

Union County Manager – A History

Union County has been in existence for 153 years. The most famous part of its recent past was the creation of the County Manager form of government which has been referred to by historians as the biggest mistake in county government history (reference New Jersey Politics and Government).

In 1976 The Elizabeth Daily Journal let a crusade to endorse this form of county government to, of all things, end widespread patronage. County charter reform forces won in a close race and George Albanese was named the first county manager. Historians have noted that Albanese was a respected and talented administrator who swiftly restored fiscal responsibility and they fretted that he would be hard to replace.

Thirty-four years later we have State Senator Raymond Lesniak's nephew appointed County Manager. A 2006 study conducted by the Union County Watchdog Association found that 542 county employees have the same surnames of elected Democrat officials. We can't say for sure that all of these people are related but we can say that we have no idea of knowing how many employees do not share the same surname, such as in-laws and cousins. For instance, Senator Lesniak's nephew's name is George Devanney. George Devanney's mother-in-law is on the county payroll as was his wife under her maiden name. All three have different surnames. So much for ending patronage.

When a freeholder was asked during a public meeting in 2009 how many relatives he had on the payroll it resulted in him banning nepotism from being discussed at public meetings. The NJ-ACLU became involved and the county was forced to read an apology along with reinstating a citizen's right to speak about nepotism. However the freeholders still have not answered the question "HOW MANY RELATIVES DO YOU HAVE ON THE PAYROLL?"

Union County is the only county in New Jersey which adopted the County Manager plan of government. It has proven to be a mistake and has become the poster child of bad county government.

Senator Tom Kean, Jr. introduced a bill in 2004 to study the effectiveness of county government. With the 21 counties in New Jersey being under home rule of one power-broker or another who dole out patronage and contracts to political contributors who keep them in power it is little wonder that this bill did not get far.

Other states have had recent success with getting county governments off of their tax backs. Connecticut got rid of county government in the 1970's. In 1997 Massachusetts abolished 8 of its 14 counties. Both of these states listed the following among their reasons for abolishing county government: rising costs, corruption, patronage and mismanagement, duplication and inefficiencies of services, secretiveness, and unaccountability. All of which applies to Union County government.

County services can be absorbed and shared by the state and local municipalities.