

## County Watchdog Urges Posting of Minutes in Searchable Format

*Editor's note: The following e-mail was sent to the Union County Clerk of the Freeholders Board and copied to this newspaper.*

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Dear Mrs. Dirado:

Meeting minutes are being posted on the Union County government website in a format which isn't searchable though a find or through an Internet search engine such as Google. If you wanted to find information, you would have to know what date it occurred on and then read the minutes word for word.

Assuming this isn't being done on purpose, I respectfully request that the minutes be machine readable rather than a scanned image.

You can find instructions on how to do this on NJFOG.org for creating a machine readable PDF, in the video "For Records Custodians."

Scanned images are much less useful, require more bandwidth to download, and are subject to errors when OCR'd, even the best Optical Character Recognition software is typically no better than 90 percent accurate, which is unacceptable — especially when you are dealing with numbers.

Union County has appropriated \$136,000 to update their website in what was touted to make it more user friendly and easier to find on search engines. Arguably meeting minutes are the purest form of county government information — posting them in

this manner is counter to the freeholders' stated mission when justifying the expense of this project. Prior to the website update, meeting minutes were posted in a machine-readable format.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

**Tina Renna, Pres.  
Union County Watchdog Assoc.**

**Clerk of the Board Replies**

Mrs. Renna:  
The minutes have been scanned and converted to PDF images from TIF Images, created in the county's state-certified Electronic Data Management System, for several reasons:

1 - A scanned image allows my signature to be seen on the document, certifying that the document is official and approved by the freeholder board;

2 - A PDF allows for any attachments to the minutes (ie: PowerPoint presentations or items submitted to the board by a member of the public) to be viewable by the public; and

3 - A PDF ensures the integrity of the document, ensuring it is not altered in anyway way.

For your information, OnBase, the county's records management software, touts an OCR accuracy rate of 95 percent-98 percent.

**Nicole L. DiRado, CMC, MPA  
Clerk of the Board**

## Commentary, What Is a pdf, OCR? What is Government Transparency?

In the exchange of letters above between Mrs. Renna and Mrs. DiRado on the posting of Union County Freeholder minutes of meetings, we think Mrs. Renna has a valid point. We've seen more and more government entities publishing their documents as images though masquerading them as pdf files. These same government entities claim they wish to be more transparent in their operations and desirous of better serving the public. Even the Scotch Plains website seems to be doing this now based on recent submittals.

Is this a growing trend? We don't know if this is purposeful by these agencies, or if they are just uninformed. The county has very skilled information technology personnel. County Clerk Joanne Rajoppi is one of the best. Perhaps she could be consulted to resolve this matter.

On a technical note, pdf stands for "Portable Document Format." It was developed so that text, images and vectors can be combined into an electronic document, readable, searchable and printable by all computer systems. Correctly constructed, the text in the pdf is searchable on websites and able to be copied and pasted. It can also be password pro-

tected so that it can't be altered, should that be a concern.

With today's computer systems, a true pdf file is easy to create — just "print to pdf" from any computer program. The setup takes only a few minutes. In fact, it's difficult to actually create a pdf that is not searchable; reducing it to only an image — one would have to go out of one's way to achieve it.

With proper pdf production, there's no OCR involved. OCR stands for Optical Character Recognition, whereby for example a piece of paper is scanned to an image and computer software then tries to interpret the image and create words from it.

So it seems if the county and other government agencies are hiring outside firms (with taxpayer money) to create improper pdf's (images), scanning paper and making images, the whole effort becomes expensive for no reason — unless of course the intent is not to be transparent but appear to be transparent.

Presumably, minutes of meetings are composed by word processing software such as MS Word (where signatures and images can also be included). One could use almost any software available today to do this. Then, just "print to pdf" — no consultants required.

The county worker could then connect to their website by an ftp program, upload the file and the information is immediately available to the public in seconds — transparently.

It all boils down to the lyrics in a country and western song, *It's so simple, it done eluded me.*



**PACKED HOUSE...**Well-wishers fill the audience Sunday at the Union County Courthouse in Elizabeth as freeholders hold their reorganization meeting.

## NJ School Board Assoc. Notes Work of Their Local School Bd. Members

TRENTON — The New Jersey State Board of Education last week marked School Board Recognition Month by approving a resolution that commends the hard work and dedication of the state's nearly 4,800 local school board members.

"New Jersey's boards of education are charged with the duty to provide students with the skills and resources necessary to achieve state standards, so they may compete in a global economy upon graduation," the resolution states. "The efforts of local boards of education, in partnership with stakeholders ranging from parents to teachers to state education officials, have fostered a public school system that has contributed to New Jersey's status as a leader in academic benchmarks such as elementary and middle school scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and college preparation through Advanced Placement offerings."

"School Board Recognition Month presents an opportunity to inform our communities about the complex and demanding job performed by local boards of education," said Raymond Wiss, president of the New Jersey School Boards Association (NJSBA).

"Our state's 4,800 local school members constitute the largest group of elected and appointed public officials in New Jersey," he added. "They are also the best prepared group — undergoing extensive state-mandated training that far exceeds requirements for other public offices. And, I have to point out, school board members receive no compensation for their service."

New Jersey's local school boards oversee the operations of the public schools that serve about 1.38 million students, according to the NJSBA, a sponsor of recognition month.

The National School Boards Association began School Board Recognition Month in the early 1990s, and various states dedicate a month to recognize the contributions of local school board members. 2011 marks the tenth year that School Board Recognition Month has been celebrated in New Jersey.

Because School Board Recognition Month coincides with the time when prospective school board can-

didates take the first steps to run for office, the state board's resolution "encourages qualified New Jersey citizens to consider serving as members on their local boards of education." March 8 is the deadline for candidates to file nominating petitions to place their names on the ballot for the 2011 annual school election, which will take place on April 27.

For more information, please see [www.njsba.org](http://www.njsba.org).

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*The New Jersey School Boards Association is a federation of 588 local boards of education and includes 44 charter school associate members. NJSBA advocates the interests of school districts, trains local school board members and provides resources for the advancement of public education.*

According to NAMI (National Assoc. Mental Illness), the U.S. Surgeon General has reported that the likelihood of violence from people with mental illness is low. Acts of violence are exceptional. They are a sign that something has gone terribly wrong, usually in the mental healthcare system. Nationwide, the mental health care system is broken. Arizona, like other states, has deeply cut mental health services. It is essential to understand the nature of mental illness and to find out what went wrong.

## New Jersey Borrows 40,000 Units Of Blood From Other States

TRENTON — According to the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services, fewer blood drives during the holiday season increase the need for blood donations in January. Currently, O negative blood is in critically short supply in New Jersey. However, blood donations are needed year round, and all blood types are needed. Blood donations have consistently failed to keep pace with need.

In 2009, New Jersey used 39,826 more units of blood than it collected and had to borrow from other states.

More than 60 percent of New Jersey adults are eligible to donate blood, yet only 3.6 percent donate on a routine basis. If New Jersey could increase its donor participation to the national average of 5 percent, the state would eliminate its blood shortage.



**FROM AFAR...**The Martin Wallberg Post No. 3 of the American Legion, Westfield, was presented a flag that flew over Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan. Specialist Carlos Granados of Alpha Co 2113 home, based in Newark, presented the flag in appreciation of the "goodies and supplies for children" that the Post sent to him in Afghanistan on his deployment and for when he was on deployment to Iraq a few years ago. Pictured, from left to right, are: Commander Bill Maines, Carlos and his friend Leidy Hernandez. Carlos had the flag framed in Afghanistan by a local artisan. To help the troops, call Pete Hogaboom at (908) 247-7630.



**THANK YOU...**Joseph Gibilisco, center, receives a plaque from RWJ Rahway Foundation President Marlene H. Lubinger and Kirk Tice, RWJ Rahway president and CEO, in recognition of his dedication, leadership and service as foundation chairman from 2008-2010.

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Dr. Merriman was recently voted by her peers as a Top Dentist in New Jersey Monthly's 2010 survey of New Jersey Dentists.

Dr. Merriman is a graduate of New York University, College of Dentistry and Long Island Jewish Medical Center in NY. Her professional affiliations include the American Dental Association, New Jersey Dental Association, American Association of Women Dentists, and the prestigious Dawson Alumni Association. She is a faculty member at The Center for Educational Excellence in NJ, and co-founder of the Dawson Study Club for Complete Dentistry. Dr. Merriman is also the author of the blog Dental Chronicles: [www.dentalchronicles.com](http://www.dentalchronicles.com)

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