

March 30, 2008

Dear Honorable Mayor and Council:

Since it doesn't look like the media will be writing about yet another wasteful expenditure of the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders, and since you are in the midst of balancing your own budgets and no doubt concerned about lost state aid and ever increasing mandated costs, I thought you should know that the county, which lays claim to approximately 1/4 of our property tax bills, continues to be oblivious to our needs and is obviously awash in tax revenue and not concerned a whit about raising their portion of our tax bills again this year.

The county enjoys being an invisible layer of government. Although the Star-Ledger has an office on the 3rd floor of the administration building, they never send reporters to freeholder meetings. Worrall newspapers has a county section, but they don't send reporters to meetings either. County reporting largely comes from county generated press releases and letters to the editor.

The public is largely ignorant to the goings on of county government and also to the fact that our freeholders are all at large in a county where registered Democrats outnumber Republicans two to one. With no factions in the Democratic party in the past decade this has led to a one-party ruled power-broker appointed and controlled freeholder board. Our county manager is also appointed, he is Senator Raymond Lesniak's nephew. They conduct the peoples business as if they are royalty serving their peasants.

The county is obviously awash in disposable tax revenue and disinterested in their constituents needs during this dire budget climate when the Union County Manager could have his office drastically renovated during the start of 2008 budget season.

What mayor in Union County could escape media scrutiny over these recent events?

On February 13, 2008 employees began clocking in overtime to complete a total renovation of Union County Manager George Devanney's office. The center point being a new royal entranceway.

On February 14, 2008 Devanney proposed the 2008 county budget with a projected increase of 6.5% that would raise taxes in every municipality but Winfield.

On February 26, 2008 Gov. Corzine proposed the 2008 State budget which drastically reduced municipal aid.

On February 28, 2008 an email shows that a county employee promises the Deputy County Manager that renovations will be completed by Monday morning. The county manger was out of town at the time, he was allegedly in Colorado on a ski trip with county vendor USA Architects.

Although some bills and costs are obviously missing, an OPRA request for the costs of this renovation revealed:

Materials cost: \$7,975.61

Employee overtime labor costs: \$2,637.39

Employee regular hours labor costs: ?

Total: \$10,613

The documents obtained through OPRA do not show the labor and materials costs of the furniture that was made in the county carpenter shop in late Summer/early Fall and stored on the 6th floor of the county jail. It appears that county management didn't want Devanney's new office to become a campaign issue so they waited for Freeholder Adrian Mapp, who fell out of favor with the democrat machine and was running as an independent democrat in the general election, to leave the board before renovations commenced and the furniture was installed.

Although work hasn't been completed yet and plans didn't show up in my OPRA request, I've been told that a sink area in the county management wing is also slated to be renovated. This is needed because the present sink is too small to wash dishes. The new sink will eliminate the need to walk a few feet into the freeholders conference room where a full kitchen complete with a dishwasher is at their disposal. By the way, have I reminded you lately that freeholders cater their board meetings to the tune of \$250 - \$350 per?

Although the public isn't barred from walking into the public area where the county manager's wing is located, I did not venture into the newly renovated interior of the office uninvited. I thought of making an appointment to see the updates, but what is the point? I doubt I would be shown the secret button that would cause the fully stocked bar to flip out of a wall and the caged go-go girls to drop out of the ceiling.

I have visited many on your towns recently and had the privilege to watch you conduct your business in full public view, with the utmost respect for your residents and it was quite obvious that you work very hard and have their best interests at heart. With this in mind, I am dismayed that many of you believe that there is nothing municipalities can do to hold the freeholders free spending ways accountable.

It was projected in a March 2, 2008 Star-Ledger article that overall county taxes will raise by \$15.4 million in order to accommodate \$22 million in new spending. This reflects a 6.5 percent increase in the budget. However, historically the county uses a PR trick which is to inflate their budget projections with promises to cut spending, and when they ultimately cut a fraction of the budget at the time of adoption, the Star-Ledger headline will make them appear to be fiscally responsible even though they have been raising taxes every year since 1999.

Where you aware that the state took of the Union County Courts in 1995? \$17.2-million dollars in savings was quickly absorbed into the county spending frenzy.

Devanney attributed much of the spending increase to built-in costs such as insurance premiums, pension contributions and contractual raises for county workers. The budget would also allow the county to hire 51 new corrections officers at the Union County Jail. This was the solution following the escape of two prisoners. A new jail director has been hired. He lives 2-hours away in Atlantic County and is given a county portal-to-portal vehicle including free gas.

Devanney did not attribute the spending increases, nor did any newspaper write about, the creation of 6 new Captain positions in the Sheriff's Department. Just by coincidence Charlotte DeFilippo's daughter-in-law scored 6th on the Lieutenants exam. In order for her to be promoted 6 Lieutenants would have to be moved up to Captain. Three new lieutenants' positions were also added to the county police department. These promotions added approximately \$300,000 to the county payroll.

Union and Bergen are the only 2 counties that have both a police and sheriffs department. Union County has a Sheriff and 3 undersheriffs whose combined salary is around \$500,000. We now employee 11 Captains. Union County also has a public safety department that runs the jail. I find it laughable that the state continues to give Union County grants to explore shared services which are largely directed to getting municipal governments to share services, and not the county to look internally for cost savings.

Did you know the county has 2 tree departments?

Devanney also didn't mention that a new division was created, it just so happens that freeholder Sullivan's niece will be heading it. There are 9 Sullivans on the county payroll. A 2006 study conducted by our organization found that there were 542 county employee's with the same surnames as elected democratic officials. We can't prove that they are all related. We also don't know how many relatives have different surnames.

The county has been conducting their 2008 budget hearings, they didn't publish the schedule for the hearings on their website nor did they issue a press release inviting the public to attend and in case they didn't send you an invitation to

attend the hearings, you can find the schedule below. The hearings are largely ceremonial. The public isn't allowed to comment and questions aren't answered. We will upload the 2008 hearings to our website as they become available and you can view last year's hearings to see the process on our Veotag account: <http://www.veotag.com/browse/?q=union+county>

The March 2, 2008 Ledger county budget article quoted Westfield Mayor Andrew Skibitsky "I think Union County has got to do a better job," said Skibitsky, noting that county taxes have surpassed municipal taxes in his town. "It's not like all our residents are awash in disposable incomes. They're watching their budgets very carefully, and it's time for the county to do so also."

It is time for all good elected municipal officials, no matter your party affiliation, to hold freeholders accountable. At the very least your offices afford you the opportunity to shine a light on county government.

I respectfully recommend that you begin to raise awareness by writing to Governor Corzine about Union County government including the waste of the States shared services grants. In 1999 the state gave the county \$30,000 to produce a report on shared services. The report was never produced and there are no meeting minutes to prove the paid committee ever met. In 2005 the state gave the county a \$104,500 state grant to study the possibilities of consolidating municipal services. They spent over \$200,000 on a commercial and a mailer that was sent to every resident featuring a freeholder, who just happened to be up for reelection just weeks away. The commercial touted county services that were already in place, like ball fields and Runnells Hospital. The county then received another \$298,357 state grant to spend on "sharing available resources efficiently"You can view the commercial here: <http://www.ucnj.org/sharedservices/>

Did you know there is no state agency that oversees or audits county government spending? I reported the \$30,000 expenditure to produce a report that was never produced to the States Attorney General's Office and was told that information like this is pouring in from all over the state and it was likely they wouldn't have the resources to investigate it.

Please be mindful to remind your constituents often that their increasing property tax bills aren't all your, or the school board's, responsibility and 1/4 percent is out of everyone's control. Believe me, the freeholders lay blame on municipalities for rising taxes very often.

The 1/4 percent doesn't include the Open Space Trust Fund, which is a separate dedicated tax.

There are nine freeholders, three of which are elected every year, who are spending tax dollars as if the 2 county tree departments were growing it. All with

Corzine's blessings and misguided views on bigger government being more economical.

Admittedly I don't know the solution to the problem, but I implore you to help raise awareness that there is indeed a huge problem with county government.

Respectfully,

Tina Renna, President
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202 Walnut Avenue, Cranford, NJ 07016
P: 908-709-0530 - F: 908-709-9209
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March 2, 2008 Star-Ledger Budget Article:
<http://unioncountywatchdog.org/docs/CountyBudget2008.pdf>

OPRA request – County Manager Office Renovation:
<http://unioncountywatchdog.org/docs/DevanneyOfficeBills.pdf>

Budget Hearing Schedule:

Thursday March 20, 2008 -

- 3:00 - Runnells Specialized Hospital - Joseph Sharp
- 3:30 - Surrogate's Office - James LaCorte
- 4:00 - Board of Taxation - Chris Duryee
- 4:30 - County Clerk - Joanne Rajoppi
- 5:00 - Engineering and Public Works - Joseph Graziano
- 5:30 - Prosecutor's Office - Ted Romankow

Wednesday April 16, 2008 -

- 5:00 - Department of Human Services - Frank Guzzo
- 5:30 - Department of Public Safety - Richard Childs
- 6:00 - Department of Corrections - Brian Riordan
- 6:30 - Sheriff - Ralph Froehlich
- 7:00 - County Counsel - Bob Barry
- 7:30 - Finance - Lawrence Caroselli

Saturday April 19, 2008 -

9:00 - Department of Parks and Community Renewal - Al Faella

9:30 - Election Board - Dennis Kobitz

10:00 - Rutgers Cooperative Extension - Karen Ensle

10:30 - Schools - Carmen Centuolo

11:00 - Administrative Services- Liz Genievich

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