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Montclair Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller makes a point at his April 22 community meeting at the Montclair Inn

Montclair Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller returned to the Montclair Inn for a community meeting on April 22, a year after holding a community meeting at the same location. The small size of the meeting room did not deter local residents from attending the 90-minute event.

Community policing, redevelopment, refurbishing the fountain in the Church Street roundabout, parking and the conflict of interest issue regarding Spiller's seat on the Board of School Estimate were some of the topics discussed.

As always, Councilor Spiller featured a Montclair police officer, Christopher Barnes, as a guest to discuss community policing. But this time the discussion touched on national policing issues when resident Marcella Simadiris, a familiar face at school board meetings, brought up the issue of race and law enforcement after Officer Barnes talked about efforts to get the police to establish a friendly rapport with boys and young men.

Simadiris, a white mother of two black boys, said that her sons have felt targeted by police, and she added she has been made to feel different in public places when walking into a building with a black person and questioned by security officers as opposed to walking in by herself. She pointedly asked Officer Barnes, who is white, what is being done to address this.

Officer Barnes admitted that there has been an us-against-them mentality in police training for decades, and that mentality has to stop. He also stressed the importance of building relationships with residents out of respect.

"We try to deal with everybody the same. We're trying to show respect for everybody, and hopefully everybody will

show respect in return,” he told the audience. “The best I can do is treat people with respect; that’s the way I ‘m trained, that’s the way I was brought up.”

Redevelopment, an issue that has rarely come up in Councilor Spiller’s community meetings despite the CentroVerde project (Valley & Bloom and the hotel) being in his ward, was also a hot topic. Resident Maggie Joralemon linked the project to the issue of gas leaks, expressing concern the development may be putting a strain on the gas lines running through Montclair and also suggesting that the manhole cover explosions of recent weeks may have been caused by gas leaks. Her comments arose from a broader concern regarding a proposed pressure increase in an existing gas pipeline that bisects Essex County.

“It would seem to me that those issues have to be addressed in a meaningful way, before there’s any more development,” Joralemon said. “What I’m concerned about is, how is it all going to play out? When those apartments are opened . . . when the hotel is open, how’s it going to play out?”

Councilor Spiller cited the request submitted by the council to Acting Township Manager Tim Stafford to find out from PSE&G about what’s going on with gas leaks at the last council meeting, but he added that he has in fact seen holes drilled in the streets all over Montclair to look for leaks in the gas lines. He hoped that the township would get some answers and get PSE&G to invest more in replacing the township’s aging gas supply infrastructure.

Resident Maryellen Kluxen brought up the fountain at the roundabout at Church Street and Valley Road near the Valley & Bloom development and the shabby state it’s in. Councilor Spiller made it clear that Pinnacle and LCOR, the two developers involved with the entire CentroVerde project, are obligated to restore the fountain, which he said should happen as soon as the Valley & Bloom apartments and infrastructural work on Valley Road are completed. That time may not be far off, as the smaller apartment building is nearing completion and the larger building is on the verge of being topped out, as windows are already being installed in its lower stories. Councilor Spiller reminded his constituents the Montclair Environmental Commission supports such development as a way to encourage mixed-use living patterns that in turn encourage more walking and cycling and less motor traffic.



The larger of the two Valley & Bloom apartment buildings, called Building 2, under construction, photographed on April 8, 2015. The topping-out is expected soon.

Coincidentally, Montclair Environmental Affairs Coordinator Gray Russell also dropped by to brief residents on his recent undertakings. Russell informed them of Montclair’s efforts to buy residential electricity in bulk from a third

party in an attempt to lower costs for individuals, with an increased component of renewable energy, such as wind and solar. He also announced when the Saturday Montclair Farmers' Market opens at the Walnut Street railway station on June 6 and the Tuesday market opens at South Park Street on June 9, vouchers from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Women-Infants-Children (WIC) program, and the senior Farmers' Market Nutrition Program will be accepted and also doubled to allow low-income individuals to buy more locally produced food. The doubled vouchers are made possible by a grant from Partners in Health, a local nutrition foundation.

Much of the rest of Councilor Spiller's meeting was devoted to updates on issues familiar to regular council meeting attendees, such as employing a computerized ranking system to prioritize and identify repaving projects and handle them more aggressively, the current status of the Social Security Administration property on Bloomfield Avenue (it's going out for open bids), and getting expert help to analyze and develop an overall parking plan.

Inevitably, the issue of Councilor Spiller's seat on the Board of School Estimate (BoSE) as a possible conflict of interest with his position as treasurer of the New Jersey Education Association (NJEA) came up. The question wasn't whether it was a conflict of interest — Councilor Spiller has already insisted it isn't. Rather, the question was *why* it wasn't considered a conflict of interest, despite the fact that the councilor is a union leader and five of every six dollars spent on Montclair schools go to teachers' salaries and benefits.

Councilor Spiller explained the BoSE has no say in what teachers' salaries and benefits are. The BoSE's role, he said, was to decide the school's operating budget. "We get a passed budget from the school board itself," he said. "They come in and say, 'This is what we asked for in our budget,' we look at it and say, 'That should be higher than you want,' 'It should be lower than you want,' and that's our role. We don't to go in and say, 'Pay teachers more.'" He said that the BoSE meticulously questions everything in the operating budget.