The TAVI Times

Bringing Local Journalism Back to Our Community

A Community Service of The Allentown Village Initiative

January 18, 2026 - Volume VI, Issue I

Where the Majority of Your Property Tax Dollars Go

By Brandon Metrick

Roughly 73 cents of every property tax dollar paid by residents in Allentown and Upper Freehold is directed toward the Upper Freehold Regional School District, making school funding the single largest component of local tax bills. While the figure often draws attention, district officials say it can be misleading without proper context, particularly as the district faces rising costs tied to health care, state mandates and long-term funding uncertainty.

According to Nicole Petrone, Assistant Superintendent for Business and Board Secretary for the Upper Freehold Regional School District, the district's financial picture this year has remained stable in key areas, with all teaching positions retained and facilities maintained, even as expenses continue to rise. "Overall, we were able to retain all of the teaching positions that we have. We are able to continue maintaining our facilities," Petrone said. "From that standpoint, that's a positive thing. But also at the same time, we're balancing being fiscally responsible and keeping any opportunities that we can without overburdening the taxpayer."

Enrollment has not been a major driver of cost increases in recent years. Petrone said that, while state reports may show a slight increase in enrollment, that change reflects program adjustments rather than an influx of new students. "It will look like we have had a little bit of an enrollment increase this past year, but that is simply because we added the preschool expansion program," she said. "It truly has not been from students that we've been servicing and budgeting for. It's remained steady."

The district's largest and fastest-growing budget

Continued on next page

Property Tax Dollars *(continued)*

pressure is health care, a challenge shared by school districts across New Jersey. “Our biggest cost driver is definitely health benefits and the increase that we’re seeing there,” Petrone said. “That’s not something unique for Upper Freehold. That’s something statewide.” She added that those costs are largely outside local control. “Essentially what the healthcare market is doing is completely out of any school district’s ability to control,” she said. “While we certainly shop our plan and things like that, there’s only so much that you can do and still provide the same health insurance that we’re required to provide.”

Petrone said unpredictability has become a defining feature of the budget process, particularly when it comes to state aid. “Things are predictable only like a week before the budgets are due,” she said, making long-term planning difficult.

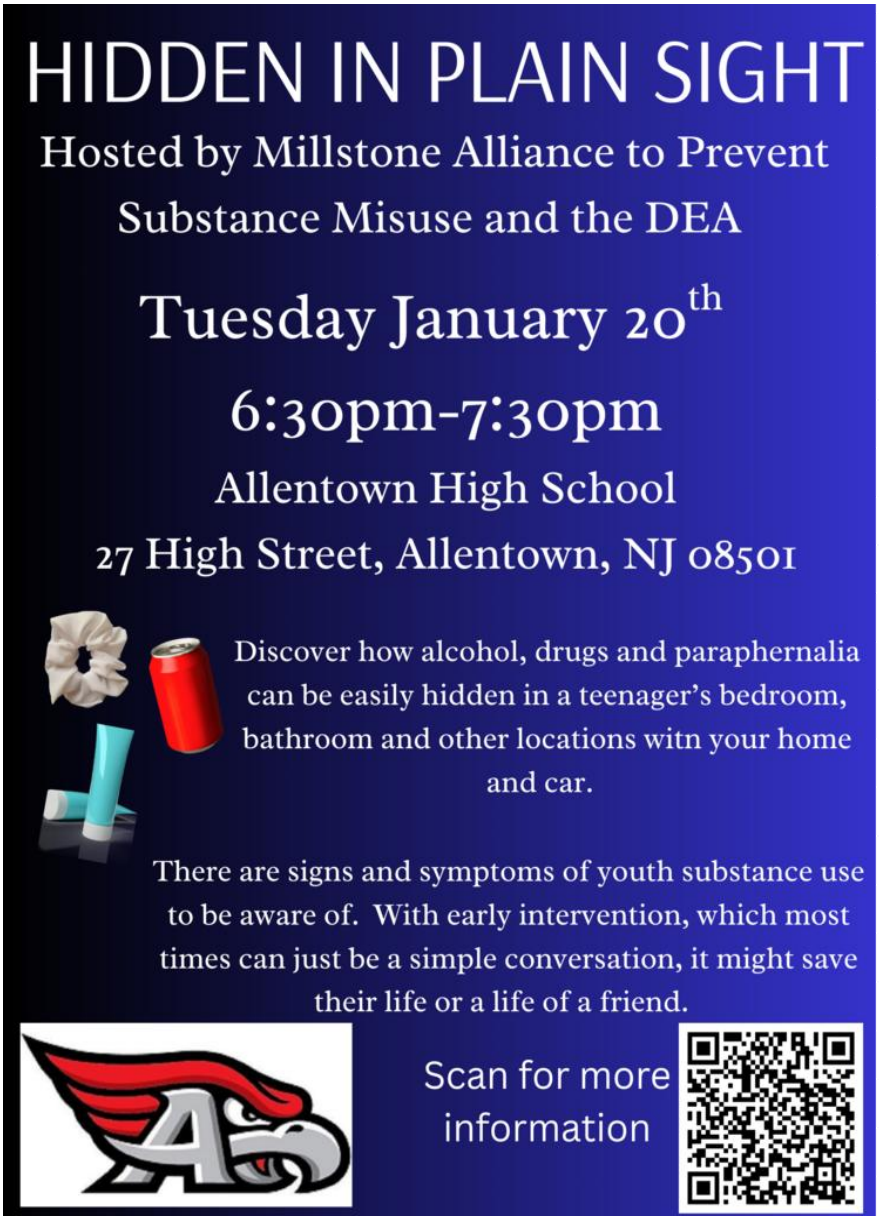
The often-cited statistic that 73 cents of every tax dollar goes to schools reflects the share of a resident’s total tax bill allocated to education, not the size or efficiency of the school budget itself, Petrone explained. “This is essentially referring to the amount of a resident’s bill that’s allocated to the school as opposed to municipalities, counties, or any other taxing authorities,” she said. “It’s actually just an expression of the portion of a person’s entire tax bill that’s going to the school, but really doesn’t speak to the school budget in itself and the constraints of the school budget.”

Because that percentage depends on how many other taxing authorities exist in a community, Petrone cautioned against using it to compare districts. “It is definitely not something that you can compare. 73 cents in one district and 60 cents in a different district really does not mean anything about the quality of an education or the type of programming provided,” she said. “It is simply just what portion of that tax bill pie goes to the school versus any other taxing authority.”

For residents, particularly those on fixed incomes, Petrone said the tax rate is a more meaningful indicator. “As a taxpayer, what’s really important to be attuned to is tax rate,” she said. “The tax rate is really the number that is more meaningful to you as a direct impact on someone with a fixed budget.” In a regional district like Upper Freehold, that rate is influenced by equalized valuation and assessed property values in both municipalities, which can shift from year to year.

When compared with similarly sized districts, Petrone said Upper

Continued on next page



Property Tax Dollars *(continued)*

Asst. Superintendent Nicole Petrone

Freehold's per-pupil spending is lower than average. "Our per-pupil expenses definitely come in a little bit lower," she said. "We're actually very efficient in comparison to that." She pointed to the district's structure, operating as a K–12 system, expanding preschool, participating as a choice district and maintaining a send-receive relationship with a neighboring K–8 district, as factors contributing to that efficiency.

Still, Petrone said per-pupil figures often lack context. "Typically, and this is standard for schools across New Jersey, around 80 percent of your overall budget goes to health insurance and salaries for staff," she said. "That really leaves you with a very small portion overall of your budget every year beyond just paying for your most valuable resource, your staff." The remaining portion must cover transportation, facilities maintenance and special education placements, many of which are mandated. "Those are all IEP [Individualized Education Plan] mandated placements, so they're not negotiable either," she said.

Superintendent Mark Guterl said the district has also had to adapt to declining state aid under New Jersey's S2 funding formula, the result of a 2018 funding reform bill that shifted aid to "underfunded" districts. "Our district was an S2 loser, as they call, so we were getting less state aid than we did, let's say, 10 years ago," Guterl said. "We had to almost learn how to be even hyper-efficient with our money." He said the district has spent years examining "every nook and cranny" of its operations, expanding shared services, maximizing staff usage and seeking efficiencies to preserve programs.

While S2 provided some predictability during its rollout, Petrone said its expiration has renewed uncertainty. "You are creating a budget where you don't know an end point essentially because you don't have that significant revenue piece to the puzzle," she said. To control costs without harming instruction, the district has relied heavily on shared services and grant funding. Petrone said the district partners with municipal and county agencies for security, facilities projects, transportation, vehicle maintenance and professional development. Grant funding, she said, has made the largest impact. "We've received over $4 million in grants in the past four years," she said. "We've used those to pay for one-time projects [that] have zero impact on the taxpayers because they're budget-neutral projects."

Grants have funded HVAC replacement at the high school, technology upgrades, new furniture, signage and the creation of a robotics lab. "Those are very visible projects that the funding source is probably not known where that came from and that it was not an impact directly to the taxpayer," Petrone said.

Guterl said budget decisions ultimately center on students. "The reason we do what we do is for kids," he said. "That model philosophy of this district — everybody we hire has to have that same philosophy. It's all about kids." Financial decisions are guided by that priority. "The budget is a big driver of making sure that we have the necessary components for an education for the kids that we care about deeply," Guterl said.

Upper Freehold Regional Education Foundation -

Volunteers needed!

Donate your time and talent to strengthen our schools and make a difference in the lives of the students and teachers of the Upper Freehold Regional School District.

Call (609) 401-2570; Visit https://www.ufref.org/

If interested, reach out today. We would love to chat with you!

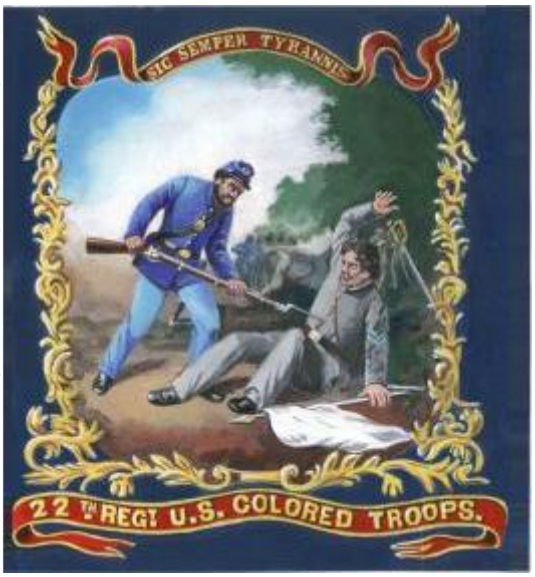
TAVI to Honor Hometown Hero -

Civil War Flag Bearer Turned Tide of Bloody Battle at Petersburg

James B. Wooby

At sunset on June 15, 1864, 27-year-old James B. Wooby, born and raised on Church Street in Allentown, charged up a hill outside of Petersburg, Virginia in what was described as "a blizzard of Rebel bullets." As his regiment's color bearer, Wooby was armed only with the Regimental flag, emblazoned with the motto "Sic Semper Tyrannis" – "Thus always to tyrants."

Miraculously, Wooby survived and reached the top of the Confederate earthworks – which had been built with slave labor weeks before. The startled defenders saw Wooby and fled. Wooby's fellow soldiers of the 22nd Colored Infantry took heart from his amazing heroism and swarmed over the Confederate defenses.



Many heroes of the Civil War's longest battle – the Siege of Petersburg – were honored, but Wooby, although recognized in the press at the time for his gallantry, was not. After the War, Wooby returned to Allentown where he lived quietly until his death at the age of 88 in 1925. He is buried alongside George Ashby, another life-long Allentown resident noted as the longest living New Jersey Civil War veteran when he died at the age of 102 in 1946.

Now, TAVI is working to bring Wooby the long-overdue recognition he earned on the battlefield 162 years ago. Join us on February 21, 2026 for "The Story of James Wooby – Allentown Native & Civil War Hero" beginning with a pasta dinner at 5 pm in Allentown Methodist Church, 23 Church Street in Allentown, NJ. There is a suggested donation of $5. Please RSVP at www.allentownvinj.org The program is part of TAVI250, a year-long series of events celebrating America's 250th birthday. For program details, visit TAVI's website at www.allentownvinj.org

TAVI is engaged with the offices of New Jersey Senators Cory Booker and Andy Kim to secure Wooby's posthumous nomination for a Medal of Honor, first established by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862 to honor extraordinary Civil War service. The Medal of Honor is our nation's highest award for valor in action against an enemy by an individual serving in the U.S. armed forces.

TAVI250

A celebration of America's 250th Birthday

TAVI's work on behalf of Wooby follows its successful effort last year to establish the birthday of Allentown native Marion VanOrkey – May 18th – as "Six Triple Eight Day" in New Jersey. Legislation creating the holiday was signed into law by Governor Phil Murphy last spring.

The "Pork Roll Princess"

and Over a Century of Jersey tradition

By Brandon Metrick

HRH Robbie Goldstein, the Pork Roll Princess

On Yardville-Allentown Road, just outside the borough, there's a small storefront where New Jersey food culture is treated less like a trend and more like a tradition. The Pork Roll Store is a family-owned business that has spent generations producing pork roll and other custom meats, and, according to Robbie Goldstein, that history is central to everything they do.

"My name is Robbie, aka the Pork Roll Princess," Goldstein said. Goldstein is the public face of a business that has built a loyal following around one of New Jersey's most recognizable foods. Inside the shop, customers stop in for pork roll and a range of house-made products prepared at a federally inspected facility that has remained in the same family for decades.

The business traces its roots back more than a century. "1920, my grandfather and his brother-in-law were Mazzilli and Battisti in Trenton," Goldstein said. "They opened as an Italian import store." During the Great Depression, the family's focus began to shift toward meat production, a change driven partly by necessity and experimentation. "That's when they started experimenting and doing the pork roll," Goldstein said. "My father's the one that really got interested in making pork roll."

The operation eventually relocated to Allentown, where it has now been based for nearly five decades. "We've been in business for over 105 years, and I believe we've been in Allentown for 47 now, going on 47," Goldstein said. The current location on Yardville-Allentown Road was chosen by Goldstein's father, who initially planned to construct a new meat processing facility elsewhere before being offered an existing plant. "He looked at it and he converted into what it is," Goldstein said. "He made it into a state of an art plant back in the day."

That transformation was required for the business to operate. As a federally regulated facility, the building had to meet strict standards from the outset. "We couldn't come here unless we've got it up to speed for the USDA," Goldstein said. "We're a USDA government inspected plant. We had to have inspectors here and everything."

While pork roll remains the store's signature product, Goldstein emphasized that the business extends well beyond a single item. The shop produces a variety of house-made sausages, kielbasa, smoked meats, and specialty cuts, using family recipes and in-house spice blends developed over generations. "We mix all of our own spices," Goldstein said. "We only use the purest of spices."

Much of the production work is handled behind the scenes by David, who oversees processing and seasoning. Goldstein describes herself as the face customers see when they walk through the door. "I'm just basically the woman in the front of the scenes," she said. "We just continue my dad's footsteps. That's basically it." For Goldstein, the responsibility of producing food for customers carries real weight. "We are the center of someone's table at the holiday," she said. "So when you put out that prime rib on that table, you better... know what you're doing."

Continued on next page

Pork Roll Princess *(continued)*

Running a specialty meat business in today's market comes with challenges, but Goldstein frames them as internal standards rather than external pressures. "To challenge yourself, to be better than you were yesterday and to make the next project your best one," she said. "We strive for better than yesterday, but even greater tomorrow."

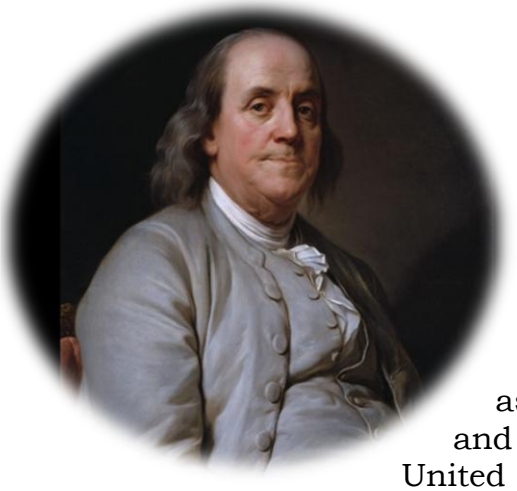
Customer relationships, she said, are the foundation of the business. "We have a very strong customer service belief that we give you nothing less than our very best," Goldstein said. "Honesty, trust. That's who we are. The shop's embrace of New Jersey's pork roll identity has helped it stand out in a competitive market. "Pork roll's a Jersey thing," Goldstein said. "We were voted number one over the big boys." Over the years, the business has marked several milestones, including its 100th anniversary, which drew coverage from News 12.

"Every day is a milestone," Goldstein said. "At the pork roll store, there's really no strangers. They're just friends we haven't met." In recent years, the store has expanded its presence online, using social media to reach customers beyond the immediate area.

The business also hosts open houses as a way to thank customers and maintain a sense of hospitality. "We can't bring you to our house," Goldstein said, "but I can always invite you here." Looking ahead, the goal is continued growth without abandoning tradition. "Bigger, better," she said. "Just keep doing what I do. Only improving every day." Wise words from the Pork Roll Princess.

Visit the Pork Roll Store at 1252 Yardville-Allentown Road or online at https://theporkrollstore.com/

Pork Roll Hotline: (609) 259-6335



“A Republic… If You Can Keep It”

-Benjamin Franklin

A republic, as we all learned in school, is a form of government where the ultimate power rests with the citizens, who exercise that power through their elected representatives. So, what did Franklin mean when asked whether we had a republic or a monarchy and responded as he did? He meant simply that the United States was wise enough to have chosen a republic as our form of government, but that retaining that form of government requires certain duties on the part of the citizenry or we run the risk of losing our cherished rights. While the likelihood of that happening might seem slim, the news every day is full of examples of what happens when “the will of the people” is not (or is no longer) the driver of a nation’s destiny.

In honor of our nation’s 250th birthday (semiquincentennial) this year, The TAVI Times, is creating a 12-part series (“civics refresher”) outlining our form of government and discussing duties that are critical to supporting it. These civic duties include understanding how government works, the responsibilities that accompany the rights we enjoy, and developing the skills involved in becoming an informed and engaged member of society. These elements help to ensure that our democracy remains vibrant and provides citizens with the wherewithal to hold government accountable and contribute in positive ways to their communities and to our nation. Topics the series will cover (starting in the February edition of The TAVI Times) include:

- **The US Constitution**
- **The Bill of Rights**
- **Structure of the US government (3 independent branches)**
- **Obeying our laws**
- **Paying taxes**
- **Serving on a jury**
- **Registering for Selective Service**
- **Running for public office/supporting the candidate of your choice**
- **Voting**
- **Staying informed about current events**
- **Engaging in community service**

DIVISIONS OPEN TO EVERYONE

***WORKDAY:* Sunday, February 1**
Behind the American Legion
11am - 2pm Drop in any time
- Design, shape, and weigh your car
- Official Pinewood Derby Cars available for purchase

RACE DAY: Friday, February 20
American Legion
2 Meadowbrook Lane New Egypt
5:30 Check-in begins
6:30 Racing begins

FREE FOR CUBS
$10 for the Public
Includes Pinewood Derby Car

For details and registration visit the QR Code or link:
https://forms.gle/Za1iSKgXugN5XJ727

TAVI250

MONMOUTH COUNTY PARK SYSTEM

AFRICAN AMERICAN PEOPLE in QUAKER RICHARD WALN'S *World*

SATURDAY
FEBRUARY 28
1-3 P.M.

The Waln House at Historic Walnford, Upper Freehold

To celebrate Black History Month and Monmouth 250, learn about Revolutionary Era Quaker Richard Waln, his abolitionist efforts, and the African Americans he employed and helped in Western Monmouth County during this lecture presented by local historian Sue Kozel in cooperation with The Allentown Village Initiative (TAVI).

The lecture will begin promptly at 1 p.m. in the historic Waln house with light refreshments to follow.

Capacity is limited, so reservations are required for this free program.
To reserve your spot, call Historic Walnford at 609-259-6275!

MONMOUTH COUNTY PARK SYSTEM NEW JERSEY

WWW.MONMOUTHCOUNTYPARKS.COM

A Tribute to the Leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Sue Kozel

The leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929- 1968), a man who profoundly shaped American public policy and national and international debates, cannot be denied. His vision of social justice and equality tackled critical public policy challenges, including the rights of African Americans, ending the Vietnam War, creating "The Beloved Community," helping establish the Great Society, and protesting and advocating for voting rights for all Americans. As many of us will be commemorating his legacy during the Dr. King National Day of Service on January 19, 2026, may I share a few valuable resources that might help our communities discuss the life of this important American? Just like our Founding Fathers, Dr. King protested to fight for his rights.

Dr. King at his historic "I have a dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., August 28, 1963

The King Institute at Stanford University has digitized several important speeches and writings by Dr. King. As part of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford describes its goals for sharing resources as, "Building upon the achievements of Stanford University's Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project, the King Institute supports a broad range of educational activities illuminating Dr. King's life and the movements he inspired." https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/.

When I spoke previously at the Gandhi-King Conference in Memphis Tennessee about Dr. King's vision of non-violence, I was drawn to how much Dr. King admired Gandhi's peaceful resistance to violence. Here is thoughtful resource available through Stanford, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/my-trip-land-gandhi.

This year, **The King Center,** in Atlanta, Georgia, will hold discussions around the theme, "Mission Possible: Building Community, Uniting a Nation in a Non-Violent Way." https://thekingcenter.org/. The King Center, led by Dr. King's daughter, Dr. Bernice A. King, has wonderful resources for schools, communities, and our families to consult including these free resources, https://thekingcenter.org/what-we-do/classroom-resources/nonviolence-for-social-change/. There are also free virtual exhibits, https://thekingcenter.org/virtual-exhibitions/.

Dr. King's vision is needed more than ever in today's highly polarizing debates. As we mark America 250, let us remember all the voices that sought to achieve the "pursuit of happiness," freedom, and equality. Dr. King's short life combined with his organizing skills and intelligence makes him a great American we honor.

Allentown Garden Club Prepares for 250th

All are welcome at the next meeting of the Allentown Garden Club on February 12, 2026 beginning at 7 pm in Allentown Methodist Church, 23 Church St., Allentown. The Club will be sharing information about its Semiquincentennial Garden Project as well as spring plant orders from Pleasant Run and Kube Pak.

New Year's Reminders:

The Allentown Village Initiative (TAVI) – Community Engagement Policy

The Allentown Village Initiative (TAVI) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose focus is on history education and historic preservation, natural resource protection, economic development, and the arts and culture. While engaging in the many and varied activities that support these areas of interest, TAVI is careful not to engage in activities that could be considered to be political or religious (i.e., partisan) in nature. And while TAVI is supportive of certain social causes (e.g., providing a "helping hand" to those in our community who are struggling in some way), the same tenet applies. TAVI strongly encourages those in our community who either are considering or are sponsoring an activity that they think would be of interest to TAVI to reach out to us about our potential involvement; however, TAVI reserves the right to determine whether, in fact, those activities or projects are truly consistent with our philosophy, our goals, and our objectives. 11/2022

Letters to the Editor

We encourage you to send us your views for publication in the TAVI Times. Our only requirements are the following:

- You try to be reasoned and reasonable and you avoid profanity and libel (we will edit out such, if necessary, or refuse to publish your letter).
- You do not exceed 100 words (again, we will edit, if necessary). If you feel your views merit an article, let us know that, as well.
- You include your name and municipality of residence for publication.
- You provide your contact information (name, email address, phone number) so we can contact you if we have questions. 10/24

Are you marking a birthday, anniversary, graduation, marriage or other milestone event in your family? Let TAVI celebrate with you – Send your announcements to mccormicknj@aol.com so we can include them in The TAVI Times.

The Allentown Village Initiative (TAVI)

President – Martha Ploshay Vice President – Mike McCormick
Treasurer – Alan DeFalco Secretary – Jacqueline Bossart
Trustees – Jeff Ploshay, Debbi McCormick, David Bossart, Kevin Jean-Louis, Denise Erb
Trustee Emeritus – Alice Wikoff

Donations are always gratefully accepted at
https://www.allentownvinj.org/donate.html