

Little comment from LTMUA following vote for dissolution

By **BETTY WUND**
Special to the Star and Wave

VILLAS — Despite a vote by Lower Township Council on May 5 to begin the process of dissolving the Lower Township Municipal Utilities Authority, it was business as usual at the LTMUA's meeting May 7.

Nels Johnson, chairman of LTMUA's board of commissioners, asked engineer Marc DeBlasio, of Remington Vernick & Walberg, if dissolution would affect grant applications to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

He answered that he did not know.

"I am working on three projects right now," DeBlasio said. "One is the application for water-main service for 2,000 hookups. It is a \$7 million project."

The USDA has asked for more information and there has been a turnover in project managers, according to DeBlasio.

The previous USDA project manager recommended the project be submitted in three phases.

According to DeBlasio, that would make it easier to get funds as money becomes available.

"We will take his guidance," DeBlasio said. "A decision will be made in the next month or two."

The LTMUA has determined that the contractor satisfied the contract specifications for road restoration in conjunction with the water-main trenches regarding the Town Bank project.

The LTMUA has addressed what has to be done beyond the contract.

It received three bids for restoration, according to DeBlasio.

A construction bid for \$379,219 was presented.

"A copy of the award letter was presented to the MUA

yesterday. If you decide to award the contract, we can set up a preconstruction date and the contractor can do the job right away," DeBlasio said.

In all, 16 minutes was devoted to open session at the beginning of the meeting.

After an hour and 10 minutes of closed session, the meeting was reconvened. The board approved a resolution to produce an employee handbook and a supervisory personnel, policies and procedures manual.

The final resolution of the meeting was a request by LTMUA Commissioner Thomas Frisoli for a \$1,500 donation to Lower Cape May Regional High School's after-prom party. The resolution was approved.

In his comments, Frisoli, a school district employee, said he was aware of the shortage of funds for an important part of the high school experience.



All five suspects in the May 8 robbery of Artisans Alcove are seen in this shot taken from security surveillance footage. Police reported that two suspects entered the store and began speaking with the lone worker. Three other suspects then entered and distracted the worker as the first two made off with \$95,000 worth of diamond engagement rings.

Robbery

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reach over the case, the male suspect's feet left the floor, Scott said after examining the video.

The male suspect was able to open another display case and remove a tray of men's diamond rings, he said.

"On the way out, he gave the other guys the 'OK,'" Scott said.

The male suspect was carrying a folded newspaper that

Scott theorized may have been a gun.

He said the other three suspects left a few minutes after the couple departed the store. Scott said Raspa immediately noticed the rings were missing and called police.

Officers investigated the scene for more than six hours, dusting for fingerprints and examining the video, Scott said.

He said he had just cleaned the glass top of the jewelry display

case before the suspects arrived, so the prints should be excellent.

Scott called the suspects "professional shoplifters."

Anyone who can identify the suspects is asked to call Cape May police at (609) 884-9500.

Cape May County Prosecutor Robert Taylor told the Star and Wave his agency has consulted with the FBI on the case.

"They may be involved in a multi-state operation," he said.

Tourism

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she said.

Detective Paul Worrell, of the county Prosecutor's Office, had good news about crime rates. He said instances of violence were very low in the county and robbery is "even rarer."

Christopher Pike, director of impact analysis with Tourism Economics, said his view was that the travel economy was going to be in "full flight" in 2014 due to improving economic conditions.

"Household financial conditions have improved to the

point where consumers are starting to spend," he said.

Pike said there has been a \$15-trillion-dollar increase in household wealth since the start of 2012. He said higher-income households have done much better during the recovery from the recession.

"Who travels? It's the higher-income households," Pike said.

He said employment in the county is 70 percent higher than in January.

County Tourism Director Diane Wieland offered visitor profiles and trends. She said tourism increased 2.3 percent

from 2012 to 2013.

She noted that visitors moved about the county during their stay, spending dollars beyond resort properties. Wieland said employment showed a 1.1 percent increase in 2013.

Lodging generates \$2.2 billion in the county, with a total of 18,718 hotel and motel room stays, down from a peak of 24,009 in 2003. The county has 48,350 second homes, representing 47 percent of the dwellings, Wieland said.

Last year, rental income was about \$800 million, she said.

The county has 560 year-round restaurants and 700 seasonal eateries, she said, adding that the food-and-beverage industry generates \$1.2 billion annually.

She said the county has 47 campgrounds with 17,199 campsites.

Wieland said the county Department of Tourism conducts an annual survey of visitors that asks 25 questions. Of those who contacted the county Tourism Department for information, 67 percent came for a visit, she said.

The visitor survey showed 47 percent of visitors stayed one week or longer.

"That really bucks the national trend of about three and half days," Wieland said.

Some statistics from the county tourism survey: 96 percent of visitors said their vacation met their expectations; 14 percent indicated they made their first trip to the county in 2013; 50 percent of visitors arrived with one other person, 30 percent in a party of three or four and 10 percent with five to six others.

Only 10 percent heard about the county via the Internet, with 29 percent being referred by friends or family, 10 percent from a travel guide, 3.9 percent from a print ad and 39 percent being return visitors.

In answer to the question of what were the most important factors in choosing this county for a vacation, 82 percent answered access to the beach.

Wieland said 69 percent of visitors to the county are 55 or older.

"That's the answer to why there are more couples, because 55-plus tend not to have children traveling with them," she said.

First District Assemblyman Sam Fioocchi told conference attendees that he has introduced a tourism bill called the County Tourism Grant Fund. He said return on the state room tax was inequitable, noting Cape May County receives about 10 percent, while Essex County receives a return of about 143 percent. Instead of excess room-tax money going back into the general treasury, more would be returned to the county of origin, under the legislation.

Fioocchi said he has introduced a bill that would benefit seasonal businesses, operating 30 weeks per year or less. They would receive a tax credit to offset the cost between the state and federal minimum wage, which is \$1.

"While it provides more dollars for those entry-level workers, it also puts some undue burdens on the seasonal businesses, which in turn I think hurts middle-class families," said Fioocchi, noting possible price increases for amusements and dining for visitors.

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