

Watchdog Panel Eyes \$20M In County Budget Cuts **By PAUL J. PEYTON**

Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

CRANFORD — The Union County Watchdog Association presented its recommendations for cuts to the county's budget during a 90-minute forum last Wednesday in Cranford. The event filled most of the township council chambers.

The group's budget review panel proposed \$20.4 million in cuts from the county budget and \$11.5 million in savings by discontinuing the county's Open Space Recreation and Historic Trust Fund, which is an additional tax on property-tax bills. Operating cuts recommended include MusicFest, lobbying services, and advertising, including the *Union County Directions* newsletter published by the Union County Alliance.

The group also called the expansion of the Galloping Hill Golf Course in Union, "foolish and unjustifiable in this economic environment." Most of the cuts recommended were in departmental expenses, outside of salaries and wages, including \$549,000 from Runnells Specialized Hospital and the entire \$12.5 million in county funding for Union County College. The college garners \$42 million through tuition and \$10.5 million in state funding for its \$68-million budget.

"The county budget is now \$469 million – close to half a billion. What are we all getting for that amount of money?" asked Bruce Paterson of Fanwood, a member of the panel. "In 10 years, our county taxes went from \$150 million to \$276 million. That is an amazing 84-percent increase."

Mr. Paterson said Union County ranks in the top 10 counties in the nation with the highest taxes, while two New Jersey counties, Ocean and Cape May, had tax increases this year of 2 and 1 percent, respectively. Burlington County, he said, "decreased its taxes for a third year in a row."

Panel member John Bury of Kenilworth said the county has "inflated" its appropriations numbers, while understating its revenues. "Union County – as most other counties, except Middlesex, use up most of their surplus on the expectation that overstated appropriations and understated revenues will replenish it," Mr. Bury said.

Neil Coleman of the New Jersey Taxpayers Association was a guest panelist at Wednesday's forum. Among the association's recommendations to reduce taxes was the adoption of one contract per individual bargaining group/entity, such as police, firefighters, teachers, etc. The group also wants all public-sector contracts posted online by 2012, as well as all government lawsuit settlements.

The Taxpayers Association, he said, also wants a mandate that public-sector employees contribute 25 percent of their individual healthcare coverage.

In conclusion, Tina Renna, president of the Union County Watchdog Association, noted that county freeholders and officials were invited but declined to participate in the forum.

Mrs. Renna said the county government “has grown tremendously beyond its simple scope outlined in the New Jersey Constitution, namely the establishment of county prosecutors, clerks, surrogates and sheriffs.” “County government was never meant to be involved with education, entertainment venues and events. These vanity services are unaffordable and dysfunctional in a Democratic society. We cannot sustain it with our property taxes, while maintaining quality basic services,” Mrs. Renna said.

She said the Watchdog Association supports having the state take over the operations of county colleges, prisons, and county prosecutor offices. “This would result in millions of dollars in savings to local taxpayers and more accountability and less patronage at the county level government,” she said.