

County Court Would Only Create Another Layer of Government

While Scotch Plains and Fanwood, as well as a half-dozen or so police departments in Hunterdon County, are researching ways to merge services to cut costs, the County of Union is looking at creating another layer of government. Union County is considering the creation of a county court system to increase ways of bringing revenues into its coffers.

Union is one of only three of New Jersey's 21 counties that have a county police department; another two operate county parks police units.

The move comes just months after the county adopted an ordinance to get into the towing business. In the past, while towing companies had to be licensed with the county in order to tow vehicles from county parks and roads if summoned by county police, they kept all revenue collected for towing vehicles. The county will now take half of all towing fees and have increased the rates when vehicles are impounded — as well as half of the storage fees. In addition, the county may create a storage location for these vehicles in Springfield and collect all revenue from the storage of impounded vehicles.

However, for the county to implement this plan, they need a court system to be able to fine people, process tickets and collect the revenue. While a county court system and police system authorized to write tickets may create additional revenue for the county, it takes revenue out of the municipal courts such as Westfield, Scotch Plains, Fanwood and Mountainside that currently handle these matters.

Bergen County, the largest county in the state, is the only county in the state that has a court in place. The Central Municipal Court of Bergen County, with an annual budget just under \$1 million, collected \$6.7 million in revenue in 2008, \$4.5 million of which went into the county's budget. Cases generated by the court come from Bergen County's police unit and prosecutor's and sheriff's offices.

Union County, with a population of just over 500,000 people, is 60 percent the size of Bergen County. Does this mean Union County residents can expect another \$5 million in fines to be taken out of their pockets down the road? We previously wrote that that the change in the county's towing policy creates an incentive for towing vehicles all around the county. By creating a county court system, will the Union County Police Department (UCP) be under pressure to significantly increase its presence beyond issuing summonses on underage kids consuming beer in county parks and trucks exceeding weight limits on county thoroughfares?

Is that why the county is looking to enhance the accreditation of the Union County Police? While all levels of government are looking to generate additional sources of revenue, additional layers of government only increase the bureaucracy and property taxes. Can we really afford to have more people on the public dole?

Would a county court judge be full-time? Would he/she receive benefits? A pension? What about the support staff, including a prosecutor and a public defender? How much money would the state take from this revenue as it does with parking tickets? The state takes \$12.50 now from each \$32 parking ticket in Westfield.

Rather than creating its own court, Union County ought to help smaller towns like Fanwood, Garwood and Mountainside form a joint court system that would reduce overhead while increasing efficiency. As part of the public safety strategic plan, the county is also looking at a countywide Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system. This is more along the lines of where the county could be effective. Towns are struggling to generate sufficient numbers of volunteers to maintain 24/7 EMS operations. The closing of Muhlenberg and Union hospitals has only put more strain on both volunteer and paid EMS units.

The county's role must be to assist its 21 municipalities, not create more layers of government that may only increase the cost of living for county residents. Taxpayers and businesses are crying for government and public schools at all levels to reduce their size and costs. This county plan seems to be counter to all reason given the existing business climate.

We suppose it is a matter of philosophy though; some believe more government and bigger government is better. Seems like the county favors this view and intends to expand. They are already buying up public property with your open-space tax dollars. Now it seems they want to fine you. This is not change we can believe in. We urge the freeholders to reconsider.

We understand the State Legislature must pass laws to enable this county court system. If you're concerned, we urge you to talk with your freeholders, assemblymen and senators before it is too late.