

COI

EDITORIALS

What budget crisis?

The same Union County freeholders who talked about cutting services in order to bring taxes under control are now submitting expense reports for a trip to Atlantic City last month. The New Jersey Association of Counties held a weeklong conference there, with more than a dozen Union County representatives in attendance.

Fortunately for Essex County taxpayers, while their government sent a dozen representatives to the conference, only five stayed overnight at some point. And only one, the county administrator, stayed for the entire length of the conference.

Asking for expense reports via the Open Public Records Act would be fruitless at this point, as many who attended the conference may not have filed their expense reports yet, if they even plan to do so.

The next stop for information in the County of Union, then, is Sebastian D'Elia, director of Public Information. He questioned the motives of this newspaper, implying, we assume, that editors should have no interest in how much money was spent on this trip. Making a list of who attended the conference and how many rooms were rented would amount to a "wild goose chase" for the public information office, he said.

But dutiful to our inquiries, D'Elia went on the goose chase and followed with a call to clarify: Fourteen Union County officials attended. Some of them shared rooms so that only 11 rooms were rented, he said.

Next on the agenda is the National Association of Counties conference, to be held in Chicago in August. Taxpayers in Union County spent less than \$5,000 for their officials to attend NACo in Milwaukee in 2003; more than \$10,000 for the Arizona conference in 2004; and \$16,868 for the conference in Hawaii last year. Essex County, on the other hand, did not send anyone to Hawaii last year.

How fitting that this summer, in the middle of a budget crisis, with a so-called hiring freeze in place, and layoffs looming, our Union County elected and appointed officials will likely be billing taxpayers for flights to and expenses in the Windy City — once a thriving center for cronyism and corrupt politics.