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Freeholder board will offer apology to longtime critic

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Alexi Friedman
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After a First Amendment challenge by the American Civil Liberties Union, the Union County freeholders will issue a public apology at tonight's meeting for cutting short a resident who was addressing the board about possible nepotism on the county payroll. The resident, Bruce Paterson, 58, of Garwood, notified the ACLU of New Jersey after the June 25 freeholder meeting, where Freeholder Vice Chairman Daniel Sullivan stopped him from "speaking about a public employee, her salary and potential nepotism affecting the hiring process of county employees," according to the ACLU.

Paterson addressed his remarks during the public comment portion of the June meeting, questioning the methods the county uses when hiring freeholder relatives.

"They just get hired because they're relatives of a freeholder, and there's the problem," Paterson charged at the meeting, which was videotaped.

Sullivan -- acting chairman that night -- shot back. "I will tell you, I'm not going to tolerate talking about family members. It's not fair to them." He added, "there are any number of people who may be or may not be related to someone else who came here long before people sitting here," referring to fellow freeholders.

When Paterson refused Sullivan's instructions to move on to another point, the freeholder said, "All right, then I guess you're finished."

The ACLU said Sullivan violated Paterson's right to free speech.

Freeholder Chairman Alexander Mirabella will read the apology, which states in part: "The meeting is now open to the public to comment on any matter. Comments regarding public employees, whether or not they are related to freeholders or others will be allowed at this and all future meetings, as protected by the First Amendment. The board apologizes to any affected member of the public that was directed not to comment on employees at the June meeting."

Paterson, a frequent critic of Union County government and how it spends its money and balances its budget, did not return calls for comment.

Another frequent, if more caustic, critic of county government is Tina Renna, who maintains a website called the County Watchers. Renna spoke before Paterson, and, according to her blog, defended herself against false accusations Sullivan had made. She was escorted out of the room after using her allotted five minutes and not ceding the microphone.

Neither Renna nor Sullivan returned calls for comment.

Sebastian D'Elia, Union County spokesman, said the apology ends the matter. He said officials will move ahead with "the business of county government and examining serious issues. Our hope is that those who choose to insult family members, whether in blogs or meetings, will stick to issues and engage in civil conversation." Staff writer Leslie Kwoh contributed to this report. Alexi Friedman may be reached at (973) 642-4065 or afriedman@starledger.com.