

NEWS - RECORD

of Maplewood and South Orange

COMMUNITY FORUM

March 30, 2006

Misinformation, the Smith sculpture

To the Editor:

Two weeks ago, the South Orange Board of Trustees admitted they "mis-spoke" when they told the public that, over the past 4 years, the Tony Smith sculpture was to be funded without "a cent of taxpayer money." In reality, the Board of Trustees now claims they have issued bonds, i.e. debt, for \$250,000, plus any remaining funds not raised privately, to fabricate and install this sculpture on Sloan Street. The taxpayers are responsible for paying back this debt.

Now the questions are 1) In a town that already has one of the highest tax burdens in the state, is expensive art the highest priority for our tax dollars, while our library has a leaky roof, many of our roads and curbs need significant repair, Village Hall is crumbling and the expected tax benefits of the downtown development have still not materialized? and 2) How could so many members of the Board of Trustees be so "misinformed" about the source of the money, yet still be so willing to vote for it anyway? We deserve answers.

Michael Goldberg
South Orange

April 6, 2006

EDITORIALS

Residents 'Tau'ting irresponsibility

As evidenced by last week's article in the *News-Record* regarding the procurement of the Tony Smith sculpture, some South Orange residents are incensed about the trustees' decision to fund the project and have made their opinions known during the last few village meetings.

Public outcries became more frequent following a meeting in early March when trustees announced they had mis-spoken about how the project would initially be funded.

Trustees had once told residents the sculpture, which will cost in total approximately \$410,000, would be covered by a federal community development grant. Thus, the cost of the art would not be levied on taxpayers. Since then, trustees have rescinded those comments after discovering those federal monies can't be appropriated for the sculpture, but can be used for the South Orange Performing Arts Center. Their response was a quick apology to the public and a decision to move forward, in spite of the new information on how it would be funded.

Their recourse is to take the \$250,000 originally slated for SOPAC and apply that money toward the partial funding of the sculpture. The remaining \$160,000 will be raised through private donations.

The decision prompted a backlash from some residents, who have told the *News-Record* they feel misled by village government and believe that going forward with the project is not the best use of their tax dollars. Instead, more pressing issues they believe trustees should focus on include funding repairs to some of the municipal buildings around town, such as Village Hall, which suffered a roof collapse last year, and the South Orange Public Library, which has roof leaks and a defunct air conditioning system.

Folded into the funding issues lies another bone of contention, which is the placement of the sculpture.

On its own, the fabrication of the sculpture, called "Tau," will cost about \$85,000. What drives the cost to \$410,000 are the site preparations. The sculpture will be installed on Sloan Street, near the train station. Its resting spot just so happens to be occupied by a gazebo, which will have to be removed and relocated. Then, the site has to be revamped before the 14-foot-high, 21-foot-wide sculpture is installed.

The bottom line is that taxpayers are contributing to this project after four years of being told the project would require no taxpayer money. In light of this information, trustees shouldn't have been so quick in their judgments to go forward with this project without first bending their ears to the concerns of the citizens, who are essentially being left to foot the bill.

April 20, 2006

Why does it have to be Sloan Street?

To the Editor:

Why don't the powers that be put the Tony Smith sculpture in the new empty lot on Vose Avenue, or the lot at the bottom of South Orange Avenue? The way it looks, it may be quite some time before anything is built on those spots. The only thing Sloan Street needs is a couple of police officers walking around between 5 and 7 p.m. on weeknights and all evening on weekends to stop the traffic insanity that occurs there regularly.

They could keep things moving along, direct people to the train station for drop-offs and pick-ups, keep untagged cars out of the handicapped zones, maybe even write a few tickets.

That might pay the \$250,000, which in reality will probably turn into \$500,000 before all is done, for the sculpture.

Leave it to the trustees to mess up something that looks good, Sloan Street, with something we don't need, with money we don't have. And it's just recently they let everyone know it's the taxpayers that will have to pay this money back. Sounds like they should go work for the Bush family. What a joke.

James Scios
South Orange

May 11, 2006

Only spend money on the downtown

To the Editor:

I have heard that our tax dollars in South Orange are going to be used to purchase a sculpture. I cannot understand why our town would allow this to happen when our streets, the lighting, the curbs and sidewalks all need money urgently spent on them. Our town does not look like the thriving center it once was, but a depressed area with empty lots and storefronts, as well as the areas where buildings have been knocked down.

The Tony Smith Advisory Committee should recommend the purchase of the sculpture be put it on hold until the town can afford it. What was the Board of Trustees thinking when it approved the purchase when existing structures in our town need repair? Our library has a leaking roof. The Baird Center, home of an art gallery, is also in dire need of repair.

The advisory board says the Tony Smith Sculpture will bring people to South Orange. I doubt this is true, but if it were, would we really want people seeing our town in the state it is now?

Our taxes should be used to maintain the existing structure of our town. We need to attract consumers to our downtown area. It needs to be transformed into safe and appealing place where people come to shop, eat and enjoy themselves. I don't believe a sculpture, which not even a majority of people want, will do that.

Susan Blodgett
South Orange

May 25, 2006

S.O. art makes no sense

To the Editor:

Our town's recent decision to "blow" an estimated \$250,000 in erecting a copy of a modern art sculpture is another example of the irrational behavior of our town's leaders.

This cost neither takes into account the original cost of planning, meetings and construction of Sloan Street, nor the removal of the gazebo. I recommend the original cost of that part of the project for planning and construction be disclosed to the public prior to a final decision to destroy what is there.

The Sloan Street project won an award for its design, and rightfully so. The town went out, bid for architects to redevelop the area surrounding the train station and came up with a theme of "towers." As memory serves me, this was to be a reflection of the Village Hall and the fire house, and to give an ambiance to the village.

The theme carried over to the Mews and you can even see it in the Rite Aid building on South Orange Avenue. As a resident and taxpayer since 1973, it is my opinion the Sloan Street Redevelopment is the best of what has been accomplished in the last 30+ years.

I will not mention the snail's pace redevelopment of the former ShopRite and Beifus sites. This observation has left many of us somewhat confused. At least the "coming soon" sign has been removed from the former ShopRite store front after two years. I guess that's progress.

And what about the poor judgment in selling property to NJ Transit that will never be reclaimed by the village? This strategy was truly a checkmate move. Not only has the village lost the opportunity to build a multi-level parking lot, but also the opportunity to obstruct the view of the new arts center.

What troubles me further is the lack of fiscal responsibility the town is demonstrating by ruining the ambiance created at taxpayer expense and the squandering of an estimated \$250,000 to erect a copy of a sculpture of an artist that I never heard of prior to this project.

Tony Smith must have had friends in high places to convince our leadership that the destruction of the Sloan Street redevelopment makes any sense. If you want this artwork, get someone else to pay for it, donate it to the town and find a more suitable place to erect it.

I would ask other residents of South Orange to speak to their neighbors and ask them if they would prefer to use \$250,000 in some other way than to honor a copy of modern art that is out of character with the village.

Gerard J. Andrews
South Orange

June 8, 2006

Village spending habits are enough to make this resident overheated

To the Editor:

On June 1, my husband and I stopped in the library to get some reading material. The library is one of the best things we have in South Orange, and it's free. We use the library all of the time.

But the library was closed. Why? Because the air conditioning, which has been broken since last summer, has not been repaired or replaced. This is a place where people come to read the latest newspapers, magazines, books, or books that aren't new. We also rely on the library for use of the computer, to rent movies, get information that otherwise wouldn't be available anywhere else in town, or just as a place to cool off on a hot day.

How could they not fix the air conditioning in such an important place where there are funds to tear up the sidewalks on Valley Street to put in those red squares: spend \$250,000 on a copy of a sculpture and tear up a perfectly good gazebo at a considerable cost and move it elsewhere, when such an important source of recreation and information is closed because it is too hot to work there? Perhaps the powers that be should get their priorities straight.

Minette Straubing
South Orange

June 15, 2006

Sculpture needs more fund-raising

To the Editor:

I noticed the full page ad in the May 25 *News-Record* stating that \$50,000 was raised at a recent fund-raiser for the Tony Smith Sculpture Project.

I would like to congratulate the organizers of the event for all their hard work on what looks like was a well enjoyed evening by all who attended.

However, the sculpture committee has actually committed to raise \$160,000, which will require two more similar fund-raisers to meet that self-established goal and eight more fund-raisers to actually fully fund the entire \$410,000-plus project.

If this project is as widely supported as the committee has alleged, then raising the full \$410,000-plus cost shouldn't be too difficult and something this committee should gladly and easily accomplish before the sculpture is installed.

I would like to urge the organizers and attendees of the event to continue their fund-raising momentum so the entire balance of the project can be raised privately in full and a local artist can be honored without imposing on the already overburdened taxpayers of our town.

Michael Goldberg
South Orange

August 10, 2006

A better way to spend tax dollars

To the Editor:

It is amazing to me that those who are in favor of spending taxpayer money on public art when the village is in such dire need of other things continue to resort to personal attacks on those who believe otherwise.

The recent Letter to the Editor by Ms. Locke is another example of this. I, as well as many others in this village, believe Mr. Goldberg did the residents a service by raising awareness about an expenditure nobody had ever clearly spelled out — not the Board of Trustees, who said many times that no taxpayer money would be used; not the Tony Smith Committee, which never detailed the costs to taxpayers in any of their material or presentations; not the people who run the taxpayer-supported Pierro Gallery — no one. All of these people were happy to spend our money with no input from us, the people from whose pockets the money was coming. And they were as willing to destroy an area already developed on Sloan Street to accomplish their own personal vision.

They alluded to the overwhelming support for this project by the community but never backed it up with evidence. Mr. Goldberg, on the other hand, spearheaded the effort to find out just how much support there was for this project by going directly to the citizens of the village.

Because I joined this effort and spent numerous hours talking to citizens and collecting signatures on a petition to not spend taxpayer dollars on this project, I found out firsthand how little support this project had among our residents once they had all the facts. In fact, the overwhelming majority of people who I approached felt as I did — no taxes for “Tau” — and keep the gazebo and Sloan Street as is. To blame Mr. Goldberg and Mr. Levinson for the \$70,000 the village spent on site plans is nothing short of outrageous. The blame squarely belongs on our Board of Trustees for reckless spending.

The Board of Trustees and the Tony Smith Committee have yet to provide the public a full accounting of the money this project will cost and how much each is going to contribute. And I, for one, will not be satisfied until one hundred percent of the money is provided by private sources. As for my tax dollars, let's fix up Village Hall, or the Baird Center or the Library, or the hard water, or the sidewalks and streets, or the school facilities, or the parking shortage, or the downtown. Need I go on?

John Purkert
South Orange

It's about S.O., not the sculpture

T I read with dismay a letter that was published last week labeling Mr. Goldberg with passing out false information about "Tau."

Mr. Goldberg has done nothing, apart from open the eyes of many a resident.

He has not told lies, hidden the truth or in any way conducted himself in a dishonorable fashion. He has been open, approachable and passionate about this town and one of our many problems at-hand.

Sloan Street is complete, as it should be, and is still being paid for. And it was to be dug up for what?

The writer of the piece last week talked about the "Tau" bringing together the "Arts District," but at what cost? More than 1,700 residents signed the petitions. The writer dismissed these signatories as pretty much being irrelevant. This is almost 10 percent of the population! The writer dismissed the collecting of signatures on NJ transit and said we are a laughing stock of other towns.

Maybe we are, but if we are, it is because of the way this was handled. It was a "gift," then it was a "grant," now it's a "bond," but not coming out of the one for the South Orange Performing Arts Center, as the town found they couldn't do that, so it's coming out of street and sidewalk bonding, but that area — Sloan Street — is already complete and a bond is still being repaid on it!

This could have been handled so much better. The Tony Smith Sculpture Project had a superb opportunity to pull the community together on this at the last Board of Trustees meeting but, instead, the speakers showed nothing but disdain, not just for those who signed the petition, but so many more people, too.

This could have been used as a chance to pull people together, to ask that the public embrace the project. It was almost spat out that the town has paid some \$170,000 to date. Spat out! And I don't remember hearing one word coming out of their mouths about the Tony Smith Sculpture Project paying anything toward this. They have talked about the \$110,000+ they have raised for the acquiring of the sculpture. So what is being done with this money if it isn't for the acquisition?

Sloan Street was, and still is, the wrong location for this sculpture.

Taxpayer money should not be used — no taxpayer's money.

Trustee Mark Rosner said the whole episode had been handled wrongly and he hoped the trustees would learn something from this. I hope so, too.

We have a library in dire need of repair, as is the Village Hall. We have "holes" in the budget where taxable properties have been knocked down and new buildings that were scheduled to be operational by now and taxes coming in, are still pie in the sky. At this time, South Orange cannot afford anything like "Tau." The town has to stop the downward-heading roller coaster of spending. It needs to apply the brakes.

The people of the Tony Smith Sculpture Project have to understand that this isn't about them. This isn't a vendetta, and stop treating it that way. This is about accountability. This is about the residents of South Orange finally standing up and saying enough! Do the Tony Smith Sculpture Project people think they are the only ones who care about this town, that they are the only ones who want to see it thrive? Think again. Maybe the people who signed the petition about the wrong position of "Tau" and the spending of tax dollars have it right.

Fiona Duffell
South Orange

Citizen concern goes beyond artwork

To the Editor:

Julie Locke makes an uncalled attack on Michael Goldberg, Howard Levison and the 1,700 South Orange residents who signed the recent "Tau petition." The issue is not "Tau." Rather, these thoughtful and concerned residents of South Orange are outraged by the seemingly endless expenditure of taxpayer money by the village's governing body. In this case, funding was approved for a project on a site that was already improved and paid for by local taxpayers!

Ms. Locke suggests we are the "laughing stock of residents of the surrounding towns." Here she makes a valid point. Residents of other towns — and ours as well — are appalled by the condition of our downtown, the projects that have gone nowhere for years, the signage first announcing a new supermarket and now announcing a new condominium project on a site for which the property has not been conveyed to a developer, another site containing mounds of dirt with grass growing on them that was suppose to be under construction years ago and a library with an air-conditioning contraption in the front yard reminiscent of the octopus from the latest "Pirates of the Caribbean" movie. Laughing stock? You betcha! I can only hope the recent petition helps to focus residents on what the real issues are in South Orange.

Nancy Gould
South Orange

Fiscal responsibility was the issue

To the Editor:

I would like to thank the *News-Record* for the editorial last week titled "'Tau'ing Meadowland Park." I also want to thank the more than 1,700 residents who signed a petition calling for "No Taxes for 'Tau.'" While I continue to firmly believe that, with the serious financial needs currently faced by the village, no taxpayer dollars should be used for "Tau," I am pleased a compromise has been reached on the location that reflects the will of an enormous number of residents to keep Sloan Street and the gazebo intact.

Despite the repeated personal attacks of "some" sculpture proponents, our three month awareness campaign about "Tau" was never a personal issue or about the value of public art. It was — and will always be — about responsible use of taxpayer dollars. It really is that simple.

I want to thank everyone that helped gather signatures all over town and everyone who helped spread the word to their friends and neighbors. I really appreciate all the encouragement, support and advice that you all gave to me. Together, we made a difference.

Michael Goldberg
South Orange



Isn't an embarrassment

To the Editor:

I was outraged by a letter that that appeared in the Aug. 3 edition of this newspaper, where a resident had the nerve to disparage one of South Orange's most dedicated citizens and then called the petition signed by 1,700 residents "illegal" and an "embarrassment." The embarrassment rests solely on trustees, who illegally agreed to partially fund the project, then lied to the taxpayers about it. I was astonished by the disdain and disrespect shown by the Tony Smith Sculpture Project representatives at the July 24 trustees meeting. It's obvious they deem themselves as art visionaries, while the rest of us prefer dreariness and drudgery. I hope 1,700 citizens who signed the petition remember the incompetent performance of the trustees next year and vote the incumbents out of office.

Elizabeth Black
South Orange

July 17, 2006

The 'Gateway' to SOPAC

To the Editor:

A letter to the editor last week created a divisive atmosphere rather than an attempt to extend oneself and understand the facts and real issues. The issue from my perspective was not the sculpture, but rather how it was to be funded, the priority of how funds are used and the openness of government.

Given the investment we all have in SOPAC, I personally want to make it a success! What became apparent as part of the Tony Smith debate was that the "gazebo" has some functional flaws and that its location is critical as a "gateway" to and from SOPAC and the train station / business district.

It is my understanding that the contracted landscape design was never completed. I would strongly suggest that the positive design components not be lost, but rather we continue and integrate them with the current gazebo installation. I was not aware of improvements to the underpass to be part of the design assignment, but it is an idea that should be included in the scope.

Howard Levison
South Orange

Clarifying facts about sculpture

To the Editor:

With respect to the letter from Julie Locke published in the Aug. 3 issue of the *News-Record*, please note what appear to be several factual errors:

- It is not clear whether the Tony Smith sculpture, "Tau," will be located in South Orange, as funding for it is uncertain. It's also not clear it would be located in Meadowlands Park.

- Neither the Pierro Foundation nor the Tony Smith Sculpture Project has ever been elected by South Orange voters to make any binding decisions on the town for any matter, including public art. As far as we know, South Orange's board of trustees has not appointed either one as its proxy in this or any other matter.

- Michael Goldberg and Howard Levison have not cost South Orange residents \$70,000, as Locke alleged. On the contrary, each of them worked assiduously to save the town this sum and more. They did not commission "the Sloan Street design" Locke refers to. While funding for "Tau" has been murky, even secretive, for some time, it appears that the Pierro Foundation spent this money and now demands that the town reimburse it, something many residents are averse to do.

- Goldberg has not stopped New Jersey Transit from renovating the underpass of the train station, as Locke alleged. Such a renovation sounds like a great idea and Goldberg, were Locke to ask him, would probably think it an excellent idea.

We encourage the Tony Smith Sculpture Project, Locke and their friends to continue their fund-raising for "Tau" and the renovation of the train station underpass. Having necessary funding for either or both projects would benefit South Orange and help quell the discord created by the mistakes of many.

We thank Michael Goldberg and more than 1,700 others who signed and worked on his petition, for keeping sight of these aforementioned facts, particularly in light of the calumny levied against him.

SMB Weber,
EJW Blatnik,
South Orange