the commuter tax will go into a capital improvement fund to be used for paving roads, installing new street lights or purchasing new police or fire department equipment.

With the commuter tax, the city could collect an additional \$130,000-\$150,000 this year and up to \$230,000 next year, O’Malley said.

It is doubtful Nanticoke will be able to eventually rescind the taxes to a lower rate because several cities in Act 47 status must keep getting the extra money to operate their communities efficiently.

“Normally, they rely on that money for quite a while until they solve the internal problems,” Cross said. “In Pennsylvania that is not an encouraging sign. Quite a few of the Act 47 cities have stayed with the higher tax rate.”

Before the city could request the higher tax rate, it had to show the PEL it was serious about fixing its financial problems by following through with recommendations in the recovery plan, including adopting an ordinance outlining a city administrator’s duties.

“If we are going to ask the taxpayer to dig deeper in their pocket, we have to watch now how we spend it,” Councilman Jim Litchkoski said.

During a special meeting Friday night council members in a 3-1 vote approved the first reading of the city administrator ordinance.

It states a city administrator would oversee the daily operations of all city departments, be required to report all city business and advise the council and mayor on administrative or governmental functions affecting the city.

A city administrator can make recommendations regarding who should be hired or fired, but the ultimate decision rests with council.

The city administrator ordinance will not go into effect until after the second reading, expected to occur at tomorrow’s meeting.

3/19/2007

Nanticoke’s grant money on hold

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

An important annual grant is on hold in Nanticoke because city officials have to prove they are shaping up their financial management. In the past, Community Development Block Grant Money went to repave most of the streets on the city’s east side, tear down several eyesore buildings and make payments on fire engines.

Nanticoke officials held a hearing Friday for input on how to use the approximately \$437,000 in CDBG funding they will apply for this year — even though they still haven’t received \$381,267 in CDBG money from last year.

The funds are being held until city officials improve their financial management system, said Greg Morgan, spokesman for the state Department of Community and Economic Development, which administers the federal grant. City officials must put together a plan for administration and oversight of the money, he said.

Nanticoke community development coordinator Donna Wall confirmed DCED won’t release the grant until financial issues are settled. The state has had a lot of problems with the city’s lack of management, she noted.

Nanticoke was declared financially distressed by DCED in May 2006. The plan by the city’s financial recovery coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League, points to poor management as a reason for ongoing money problems.

“There has been a lack of both continuity and expertise in overall city management. The city has had a succession of administrators and/or financial directors, none for a significant amount of time,” the plan states.

The city has gone through five administrators since the position was made full-time 10 years ago. The previous financial director was part-time, and the position was eliminated in January 2005.

Council hired Tony Margelewicz as full-time financial director in April 2006, but he was soon demoted to clerk. In August 2006, council hired Holly M. Quinn for the position.

The city has a hearing in Luzerne County Court at 9:30 a.m. today to ask for an earned income tax increase from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent. Before asking for the increase, city officials had to formally establish the position of administrator as assurance someone will be hired to make sure the money is spent properly. Council passed an ordinance Friday.

Keystone Municipal Services managing director Robert Sabatini is interim administrator until council can find someone to fill the position permanently.

City officials hope the actions they are taking to correct the management problem will encourage the state to give them their CDBG money for 2006 and 2007.

"I really think we're going to wind up all right with it," Mayor John Bushko said.

State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, said he would help.

Nanticoke is one of approximately 200 communities statewide that can apply annually for the CDBG grant, which is funded through the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development, said Donna Enrico, DCED's Acting Division Chief for the CDBG program.

DCED needs to make sure projects fit CDBG program requirements, which include using it to benefit low- or middle-income residents. The money can't be used to repave two of the city's worst streets, Grand and Orchard, because residents' income level is too high, Wall said.

The city planned to use \$32,930 of the 2006 CDBG allotment for a payment on its new fire engine, she said. Another \$279,709 was earmarked for improving three roads: Maple Street from West Broad to West Green; West Noble Street from Hanover to Fairchild; and West Ridge Street from Market to Hanover, she said.

Residents stayed away from Friday's CDBG hearing because of the bad weather, Bushko said. As a result, city officials plan to hold another on Wednesday at 6:30 p.m., before council's work session, he said.

3/18/2007

A special gift for pal seeking a new life

Mark Brown of Nanticoke donates kidney, giving Daniel Young a healthier future

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Both Mark Brown and Daniel Young have a daughter named Taylor.

They were also a 99.4 percent match for a kidney transplant Young needed.

Coincidence?

"I really think it's fate," Brown said after recently donating a kidney that saved Young's life.

It all began at a Fourth of July party Young was having last year, when he told Brown of his failing kidney. Brown and his wife Kelly both decided to get tested, along with several of Brown and Young's co-workers at the State Correctional Institute at Mahanoy.

Young's health began to decline after an accident he was in a few years ago, Mark Brown said, and as a result, his condition worsened in January to necessitate either a kidney transplant or being put on dialysis.

"I didn't want him to go through that," said Brown. "I couldn't believe we were a match. I couldn't believe it and I was elated at the same time. Daniel didn't have to look any further."

Brown, of Nanticoke, was the only match for Young out of all Young's friends, relatives and co-workers tested.

And so the pair went to the Lankenau Hospital, Kidney Transplant Program, near Philadelphia. On Feb. 22, Brown had surgery to remove the baseball-sized organ that would allow Young to continue his life.

"The hospital we went to said they have done over 400 of these procedures, and that everything would be just fine," Brown said of Lankenau Hospital.

Brown said he wasn't nervous about going under the knife, but "more nervous my kidney wouldn't work and Daniel's body would reject it."

Although Brown doesn't remember much after coming out of surgery, his wife said he was in a great deal of pain.

"The pain is 10 times worse for the donator than the receiver," Kelly Brown said.

It took doctors four hours to remove Brown's kidney, and he was released from the hospital on Saturday, Feb. 24.

"I talked to Daniel on the phone on Sunday (Feb. 25), and he's doing fine," Brown said. "At some point, his body was rejecting the kidney and doctors had to give him medication, which prolonged his stay."

In a conversation from a few weeks ago, the Browns say they learned that Young is doing much better with his new kidney. "It's a 100 percent turnaround," said Kelly. "He's up, alive and vibrant."

Doctors say Brown will be able to function normally with only one kidney, but will need to stay away from contact sports. He will return to work at the end of March.

Brown said the first six months are the most important time for a kidney transplant because the body could still reject the kidney. "But a kidney can last up to 20 years. And with all the new medication, that's what we're hoping for with Daniel. For my kidney to last him a lifetime.

"But he told me to grow a new one just in case this one doesn't work," Brown said jokingly.

And that's the key to a successful recovery, Kelly said. "We try to keep the mood light because it makes for a better recovery, and takes a lot of stress out of the situation.

"Like when Mark gets frustrated, I say, 'Don't get your left kidney out of shape,'" Kelly said.

Brown, a retired Iraqi war veteran who spent time in the Mideast for a short time with the 109th Field Artillery National Guard Unit out of Nanticoke, said he is glad the surgery is over. "Now I can see the road to recovery."

The Browns say they received a lot of negative feedback from relatives and friends when Mark decided to donate his kidney. "They said things like, 'How well do you know this person?' and 'You're going to give someone an organ?' But I think they were mostly misinformed," said Kelly.

Kelly encourages people to become organ donors when they get their driver's license.

"People do need organs. And it's a big gift to give, and it's worth giving," said Mark.

3/18/2007

Nanticoke focuses on duties of officials

Council hopes to adapt recovery plan dividing responsibilities of administrator, mayor and council.

slong@timesleader.com

The city is one step closer to bringing a recovery plan mandated by the Pennsylvania Economy League to fruition.

City officials took the first step in formalizing the duties for future city administrators by accepting a new revised four-page ordinance during a specially called meeting Friday night.

Many said the first ordinance presented to council members earlier this year gave the city administrator too much power.

Councilman Brent Makarczyk was one of several council members who thought the revised ordinance balanced the power between an administrator and elected officials more fairly.

"It does walk that fine line," Makarczyk said.

"It gives the administrator authority to do his job, but gives council and mayor the right to make decisions and directions for the city."

Under the ordinance, a city administrator will supervise and be responsible for activities in all city departments.

The administrator can make recommendations regarding employees' employment status, but will not be able to suspend, fire or hire any city employees without approval from the council and mayor.

An administrator would also update elected officials on pending city issues and advise them how to proceed with governmental functions or administrative duties.

Councilman Joe Dougherty was the lone dissenting vote against the ordinance.

He was not available for comment before press time.

Mayor John Bushko said Dougherty didn't like how the ordinance limited the council's powers.

The ordinance will not be formally adopted unless it is accepted by council again on Wednesday during the next council meeting.

The ordinance states in "black and white" what is expected of the administrator and of the council members.

While the city has had city administrators in the past, their job descriptions were never put in writing.

"It was supposed to work exactly like it's set up now, but politics got in the way," Bushko said.

No deadlines have been set when a new administrator will be hired, but Bushko said, he hopes it is sooner rather than later.

"We are starting this transition with the Pennsylvania Economy League and they should grow together," Bushko said.

Under the recovery plan presented by the PEL the city was required to adopt an ordinance formalizing a city administrator's duties.

Others say the city should take as long as needed to find the best person for the job.

It's important to take time to find the most qualified candidate, Councilman Jim Litchkoski said.

City officials have already received a couple resumes after the position was posted on Monster.com, but no candidates have been reviewed thoroughly or called for interviews.

The council had budgeted \$65,000 to pay a new administrator, former Director of Finance Bill O'Malley said.

3/17/2007

Nanticoke teachers show unity at meeting

Elizabeth Skrapits

Approximately 75 Greater Nanticoke Area teachers sporting "I Support My Team" tags attended Thursday's school board meeting.

The teachers union voted on a contract Wednesday but did not give the board official word of its decision, said board member Robert Raineri.

"We're hearing on the street they voted 'no,'" he said.

Barbara Zaborney, representing the teachers, wouldn't comment. The Greater Nanticoke Area teachers contract expired June 30, 2005.

The sticking points in negotiations have been salary increases and health care, Raineri said.

"But we are here to represent the taxpayer, and we know this town can't afford another tax increase," he said.

3/17/2007

Video of Nanticoke students misbehaving hits Internet

Elizabeth Skrapits

Greater Nanticoke Area School Board members were surprised Thursday to hear about an Internet video featuring students misbehaving.

The star is a male student wearing a ski mask who pours pills into a plastic disc, smokes and writes on bathroom walls at the high school, parent Delia Bracero said.

She said her daughter found the film on "YouTube," a Web site that allows people to post and watch videos from their computers.

"I'm glad you told us," Superintendent Anthony Perrone said to Bracero.

The students responsible for the video will face disciplinary action when they are caught, Perrone said.

3/16/2007

Nanticoke has key roles to be filled

Resignations of two officials are cause for shakeup

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Officials are trying to turn the city's finances around.

The face of Nanticoke leadership is changing.

Councilman Bill O'Malley and City Solicitor Keith Saunders resigned at the March 7 council meeting.

Appointed to council in January 2006, O'Malley resigned from council and as director of finance effective immediately.

"The director of finance position has now become a second full-time job which is more than can be expected or sustained over a long period of time," O'Malley stated in his resignation letter. "This is indeed taking a toll on my health, family and professional career."

O'Malley's seat is one of two seats up for election this year, but he did not file the paperwork seeking re-election. Councilman Joe Dougherty is seeking re-election. Stockbroker Jon A. Metta and retired Nanticoke police officer Bill Brown are also running for council. Council members and the mayor have 30 days from the date of resignation to appoint O'Malley's replacement, who will serve until January when the newly elected official takes office.

Mayor John Bushko said there were a few people being considered for the appointment, but he would not release any names. It is unknown if Metta or Brown will be appointed to the seat.

Last year the state declared the city financially distressed, requiring officials to implement Act 47 procedures.

City officials are trying to turn the city's finances around with assistance from the Pennsylvania Economy League.

Metta said he felt O'Malley was doing the best he could based on the city's dire financial problems. "He got the ball rolling and moving forward" trying to help the city recover from the financial crisis, he said.

Brown, a former councilman, could not be reached for comment.

City code gives the mayor the authority to appoint elected officials as directors of city departments, but council members do not necessarily handle daily city business.

Fiscal officer Holly Quinn ensures the city's financial business is being handled on a daily basis, Interim City Administrator Bob Sabatini said.

"For all intents and purposes, she is the day-to-day finance director," he said.

Serving as the city's solicitor for three months, Saunders cited an exhaustive work schedule for his resignation.

"They need significantly more than just a few hours a week and that was more than I was able to give to them," Saunders said.

When offered the position, Saunders was told it was part time.

Most solicitors spend an hour a day handling business for other cities the size of Nanticoke, but Saunders was spending up to five hours a day working on city business, Bushko said.

"You can't let your business go down to handle our business," the mayor said.

Saunders will serve as solicitor until council hires a new attorney.

Two other law firms have expressed interested in serving as the city's attorneys, but Sabatini would not release the firms' names.

Saunders replaced attorney Joseph Lach who served as Nanticoke's solicitor for a year before stepping down.

3/14/2007

Parents to open Christian school

By hruckno@citizensvoice.com

Frustrated over the closure of Pope John Paul II Elementary, Nanticoke area parents quietly decided to create their own school.

Holy Spirit Academy, an independent Christian school, is slated to open at the beginning of next year, parent Donna Redenski said.

"We're trying to replace the parochial schools that are closing," she said. "We've had contributions coming in. My phone's been ringing off the hook with contributions."

The school will open inside the old Penn Footwear building on Line Street. Tuition will be \$1,895, Redenski said.

Redenski is optimistic the school will be supported by tuition, fundraising and community contributions; however, without the financial backing of the diocese, the school's financial future is far from certain.

"They're not exactly funded," said volunteer Jeannie Ditzler, who served on the Pope John Paul II Advisory Board. "We're going after grants and pledges and so forth right now."

Neither Ditzler nor Redenski, however, could provide specific information about the grants for which they were looking.

Other questions remain as well. Ditzler said no preliminary budget has been proposed, and it is still unclear how many teachers will need to be hired. Also yet to be determined is the amount of renovations the building will need.

Two parents involved with Holy Spirit will attend a Department of Education seminar on April 3 and 4. Redenski and Ditzler hope to have a lot of those issues addressed after that meeting.

The Geneva School, Olyphant, is the only other Christian school in Northeastern Pennsylvania. Its Web site said the school offers students "a classical education with a Christian Worldview," but attempts to reach Geneva School Board members were unsuccessful Tuesday.

Redenski, however, said Holy Spirit is not modeled after any particular school. The school will be governed by its own board of directors, but as of Tuesday no board members had been appointed.

Ditzler said the school's curriculum would follow Department of Education guidelines. Department of Education spokesman Michael Storm, however, said those guidelines would be different depending on the school's classification.

If Holy Spirit Academy were considered a licensed academic school, Storm said it would have to answer to the State Board of Private Academic Schools.

If the school were affiliated with a religious institution, it would need to give the department an affidavit stating it provides 180 days of student instruction, Storm said.

Despite the questions, a letter sent out to the public indicates Holy Spirit Academy is accepting registrations. Curriculum, registration and building renovations will be revealed at an April 1 public meeting at Nanticoke City municipal building, the letter said.

Registration is \$50, and those interested in sending their children to Holy Spirit are invited to attend the meeting.

3/9/2007

Nanticoke administrator's job gets makeover

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Council and the mayor will vote to revamp the position of city administrator to make it stronger — but not so strong it takes them out of the picture.

The recovery plan by Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, the Pennsylvania Economy League, calls for a city administrator who will oversee all daily operations, including money, employees and procedures.

"We consider it a key component of developing fiscal administrative capacity in the city," PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said.

Although Nanticoke had administrators in the past, there was never a job description. Council must pass an ordinance creating the position and outlining its duties.

Mayor John Bushko and councilman Joe Dougherty thought the first draft of the ordinance made the administrator too strong. It put him or her in sole charge of hiring, as well as disciplining and firing city employees. The ordinance also prohibited mayor and council from dealing with departments or employees except through the administrator.

After a debate during the Feb. 21 meeting, the ordinance was modified.

In the new version, the administrator only makes hiring and firing recommendations to council and the mayor. The ordinance is also more general regarding financial oversight duties, solicitor Keith Saunders said.

Dougherty said the revised ordinance was "absolutely" more reasonable.

"If we are the ones who have to hear the complaints of the people, we should be the ones to make decisions, not an appointed official who can override our authority," he said, adding, "We're not looking for power. It's just that we are the ones elected by the people. We answer to the people."

Under the recovery plan timeline, council must start establishing the administrator position before the public hearing to increase earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent.

Since the hearing will be held Monday, March 19 at 9:30 a.m. in Luzerne County court, council called for a special meeting on Friday, March 16 for a first vote on the administrator ordinance.

City officials will be responsible for proving to taxpayers that the extra earned income tax they would be paying is accounted for and being spent properly, Cross said.

"The only way to do that is to have a centralized fiscal administration," he explained.

3/8/2007

Two Nanticoke officials stepping down

Councilman who also serves as finance director quits. Council solicitor resigning.

By Janine Ungarvasky Times Leader Correspondent

The city will have to fill two key administrative positions after a councilman who also served as the finance director and the city's solicitor tendered resignations Wednesday.

"I have been troubled over the past six months trying to manage my commitments to this position and the role of husband, father and businessman," said Councilman William O'Malley in his letter of resignation.

He listed adoption of the Act 47 financial recovery plan and the South Valley Partnership economic development plan as well as new financial systems adopted by the city as accomplishments of his 14-month term of office.

"Over the past few weeks, it has become apparent to me that the administration's desire to move the recovery process forward is in question," O'Malley's letter stated, adding that this, combined with time away from his family, compelled him to "realign my priorities to concentrate on what is most important in my life at this time."

O'Malley declined further comment. His resignation was accepted by a 3-1 vote, with Mayor John Bushko voting no.

"That's a big loss for the city," Bushko said. "He had to work 50 hours a week on city business," he said of O'Malley.

O'Malley's resignation was effective at the conclusion of the meeting. Council did not discuss filling O'Malley's spot on council.

Solicitor Keith Saunders also resigned, citing time demands of the position as his reason for leaving after just three months on the job.

Saunders will continue to serve as solicitor until a replacement is found.

In other business, council voted to re-advertise eight ordinances that cannot be enforced because of technical violations in how they were originally advertised.

Saunders said he had no idea how the errors occurred "because there is no paper trail," but said he was "fairly certain it was not

intentional.”

Council also voted on several other matters to correct past voting deficiencies, including the appointment of Andrew Kratz as zoning officer and the appointment of the zoning hearing board, planning commission and civil service commission.

Kratz’s original appointment was made by motion instead of resolution, while no documentation could be found of when the appointments of members of the three committees began or should end, Interim City Administrator Robert Sabatini said.

Council also authorized independent counsel Reed Smith to pursue collection actions against four retired city employees who received health insurance benefits beyond those allowed for in the collective bargaining agreement.

3/08/2007

Nanticoke officials must try to recover funds illegally spent or face fines, jail time

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

City officials could face fines or jail time if they don’t try to recover funds illegally spent to provide the children of retired city employees with health care benefits, officials learned Wednesday.

Also during the meeting, councilman William O’Malley and solicitor Keith Saunders resigned.

Council voted at the Feb. 21 meeting to stop providing the children of retired police officers Leonard Nardozzo and William Brown and public works employee Henry Levandowski with city-paid health care benefits. Retired police officer Edward Grabinski was added to the list Wednesday.

An outside legal firm hired by the city, Reed Smith LLP, determined that the police contract effective Jan. 1, 2004, entitles retired police officers and their spouses to health insurance for the rest of their lives, but says nothing about their children. Levandowski’s contract did not award him any post-retirement health care benefits.

The financially distressed city was advised to remove the retirees’ children from the insurance rolls by Nanticoke financial recovery coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League.

Saunders sought an opinion from Reed Smith on whether the city should ask the four employees for reimbursement. A letter from Reed Smith attorney Joel Barras said the city is legally obligated to recover its money for the benefits not covered in the contract.

Under Third Class City Code, any city official who allows money to be spent that wasn’t lawfully authorized is guilty of a misdemeanor, according to the letter.

“As the Council Members are on actual notice that the City expended funds without legal authorization, any failure to attempt to recuperate those funds could subject the Council Members to criminal sanctions, including fines and terms of imprisonment,” the letter states.

City officials can work with the employees to come up with a payment plan. But if no arrangement can be worked out, the city might have to resort to legal action to get the money back, the letter states.

Council voted unanimously for Reed Smith to start appropriate negotiations with the four retirees.

At the end of the meeting, O’Malley’s announcement he was stepping down immediately for family and business reasons was met with surprise by residents and his fellow elected officials, who threatened not to accept his resignation.

“He put in more time and effort than anyone,” Mayor John Bushko said.

“The taxpayers’ association appreciated you also,” resident Hank Marks said to O’Malley.

“Over the past few weeks it has now become apparent to me that the administration’s desire to move the recovery process forward is in question,” O’Malley said in his resignation letter. “This, combined with the increased difficulty of explaining to my children that ‘daddy has another meeting,’ leads me to only one alternative.”

When Bushko was sworn in as mayor in January 2006, he appointed O’Malley to take his place. O’Malley, one of two councilmen up for re-election this year, did not file papers with the Luzerne County Bureau of Elections to keep his seat.

In addition to councilman Joseph Dougherty, who is seeking another term, Brown — who is a former councilman — and Jon A. Metta filed nominating papers for council.

Council has 30 days to appoint someone to O’Malley’s seat until January 2008.

Saunders has been solicitor since January. He replaced attorney Joseph Lach, who stepped down after a year in the position.

3/8/2007

Diligence, cooperation advance revitalization project

A revitalization project for downtown Nanticoke finally seems to be headed in the right direction.

After months of debating how to best use a \$5.6 million federal grant earmarked for downtown improvements, Tuesday night’s meeting of the Nanticoke municipal and redevelopment authorities revealed a new spirit of cooperation between the two organizations to move the project forward.

The grant was obtained in 2005 and there was concern that without a definitive plan, the funds would be lost. But Tuesday night’s approval of preliminary plans for East Main and Market streets advances the project to the next step. Design plans could come in about three months.

This is good news for the city, which needs to rebuild its business district. And, with two developers already on board, it was crucial for the authorities to act quickly.

Plans include developing two parking lots. Businesses cite the lack of parking has been a major obstacle for them.

We applaud the authorities' officials for their diligence in getting the project started. Through cooperation, we see good things in the future for Nanticoke, its business owners and the residents.

We urge PennDOT, which is administering the loan, to move swiftly on the plans, so the city can begin its new era, one that envisions people bringing their cars without worry to an illuminated, secure parking area so they can walk from store to store on improved city sidewalks or relax in an inviting Patriot Square.

3/7//2007

Two Nanticoke authorities OK preliminary plans

An improved downtown means business.

By Elizabeth Skrapits, Staff Writer

Safer sidewalks, brighter, uniform lights and more parking would not only be attractive to residents, but for new development, Facility Design and Development Ltd. principal Alex Belavitz said at a special meeting of Nanticoke's municipal and redevelopment authorities Monday.

Two private developers are already in line for three downtown business projects because the city has a plan for revitalization, Belavitz said. Both authorities took the first step to get it started by approving the preliminary plans for improvements to East Main and Market streets drawn up by the Scranton-based firm.

Municipal authority chairman Ron Kamowski referred to the vote as the "most vital step in the whole operation."

The plan now proceeds to Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, which administers the \$5.6 million federal grant U.S. Rep. Paul Kanjorski, D-Nanticoke, obtained in 2005 for downtown improvements.

Starting point is the city's business district, the first few blocks of Main and Market streets, Belavitz said. Depending on how far the grant stretches, the "community gateway" from Luzerne County Community College to Patriot Square could be next, he said.

Instead of a parking garage on East Main Street next to the Kanjorski Center as the authorities initially wanted to build, the plan calls for a paved parking lot for up to 170 cars. It would be located behind the center and would require closing off parts of Arch Street, Belavitz said.

A second parking lot for up to 50 cars should be created on a city-owned property on Market Street between Broad and Spring streets, he said. Both lots would be illuminated 24 hours a day and spruced up with greenery, Belavitz said.

Business owner Mary Lou Pomicter urged the authorities to move quickly. Lack of parking cripples downtown businesses, she said, including her combination deli and mini-mart on East Main Street.

"We need parking real bad," Pomicter said. "If it takes more than six months, I may not be there."

Project design can be completed in about three months. The big question remains: how long PennDOT will take to review and approve the plans so it can start, Belavitz said.

2/26/2007

Recovery coordinator: Nanticoke needs strong administrator

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Financially distressed Nanticoke needs a strong administrator to help get its affairs in order, the city's financial recovery coordinator says. But some city officials think a proposed ordinance gives the administrator too much power.

Nanticoke was declared Act 47, or financially distressed, in May 2006 by the state Department of Community and Economic Development. City administrator is a key position in the recovery plan drawn up by Nanticoke's state-appointed Act 47 coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League.

The plan states, "Unless the city can move to professionalize operations as it solves the financial structural imbalance, the city will remain subject to changes in policy and direction under different council leadership. Indeed the Recovery Plan Coordinator believes most strongly that the management system must be changed."

During the Feb. 7 meeting, council hired Keystone Municipal Services — specifically its principal, Bob Sabatini — to fill in as administrator for a few months while a search is conducted. In the meantime, council is looking to pass an ordinance re-defining and strengthening the position.

Besides managing the city's financial affairs, the administrator would supervise all the departments, hire, suspend and fire employees without any interference from elected officials, and set salaries, according to the ordinance.

It states the mayor and council can deal with departments only through the city administrator, and the elected officials cannot give orders, publicly or privately, to any city employees.

The ordinance came up at a recent council meeting and was set aside without a vote until the next meeting. Mayor John Bushko and councilman Joseph Dougherty oppose it.

"This, to me, is taking too much responsibility from elected officials. They're the ones who have to answer to the people," Dougherty said.

"It's like they're changing the form of government," Bushko said. "They took all my authority away and gave it to (the administrator)."

Councilman Bill O'Malley believes the administrator should take over personnel duties because he or she will work directly with city employees. Elected officials don't spend enough time with them to evaluate them properly, he said.

"In all honesty, it's difficult for a part-time city councilman to involve himself in the day-to-day operations," O'Malley said.

Dougherty's opinion differs.

"I understand you need an administrator for the day-to-day business of the city, but we don't need someone in there who's a control freak," he said.

A problem cited by PEL in the financial recovery plan is "a lack of both continuity and expertise in overall city management." The plan states, "The city has had a succession of administrators ... none for a significant amount of time."

Nanticoke's first full-time administrator, Paul Keating, came on board in October 1996. In June 1997, Keating left to become administrator for Kingston. He was replaced by Ray Nearhood, who left in July 1999 after clashes with former Mayor John Toole and members of council.

Richard Muessig became Nanticoke's administrator in September 1999. He resigned in September 2002 for health reasons, and Greg Gulick was hired in February 2003.

Council terminated Gulick in April 2006. At that time, Tony Margelewicz came on board as financial administrator, a new position. Within months, Margelewicz was demoted to city clerk.

2/23/2007

Changes to health care rile Nanticoke unionized workers

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Nanticoke's union employees are upset over council's decisions to end post-retirement benefits to their children and to remove the police and fire chiefs from their collective bargaining units.

A councilman says the move, prompted by the city's financial recovery plan, is to save money and bring management in line with the norm.

Council voted Wednesday to remove police Chief James Cheshinski and fire Chief Mike Bohan from their unions.

Council also voted to stop providing the children of retired police officers Leonard Nardozzo and William Brown and public works employee Henry Levandowski with health care benefits, on the advice of attorneys from Reed Smith LLP. Council hired the outside firm on the recommendation of Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League.

Both votes were 3-2, with Mayor John Bushko and Councilman Joseph Dougherty voting against.

"If they would have come to us and spoken to us about these sort of things, we might have been able to work out an amicable agreement without any hostility or anger on our part," firefighters union president Greg Grzymiski said. "But they're going with what the (financial recovery) plan says and shoving everything down our throats."

Brown, a former councilman who has expressed interest in running for the office again this year, did not return calls for comment.

Councilman William O'Malley said it was a misinterpretation of their contracts that allowed the three former employees to get city-paid health care for children until they turn 18, or 23 if they are in school. Terminating them from the retirees' coverage will save the city about \$21,000 a year, he said.

In the police contract, officers and their spouses receive lifelong health care fully paid for by the city, O'Malley said. He said

Levandowski's contract did not call for any post-retirement health care benefits.

"The issue that we have here is the fact that we're going to the taxpayers and saying, we're going to raise income taxes and become financially solvent and cut expenses," O'Malley said. "This is our way of showing we are watching the shop and following procedures."

Removing Cheshinski and Bohan from the union is a management issue, not financial, O'Malley said. Previous chiefs were non-union, he said.

2/23/2007

Nanticoke coverage decision disputed

Union representative, others protest health-care decision.

By slong@timesleader.com

A retired Nanticoke street department employee and children of two retired police officers lost health coverage Wednesday night when city council members agreed to stop providing what interim City Administrator Bob Sabatini deemed "excessive or improperly granted health insurance."

Declared financially distressed last May by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development the City of Nanticoke has been looking for ways to trim its spending. The city will save thousands of dollars annually by not paying these health premiums, Sabatini said.

Under current labor contracts, retired police and firefighters receive 100 percent city-paid lifetime health insurance for the retiree and spouse, but not for their children, and other retired city personnel are not provided any health insurance coverage in their labor contracts, Sabatini said.

"The difference between a husband/wife and family coverage is \$5,000 a year per retiree," he said.

A police union representative said their members are being treated unfairly.

Bill Brown was forced to retire from the police department in 1996 because of a back injury he sustained while on-duty, said Capt. Kevin Grevera, the police department's union representative.

"He broke his back for this city and now they want to take benefits from his kids," Capt. Kevin Grevera said.

Leonard Nardozzo retired last year after aggravating a previous injury while attempting to save a woman from drowning, Grevera said.

Both retired officers have children under 18 years old.

President of the fire department's union Greg Grzymiski said two firefighters were considering retiring, but one will have to put his plans on hold because he has children.

He said the city should continue provide health coverage for families of retired police officers and firefighters.

"I think it is the least they could do as we put our lives on the line every day," Grzymiski said.

Henry Levandowski, who retired from Nanticoke's street department, received health insurance when, according to city officials, he was not eligible. It was unknown when he retired.

Sabatini said because of an improper understanding of the contract, Levandowski thought he was entitled to receive health benefits and someone from the city incorrectly agreed with him.

When working full time, the city pays 100 percent of all health care insurance costs for a police officer and firefighter's family.

Other full-time city employees receive city-paid health insurance before retiring.

Once a retiree reaches 65 years old, they are eligible for federal Medicare programs.

Both unions vowed to fight this issue to ensure the rights of current city employees and retirees are protected.

"If legal action doesn't work, this is an election year, and some members are up for re-election," Grzymiski said.

"We have to do what we have to do to secure our jobs."

Brown, Nardozzo and Levandowski were unable to be reached for comment.

Mayor John Bushko supported allowing retirees to keep health insurance for their entire families, not just themselves and a spouse.

"The lawyers said you can't spend city money improperly, and I didn't think it was improper at the time," he said.

Labor lawyer Joel Barras of Reed Smith LLP in Philadelphia informed council members in executive session at a previous meeting it was illegal to provide health insurance for police and fire department retirees' children and other department retirees under the current labor contracts.

Retirees have the option of paying out-of-pocket for their children's health care coverage, but might be required to reimburse the city for the health insurance erroneously paid out, Sabatini said.

"In my opinion, I don't think they need to be required to pay the money back," Bushko said.

"If we paid them and it's not covered it's our mistake."

A decision was expected to be made at the next council meeting based on advice from Barras.

2/22/2007

Nanticoke curbs retiree benefits

By Janine Ungvarsky Times Leader Correspondent

City Council took heat Wednesday night over everything from Act 47 recommendations to snow removal.

A contingent of city employees, including members of the police and fire departments, were present in force for discussions on benefits for retired city workers, the collective bargaining status of the police and fire chiefs and a stronger city administrator.

Council voted 3-2 to act on the recommendation of a special outside council to terminate all health insurance benefits for children of retirees.

Mayor John Bushko said that while the contract says the retired employee will have the same benefits, they also state the "employee and spouse" will continue to have coverage. Lawyers hired as part of the city's Act 47 fiscal recovery plan said this indicates that children should not be covered and recommended the city cease paying benefits and attempt to recover past premiums.

Several people spoke out against this, including a man council members identified as a member of the police force. Kevin Grevera challenged the interpretation of the contract limiting the coverage and said a grievance had settled this issue in the past.

Another audience member, Bill Brown, asked council what happens if a young officer with small children is disabled and must retire.

"Who covers their kids after they serve?" Brown asked. "This is harassment. It might be political harassment."

The children of two retired policemen — including Brown — and a former street department employee will lose benefits as a result of the action. Council decided to seek further counsel before moving to recover premiums for past coverage.

Council also voted 3-2 to ratify a discussion at a previous executive session removing the police and fire chiefs from the collective bargaining agreement. This was also a recommendation of the outside counsel, Bushko noted.

Consideration of what Interim City Administrator Robert Sabatini called a strong manager to oversee the day-to-day operation of the city brought debate among council.

Sabatini said a central point of leadership is required as part of the city's Act 47 recovery plan, but Bushko disputed the job's description.

"I'm not saying we don't need a manager. I'm saying you're giving him too much authority," Bushko said to applause.

Council also heard complaints about snow removal. Councilman Jim Litchkofski said numerous breakdowns of the city's three trucks hampered efforts. "Those are reasons, not excuses," he said, and he asked residents not to blame the street crews. "Be angry at me, but don't belittle our workers," he said. "They put in the hours and worked hard."

2/20/2007

How sweet it is

By bkalinowski@citizensvoice.com

It has been a tradition among the Polish and Pennsylvania Dutch — purge kitchens of sweets and fatty foods before the Lenten fast, then feast on baked goods made from the ingredients.

The tradition continues today by making tasty doughnuts known as ponczkis and fastnachts for church bake sales and at places like Sanitary Bakery in Nanticoke.

Sanitary Bakery owners Ed and Joe Kowalski were busy Monday readying for the hundreds of dozens of ponczkis and fastnachts they expect to sell today, often called "Fat Tuesday," the day before Lent begins.

"(Fat Tuesday) ranks right up there with the day before Christmas and the day before Easter" for business, Ed Kowalski said.

Ponczkis and fastnachts are doughnuts made with extra sugar, eggs and margarine. Both are deep fried. The Kowalskis fill their Ponczkis with blueberry, black raspberry, prune or apple filling. They coat them with powdered sugar. Their fastnachts are plain inside and coated with glaze.

Making ponczkis is a Polish custom, while baking fastnachts is a tradition of the Pennsylvania Dutch. "Fastnacht" is German for the "eve of the fast." In many parts of central Pennsylvania, eating fastnachts to excess today is the equivalent to the hard-partying tradition of Mardi Gras.

"Doughnut sales will drop right off after Wednesday," Ed Kowalski said.

The Kowalskis estimate they will sell about 200 dozen fastnachts and 400 dozen ponczkis today. The treats are a hit, the Kowalskis say, because of the few family owned bakeries left in the area that make them.

"It takes time. But we've been doing it for so long already. It's like rolling out of bed," Joe Kowalski said.

Sanitary Bakery only sells the fastnachts this time of year. But the ponczkis are a year-round favorite in the town known for its large Polish population.

"One year, we stopped making them after Ash Wednesday, and lo and behold, we had people asking for them all year round," Ed Kowalski said.

2/20/2007

Nanticoke man, firefighters injured in blaze

By Bob Kalinowski , Staff Writer

Two firefighters were injured and a resident was burned in a Nanticoke fire late Monday night at a 540 Market St. apartment.

The fire was reported just after 11 p.m. above the dining room of the former Budd's Pizza at Market and Ridge streets, directly across the street from the city's fire department headquarters.

Crews used a ladder to rescue the occupant from the roof. He was airlifted to an area hospital to be treated for burns suffered in the fire.

His condition was not immediately known.

A female in the apartment was able to escape unharmed, while another man in an attached apartment also escaped without injury.

One Nanticoke firefighter sustained burns to his face, and another fireman from Hanover Township broke his ankle, Nanticoke fire Chief Mike Bohan said.

They were taken to Wilkes-Barre General Hospital for treatment.

A cause for the blaze was not immediately known. A state police fire marshal is visiting the scene this afternoon.

There was heavy fire, smoke and water damage to the second and third floors. The first floor, the former dining room, sustained water damage, Nanticoke fire officials said.

Bohan said the fact that the fire occurred right next to fire house.

"The duty guys were taking the dog outside, and they noticed it. They called it in on the radio," Bohan said. "The guys got in and made a good hit, and knocked it down."

Budd's Pizza bar and restaurant is closed. A "For Rent" sign was displayed in the former dining room's front window. Two rooms in the apartment above the dining room were badly damaged, fire crews said.

The building is owned by Kevin Lee, of Princeton, N.J., officials said.

2/18/2007

Town Crier

By: Pam Urbanski

A Nanticoke elementary teacher was honored recently for her commitment to her students and her profession.

Kelly Wanchisen, a fourth grade teacher, was selected as the WBRE January Teacher of the Month. Wanchisen, who has been teaching in the district full-time, for the last six years, was nominated by parents and students in her class.

Wanchisen said teaching was the only job she really thought about.

"I don't remember there being anything else that I wanted to do," she said. "I love teaching."

For her, the most challenging aspect of the job is keeping students on track and focused on their lessons.

And the most rewarding? "Seeing the progress they make from the beginning of the school year to the end," she said.

Representatives from WBRE stopped by Wanchisen's fourth grade classroom to get a feel for her teaching style and to talk to her students. They also presented her with a plaque.

Tax reminder

Albert J Wytoshek, Nanticoke city treasurer/tax collector, announced the 2007 municipal property and per capita taxes were issued Feb. 12.

The rebate period will end on Thursday, April 12, 2007; face period ends on Monday, June 11, 2007. Penalty ends on December 15th, 2007, which is the last day to pay taxes at the city building. Anyone not receiving his or her tax statement is requested to contact the tax office. It is the property owner's responsibility to promptly forward their tax statement to their respective mortgage company. When remitting payment by mail and a receipt is requested, enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope. All residents are reminded tax payments are not accepted by postmark.

The 2007 City per capita taxes are issued on a separate tax statement. All residents, 18 years and older are responsible to pay per capita tax. Any resident who has not received a statement is requested to contact the tax office. It is the responsibility of landlords to inform the tax office of all residing tenants. The tax office is open Monday thru Friday 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.. Anyone needing an appointment or assistance is asked to call 735-2800.

The Knights of Columbus, St Denis Home Association will hold their famous annual Fish Fry Dinner on Friday, February 23, 2007, from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. The menu includes fried haddock filet, French fries, cole-slaw, roll and butter, desserts and refreshments. The cost is \$7 for adults and \$4 for children. Tickets may be purchased from any member or at the door. The Home Association is located at St. Denis Church, Main Street in Glen Lyon.

St. Francis Parish is holding a Lenten Take-out Special for Ash Wednesday on February 21st. Meal includes a salmon pattie, macaroni and cheese and stewed tomatoes. The cost is \$6. The time is 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Advanced order may be placed by calling Andrea at 735-5381 or the parish center at 735-7781. Delivery is available to hi-rise residents.

St. Andrews Episcopal Church, 12 East Kirmar Avenue, Alden is sponsoring a home-made beef vegetable soup sale. Price is \$5.00 per quart. Take-out containers are provided. Advance orders are required by February 21st by calling Dorothy at 735-2126 or Edith at 735-2662. The day for pick up is March 3rd between 10 a.m. and noon in the lower level of the church.

2/11/2007

Sunday News by Pam Urbanski

As you know, Pope John Paul II School is slated to close at the end of the school year.

In order to bring players, their families and friends, back to the gym one last time, the athletic committee is hosting a homecoming basketball game on Wednesday at 7:30 p.m.

"This is an opportunity for our school community, past and present, to come together," said Athletic Director Brian Waugh.

All former players who attend will be introduced at halftime of the boy's basketball game. Former coaches will also be acknowledged.

"Banners that hang in our gym tell the story of the talented boys and girls that played at Pope John Paul II School," said Brian. "We had a lot of players that went on to play in high school and really contributed to those teams."

"I think that we can say that athletics really bring life and spirit to a school and community like no other program," he added. "This night will be a way to honor all former players and coaches."

For more information, call the school at 735-7935.

Celebrate Valentine's Day early

There is no need to cook breakfast this morning. The parishioners of St. Stanislaus Church will do that for you. Stop by their annual Valentine's Day breakfast buffet today from 8:45 a.m. to noon. Menu includes four different meats, homefries, eggs, French toast, cereal, fresh fruit, pastry, coffee, tea and juice. At \$6 it is the best deal in town. For children younger than 8, the cost is \$3.

After breakfast, head over to St. Joseph's Church for the annual Valentine bingo party today. Doors open at 12:30 p.m. with early birds at 1:45 p.m. and regular games at 2 p.m. Cash prizes and door prizes will be awarded. Refreshments will be available. The event will be held in the basement of St. Joseph's Church on East Noble Street.

Get great food at St. Mary's

The parishioners of St. Mary's Church are holding their annual homemade potato pancake and clam chowder sale. This is a takeout sale and advance orders must be made by Saturday. Cost is \$5 per quart for clam chowder and potato pancakes are 50 cents each. Orders can be picked up Wednesday, Feb. 21, from 3:30 to 6:30 p.m. in the lower level of the parish center located on South Hanover Street. To place an order, call Mary at 735-4653, Helen at 735-4668 or Carol at 779-3597.

Celebrate Mardi Gras at PJP

Don't forget to make your reservations for the Mardi-Gras celebration being held on Saturday in the hall of Pope John Paul II School. The event will be held from 7:30 to 11:30 p.m.

Musical entertainment will be provided by the Cadillacs and will feature Oldies Music from the '50s and '60s. Cost is \$15 per person and includes refreshments.

For reservations, call Tony at 256-3914, Xavier at 735-6017, Millard at 735-2133 or Jim at 735-8108.

Ash Wednesday dinner

The Altar and Rosary Society of St. Francis Parish is holding a Lenten takeout meal on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 21. The dinner includes salmon patties, macaroni and cheese and stewed tomatoes. Cost is \$6. Pick-up hours are 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Advanced orders are recommended by calling Andrea at 735-5381 or the parish office at 735-6903 by Friday. Delivery is available to

residents of the city's highrise apartments.

2/10/2007

Pastor credits parishioners' spirit for making transition easier

By Kevin Kazokas Times Leader Correspondent

"He's really a servant of the people. He's a very humble man. He really doesn't think of himself too much."

Bill Borysewicz The youth ministry director on the Rev. James Nash, pastor of four Catholic churches in Nanticoke

Change has affected nearly every part of the Diocese of Scranton in recent years. From the overhauling of the area's Catholic school system to the consolidation of many long-standing independent parishes, transition has been as widespread and ever-present as gravity in the 11-county Scranton Diocese this decade.

And the modifications haven't always been received well.

But along with the strife have come examples of people forging ahead in their faith, trying to make the best of their new conditions. A prime case of that, perhaps, involves Nanticoke.

Despite the reality that four of its parishes had to come under the leadership of one pastor just to remain open and that one of its schools will close this year, the Catholic community there has come together, said its leader, the Rev. James R. Nash, under a spirit of gratefulness, cooperation and helpfulness.

"It's gone better than I could have possibly imagined things," said Nash, an area native who in 2005 was transferred from Holy Name of Mary Church in Montrose to Holy Trinity and Holy Child churches in Nanticoke. Around that same time, St. Stanislaus Church in the city also fell under his care. Then, in July 2006, he took on a fourth parish in Nanticoke's St. Mary of Czestochowa, after the retirement of its pastor, the Rev. John S. Krafchak.

Nash, 65, is by far not the only modern-day priest charged with leading multiple parishes, or even as many as four. Such requirements have become common in this era of church consolidation. For example, on the local front Monsignor John J. Bendik of Pittston leads four churches.

But for somebody who spent 10 years as a pastor outside the area, coming home to such a daunting task could have been frazzling for Nash if not for the community's spirit of welcoming and unity.

"The people have been more than gracious," the Hanover High School and King's College graduate, and former public school teacher, said during some rare minutes of downtime on a recent Saturday morning.

Nash's four churches have kept their distinct identities, but the hardships of placing four separate parishes with storied histories under one leader's care remain tough to ignore.

For the church community as a whole, there are the financial struggles of maintaining all the buildings, Nash said, and dealing with empty buildings. The community also must face the closing in June of Pope John Paul II School, a move that comes as part of the diocese's Catholic school restructuring plan. And sometimes there's the challenge, Nash said, of inspiring people to think in terms of belonging to one very large church community, as opposed to belonging to the four smaller churches from which they hail.

For Nash himself there's the rigorous schedule of hospital visits almost daily, appointments for baptisms and marriage preparation, meetings, emergency calls and serving local nursing homes and senior centers with Masses. Sometimes, he must conduct six funerals in a week, he said.

He doesn't play the martyr's role, though. Instead he credits the assistance he's received from staff and volunteers around him and points to the modest steps the four churches have made in drawing closer together. All the churches share one bulletin, he said, as well as one religious education program, one youth ministry, one finance council and a combined choir for special liturgies that includes additional Nanticoke-area churches. Nash also mentioned that collectively the parishes have been able to hire a full-time youth director, something they could not have afforded while on their own.

Speaking as a man who joined the priesthood after 23 years of teaching, - 18 of them at Coughlin High School - Nash said he hopes to run this church structure like a community, not just like an organization. "I like to know people by names," he said. "I don't want to just be a functionary or an administrator. I want to be a pastor present for people; a listener."

Bill Borysewicz, the youth ministry director, said Nash has already accomplished that. "He's really a servant of the people," Borysewicz said. "He's a very humble man. He really doesn't think of himself too much."

When it comes to church youth, Borysewicz said Nash shows them what church is all about, explaining why sacraments are celebrated and speaking in simple terms. The priest leads a Mass for teens every third Sunday night, with the event having drawn as many as 40 to 60 in recent weeks.

"I just love their enthusiasm, their honesty," Nash said. "And it gives me hope for the future."

And judging from the sound of things, that future will have Nash staying right here in Nanticoke, doing exactly what he's doing right now. He simply loves being a priest.

"It's a wonderful way to spend one's life," he said.

2/8/2007

No property tax hike for GNA district

By Janine Ungvarsky Times Leader Correspondent

Early figures indicate no property tax increase for residents of the Greater Nanticoke Area School District, but the results of the May

election could increase earned income taxes for some to reduce property taxes for others.

The school board voted Monday night to adopt a preliminary budget of \$21,901,850 that would hold millage at the current rate of 249 mills. Business Manager Al Melone said more than \$13 million goes toward salary and benefits, and that the budget doesn't include any allowance for increases that would come out of teacher contract settlements.

A mill is one dollar of tax on every thousand dollars of assessed property value.

Melone stressed that it is early in the process, which won't conclude until a final budget is adopted in June, but he said that the district does not anticipate needing any increase that would go above the index allowed by the state. Exceeding the index would require the district to put the request for an increase on the May ballot.

The ballot will include a referendum question on an increased earned income tax. The board accepted the recommendation of the Tax Study Commission to ask voters to approve a 0.5 percent increase in the tax on wages. Commission Chairman Robert Hughes said the group considered the demographics of the district in deciding against a personal income tax, which would tax wages as well as other income sources such as dividends and interest. The recommendation called an exemption for those earning less than \$12,000.

Hughes explained that in exchange for the higher earned income tax, eligible property owners who filed for a homestead exemption would receive a tax credit of up to \$213. However, those who do own property eligible for the credit and those who earn more than \$42,500 would pay more in earned income tax but receive no credit.

Superintendent Anthony Perrone stressed that homeowners should complete the exemption form. Forms are available in the school administrative offices.

In other business, the board approved tuition reimbursement totaling \$3,900 to 8 teachers for college courses and approved salary increases for Theresa Polifka and Sara Pierontoni based on additional credits earned.

2/08/2007

GNA will put personal tax issue on May ballot

By Elizabeth Skrapits

Greater Nanticoke Area real estate taxes might stay the same this year, but taxpayers could see an income tax increase depending on what happens in the May election.

The \$21,901,850 preliminary budget for 2007-08 the school board passed Wednesday keeps millage steady at 249 mills.

During the meeting, the board also accepted the Act 1 study committee's referendum for the May 15 primary election ballot. The committee recommended raising the district's share of earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1 percent for residents earning more than \$12,000 a year, board President Jeff Kozlofski said.

If Greater Nanticoke Area voters adopt the ballot question, eligible homeowners each would receive a real estate tax reduction of \$213. If the referendum fails, the district's tax structure stays as it is.

Under Act 1, school districts get a share of state gaming revenue when it becomes available. In return, districts must raise or implement an earned or personal income tax to give property tax relief.

The financially distressed City of Nanticoke is seeking court approval to raise its share of earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent this year. With the school district's current 0.5 percent earned income tax, city residents would pay 2 percent.

If the school district referendum passes, it would raise Nanticoke residents' earned income taxes to 2.5 percent total. Residents of Plymouth Township, which is also financially distressed, would pay 2.5 percent as well.

"But that's if the public votes for it. They can vote it down," Kozlofski said.

2/8/2007

Nanticoke gets recovery under way

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

On Wednesday, elected officials and residents met members of the recovery team that will start whipping the financially distressed city into shape.

Last week, council adopted the financial recovery plan drawn up by Pennsylvania Economy League. The team will work intensely with city officials and administration over the next four months to start putting the complex, long-term plan in place.

Key team players are:

Joseph L. Boyle, Harry Miller, and Gerald Cross of the Pennsylvania Economy League.

As financial recovery coordinator for Nanticoke, PEL will be at the center of the effort. They will oversee the other team members and city administration and act as bookkeeper for the city. PEL will hold public meetings with council twice monthly, probably an hour before the regular meetings on the first and third Wednesdays.

Tom Melone, Pam Heard and John Bonita of Albert B. Melone and Associates.

Since finances are at the root of the city's problems, the certified public accountants said they would start reviewing Nanticoke's accounting procedures today. They plan to work through April to put new, better ones in place.

Teri Ooms, executive director of the Joint Urban Studies Center.

She will focus on economic development — such as attracting more businesses to the city — and improving code enforcement. The Center previously worked with the South Valley Partnership to gather data and put together a regional revitalization plan for Nanticoke, Newport Township and Plymouth Township.

Matt Domines of the state Department of Community and Economic Development's northeast regional office. The representative of the state agency that granted Nanticoke Act 47 status will keep an eye on proceedings and help the city get grants. The city can apply now for funds to update code enforcement, train city personnel in the new accounting systems, and purchase computers and equipment, Domines said.

As another part of the team, council hired Keystone Municipal Services to fill in for a city manager, at a rate not to exceed \$80 an hour plus \$100 per diem. The Camp Hill-based firm worked with Nanticoke in 2005, when the city was in the state early intervention program for financially troubled municipalities.

2/8/2007

**Nanticoke hires firm to run city
Keystone Municipal Services will perform the task of interim city administrator.
By Ian Campbell Times Leader Correspondent**

By appointing Keystone Municipal Services of Harrisburg as the interim city administrator, city council hopes that when it does finally appoint a permanent manager the learning curve will be substantially flattened.

At the same time, the move was supported by the coordinator for the Act 47 Recovery Plan as a way of getting the city in compliance with the state's requirement to have the position filled.

Gerald Cross, of the Pennsylvania Economy League, the plan coordinator, noted that Keystone had been involved in the city's early-intervention program in 2005 and has a familiarity with the city's operations and the constraints upon it.

"It's a definite advantage to the city," he said after the meeting.

The costs will be met out of the current city budget, said Councilman William O'Malley. It's expected the company will operate an average two or three days a week at the beginning of the no more than one-year period of the contract, with a cost of \$80 an hour and no more than \$100 a day.

The advantage to the city will be that when the permanent position is filled the Harrisburg firm will be able to bring the administrator up to speed quickly on the city's workings, O'Malley said.

The amount of work involved was more than mayor or council could manage without assistance, he said after the meeting, especially as none was able to take on the task full time.

Cross explained to council the needs PEL had now that the plan had been formally accepted by the city and the state, with the first task being the introduction of the earned income tax increase. That requires court approval.

PEL would also need a public, twice-monthly meeting with council to discuss everything that might impact the city's finances. Cross suggested meetings be held every second Wednesday at 6 p.m., which is an hour before the scheduled monthly meetings and monthly work sessions.

In order for the recovery plan to work, PEL needs to be "kept in the flow of paper," Cross said.

2/5/2007

**Nanticoke area projects give city hope
By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com**

Although they aren't located downtown, three projects are under way that could channel more business to the most visible part of the city. A public safety institute will attract students from 10 counties. A senior housing complex will bring in residents. An industrial park will open up a gateway to the city.

All three projects mean more people will be coming to Nanticoke — and city officials hope they will patronize downtown merchants and services and lead to further development.

"Everything works hand-in-hand. There's no doubt in my mind about that," Mayor John Bushko said.

Public Safety Training Institute

Luzerne County Community College's four-phase, multi-million dollar campus renovation and expansion project begins with the creation of a regional Public Safety Training Institute at Prospect Street and Middle Road. It will be able to train up to 4,000 emergency responders per year.

The project, estimated to cost between \$15 million and \$22 million, will be funded through grants and contributions, including a \$1.7 million donation by the county.

Since LCCC received approval from the Nanticoke planning commission Tuesday, bids for the project will go out by Feb. 12, and groundbreaking will be on March 30, said Dr. Karen A. Flannery, the college's dean of public safety.

Lexington Village

Lexington Village on Kosciuszko Street, a senior community of 55 town houses being built in two phases, is Nanticoke's largest new construction project in several years. The \$13 million project is all privately financed except for a state grant of \$260,000 to reclaim old strip mine land.

Although developer Dominic Ortolani still has to work out some issues with the city's planning commission, the project is well under way. Several housing units are already complete. In fact, the first tenant received the key at a ceremony Thursday, and there are 12 more planning to move in within the next few weeks, according to Ortolani.

Whitney Pointe

Whitney Pointe's entrance is at Garfield Street and River Road in the Honey Pot section of Nanticoke, but most of the park is in Newport Township.

However, it's good news for Nanticoke. To get in and out of Whitney Pointe, residents and workers have to go through the city, Bushko said, and he hopes that will bring new businesses downtown.

"We feel to revitalize Nanticoke, it's got the ingredients to do that, if everybody gets on board," said engineer Tom Doughton, who represents its developer Ken Pollock.

The approximately 500-acre park will contain a total of 125 residential and 10 to 12 industrial sites, according to Doughton. A grand opening is expected in March.

The first new business to set up shop in the park, Creative Printing, is about 70 percent finished with its building, Doughton said. The first phase of housing, 23 lots, is undergoing final review by Luzerne County, he said.

"Hopefully we will be able to sell residential lots within two to three weeks," he said, adding that there is a list of 13 to 15 people waiting to put down payments on lots.

The former Dan Flood Industrial Park was designated a Keystone Opportunity Zone in 1996. Not only will businesses that locate in Whitney Pointe be tax-exempt until 2011, but so will homeowners who buy lots there.

On the industrial end, ethanol and other alternative energy companies have been sniffing around the park, said state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke.

What makes Whitney Pointe appealing is rail access: the former Glen Lyon branch line is being reconnected to a Canadian Pacific main line. That could spark more industrial development on former coal mining land from Nanticoke to Mocanaqua, Doughton said.

Goodbye, Y-T

Construction of a parking lot or garage next to the Kanjorski Center is temporarily on hold while city officials decide what to do, but destruction of a safety hazard and eyesore on East Main Street is a go.

The owner of the former Y-T Hardware building, Joseph Darlak of Tobyhanna, isn't happy with the way neighboring properties were demolished by the city. He claims the contractor hired by a previous municipal authority board damaged his building in the process of tearing down 108-112, 116 and 120 E. Main St. in November 2005.

Despite his discontent with city officials, Darlak said he will have the Y-T building demolished within a week or two, mainly for safety reasons.

"We're going to level it. We're going to destroy what has been damaged, so no one gets hurt there," he said.

2/4/2007

Nanticoke News

By: Pam Urbanski

The Nanticoke Food Pantry is a nondenominational pantry created to provide assistance to people in the Nanticoke Area who need supplemental groceries. The pantry was started in 1998, after city resident Mary Ellen Starzynski, through her job at the Nanticoke Family Center, saw a need for her clients.

"I knew that some received food from the pantry in Plymouth. It was difficult to get to Plymouth from where they lived because some didn't have transportation," she explained.

Since she is a member of St. Stanislaus Parish, she approached the pastor at that time, the Rev. Joseph Kakareka, and asked for help.

"Father was very supportive," she explained. "He gave us space in the basement of the school on 38 West Church Street."

Volunteers cleaned, painted and added shelving. They also made a shute to get the food down more easily. The pantry is funded through the Commission on Economic Opportunity. People who use the pantry must meet federal guidelines based on their income. In addition to the CEO, food is donated from many organizations in the city of Nanticoke.

"The amount of donated food we get is wonderful," said Mary Ellen. "The postal food drive is probably our biggest source of donated food. The Greater Nanticoke Area Schools donate a lot, as do all the churches in Nanticoke."

Businesses throughout the city call the center all the time asking what items they are short on and what their employees can donate. The food that is donated locally is used as supplemental food, she added.

"It is something that is really needed by our families. It gets them through the month," said Mary Ellen.

More than 100 families take advantage of the pantry. The amount of food each family receives is based on the amount of people in their family.

The food bank is open the first three Wednesdays of the month from 9 to 11 a.m. and serves the communities in the 18634 zip code.

Those who operate the pantry could use some help to ensure the pantry runs smoothly and that the people who have worked tirelessly for

the past nine years have some help. Mary Ellen tells me one of the hardest things to do is to empty the truck when it comes from CEO. The food is really heavy, and help is needed to get it into the pantry. Ray Starzynski, Mike Pretulak, Ed Karasucki and Gene Horanzy are joined by community service workers sent by the county.

But more help is needed. The truck comes once a month. If you can help out, call Mary Ellen and she can give you an exact time and date when the truck pulls in. Help is also needed to sort and bag food.

You can get more information about the program or sign up to volunteer by calling Mary Ellen at 735-6092.

Yoga at Pope John Paul

Pope John Paul II School is offering YOGA classes. "Stretching for Fitness" will be offered twice a week, Mondays at 2:05 p.m. for students ages 6 to adult and Wednesdays at 7 p.m. for adults. If you are looking for something to get you through the dreary months of winter, this is a great opportunity.

Mary Frances Giordano, a certified yoga instructor, will teach poses that gently stretch and strengthen the body.

"You will find it is a great stress reliever and a good way to improve focus. It is also a great aid for those involved in athletics," she said.

Cost is \$60 for six sessions. Participants will need to bring a "sticky" non-slip mat and wear loose, comfortable clothing. The first Monday session starts tomorrow but it is not too late to sign up. Call the school at 735-7935 to register.

Take your Valentine to breakfast

St. Stanislaus Parish is holding its annual Valentine's Day breakfast Sunday, Feb. 11, from 8:45 a.m. to noon. The all-you-can-eat breakfast will be held in the St. Stanislaus gym. The food items include four meats, eggs, home fries, French toast, pastries, fruit, coffee, tea and juice. The cost is \$6 for adults and \$3 for children younger than 8. The event will be held in the St. Stanislaus gym on 38 W. Church St. For more information, call 735-4833.

Celebrate Mardi Gras

The combined Holy Name Society of Holy Child, Holy Trinity, St. Mary and St. Stanislaus will hold a Mardi Gras celebration Saturday, Feb. 17, from 7:30 to 11:30 p.m. in the hall of Pope John Paul II School on South Hanover Street. Music will be provided by the Cadillacs. The cost is \$15 per person, which includes dancing and refreshments. Call 735-4833 for reservations.

Ash Wednesday dinner

The Altar and Rosary Society of St. Francis Church is sponsoring a takeout salmon dinner on Ash Wednesday, Feb. 21, from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. The meal includes salmon, macaroni and cheese and stewed tomatoes. The cost is \$6. To place an order, call Andrea at 735-5381 or the parish at 735-6903.

2/1/2007

Rail access and lots of land make a South Valley industrial park attractive to alternative energy producers, including ethanol plants. eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The approximately 500-acre Whitney Pointe, mainly in Newport Township but with its entrance in Nanticoke, has been a focus of interest for 10 to 15 ethanol plants and other manufacturers, said State Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke.

Representatives from the state, the South Valley Partnership, and the owner of Whitney Pointe, Ken Pollock's Pollock Enterprises, have been "right in the thick of the discussion" with the companies to get a feel for their needs, Yudichak said.

Northeast Ethanol and Renewable Resources opted against putting a proposed \$100 million plant at the Crestwood Industrial Park in Wright Township due to environmental concerns. Yudichak wouldn't confirm that the company was one of the interested parties, despite rumors.

"It's really too early to get into specifics about an individual company because frankly, we've had several," he said, noting, "Everything at this stage is nothing more than preliminary."

Northeast Ethanol CEO Rich Scheller would not comment on Whitney Pointe as a proposed site. Scheller has said the company will build an ethanol plant somewhere in Northeastern Pennsylvania, and is considering four possible locations in the region.

Due to state and federal interest in developing alternative forms of energy, several corporations are getting into the business of manufacturing ethanol and other grain- and vegetation-based fuels.

An ethanol plant could invest more than \$100 million in the region, create 70 to 100 jobs, and foster an economic spin-offs, Yudichak said. But although an alternative energy plant would benefit the South Valley economically, it must be environmentally sound and fit in with long term plans for the region, Yudichak said.

Competition for alternative energy plants can be tough, too.

"The ones we've met with, they all see the value in a site like Whitney Pointe, but it all comes down to we are competing with sites throughout the state and the country. A lot of factors go into it," Yudichak said. "But discussions have been very positive. We're going to continue them."

One of the most desirable aspects of Whitney Pointe is its access to an active railroad, he said.

The former Glen Lyon branch rail line is being restored with the help of three grants from PennDOT's rail freight division, said Tom Doughton, the engineer in charge of the project.

There are about 2,800 feet of rail already installed; ultimately 7,000 to 8,000 feet are needed to connect to the main line of Canadian Pacific

Railway, he said.

In addition, Canadian Pacific is investing almost \$1.5 million to restore the old Honey Pot rail yard, Doughton said.

“It will be fantastic. It’s the most active rail line in the Wyoming Valley,” he said.

The Dan Flood Industrial Park was made a Keystone Opportunity Zone in 1996 by officials in Nanticoke and Newport Township and the Greater Nanticoke Area School District, which means businesses and residents in the park don’t have to pay local or state taxes until 2011. Despite the KOZ designation, the industrial park languished until the HUD Corp., a subsidiary of Pollock Enterprises, purchased it for \$300,000 in June 2004.

State grants and private money invested by Pollock Enterprises paid for resurfacing the road and reclaiming former mine land at the park, Yudichak said.

Coulter Jones, staff writer, contributed to this report.

1/31/2007

Fire breaks out when candle ignites kerosene

By bkalinowski@citizensvoice.com

A man suffered burns Tuesday morning during an intense fire that erupted in a condemned Washington Street home when a candle was knocked over, city fire and police officials said.

Officials said Donald Dillon and his girlfriend Monica Kristensen were using candles as a source for light and a portable stove for heat. The two occasionally stayed at the 424 E. Washington St. home that was vacant since an August 2003 blaze and had no working utilities, police said.

Kristensen told police the couple had just filled a camping stove with kerosene. She said kerosene had spilled on the floor and then a candle was knocked to the ground, sparking the fire, said police Capt. William Shultz.

Dillon, 47, sustained burns to his right leg and right arm. He was airlifted to the Lehigh Valley Burn Center in Allentown. Hospital officials refused to release his condition.

Kristensen, 44, of New Grant Street, Nanticoke, was not injured.

Fire crews were called for a report of two people possibly entrapped in the burning structure around 1 a.m. and arrived to heavy flames and smoke.

Firefighters entered the burning two-story home but found no one inside. Dillon and Kristensen, who police said were both drinking, had walked several blocks away to an acquaintance’s house before notifying authorities.

A Washington Street neighbor was the first to call 911, Shultz said.

A firefighter sustained minor burn injuries in the initial phases of the fire, and another was treated for smoke inhalation, Fire Chief Mike Bohan said.

Frigid temperatures that hovered around 10 degrees caused icy conditions for firefighters, Bohan said.

The home is owned by Dillon’s family, and he apparently had plans to renovate the residence. However, Dillon told police he was homeless and occasionally stayed in the home.

“As far as we know, it (the house) has been condemned,” Bohan said. “Should they have been in there? No.”

A state police fire marshal visited the home Tuesday afternoon. An official cause of the fire is pending.

1/30/2007

Nanticoke to receive income tax money to ease financial woes

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The city will soon get more money to ease its financial troubles, but there’s no such relief in sight for the Nanticoke General Municipal Authority.

Council and Mayor John Bushko held a brief special meeting Monday to officially adopt the Act 47 recovery plan created by the city’s financial recovery coordinator, Pennsylvania Economy League.

Now that the plan is adopted, the city will ask Luzerne County Court for increases in the city’s share of earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent and the non-resident earned income tax — also called “commuter tax” — from 1.0 percent to 1.33 percent.

Solicitor Keith Saunders has everything ready to go to court, which he will do as soon as possible, councilman William O’Malley said.

After a public hearing and a judge’s approval, city officials can have Berkheimer Associates start collecting the increased income taxes, said Joseph Boyle of PEL. The higher earned income tax is expected to bring in an additional \$700,000 in 2007, and the commuter tax should bring in about \$225,000.

Nanticoke, which has been declared Act 47, or financially distressed, by the state, will use the extra earned income tax to pay expenses and make capital improvements. The commuter tax can only be used for things that benefit commuters, like police cruisers or road paving. As soon as council finished, the municipal authority board held its regular meeting.

The authority, which is responsible for downtown redevelopment, is independent from the city. However, the city is responsible for the municipal authority’s bills if the authority goes broke.

That could happen. The municipal authority only has \$8,800, enough for a month and a half of expenses, board member Dennis Butler said.

“Based on your burn rate, it doesn’t look good,” O’Malley told the authority board.

The only way to get enough to pay the bills is if the authority finds a tenant for its Kanjorski Center, which has been 80 percent vacant since October 2005. There are no takers so far for the East Main Street building, authority chairman Ronald Kamowski said. Municipal authority solicitor Richard Hughes said he would compile a list of options for the authority if it goes bankrupt. The authority already let its accountant Karen Hazleton go and is using the services of Nanticoke's fiscal director, Holly Quinn, to save money. Despite the authority's financial condition, its board should meet with council and the redevelopment authority within the next 30 days to start planning how to use \$5.6 million in federal Department of Transportation money, O'Malley said. The grant money will be used to create parking for the downtown redevelopment project.

1/30/2007

Coroner yet to rule on fire victim's death

By bkalinowski@citizensvoice.com

The Luzerne County coroner's office is awaiting further investigation into a fatal Nanticoke fire before ruling on the manner of death of a man who perished in an early Sunday morning blaze, authorities said Monday. Investigators have not determined what sparked the deadly fire at a Grand Street apartment complex, and they hope interviewing displaced residents will help them determine a cause. Police and fire officials say Paul Colwell, a man who sustained first-degree burns in the fire, is the most important witness, but his injuries will prevent him from meeting with authorities for at least several more days. Colwell remained in critical condition Monday night at Lehigh Valley Burn Center in Allentown, a hospital spokeswoman said. He and the deceased victim, Bernard Johnson, were inside the same apartment when the fire erupted at the 109-111 Grand St. building just after 2:30 a.m., officials said. Colwell, 47, who lived in the apartment, managed to escape the complex. Johnson did not. Johnson, 45, died of smoke inhalation, the coroner's office said. Police believe Johnson was visiting Colwell. Authorities said it appears the fire began in Colwell's apartment, but the cause is still being investigated by a state police fire marshal. Up to a dozen people were displaced from the multi-unit apartment building, which was condemned after the blaze. Nanticoke police are working with the city's fire department and the fire marshal to determine what led to the blaze. Police Capt. William Shultz said it was too early to make a definitive ruling on the blaze. He estimates it will be at least several more days before authorities have answers. "We have a fire. Numerous people are displaced. One person is seriously injured, and one is dead. You have to take a close look at it. It would behoove us to interview everyone," Shultz said.

Fire Chief Mike Bohan said authorities will have a better idea what occurred after speaking with Colwell.

1/29/2007

Man, 45, dies in fire in Nanticoke

Another man is seriously burned and taken to Lehigh Valley after Sunday blaze.

By rsweeney@timesleader.com

A 45-year-old man died and a 47-year-old man was seriously burned in a fire that started early Sunday morning in an apartment on West Grand Street, according to investigators. Bernard Johnson, whose home address investigators hadn't confirmed as of Sunday evening, died of smoke inhalation from a blaze in Apartment 8 at 111 W. Grand St., said Luzerne County Coroner Jack Consalvo. His body was found near a closet in the apartment's bedroom, but investigators didn't know what prevented him from leaving the building. Consalvo said an autopsy was performed to ensure Johnson wasn't injured before the fire. "We don't understand why he didn't get out," he said. "He would have been conscious based on his drug screen and alcohol level." Paul Colwell, who lived in the apartment and with whom investigators believe Johnson was staying, was severely burned and transported by helicopter to the Lehigh Valley Hospital, said Nanticoke fire Chief Michael Bohan. The blaze started around 2:30 a.m., and firefighters had the scene completely under control by 4:30 a.m. Bohan said Colwell's apartment was "destroyed," but that the fire was basically contained to that apartment. Apartment 9, above Colwell's, received smoke, fire and water damage, while the apartment below received water damage. Two firefighters suffered minor cuts while battling the two-alarm fire, but no other injuries were reported. Firefighters from Plymouth, Hanover and Newport townships, and Edwardsville responded, as did Hanover Medic 9 and Newport EMS. The American Red Cross found housing for between nine and 12 people displaced by the fire, Bohan said.

1/23/2007

Postcards From Main Street

By bkalinowski@citizensvoice.com

When he was a teenager in high school and tasked with compiling a family tree, little did Nanticoke resident Mark Regulski know the experience would turn him into a history buff.

A decade ago, he began collecting relics of his town's past at flea markets and on the Internet.

Among his favorites are postcards highlighting scenes from the town dating back to the late 1800s. In them, he saw visual proof of the thriving city he only heard of from his parents and grandparents.

So successful was his quest that Regulski now holds what many in town consider to be the most complete collection of Nanticoke-themed postcards anywhere. He has about 75.

This week, area residents will have a chance see the collection in full.

Regulski will host a slide presentation of the postcards, photographs and memorabilia at the Nanticoke Historical Society headquarters, 229 E. Main St., on Thursday at 7 p.m.

He is hoping for a good turnout and a diverse crowd.

"Hopefully we'll get younger people to see what the town was once like. I'm sure we'll have some older people reminiscing," he said recently from his West Union Street home.

The 29-year-old is a founding member of the Nanticoke Historical Society, formed in 1996.

At the time, he was 19 and just one year out of high school. His postcard collection was growing by the week. He heard that there was another person in town who also collected Nanticoke memorabilia - Chet Zaremba, the city's chief of police at the time.

The two met and spoke. It was a time when several demolition projects were being planned for historic structures in the city - the demolition of the old Nanticoke High School on East Main Street and the State Theatre building on Main Street in the downtown.

They decided to form an organization dedicated to preserving the town's history. Their postcard collections became the foundation of the small, volunteer group.

Regulski's growing collection includes various images of the city's main intersection, Main and Market streets, through the years, from pre-automobile to trolley to the first cars to travel Main street. The images show a vibrant downtown, throngs of shoppers and a variety of stores.

Each building and storefront had its unique architectural character.

"Before the malls and interstate, downtown was the place to go," Regulski said. "I'm fascinated by all that, the type of architecture you don't see now - they're all boxes."

A few of the cards focused on the industry behind the town and much of the Wyoming Valley: anthracite coal mining. Some of those cards proudly proclaimed, "Nanticoke, PA. - The heart of anthracite." In the background of many of the cards are the embodiment of the mining industry in northeastern Pennsylvania - the coal breaker.

Today, the only breaker remaining in the area is the Huber Breaker in Ashley, which Luzerne County is trying to preserve.

But locals might be interested to see the breakers in the Nanticoke area, and these old postcards and photographs do just that, Regulski said.

Other cards contain scenes around town, from what is now Patriot Square to the banks of the Susquehanna River, which runs along the city's border.

Regulski has preserved his postcards both in albums and on computer files.

On Thursday, he will project his computerized inventory on a screen, photo by photo, and encourage discussion on each postcard.

"I'm sure people will be like, 'I remember this, and this is where that building used to be,'" he said.

Regulski continues to search for more postcards from the town, but he thinks there might not be many more out there. These days, he often checks the online auction site, E-Bay, to find more cards.

Often, he's disappointed.

"Now I look on E-Bay and I'm like 'I have it...have it...have it,'" he said.

Still, he continues the search.

"This is pretty much my main hobby," he said.

He said the usual cost for a post card he finds is \$10. But he has paid \$30 to \$40 for a card he doesn't have.

At 29, Regulski knows many of his peers aren't as enthused by history as he is.

He hopes more younger people will begin to cherish their roots.

"I guess I'm one of the exceptions of young people who are interested. More younger people should be concerned about their history. A lot of people don't know how nice the town once was. For me, it's curiosity and fascination about what the town once looked like. And it's almost all forgotten by a lot of people."

1/21/2007

'Everyone cares about everyone.'

By Wade Malcolm - wmalcolm@citizensvoice.com

Befitting of a school with the motto "See how they love one another," many students, teachers and parents described the closeness of the school community as their favorite aspect of Pope John Paul II School.

"Everyone cares about everyone," said eighth-grade teacher Mary Ann Yendrzejewski, who has taught at the school for 24 years. "The people here, it goes beyond the school day. You're part of them. That's what I'm going to miss the most."

During much of its early history, Bernardine Sisters ran the school out of the basement of Holy Trinity Church until a new school was built next door on Hanover Street in 1923.

Invited by the Rev. Roman Wieziolowski, seven Bernardine Sisters oversaw the new facility with an enrollment of 339. Enrollment expanded throughout the decade, reaching the school's peak of 666 students in 1933.

In 1981, the school consolidated with several other parishes, three of which were traditionally Polish. A community of pastors and sisters named the school Pope John Paul II in honor of the Polish pontiff at the time.

Now in debt \$162,000 to the Diocese of Scranton, enrollment at the school has declined steadily in recent years. The demographics of Nanticoke, dominated by senior citizens, will not accommodate a viable school at the site, according to the diocese.

While other schools may be phased out, Pope John Paul II will close immediately at the end of the school year, the diocese ordered. Current students will be accommodated at either St. Aloysius in South Wilkes-Barre or the new elementary center at the former Bishop O'Reilly high school building in Kingston.

"Everybody is a friend here," eighth-grader David Labenski said. "And all the kids and parents know each other."

1/21/2007

Out of Town

By dlevarse@timesleader.com

While the current incarnation of the Nanticoke girls basketball team plows through opponents in its quest for a state title, a former Trojan who helped accomplish that feat received a great honor earlier this month.

Casey Comoroski, who helped lead Nanticoke to a PIAA Class 3A championship in the early '90s, has been inducted into the St. Bonaventure Athletics Hall of Fame thanks to her stellar career with the Bonnies.

She currently holds the titles of Acting Associate Athletic Director and Acting Senior Woman Administrator at Missouri State, but will return to St. Bonaventure on Feb. 17 for the induction ceremony to be honored with four other former athletes.

"This is a singular honor for me and I'm very humbled to be selected," Comoroski said in a Missouri State press release. "It was a special time for me when I was playing for the Bonnies, and it's a tremendous honor to be singled out for my contributions as a student-athlete."

Comoroski was a four-year starter at point guard for the Bonnies and is the all-time program assists leader with 481. She ranks third in career free-throw percentage (.817), seventh in career three-pointers (76) and 11th in career steals (146).

1/20/2007

A new leader for Battery B

Cpt. Joseph A. Ruotolo takes charge during ceremony at the Nanticoke Armory on Friday night.

By rlieback@timesleader.com

In a gymnasium full of soldiers donned in camouflage, it would be hard to see anything but rugged emotions. But as a switch of command occurred for Battery B of the 109th Field Artillery in the Nanticoke Armory Friday night, the sternness suddenly exploded into heartfelt emotion.

This was not so hard to see, considering they were deployed overseas in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2004 with their then commander, Cpt. W. Robert Ohl, of Painted Post, N.Y.

Ohl and his unit entered history, since it was the first time that the unit was deployed overseas for battle since 1943.

During his commencement speech, Ohl said his four most important moments in command could be summed up in four words, scariest, proudest, happiest and saddest, each having an anecdote behind them from the battlefield.

"The scariest moment was in Baghdad," he said. "(And seeing) what every soldier prepares for, and that's battle."

His proudest, when he witnessed his soldiers' "stellar and intimidating" actions on the field. His happiest, when the battery returned home on Feb. 1, 2005, and everyone came home to their families and communities.

And his saddest was the ninth day home from the battery's yearlong deployment in Iraq, the day Sgt. Christopher Daniels was killed in a car crash, Feb. 10, 2005.

"Life is too important and goes quick," Ohl said, as the already straightened backs of his soldiers suddenly became stiffer.

Upon giving the stage to the new commander, Cpt. Joseph A. Ruotolo, of Noxen, Ohl gave him some advice: "Don't ever be overcome by fear and have confidence in the soldiers before you."

Ruotolo joined Battery B in 1994 as a cannoneer, graduated from State Officer Candidate School and was commissioned a second lieutenant of field artillery in 1996. A graduate of Wilkes University, he has served in a number of positions, including being deployed with Battery A as a platoon leader in Operation Iraqi Freedom. He also served an additional tour as part of the 256 Infantry Brigade in Baghdad throughout 2005.

"I know we all want to get to the drinking part, so I'll make this quick," he said at the end of the two-hour ceremony. "I hope I can be as distinguished and respected as Bob. He has the voice of reason and logic."

Another ceremony was supposed to occur Friday, but it was postponed until 8 a.m. today because of inclement weather.

Cpt. Cliff A. Morales of Nuangola will assume command of the Headquarters Battery in the 109th Field Artillery Armory in Wilkes-Barre from outgoing Commander Gerard M. Wrazien of Wyoming.

Morales served as office strength manager full-time for the guard. He enlisted in Battery B as a fire direction specialist in 1991. He graduated from Mansfield University and Temple University School of Law and received direct commission as a Second Lieutenant of Field Artillery in 2001.

He has been deployed to Germany as a platoon leader as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002 and to Iraq as a platoon leader with Battery B in 2004.

Wrazien has been selected to serve as Deputy Inspector General of the PAARNG at Fort Indiantown Gap. He enlisted in Battery C as a fire

direction specialists in 1990. He graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant of Field Artillery following graduation from Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Ga.

1/19/2007

Nanticoke officials take aim at problem properties

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Last June, Nanticoke's council and mayor promised an increased crackdown on problem properties.

By the numbers, they were successful. Code enforcement collected \$124,692 in fines and fees in 2006, which councilman Joe Dougherty said was \$52,623 more than 2005.

This year, city officials say they plan to do even better, with an aggressive code enforcement campaign to make Nanticoke a cleaner, safer place to live. They will also work harder on ways to deal with the creator of the biggest code enforcement headaches: absentee landlords. The financial recovery plan, which council took the first step in adopting Wednesday, contains recommendations not only for making the city financially healthy, but also improving the quality of life. Better code enforcement is important for residents, who expect something in return for the higher taxes they will be paying.

"If you're going to pay for a service, you should get excellent service," Dougherty said.

"It will bring in some revenue, but it will really clean the town up," Mayor John Bushko said.

But first, city officials have to comply with some rules themselves.

"It appears that the entire system of code enforcement needs to be completely restructured from the ground up," the recovery plan states. It suggests, "immediately upon adoption of the recovery plan ... council shall appoint a committee chaired by the commissioner for code enforcement to develop specific policies for the restructuring."

City officials never even adopted the Uniform Construction Code, according to the recovery plan, much less set up an appeals board.

"There was no board prior to (Wednesday) night that I'm aware of," solicitor Keith Saunders said.

To remedy the problem, council created a code enforcement appeals board and named residents Paul Huber Jr., John Minsavage and Ron Kamowski to it. All three are — or have been — contractors, Bushko said.

The state made the Uniform Construction Code, which calls for at least five categories of inspection for all residential and commercial construction, mandatory in 2004.

At that time, municipalities could either opt to have their code official do the inspections, hire a third-party inspector or have the state Department of Labor and Industry perform them. Municipalities with their own inspector had to set up an appeals board consisting of people with experience in construction-related fields.

Although the financial recovery plan recommends a full-time code enforcement officer, Dougherty said council will have to discuss it.

1/19/2007

Facility's closure will leave Nanticoke without a Catholic school

Pope John Paul II shares distress

By sdelazio@timesleader.com

With Bishop Joseph Martino's recent announcement of several Catholic school closures in Luzerne County comes the closing of Nanticoke's only Catholic school, Pope John Paul II.

The first school in the United States to be named after the late pope will close its doors after this school year.

Students from Pope John Paul II will combine with students from St. Aloysius in Wilkes-Barre, and attend a new elementary center in Kingston.

"We are disappointed," said a school official who asked not to be named. "We put together our feedback and provided a map, just like the high schools had done, but we're in the same boat they are," she said.

Pope John Paul II was formed by the consolidation of Nanticoke's three Catholic grade schools, Holy Trinity, St. Stanislaus and St. John Newmann, and opened in 1982.

Supporters, faculty members and families of students at Pope John Paul II, which currently houses just over 300 students from grades pre-kindergarten to eighth, provided the diocese with a plan to become a kindergarten through fourth-grade building.

"We hoped we put together a viable plan, and from our perspective it was," the official and spokeswoman said.

"I think closing Pope John Paul School is a disgrace," said Thomas Gernhart, whose two daughters attend the school. "I understand enrollment is down, but at the same token, people are not gonna want to send their kids to Kingston."

Gernhart said he began looking at other schools to send his daughters, Elizabeth, who will enter kindergarten in the fall, and Erica, who is in sixth grade, for the next year.

"I looked at St. Jude's in Mountain Top, but I'm not sure what I'm going to do, public or private," Gernhart said it all depends on how far his daughters will have to travel to attend school. "I don't want my kids to spend an hour on a bus."

Erica Gernhart said the closing of her school was very disappointing. "We all really wanted to go to eighth grade together," she said.

"Our teachers told us it might close, and then the bishop came on TV and said it would."

Erica said she looks forward to going to a new school to meet new people but, "I'd rather stay at Pope John Paul."

1/18/2007

Nanticoke approves long-term recovery plan on first reading

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

Council cast the first vote Wednesday to adopt a long-term plan that will restore the city's financial health.

Despite the fact that the Act 47 recovery plan contains income tax hikes, there was no negative feedback from the approximately 25 people attending the meeting.

"Nobody complained about it. I was surprised," Mayor John Bushko said.

The only resident to comment specifically about the plan was Mary Alice Brokenshire, who congratulated the Pennsylvania Economy League for creating it and council for passing it.

"Mayor Bushko has taken the initiative to turn the city around," she said. "Previous administrations took out loan after loan because insufficient money was coming in to pay expenses, until the city had over \$2 million in debt. Last May, city officials asked the state Department of Community and Economic Development to declare Nanticoke distressed under Act 47, the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act.

Brokenshire blamed the problems on years of "incompetent, inaccurate bookkeeping and accounting practices" and financial mismanagement by former officials.

"This city has been neglected, and has been run for the past 30 years by irresponsible, uneducated, untrained, unscrupulous... administrations," she said.

Under the new recovery plan, city officials will:

Reduce the total real estate tax from 60.38 mills to 44 mills

Increase the city's share of earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent

Increase the non-resident earned income tax, or "commuter tax" from 1.0 percent to 1.33 percent

Council has to vote again during the next meeting on Feb. 7 to officially adopt the plan. After that, city officials can go to Luzerne County Court to ask for the earned income tax increases.

Although it won't happen on Feb. 7, council will also hire a city administrator. Instead of each council member being responsible for a city department, administrative decisions should be delegated to a central person such as "a respected and effective City Administrator," the plan states.

There have been several qualified applicants since the position was advertised on the employment Web site Monster.com recently, councilman Bill O'Malley said.

1/18/2007

Nanticoke adopts recovery plan

City will raise commuter and earned income taxes, control spending under state Act 47.

By rlieback@timesleader.com

On the agenda at Wednesday night's public meeting: the proposed Act 47 Recovery Plan.

The action taken by council: plan implemented by unanimous vote.

"This is a big step forward to clean up our past," Mayor John Bushko said. "This year is off to a great start now that we have the plan."

Nanticoke had been struggling with money woes for years and was declared "financially distressed" in May by the state Department of Community and Economic Development under provisions of Act 47.

According to a study completed by the Pennsylvania Economy League, which served as recovery plan coordinator for the city, Nanticoke's financial troubles are due to a pattern of financial mismanagement and because the regular warnings of the auditors were left unheeded.

Under the plan, the city will get a handle on its finances by raising the commuter tax to 1.33 percent so that it has funds to invest in infrastructure, and raising the earned-income tax to 1.5 percent from the current 0.5 percent.

The city also will control employment contracts and in the future make employees contribute more for their health and other benefits.

Resident Mary Alice Brokenshire said she wants the city to fix its problems by emphasizing the need for an "educated, qualified and competent" city administrator and code enforcement officer.

"The city had years of incompetence that needs to be fixed," she said. "We need to seek solutions to the problems and the healing process will begin."

Part of the problem was also unpaid city property taxes, Treasurer Al Wytoshek said. He said 412 families failed to pay a total of \$82,243 in taxes in 2006.

The city still hasn't filled the city manager post that has been empty since April, but it is being advertised on Monster.com. Councilman William O'Malley said the city has budgeted about \$50,000 for the position.

In other business, the council:

Opened four bids for electrical work at the municipal building and accepted the lowest bid of \$23,167 from Edison Electrical Construction in Jermyn.

Appointed three people to the Code Enforcement Appeals Board.

Accepted a letter of resignation from the city's longtime electrical inspector, Joseph Novak, who will retire on Jan. 31.

1/12/2007

Greater Nanticoke Area School District considers increasing its earned income tax

By Elizabeth Skrapits

The Greater Nanticoke Area School Board is considering raising its earned income tax.

The board will have a special meeting at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 7, for a public hearing on increasing earned income tax by 0.5 percent to give homeowners real estate tax relief.

Under Act 1 of 2006, districts can shift the tax burden from property tax to an earned income tax. Greater Nanticoke Area's tax study committee recommended a 0.5 percent earned income tax increase for district residents earning more than \$12,000 a year, bringing the district's total income tax to 1 percent.

That would give each qualifying property owner a \$242 tax rebate, board member Mark Yeager said Thursday.

Nanticoke has a 1 percent earned income tax, 0.5 percent of which goes to the district and 0.5 percent to the city. Nanticoke officials are planning to raise residents' earned income tax to 1.5 percent, or 2 percent overall. If the district increases earned income tax, Nanticoke residents will pay 2.5 percent.

Residents of Plymouth Township, which is financially distressed like Nanticoke, already pay a total of 2 percent earned income tax, and would also pay 2.5 percent if the GNA increase goes through.

In other business, the board authorized Superintendent Anthony Perrone to form a strategic planning committee. It will draw up a long-range plan for the district after examining all aspects of its schools, board president Jeff Kozlofski said.

Teachers, students and community members are invited to participate, and can call Perrone's office at 735-1270.

"We'll listen to anybody. Anything helps," Kozlofski said. "In fact, we're looking for input from the public."

1/12/2007

Financially distressed Nanticoke seeks city manager

Position has been vacant since April, and state agency helping with recovery recommends keeping someone in post.

By mguydish@timesleader.com

Council has started looking for someone to fill the city manager post that, though recommended by a state agency trying to help the city get back on firm financial footing, has been empty since April.

The city posted the job this week on Monster.com, an online employment classified ad service. Councilman William O'Malley said the city has budgeted about \$50,000 for the job.

Nanticoke has been struggling with money woes for years, and in May was declared "financially distressed" by the state Department of Community and Economic Development under provisions of the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, known as Act 47. The Pennsylvania Economy League's Central Division is serving as recovery plan coordinator for the city.

Bushko said that the league recommends the city keep a full-time manager. The post has been vacant since Greg Gulick was "let go" in April.

O'Malley said council has been slow to fill the post because it wants to get the right person. He noted that managers tend to locally bounce from one municipality to another – Gulick is now the zoning/code enforcement officer in Pittston – and that they placed the ad on Monster.com in hopes of drawing applicants from outside the area. Council will probably advertise the job in local papers next week, he added.

"The biggest problem we are having is finding people who have the qualifications that we need," O'Malley said, adding that it's critical to find someone who can manage the ins and outs of the upcoming Act 47 recovery plan.

Bushko also noted that leaving the post empty did save a little money as the city worked out the recovery plan. Anthony Margelewicz, hired as city clerk and fiscal manager in February 2006, was handling the day-to-day duties of city manager, but was "let go about three months ago," Bushko said, and the post has been vacant since.

The Monster.com posting lists a lengthy job description along with requirements of a bachelor's degree in public administration or a related field and a minimum of five years in public sector management and/or training.

Bushko and O'Malley said it is unlikely council will take any action on the job at the next meeting (Jan. 17) because that agenda has one huge item: the proposed financial recovery plan. "The next meeting is a big meeting with us accepting or rejecting parts of the plan," Bushko said.

Still, filling the manager post has become a priority, and both O'Malley and Bushko said they expect council to hire someone as soon as possible, but not to rush it.

"It's more important for us to hit the nail on the head the first time than to put someone in there quickly," O'Malley said.

1/12/2007

Catholic school ruling may affect Nanticoke sport schedule

Board member says schedules may change, football season may shorten if schools close.

By sdelazio@timesleader.com

Greater Nanticoke Area School Board member Robert Raineri announced Thursday the district might have to shorten its football season, and make changes to all other sports schedules for the next school year.

“It isn’t going to be easy to do,” Raineri said. “The school district will have to revamp all their sporting schedules.” The decision is dependent on the Diocese of Scranton decision regarding possible school consolidation, since Nanticoke area schools play against Catholic schools like Bishop O’Reilly.

Raineri said the topic has been tossed around and will be discussed at a meeting in March. A final decision will be made in May.

In other business, the board authorized the superintendent to establish a District Strategic Planning Committee, comprised of teachers, students and community members.

The board granted permission for the South Valley Babe Ruth Fast Pitch League to use the baseball field at K.M. Smith Elementary School for practices.

The board accepted repairs made to district buildings and grounds, which included dry wall and primer, and announced that vision and hearing tests were being conducted throughout the schools.

Twelve Greater Nanticoke Area School District teachers were granted reimbursements for courses taken at Wilkes University, King’s College and Carlow University; and four teachers received an increment increase based on additional credit accumulation to their degrees that will take affect this month.

1/11/2007

Relief for skateboarders in sight

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

As a member of the municipal authority, which owns the Kanjorski Center at 60 E. Main St., Ron Kamowski is tired of chasing skateboarders away from the front of the building and its tempting concrete stairs.

As skateboarders, Mack Wydawski, 16, and Mike Holena and Tyler Woods, both 15, are tired of being chased away from the Kanjorski Center — and the Greater Nanticoke Area School District grounds, and the Weis Market parking lot, and all the other good places to skate in the city.

“You can’t go anywhere in this town without getting kicked out,” Wydawski said early Wednesday afternoon while the three waited for a hearing in front of Magisterial District Judge Donald Whittaker.

A solution to the skateboarders’ and the municipal authority’s complaints could come as early as this summer. Later on Wednesday, state Rep. John Yudichak, D-Nanticoke, said obstacles have been cleared and a long-awaited skateboard park will be in the works.

Six teenagers, including Holena, Wydawski and Woods, were among the first to be cited by Nanticoke police under a new policy by the municipal authority.

In a move to deter skateboarders at the Kanjorski Center, the authority asked police to charge skaters with trespassing, which carries a maximum fine of \$300 plus court costs of \$129, instead of using Nanticoke’s skateboarding ordinance, which has a fine of only \$5.

Whittaker said after the hearings he would notify the six of his decision by mail.

“The unfair thing is, the parents have to pay if I do find them guilty,” he said, noting that most of the kids are too young to have jobs.

The municipal authority just spent \$15,000 to clean up the Kanjorski Center to make it marketable, Kamowski said. Skateboarders cause thousands of dollars in damage to the granite and handrails and make the stairs a slippery liability with wax, he said.

“If they can’t respect a public building and they’ve been warned numerous times. ... I say they deserve the fine,” Kamowski said. “What else is going to work?”

Colette Zendarski said ever since her 13-year-old son James was cited, she and his father have kept him away from the Kanjorski Center. But she believes kids will continue to hang out there.

The South Valley Partnership has some government funding in place and has already bought skate park equipment, but a legal tangle with properties that make up the site stalled the project. The issues have been resolved by the city’s former attorney Joe Lach, Yudichak said.

1/7/2007

Drug War Casualty

By bkalinowski@citizensvoice.com

After his sudden death last month, the family of 21-year-old Alphonse Rende requested his obituary end with the phrase, “He was a casualty of Luzerne County and America’s failed war on drugs.”

The words represented the tragic reality his father, Al Rende, had to face. A social worker, the elder Rende has dedicated his life to crusading against illegal drug use.

Rende believes his son’s untimely death could serve as a wake up call to parents throughout Luzerne County.

“I ran into several people who thanked me because I wrote that in the obituary. I did it because it’s only going to get worse. The drug dealers are winning,” Rende said.

Just weeks after burying his son, Rende gathered the courage to speak about the years-long struggle to keep Alphonse clean and the pain of losing his son to drugs.

Alphonse was found dead in a Nanticoke apartment the morning of Dec. 5 after a night of partying with friends. Preliminary tests show his blood contained a mixture of alcohol, cocaine and opiate, his father said.

Opiates include heroin and prescription pills like hydrocodene and Oxycontin. The coroner’s office couldn’t comment on which was in Alphonse’s system.

“I’ve never accepted the fact kids could get any type of drugs they want. Obviously it got here from Afghanistan or Peru or wherever to my son,” he said. “My issue is how did it get in his system and who do we hold accountable?”

There were 43 deaths ruled drug overdoses in Luzerne County in 2006, and about 15 others were most likely overdoses, but not officially ruled that way, according to Coroner Dr. Jack Consalvo.

The numbers reflect overdose deaths through early December. The cause of several deaths that occurred in the last few weeks of 2006 won’t be determined until toxicology reports are complete, Consalvo said.

Living in ‘two different worlds’

Rende likened his son’s life to a paradox between “two different worlds.”

There was Alphonse, the loving family member, and Alphonse, the young man who couldn’t stay away from acquaintances who led him down the wrong path,

“And he was trying to balance the two,” the grieving father lamented recently from his Newport Township home.

Alphonse held a steady job as a mason with a local construction company, and his boss trusted him enough to allow him to take a work truck home with him each day. He and his father went fishing, watched football games on television, worked on cars, and even challenged each other to games of chess.

He was polite, respectful and drug-free around family members, his father said. But Alphonse wasn’t around his family a whole lot after turning 18.

A setback came in 2004 when, after high school, Alphonse wanted to join the military but was not accepted because he was overweight.

“I always said before this happened, he had a better chance of surviving in Iraq than on the streets here with drugs,” Rende said.

Alphonse soon moved in with friends and became distant from loved ones.

“When he was hanging out with his buddies, I wouldn’t see him for months,” the distraught father said.

Rende did not consider his son a “drug addict.” He said Alphonse simply partied too much. At those parties, Rende learned, alcohol and drugs were plentiful, and Alphonse couldn’t resist the temptation to experiment.

“I wanted to ruin my son’s party, but it was virtually impossible,” Rende said.

A son’s battle

Rende and Alphonse’s mother, Annette, split up when Alphonse was 4 years old. Alphonse lived with his mother and grew up in Staten Island, N.Y., while Rende moved to the Wyoming Valley.

Rende brought his son to the Nanticoke area when he was 14, amid “suspicions” he had begun dabbling with drugs in New York and had made some friends who were bad influences, his father said.

Those friends used drugs and idolized gangster rap music stars, according to Rende.

“He was falling into that,” Rende said. “You have those rap artists dressed in prison clothes and they were glorifying incarceration and drug use.”

Roxanne Rende, 24, Alphonse’s sister, recalled the period when her brother left for a new life in a new town.

“I believed my dad saved him in time,” she said.

Roxanne, who had her own struggle with drugs, said she and Alphonse made a promise before he left to be drug free. She thought he would. But about a year after moving to the Wyoming Valley, Alphonse was cited by police for underage drinking.

In the weeks that followed, Rende said his son showed signs of alcohol and drug use — not waking up for school, having no ambition and showing an “inability to manage life.” Rende then committed his 15-year-old son to drug rehabilitation in Clear Brook Lodge in Shickshinny, where Alphonse stayed for three months.

At age 17, a few of Alphonse’s friends from Staten Island moved to the area, much to his father’s dismay. Alphonse began another downward spiral, and was arrested again for underage drinking.

This time, though, he was sent for several months to an intensive anti-drug and alcohol boot camp in Schuylkill County that was run like a military institution. He came out clean and stayed that way briefly.

One night, Alphonse, who was on probation, missed his curfew imposed by a juvenile court judge. Instead of covering for his son, Rende reported him to the judge. Alphonse was sent back to the boot camp until his 18th birthday. Rende said things were never the same again between him and his son. Alphonse later moved in with his friends, seeking a more independent life, his dad said.

“I used tough love on my son, and my kid didn’t come back,” Rende said.

Though admitting he was surprised by the availability of illegal drugs locally, Rende said he does not regret relocating his son to the area. It gave Alphonse a better chance to turn his life around, he said.

A father’s struggle

Rende is a certified drug addiction counselor with bachelor’s and master’s degrees in social work. As much as he tried, he couldn’t save his own son, Rende said, acknowledging that drug dependency could even overpower a father-son bond.

“I think any parent who goes through something like this thinks there’s more they could have done. But I don’t think there’s more I could have done. The only other alternative was to follow him around for the last six years wherever he went and be there. And that was humanly impossible,” said the 44-year-old, who has three other children.

Despite Alphonse’s problems, Rende said he was shocked by his son’s death. Signs that Alphonse was deep into drug use weren’t there, he says.

“A lot of people have a vision of someone with tracks in his arms, uncontrollable, stealing from the family. My son wasn’t like that,” Rende said.

Rende got involved in the drug counseling field after his son’s early struggles. A manual laborer at the time and in his 30s, he decided to attend college for the first time.

He joined several community groups. In 2002, he started a local, proactive drug-fighting group, Citizens Drug Policy Forum, which recommended a community philosophy Rende believed could win the war on drugs — focus less on putting addicts in jail and more on treatment and providing outlets, like recreation and community centers.

For Alphonse, his dad's message might have come too late.

A life lost

Rende was on his way to mentor some young people and spread his anti-drug message the morning he got the call he always knew was possible, but was not ready for. A friend called and said Alphonse was dead from a suspected drug overdose.

"I was trying to save someone else's children, but you never think this is going to happen to your kid, even if you think there's a chance it could happen," Rende said. "I just couldn't believe it."

Since the funeral, Rende said he's been reflecting a lot and even second-guessing his parenting.

"I really need to re-evaluate things to see how I could have been more effective in getting the message out. I'm trying to assess what I could have done better," he said.

He has generally come to grips with the fact that there was a point after which he no longer could control his son's life. He had to let him go to try to be a man.

Alphonse leaves behind a family struggling to deal with losing a loved one to a drug culture that is more widespread than most want to believe, Rende said.

Rende feels pain, and even embarrassment, about his son's plight. But to remain silent, he says, would only diminish any chance to save other young people who are walking the same road Alphonse did.

Some of those youngsters are people Alphonse once called "friend." Rende said something much worse might have been in store for the whole group of friends had this tragedy not occurred. A strong believer in God, Rende says he thinks the Lord choose to take his son to save others.

"Hopefully he gave his life so his friends could live."

1/4/2007

Residents give their opinions on Nanticoke recovery plan

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

The people who gave input at a public hearing on the city's new financial recovery plan had mixed reactions, but most agreed a plan of some kind was necessary to make the distressed city financially stable.

Representatives from the state Department of Community and Economic Development and Nanticoke's financial recovery coordinator Pennsylvania Economy League came to hear from the approximately 100 people in the Greater Nanticoke Area High School auditorium on Wednesday.

Although 16 people signed up to speak, only about half of them took advantage of the opportunity. And PEL received no letters at all from people affected by the plan since the public comment period opened on Dec. 14, Executive Director Gerald Cross said.

Years of bad accounting, uncontrolled spending and annual borrowing to make ends meet got Nanticoke into debt, Cross said. If the city continued on its current course, by 2009 Nanticoke would run a deficit of more than \$1 million each year, he said.

"My first concern when I read the plan was, 'who was watching the store here in Nanticoke?'" business owner Walter Griffith said. "Why did it take so long to recognize there was a problem?"

Griffith asked if city employees' contracts can be re-negotiated, but Cross said under the law the city can't change them until they expire. When they do, the plan contains things the city needs to do, such as make employees contribute toward health care cost increases, and give no post-retirement health care to new hires.

Resident Rich Novak didn't think the plan goes far enough. City officials must cut expenses and make city government more efficient, he said.

"Council should assure us they're going to change the way they do business before they start asking us for more money," Novak said.

Resident Dennis Butler protested raising residents' earned income tax from 0.5 percent to 1.5 percent.

"You're putting the burden of the support of this town on the minority," he said.

In regards to a proposed 0.33 percent "commuter tax" that would only be paid by non-residents who work in Nanticoke, Butler said it is unjust because they don't have the opportunity to vote for city officials.

"It's taxation without representation," Butler said, the phrase later echoed by a woman who only gave her name as Janet. She said she worked in the city, and called the tax "very unfair."

Resident Mark Yeager didn't think it went far enough, saying it should be 0.5 percent or 0.75 percent.

1/3/2007

Financial recovery plan will alter Nanticoke tax rate

By eskrapits@citizensvoice.com

When council and Mayor John Bushko re-established all the city's taxes on Tuesday, they held the line — but only for now.

As required by law, the officials passed ordinances setting taxes for the new year, keeping them at 2006 rates.

However, that should change after council adopts a financial recovery plan, which it plans to do in about two weeks.

Nanticoke's recovery coordinator, the Pennsylvania Economy League, drew up a plan calling for an earned income tax increase from 0.5

percent to 1.5 percent, and a new 0.33 percent “commuter tax” on people who work in the city but do not live there. The city would have to get permission from Luzerne County Court before the new and increased taxes could be levied.

The plan also would allow a decrease in real estate tax from 60 to 44 mills. A mill is \$1 on every \$1,000 of assessed property value.

PEL representatives will give a presentation on the plan and allow public comment during a hearing tonight at 7 in the Greater Nanticoke Area High School. People can give their input, but the hearing is not a debate, PEL Executive Director Gerald Cross said.

Bushko encouraged residents to attend, stating, “If you don’t agree with something, you should actually let everyone know.”

In other business, attorney Joseph Lach stepped down after a year as Nanticoke’s solicitor. He was replaced by attorney Keith Saunders, a city resident whose law office is in Plymouth.

“It’s too much,” Lach said when asked why he was giving up his position with Nanticoke. “I wanted to be helpful within the city, but it’s just too much to try to do two municipalities that have the responsibilities that come with distressed status.” Lach said he will remain solicitor for neighboring Plymouth Township, which like Nanticoke, is in Act 47, the state program for financially troubled municipalities.