

The Record Local



Hot weather and soaring membership quiet a town pool debate. **2**



New roller hockey rink is almost ready to welcome skaters. **7**

ROAD WARRIOR



Crossing guards in path of danger

Like a double shot of caffeine, road warriors get an early dose of autumn reality this week as rush hours once again get swollen with big yellow buses, mom-and-pop car pools and little people skipping blithely across neighborhood streets on their way to school.

Besides police, whom can we count on to stem this chaos?

The 9,000 New Jerseyans whose job has become the most dangerous in municipal government – crossing guards.

In the last 10 years, injuries for these part-timers have risen 65 percent, said David Grubb, who's paid to keep track of such things as head of New Jersey's Municipal Excess Liability Joint Insurance Fund.

Stretched over 15 years, the figures show 150 deaths nationally, but Grubb said one county's crossing guards have been hit especially hard.

"Bergen alone accounted for three fatalities in just five years," he said.

Three! The latest one was in January when a van killed Joseph Dotterman in Little Ferry.

Why so many? Why Bergen?

"Overdevelopment," said Grubb, whose office is in Saddle Brook. "Our roads became overcrowded 30 years ago, and since then traffic has increased dramatically. Back then, most folks had two cars. Today, they might have five or six."

Half of all children walked to school back then compared with 15 percent now, Grubb added. That doesn't mean these kids are being bused. Nearly all of Bergen's 70 towns rely on neighborhood schools within walking distance of home, but many parents are loath to let their kids hoof it.

So, mom and dad do the driving, a practice that puts still more cars on crowded roads and creates mob scenes at school drop-off points. In many families, pool cars are driven by teen siblings, the most crash-prone group of all.

"We discourage that," said Pam Fischer, director of the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety.

Fischer encourages busing, which, research shows, is the safest way to get kids to and from school. Like other safety advocates, she also urges road improvements, such as building sidewalks for neighborhoods that lack them. But such initiatives are expensive, controversial and unlikely. That's one reason advocates usually focus their limited budgets on education.

On Thursday in Wood-Ridge, Fischer's agency, Grubb's insurance fund, the New Jersey Association of Chiefs of Police and the Brain

See **ROAD** Page L-7

LOCAL ISSUE: POLICE HIRING

Minority cops remain rare sight

Towns can't keep pace with the changing populations

By **ERIK SHILLING**
STAFF WRITER

Nearly every day, Englewood patrolman Carlos Marte translates something from Spanish into English – sometimes for other officers and less often for medical emergen-

cies and other serious needs. But Marte, one of 16 Hispanic officers in Englewood, says speaking Spanish only helps to a point.

"On a ticket, whether I speak Spanish or not, they aren't too happy," he said.

Marte, a 13-year police veteran, is one of slightly more than 100 Hispanic officers in

Bergen County, where there are around 2,000 officers in town police departments – about 90 percent of them white, according to a Record survey. Even while Hispanic, Indian and Korean populations have grown, the number of white police officers has remained stable. Police chiefs say they have

tried to diversify their ranks.

The economic crisis is one factor making it difficult to hire minority officers. "The fight right now isn't to get minorities, it's to get bodies," said Michael Saudino, president of the Bergen County Police Chiefs Association.

Some departments have reacted to demographic changes more swiftly than others. See **POLICE** Page L-3

PASSAIC STILL FEELING THE IMPACT OF 1985 FIRE



RECORD FILE PHOTO

The Passaic fire on Labor Day 1985 destroyed 2.2 million square feet of factory space, uprooted at least 400 people and wiped out 2,400 jobs.

'Absolute disaster'

By **KERI ANN FLACCOMIO**
STAFF WRITER

PASSAIC – On Labor Day 1985, one of New Jersey's most devastating fires wiped out more than 20 acres of businesses and homes in the city. Twenty-five years later, Passaic is still recovering.

"It looked like Berlin was burning," said retired fire Capt. James McBride, a firefighter on the scene that day, who recently recalled the cataclysmic blaze of Sept. 2, 1985, on the occasion of its 25th anniversary.

Residents watched from the streets as flames turned 23 homes along Eighth Street to ashes – despite the efforts of hundreds of firefighters – and within hours destroyed the lives they had built in the neighborhood. Lost, too, was a significant piece of the city's industrial landscape fronting the Passaic River: 2.2 million square feet of factory space, encompassing more than 60 companies, was destroyed, and 2,400 jobs disappeared in an instant.



The Record of Sept. 3, 1985.



Source: "Fire Engineering"



JAN HOUSEWERTH/STAFF ARTIST

Children's mischief

Investigators traced the fire's source to an alleyway between two six-story factories at 122 and 130 Eighth St., where two boys tossed matches into a refuse bin containing naphthalene, a highly flammable chemical used to make mothballs. Once lit, the fire spread rapidly between buildings and from one side of the street to the other.

Fueled by chemicals stored in some of the Eighth Street factories, the fire spread quickly, consuming six industrial buildings. Low water pressure from hydrants and a strong wind compounded firefighters' troubles extinguishing the blaze on the particularly warm day. More than 100 hydrants in the area had been shut to prevent people from opening them to cool off during the summer, McBride said.

In addition, a 100,000-gallon water tank that fed firefighting appliances had sat empty and inoperable for at least two years. See **FIRE** Page L-6

"Every time we send out a tax bill, anytime we do anything, we feel that pain continuously," said Gary Schaer, the City Council president and a state legislator. "That fire was an absolute disaster to the city in so many areas."

Having destroyed such an economically vital area, the fire's impact still is felt citywide,

Schaer said. The Eighth Street neighborhood, he said, "used to be the tax base of the city. We've never gotten over it, and gosh, who knows if we ever will."

Fire Capt. Stephen Geosits III, then 19, had been a firefighter only 10 months. "I remember an old-timer firefighter

saying to me, 'Hey, kid, take a look at this, 'cause you're never going to see this again.'"

In the aftermath, the Fire Department expanded personnel and equipment to be ready to fight fires on a large scale. But the city itself only partially recovered the tax base lost in the fire, and the jobs never returned.



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RECORD FILE PHOTO

Nearly 300 firefighters from 39 regional departments battled the Sept. 2, 1985, blaze for 12 hours.

Fire: Passaic feels impact 25 years later

From Page L-1
before the fire.

Nearly 300 firefighters from 39 regional departments battled the blaze for 12 hours. Yet the scorched buildings smoldered for several weeks, according to the city Fire Department. A Secaucus firefighter, William Koenemund, 65, died after suffering a massive heart attack, and 11 others were injured.

Residents left homeless by the blaze flocked to the Red Cross shelter at Passaic's Holy Rosary Church. A Red Cross report shows that 400 people – nearly 160 families – registered for some type of aid or relocation in the fire's aftermath.

Retired Battalion Chief Victor Trentacost, a lieutenant at the time, recalled that the department kept a fire engine at the site for a month after the fire. "At that particular time, [the fire] was the biggest catastrophe in the country," he said.

The two boys suspected of setting off the blaze were charged as juveniles and convicted of arson, criminal mischief and reckless endangerment.

Fire sparked reform

Henry Tiritilli, a retired deputy chief who was a young firefighter on the scene that day, said the blaze underscored the department's staff shortages, which led to a significant increase in manpower, a change in standard operating procedures and the purchase of updated apparatus.

There also was significant improvement in radio communication, maintenance of sprinkler systems and building inspections, ac-

ording to retiring fire Capt. Ray Schmitz, who was a firefighter on the scene.

"After the fire, the department definitely increased in value and concern for the city, probably 200 percent," said Michael Rainer, former zoning board chairman and former municipal utility authority commissioner.

The fire's impact reached far beyond its physical destruction. A steady economic decline began with the loss of hundreds of jobs and a chunk of city tax base and rentals.

The alleyway where the fire was touched off today is the center aisle of the ShopRite parking lot. The supermarket, in a strip mall, and a Verizon warehouse across the street mark the only significant redevelopment on fire-ravaged Eighth Street in 25 years.

Progress toward rebuilding the area into a thriving business zone has been slow.

Almost immediately after the blaze, in October 1985, city officials began planning to rebuild what's called the lower Dundee neighborhood, aiming to promote residential and retail development and deemphasizing heavy industrial buildings and low-income housing that had characterized the area before the blaze.

Rainer said an early plan considered building 150 housing units, wrapped with a riverfront walkway.

Officials urged a speedy redevelopment, but by 2003 the only major change was the development of the ShopRite shopping center built in 1994 and the Verizon warehouse built in 2000.

New hope surfaced in 2004 when the city's redevelopment

agency classified the area as "in need of redevelopment" and began searching for a developer, but plans that seemed promising fell through.

Hope for rebuilding

A partial foundation of the industrial complex at 100 Eighth St. sits isolated, engulfed by weeds on barren land.

"There was always the intention of hoping to rebuild, but it was a question of whether the owners were in a position to do that," former Mayor Marge Semler said.

To move forward with development, the property owner and developer would need to come to an agreement and submit a plan to the redevelopment agency and planning board for site plan approval, according to Rick Fernandez, executive director of redevelopment.

Rainer said environmental issues stopped the area from being developed. Not only was the site contaminated, but it remains part of a flood zone.

But owner Richard Ellis, who inherited the property from his father two months before the fire, cites other reasons for the halt in redevelopment: mainly high taxes – \$163,520 on the unimproved piece of property – delays in getting an approved cleanup plan from the state Department of Environmental Protection and economic difficulties.

"The major problem is that it's difficult to sell property unless they approve a cleanup plan," Ellis said, adding that the DEP has now agreed to one.

Ellis said there are several good prospects for the property, even

during the recession. He declined to comment further as negotiations are pending but said, "We hope to do this as soon as possible. We're not going to lag after this period now. We're going to aggressively try to sell the property."

Rainer said the problem involved lack of planning, creativity and persistence in the redevelopment agency, even as Semler had reworked the site's infrastructure with new sidewalks, curbs and gas lines to make it ready for construction.

Today, Fernandez says the city is waiting on a plan from the property owner. With the ball in Ellis' court, longtime city residents and officials hope to revitalize the area in the upcoming years.

"It's just sad that the negative has not been turned into positive in so many years," city historian Mark Auerbach said. "The fact is ... we don't have a whole lot to show for rectifying the tragedy that manifested itself. It's killing a very great city."

Staff Writer Alexander MacInnes contributed to this article.
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Jersey's greener thanks to \$1.8M from DuPont

Pollution penalty funds 8,217 trees

By JAMES M. O'NEILL
STAFF WRITER

More than 8,000 new trees now line streets and soften school grounds in about three dozen North Jersey towns because of a \$1.8 million fine DuPont paid to atone for groundwater contamination at its facilities in Pompton Lakes and elsewhere.

The trees – 8,217 in all – have been planted over the past five years by the New Jersey Tree Foundation, a non-profit that received the DuPont fine, officials said last week.

The money was part of a larger resource damage settlement DuPont negotiated in 2005 with the state Department of Environmental Protection, which included preservation of nearly 2,000 acres of undeveloped land, mostly in South Jersey.

The settlement was intended to compensate for an estimated 2,400 acres of groundwater contamination at eight DuPont sites throughout the state.

Lisa Simms, the New Jersey Tree Foundation's director, used the DuPont fine money to create the Green Streets Program, designed to educate urban residents and students about the importance of urban forestry while creating lush green corridors and school grounds.

"One of my goals with this program was to show that giving resource damage fines to a non-profit is the best way to get the job done," Simms said last week. "We proved that by planting three times the number of trees we promised and by creating a program that successfully employed ex-convicts in 'green' jobs way before it became popular."

Joint effort

The tree foundation worked with the New Jersey State Parole Board to create transitional jobs for 36 parolees who made up the tree-planting crews.

Simms also required recipient towns to offload trees, get them to the planting locations, and assist with cleanup – saving money and enabling the foundation to provide more trees than planned.

Among the 38 cities and towns receiving trees were Paterson, Clifton, Pompton Lakes, Lyndhurst, East Rutherford, Ruther-

ford and Wood-Ridge. The project targeted towns in the Lower Passaic and Arthur Kill watersheds.

The program was so popular that in 2006, the first season the tree foundation offered trees, Simms had to close out the application process after 24 hours. The same scenario played out each year since. "Towns are hungry for trees," she said.

The overall settlement with DuPont was designed to have the company protect land that replenishes groundwater reserves. The trees help that by absorbing storm water that might otherwise cause storm drains to overflow and dump raw sewage into streams and rivers.

Soak up water

Simms said a single 2-inch diameter tree can intercept 155 gallons of storm water runoff. Once the tree is mature, it can intercept more than 3,000 gallons of storm water.

The eight DuPont sites with groundwater contamination include a blasting cap facility in Pompton Lakes, which the company closed in 1994. The solvents TCE and PCE were used for decades at the site. The solvents made their way into the groundwater after improper disposal practices, and then migrated off-site.

More than two decades ago, the state detected that the groundwater plume had migrated under a neighborhood of about 450 homes, and in the past two years the DEP discovered the solvents have been vaporizing up through the soil into basements.

DuPont has been installing systems on homes to remove the vapors, and it is working on a plan to clean up the groundwater under the homes.

The solvents have been linked in some studies to kidney cancer and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in humans. In 2009 a state health department study found significantly elevated levels of those cancers in Pompton Lakes residents living above the plume. It could not conclusively link the elevated levels to the groundwater contamination, but it did not rule that possibility out.

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