

# Tax bill sliced average of \$178

## S. Plainfield budget OK'd

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### South Plainfield —

Property owners will see an average \$178 decrease in their tax bills this year under a new \$25.9 million municipal budget approved by the Borough Council.

The plan was passed 4-1 by the Republican-Controlled council, with Democrat Chrissy Buteas casting the lone no vote. Fellow Democrat Franky Salerno did not attend the Monday night meeting.

Buteas and Mayor Charles Butrico, who did not have a vote on the budget, criticized the GOP, saying their political foes were relying on a quirk in the billing.

Butrico said that in 2008, the last time Republicans controlled the council before this year, the municipality billed property owners less during the final six months of that year than it did during the first six months of 2009 — the final half of the fiscal schedule that the town was using at the time for its budget. That fiscal cycle was the last time South Plainfield operated under a July-to-June fiscal year, having shifted to a calendar year for 2010. During the 2008-09 cycle, the borough reduced the amount billed to taxpayers during the July to December 2008 period, then hiked it in the January to June 2009 time slot. Buteas contended that the budget contained \$1 million in new taxes.

Republican Councilman and Finance Chairman Ray Rusnak said the GOP couldn't have known in 2008 what would transpire nearly two years later, and said the tax reduction was the result of weeks of work by Borough Administrator and Chief Financial Officer Glenn Cullen, accountant Rob Swisher and the finance panel, which carried out nearly \$1.1 million in cuts by

trimming the borough's workforce, refinancing debt and other measures.

"There was a lot of work in this. It wasn't just because of the way the billing went out," Rusnak said. "(But) the taxpayers will ultimately make the decision on what they think."

The borough reduced salary expenses by \$722,000 for 2010, Rusnak said. The cuts came through a series of moves, including retirements of several high-paid senior employees, such as two mechanics in the Department of Public Works and the tax assessor, Cullen said. In each case, no replacement was hired or personnel were shifted from other departments. The DPW rehired the two mechanics to work two days a week each, enabling them to collect their state pensions. The rest of the workload in the department will be picked up by present staff. Assessor Gary Toth was replaced by his assistant, and the assistant's job was taken by someone from the fire-prevention office, Cullen said.

"He's used to reading plans, schematics, things that an assessor would need to work with," said Cullen.

The moves were hailed by a statewide lobby group for cities and towns.

William Dressel, executive director of the New Jersey League of Municipalities, said the practice of allowing senior workers to retire may see more use with towns struggling to trim expenses.

"It's a sign of the times. Local officials taking a look at what their needs are, seeing if they can maintain that skill level and still perform the function at a lower cost. It's not going to work in every situation. You have to see if you have the right individuals," Dressel said.

Other savings were achieved by refinancing the borough's debt and its sewer utility debt, which Cullen said would save nearly \$50,000 a year during the next few years.

The \$178.40 tax decrease applies to a house assessed at \$122,400, the borough's average, Cullen said. However, when figured with an anticipated rise in Middlesex County's taxes, the figure would drop, the administrator and CFO said, to about \$150.