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Was the voice of voters heard?

Last month voters voiced their frustration and rejected 14 of the county's 24 proposed tax levies. Statewide, voters said no to 315 of 537 budgets, the highest rejection rate in 30 years.

Rosalie Lamonte, the Sussex County executive superintendent of schools, pointed out that tax frustration can drive April budget votes.

"It's part of the process. It gives people a voice," she said.

But was that voice heard?

After the voting, municipal officials, whose job it is to make appropriate adjustments to the defeated budgets, spent numerous hours reviewing spending plans and hearing impassioned pleas from school board members.

The result of all that deliberation and angst? Less than 2 percent reduction overall from the original proposals within Sussex County districts.

Granted, the voter turnout was not exactly stellar with only about one in four registered voters choosing to weigh in on budgets and school board candidates. And in some cases where the budgets were defeated, it was not by an overwhelming majority. But the people did speak, and a defeat is a defeat.

Regardless of the vote margin, the budget trimming was minor. Even where the voice of the people could be considered loud, even a mandate, such as in Sparta where nearly 70 percent of the voters said no, the final changes amounted to 1.23 percent less than the original nearly \$50 million budget. In Fredon, which did not have such a clear outrage with a vote split of 49-51 percent, the final tax levy was a mere .15 percent (that is POINT one five of 1 percent) less than the defeated one — \$20,000 off the \$6.9 million tax levy. Interestingly, Fredon's proposed tax levy was already less than the previous year but voters still thought there was room for more savings. Frankford, likewise, made little change in its budget, trimming .29 of 1 percent from its \$6.85 million tax levy.

The largest cut percentagewise was in Montague where the assigned parties reduced the \$5.5 million tax levy by 3.6 percent, with the resulting approved tax levy amounting to only .2 percent over the previous year.

Most of those voters who cast "no" votes no doubt feel betrayed by the process. The token trims are indeed an affront to those who were involved enough to go to the voting booths. Such response also supports an apathetic electorate who rightfully could ask: What's the point?

Defenders could counter that the process works and that overall, the scrutinized budgets passed muster, justifying the original proposed levies. Those tasked with the review certainly spent more time poring over the figures than the average citizen, and presumably were more knowledgeable with what can and shouldn't be cut.

Still, such slight changes to defeated budgets are a slight to the voters.

If the law allows voters to reject school tax levies, a more defined response is necessary. Gov. Chris Christie, who suggested voters reject budgets in districts where teachers did not agree to pay freezes, would do away with the votes altogether in cases where the proposed levy stayed within the state-mandated capped increase, which could be lowered. To carry that further, districts that sought, but failed to get voter approval of higher increases would be forced to trim to the cap.

This process would eliminate unfruitful debate and let the voters' voice be heard.

ON THE WEB: READER POLL

Question

Sussex County Technical School has decided to close its swimming pool as of Aug. 6 because of the high cost of repairs. Who do you think should take over the pool maintenance and operation?

The county	25.8%	184
A private entity	28.5%	203
A nonprofit organization	9.3%	66
Tech should find a way to reopen the pool	27.9%	199
Other	8.6%	61
Total votes		713

Comments

I was shocked to see some think Tech should find a way to open the pool. Why? Cut teaching programs? I fear for the lack of intelligence in this county!

The county can open the pool and the users pay for it. Swimming is important sport for jr. and sr. high schoolers and public.

Keep it closed. Times are tough. It seems every day one reads in the papers that schools, industry, individuals, states or countries need some type of financial assistance. Enough. Learn to go without until the economy improves.

I think the county should help.

Close it down for good. The pool is an expense that NO ONE can afford at this time. It is way too expensive to save and the cost of maintaining it as well as the insurance and the staff to keep it in working order is just too much. A pool is something you have when you can afford extras, not when we need to cut the budget and still provide a good quality education at a price the taxpayer can afford. When will people get it into their thick heads? The party is over. Now it is time to grow up and pay the piper for our foolish choices in the past. Maybe we will learn that just because you can spend money it is NO reason to spend it foolishly ... like we clearly did in the past.

Real men not afraid to shed their image

COLUMN: GREGORY J. RUMMO

Up here in the boonies there are lots of real men.

This begs the question, what is a real man? A real man is not someone who drives a 4X4 or who rides a Harley. It's not someone who wears leather or Levi's or who sports a tattoo on a bulging bicep or who displays a favorite football or baseball team's logo out on the front lawn. It's not someone who eats red meat or quiche. It has nothing to do with firearms or patriotism. We're all patriotic up here in the Boonies but not all patriots are real men.

What makes a man a real man is his shed out behind the house.

A shed is a man's secret lair, the place where he keeps all of his dangerous stuff like chain saws and weed whackers and rows of smelly liquids that could kill anything that crawls or flies. It's his personal armory, his stockpile of chemical weapons; it's where he arms himself to do battle with the flora and fauna that threaten to encroach on his existence, overrunning his house and his family like an army of invaders from outer space — or at least from those outer spaces on the fringes of his yard.

Show me a man without a shed and I'll show you a mere shell of a human being. The battle beckons but he is unarmed and thus helpless to respond — a dodger perhaps? Or worse yet, a coward? — or perhaps just stuck behind a desk and apathetic to the war all around him; a greater tragedy still.

It was mere days after we moved into



GREGORY J. RUMMO

our home in the boonies over 18 years ago that I contacted a builder to come and erect a shed on our property. I had already ordered a lawn mower, a snow blower, a leaf blower and all of the other assorted smoke belching noise makers that would identify me as a man of the boonies to my neighbors. But I wasn't yet a real man until I had my shed where I could store my arsenal.

But late last year, despite an initial two coats of outdoor paint, the enemy prevailed. My shed is rotting into the ground.

It's a sad site. It's actually leaning back on itself probably from the weight of all the stuff I have accumulated over the years. It's so cramped in there that I have to empty half of the stuff just to get at the lawn mower, a maneuver that usually results in bumping my head on the door frame at least once followed by the exercise of unbelievable self-control to avoid uttering a string of expletives. The bottoms of the doors are falling off in wet, finger-sized splinters. The latch is covered with a patina of iron oxide. There are oil stains on the floor in various places where the seals on power machines hanging from the ceiling gave out over the years and there's a lachrymatory stench from the toxic mixture of biological and chemical hazards that is overwhelming even for a real man like me.

Surprisingly none of this has been able to thwart the annual invasion of cave crickets that thrives in the foul environment. Every time I open the doors from June to September I am scared out of my wits by several dozen of the fat,

brown and white speckled creatures that all spring off the doors at once, scampering under the space between the shed and the gravel to escape the daylight.

This past weekend, I decided I had had enough of the foul smell, the lumps on the back of my head, and the army of cave crickets overrunning the place. Heading north on Route 23, farther into the boonies, I found John Brady Sheds in West Milford and I say "found" because if you're not careful, you could drive right on by never having known the place is there.

His showroom is his front yard. His workshop is an addition and a garage attached to the house, set back several hundred yards from the highway at the end of a loose gravel driveway along which are piles of lumber neatly stacked.

I had arrived in real man land.

We chatted for 15 minutes during which time I got the tour. That's all it took. "I'm sold. Work out the numbers," I said, "and throw in a window, a window box planter, a shelf inside and a coat of stain."

I now have three weeks during which time I must empty what has been my fortress of solitude for the last 18 years, going through almost two decades of accumulated treasures, deciding what goes into the garbage and what stays, followed by the coup de grace when the shed itself is demolished to make room for the new.

That will be a sad day but I can take it. I am a real man.

...
(Gregory J. Rummo is a real man and the author of "The View from the Grass Roots." Contact him at GregRummo.com)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Victory worth 22 cents for Sparta taxpayers

Editor:

My wife and I worked tirelessly to help pass the Sparta school budget. We engaged state officials, organized rallies, wrote letters to newspapers and spoke at public meetings, all to help citizens understand the consequences of a failed school budget. Regrettably, the budget and second questions were rejected by a 70 percent majority and led to a \$600,000 "haircut" by the Township Council. Despite my disgust over this outcome, I will give this moment its due. Democracy is alive and well in Sparta. Socialism and unions are dead. Sparta citizens have spoken out against higher taxes by exercising their constitutional right to vote. So now I must ask you, what will you do with your 22 cents?

The rejection of the school budget, second questions and \$600,000 reduction by the Township Council will save the average Sparta household \$113. However, since local property taxes are deductible on state and federal income tax returns (in essence acting as a subsidy), the \$113 is reduced to around \$79 after taxes, or about 22 cents per day. While you ponder what you will do with your democratically engineered windfall, let me tell you how Sparta's children and schools will now be made to suffer.

Class sizes will increase at all levels: kindergarten by 70 percent; grades one through five by 25 percent; middle school by 40 percent. School supplies will be cut by 60 percent. Athletic programs will be cut by 50 percent. No more music or chorus. Despite ranking in the lowest quartile of comparative school districts for per pupil spending, the citizens have demanded these cuts, even if it means paying \$1 million more in unemployment to make teachers stay home rather than having them in the classroom teaching our children.

Ironically, our children's fate was partially determined by two rather inefficiently spending public entities, Sussex County and the Township Council. Sussex County limited the proposed Board of Education tax increase to 9.9 percent. This necessitated the two failed second budget questions. Keep in mind that Sussex County's budget of \$108 million for 155,000 residents represents 23 percent and 5 percent more spending per person than Bergen and Morris counties, respectively. Simply bringing county spending in line with Bergen County could have saved Sparta residents nearly \$3 million.

Next the Township Council cut \$600,000 from the Sparta school budget. Keep in mind that Sparta's current municipal budget is \$24 million, \$2 million more than neighboring Jefferson and Vernon, despite these towns having 10 percent and 20 percent more population, respectively, than Sparta. Simply bringing municipal spending in line with these towns could have saved Sparta residents nearly \$7 million.

So, have you decided what you will do with your extra 22 cents yet? Allow me to suggest that you make one local phone call from a public telephone each day. This may not be much of a benefit if you upgraded recently to the latest \$500 iPhone or Blackberry. If not, democracy may mean, "Adios elementary school Spanish, hola upgraded cell phone!" If you do not have your cell phone handy, perhaps you could borrow your child's cell phone. Ironic that the monthly cost

of your child's cell phone greatly exceeds the costs to fully fund his or her school(s).

Regardless of my personal feelings on this matter, I say to the victors go the spoils. Congratulations to those who voted "no" to the school budget and "yes" to lower taxes. This moment is yours. Revel in it. You are great Americans. Let (tax) freedom ring. Accept my best wishes as you decide how to spend your extra 22 cents. Just do me one favor, never ask to borrow my cell phone.

Peter Huhn
Sparta

Why doesn't state enforce bear laws?

Editor:

I am very strongly opposed to hunting black bears for sport; it does nothing to reduce the problem of bears raiding dumpsters and bird-feeders. In fact, incidents of this sort have increased in nearby states where hunting is allowed. Most important, the rare instances where black bears have harmed people always happened in states that allowed black bears to be hunted for pleasure. As long as game commissions do everything possible to keep bears as trophies for hunters, the situation will not change.

Why has the Division of Fish and Wildlife refused to issue citations for dumpsters and garbage containers that are not bear-resistant? The vast majority of dumpsters at diners and restaurants are not bear-proofed. During the past six years, only four tickets were issued. Will the taxpayer get a refund?

Another serious question is: Why did the Division of Fish and Wildlife tell residents of bear country to keep their garbage in garages or sheds? What happens is this: The bear smells the garbage or food, enters the garage or shed, is labeled dangerous, and killed. This is despite the bears never having entered the main house. I think the reason for this is because Fish and Wildlife wants as many "home entries" as possible to gain support for a trophy hunt.

The New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife exists for the sole purpose of building and keeping animal populations high to suit hunters' demands. The money from hunting licenses fills the pockets of this state agency, along with tax dollars. Only 1.4 percent of the state's citizens hunt. The rest have no voice because the Fish and Wildlife Council is composed entirely of hunters. This unfortunate situation needs to be changed.

Jean Mollack
Highland Lakes

Tech pool important for lots of reasons

Editor:

As a child I couldn't have asked for a better location to grow up than Sussex County. There have been countless memories I acquired over the years that shaped my life and, I believe, many others' lives as well. These experiences include going to the Farm and Horse Show, visiting Space Farms for the first time, the Franklin Mine, summertime, going to the High Point Monument and hunting and fishing with friends and family, but the one thing that meant the most was swimming. And now, the home of Sussex County swimming, the Sussex Tech pool, is in serious jeopardy.

Most people may not understand the

importance of this facility, but for decades it has been the source for Sussex County swimming, whether it be first-time swim lessons, first aid training, lifeguard training, aquacize classes, family recreational swimming and, last but not least, competitive swimming. Competitive swimming is and was a large part of my life since I swam for the Newton summer team, Kittatinny Regional, and currently have the pleasure of volunteer coaching with the High Point Wildcats. With each of these teams I have experienced great success as a swimmer and coach and some of the best races I experienced have been in the Sussex Tech pool.

Without that pool there would be no Sussex County swimming. I know some people may not understand high school swimming and the importance of Sussex Tech, but I can assure you that the swimming community does recognize it, and we don't want our pool to close. If we have to, the swimming community will come together and help do whatever is necessary to keep our home open. It is my hope that future children will have the same great experiences that I and many others have had.

When I say the names Bohman, Olsen, Cooper, deVries, Gross, Tomuslula and Bond, you might not know who I'm talking about, but when you step on that pool deck on an early February Saturday morning or look up at that record board on any given day, you understand. And for those of us who have had the pleasure, the honor, and the opportunity to share the pool with the greats of Sussex County swimming, it is something we will never forget.

So please, Sussex Tech Board of Education, Sussex County Board of Chosen Freeholders and citizens of Sussex County, please keep the pool open.

Ryan Westra
Hampton

Newton candidate congratulates winners

Editor:

I want to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate the winners of the Newton Council election. I wish them much success as they try to take Newton to the next level while keeping costs low and the quality of life high. I also wanted to take this time to thank all of the wonderful people who supported my campaign. I believe I was able to bring your concerns to the forefront and am confident our leadership now understands how important these issues are to you.

Although I am a bit disappointed that I missed acquiring an available seat by only 60 votes, I thoroughly enjoyed discussing and debating the issues with the other candidates and my fellow residents. I hope to see the enthusiasm and interest in local politics that I helped generate continue as more and more residents take the time to get involved and attend council meetings.

The whole process was a challenge that I look forward to once again having in the very near future.

Wayne Levante
Newton

Elections pointless

Editor:

At the latest school budget meeting, one of the new school board members stated during an impasse that the nego-

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How to submit Letters to the Editor

The New Jersey Herald welcomes letters from readers on topics of interest in our region and accepts those delivered by e-mail, regular mail or fax.

The Herald reserves the right to reject or edit letters for clarity, length and concerns of taste or libel. Form letters will not be printed. Writers should limit submissions to one per month unless responding to a local topic of interest.

Letters, including those e-mailed, must contain the writer's complete mailing address and telephone number for verification purposes. Only the writer's name and town will be published. Letters become the property of the Herald on receipt.

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