

Blogger, freeholders feud on videotaping

County to do its own taping after refusing woman

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Union County officials have refused to allow a political blogger and vehement critic of county government to videotape freeholder budget hearings and broadcast them on her Web site.

The blogger, Tina Renna of Cranford, contended she wanted to grant residents convenient access to hearings, which began yesterday. The \$415 million budget calls for a 5.7 percent tax hike.

Although the hearings are open to the public, county officials assert that state law does not grant citizens the right to videotape the proceeding. Besides, the "intimate, table-top setting" of the hearings and size of the conference room were simply not conducive to a camera, officials said.

Renna contended, "They just don't want people to see the process."

Initially, county officials said they had no intention to videotape the hearings, either. But after a reporter inquired about Renna's request, they changed their mind.

"After further consultation between the county manager and the freeholder board, the county has decided it will tape the budget committee meeting," county spokesman Sebastian D'Elia wrote in an e-mail.

The tapes will be available for public viewing at the county administration building. Officials have yet to determine if they will be aired on cable access channels. Renna said she planned to post them on her Web site.

Renna's regular, and occasionally acerbic, critiques of county government have often left her at odds with county officials, including D'Elia.

In November, he filed a lawsuit against Renna, claiming she soiled his reputation by comparing him to Adolf Hitler and questioning his sexual orientation in an article titled, "County Hacks are Soulless Psychopaths."

Renna, in turn, has filed a counter-suit, accusing D'Elia of trying to squelch her First Amendment rights.

Politics play a role, too.

All nine county freeholders are Democrats. So are most county officials.

Renna is a registered Republican. She shares her blog with former GOP freeholder candidate Patricia Quattrocchi. And the Union County Republican Committee has donated to her watchdog association.

D'Elia accused Renna of asking to videotape the budget hearings out of partisan spite, not a desire for open government. Before Renna, he said, no one had ever asked to video record a budget hearing.

"County taxpayers are once again accommodating the singular demands of one individual who is nothing more than a paid-for tool of the Republican Committee," D'Elia wrote.

Renna, in turn, called D'Elia "a paid shill" of the Democratic Committee.

"I'm not raising taxes," she said. "They are."

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