

More Letters to the Editor

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Towns Should Takeover Services From County and Keep Tax Money

In September 2006 the County of Union held a summit on shared services in which officials from all 21 municipalities were invited to participate; boards of education were not invited to attend. The summit was facilitated by the Forums Institute, and a summary they prepared of the summit was obtained by the Union County Watchdog Association using the Open Public Records Act.

According to the summary, the purpose was to "facilitate an interactive dialogue with the county's mayors and administrators to identify areas of potential shared or regionalized services."

Only 12 participants representing 11 of the 21 municipalities participated and one of the 11 municipal administrators was the county manager's wife. Fifteen county representatives were present including three freeholders. Some areas for change noted by participants were: not enough municipal participation was mentioned three times; need ideas to foster a better turnout.

Here's an idea: switch the concept. Everyone knows that the County of Union has never saved a taxpayer a dollar. The municipalities run their governments with more respect for their taxpayers and their money than the county does. The municipalities should be taking over services from the county and keeping the money they send to them. And who knows, with the savings they might be able to throw a concert in town and treat their residents like VIP's.

This past campaign season the incumbent freeholders didn't mention the word "tax" once in their campaign literature or their press releases. Their behavior has been indefensible, and even they didn't want to be associated with the money they are spending on waste and mismanagement. The media followed the county's million dollar public information department's lead and barely mentioned county taxes.

County taxes have increased over 50 percent since the year 2000. What doesn't get mentioned at all is that just prior to 2000, in 1995, the state took over the county courts saving county taxpayers \$17.2 million. But taxes weren't decreased and by 1999, the county was spending the \$17.2 million savings on other things - like their payroll.

One unnamed participant of the summit noted the opportunity to network was valued because "true shared service will evolve from trust and relationships of individuals." This comment smells like it came from a freeholder.

How can any municipal official with the intelligence to get elected, or put on their socks, "trust" the county government to take over their services and save them money?

County budget year/expenditures: state takes over the county court system: 1995, \$272.6; 1996, \$271.4; 1997, \$278.7; 1998, \$282.7, and 1999, \$288.2 million.

The county has never consolidated a service within its own government. If municipalities pay the county to run their services, there are a few things that are guaranteed to happen. One, the cost for the county to deliver the same services

would be much higher than the sum total of what the municipalities currently spend. Two, the county would create a much larger work force and/or will add additional layers of supervisors, managers, bureau chiefs and directors. Three, money collected from the majority towns would be diverted to the few towns that represent the freeholders voting base. I doubt even the City of Elizabeth sees an honest return on their county tax dollars.

We already saw the costly disaster that privatizing the county print shop has become. At one point the county-run printing facility did printing for municipalities at an inexpensive rate. Now the bulk of the county's own printing is sent to an outside vendor; a campaign contributor who is located in Hudson County.

Union County is only one of two counties that have both a police department and a sheriff's department. We also have a public safety department, which the corrections officers who run the jail fall under.

The county even wasted money on their shared services "initiative." They received a \$104,500 state grant to study the possibilities of consolidating municipal services. They spent about \$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 touts county services that are already in place, like ball fields and Rumlins Hospital. The county is now seeking another \$298,357 state grant to spend on "sharing available resources efficiently."

In the logical world, consolidation makes sense. Most of the county has their services performed by a county system. But we are talking about New Jersey, the bizarre land of politics and government, where everything is backwards and upside down. In New Jersey, we should do away with wasteful and redundant powerbroker controlled county government.

If the state would take over services such as the courthouse and the municipalities, which taxpayers have more direct control over, the government would be held accountable, and would have the ability to maintain the properties in their own town.

New Jersey, with meaningful pay-to-play reform being only a dream, with ELEC laws that do not stop the county from spending hundreds of thousands annually on taxpayer-funded campaign literature and commercials, with no ethics commission to stop county government from doling out no bid contracts to family and campaign contributors, with no state oversight of county hiring practices, with little state oversight of employee benefits have indebted us for generations.

Handing this form of government more power would be disastrous to our fragile democracy here in Union County. History has shown this government has no interest in saving tax dollars, only generating more jobs, contracts and power.

Tina Renna, President
Union County Watchdog Association
Cranford



HUNG UP!! Universal Truths That Tell Us a Lot About Ourselves

By Milt Faith, Executive Director
Youth and Family Counseling Service

A Dedicated Reader Writes: I've always enjoyed your column. You make reading about mental health issues - dysfunctional relationships, feelings of inadequacy, self-doubts, etc. - informative and fun. You bring in music, sports, poems and Chinese cookie proverbs that provide a smile and useful information. You recently told a group that someone provided you with some fun statements that were universal truths and told us a lot about ourselves and our crazy universe. Could you include it in your column?

Answer: A good colleague sent me a list of 38 rules that can be very helpful. See if you can find yourself in any of these sayings. The colleague is Scott Cassie and he found it on the Internet. Its title is: Subject: Rules to Consider and here are my favorite 10:

- 1) If you look like your passport, you probably need the trip.
- 2) Bills travel through the mail at twice the speed of checks.
- 3) Men are from earth. Women are from earth. Deal with it!
- 4) Middle age is when broadness of the mind and narrowness of the waist change places.
- 5) Experience is a wonderful thing. It enables you to recognize a mistake when you make it again.
- 6) You should not confuse your career with your life.
- 7) Nobody cares if you can't dance well. Just get up and dance.
- 8) Never lick a steak knife.
- 9) The most destructive force in the universe is gossip.
- 10) Thought for the day: Never be afraid to try something new. Remember that a lone amateur built the Ark. A large group of professionals built the Titanic!

A Troubled Husband Writes: My daughter will be getting married this winter and my wife refuses to attend the wedding. She will be married by a mayor of a local town; she and her intended husband are of different faiths and my wife insists that "Bette" (disguised name) be married by a minister of our faith. The children have talked to her and she refuses to budge. I do not agree with my wife. I would have preferred a religious wedding, but the children are good, happy and in love. I support them and will be there for them. Any recommendations on how to resolve this?

Answer: This is difficult. I respect your wife's feelings, but Bette has a right to make this important decision (which I assume is based on many factors). Try to encourage your wife to speak to her minister, who, I hope, will offer support and guidance. I am pleased that this conflict

will not dissuade you from attending and being a participant in this wonderful event.

Regarding your wife, it is difficult (too often) to give up basic beliefs we've had our entire lives, but we have to accept the right of individuals, including our children, to decide for themselves what is appropriate and what would make them happy. Good luck to you all!

A Puzzled Woman Writes: I recently attended my uncle's funeral. The family loved him, and it was an honorable and solemn service. Everyone behaved properly and dressed in black, except for one person. My brother brought his girlfriend who wore a bright red outfit, red shoes, pocketbook, etc. Later, when we spoke to my brother and expressed our surprise and, quite frankly, shock, my brother told us that he had asked "Brenda" (disguised name) to wear black, but she said black doesn't do her justice, and she has the right to dress the way she wants to, anyway. Are we overreacting? We think Brenda is too controlling and insensitive.

Answer: Black is the usual color of clothing worn by those who attend a funeral; it is an expression of respect and support for the family that is grieving and it is consistent with the sadness of loss. I would think that Brenda was somewhat insensitive and may have a need to be the center of attention.

Secondly, I would have hoped that she would dress in black out of respect for your brother's wishes. This may be an indication of difficulties in their relationship, and I hope your brother would talk further with Brenda in order to resolve future problems regarding communication, sensitivity and control issues. Show him this article; it may help.

Church to Continue Free Lecture Series

AREA - The Social Justice Committee of the First Unitarian Society of Plainfield (FUSP), the congregation of which includes residents of Westfield, Scotch Plains and Fanwood, will present the fourth lecture in its "Thinking Globally, Acting Locally" series.

It will take place on Friday, December 15, at 7 p.m. at the FUSP church, located at 724 Park Avenue in Plainfield. Stephen St. Hilaire, president of the United Nations Association of New Jersey, will be the featured speaker.

He will discuss how people can use tools from both international and federal law to work toward a truly level playing field with real security for workers in the global economy.

The evening will begin with a potluck supper at 6 p.m. and a discussion will follow the lecture. Childcare will be provided. This free lecture series will run through May, with community pizza parties in January and June so participants can socialize and share their views.

Future topics include environmental justice and civil liberties in the age of terrorism. All the dates and topics are posted at fusp.org under news and events. For more information, call (908) 756-0750 weekdays between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

Coffee With Conscience Presents A Capella Group

WESTFIELD - The Coffee With Conscience Concert Series continues its seventh season by presenting the San Francisco-based, a cappella group, the BOBs, in concert at the First United Methodist Church of Westfield, located at 1 East Broad Street (corner of North Avenue), on Saturday, December 9.

Doors will open at 7:15 p.m. and the concert begins at 8 p.m. Admission is \$20. All net proceeds from the concert will be donated to Community Food Bank of New Jersey.

The BOBs are a cross between a choral group and an improv comedy troupe. Whether they're emulating an instrument or actually singing real words, the BOBs consistently provoke responses ranging from laughter to

shock. The BOBs display intimate knowledge of genres ranging from barbershop to classical to rap.

For more information about the BOBs, visit bobs.com. This season the concerts are being recorded for broadcast by Westfield's TV-36. Residents of Westfield, Scotch Plains, Fanwood and Mountainside can see each month's concert on Saturday and Sunday at 7 a.m.

For more information about the Coffee With Conscience Concert Series, the upcoming performance, ways in which to get involved with the series or information on getting a copy of the Season Sampler CD, visit coffeewithconscience.org or call (908) 412-9105 or send an e-mail to concerts4causes@aol.com.

Trailside to Host Teacher Training Workshop Today

MOUNTAINSIDE - The Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders will present "Project WILD," a teacher-training workshop for adults, ages 18 and older, at Trailside Nature and Science Center, located at 452 New Providence Road in Mountainside, today, Thursday, December 7, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Whether a formal, informal, home-school educator or scout leader, Project WILD can assist in teaching any subject, to any grade level: science, social studies, math, literacy or art. Attendees will acquire new teaching skills and practices that translate into more effective teaching. The public should prepare to get "wild" in the classroom, through a multitude of interdisciplinary, hands-on educa-

tional activities, teacher-tested and classroom ready for K-12 students.

The fee for this workshop is \$25 per person, which includes a curriculum guide. Space is limited and pre-registration is required.

Project WILD lessons are correlated to New Jersey Core Curriculum Content standards. Participants receive six New Jersey Department of Education professional development credits. Light morning refreshments will be served during registration, but participants are encouraged to bring a lunch.

For additional information on "Project WILD" or information about upcoming programs and special events at Trailside, call (908) 789-3670 or visit www.ucnj.org/trailside.



INSIDE EDITION...Children in the Passport Program at Wesley Hall Nursery School welcomed Anita Walsh - one of the school's parents - to give them an insider's view on India's customs and traditions. The children sampled Indian food and heard stories of Ms. Walsh's childhood in India.

Holiday Boutique Open At Visual Arts Center

SUMMIT - The second annual For Art's Sake Holiday Boutique is now open at the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey (VACNJ), located on 68 Elm Street in Summit, right on time for the holiday shopping season.

Featured are unique, handcrafted works in a variety of materials ranging from glass, ceramics, jewelry, textiles and more. Those shopping for someone special this holiday season are sure to find something.

Located in the multi-purpose room on the first floor of the art center, the Holiday Boutique is open seven days a week. Hours are Monday through Thursday, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Fridays

from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and weekends from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Ample parking is provided in the center's lot.

Proceeds from the gift sales at the Holiday Boutique will go to support the art center's art scholarships for economically disadvantaged children, education and exhibitions programming.

Whether looking for a pair of earrings, scarf, ceramic bowl, or woven handbag, the public is invited to stop by the VACNJ. The boutique is open through December 23.

For more information on the boutique or the Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, call (908) 273-9121 or log on to artcenternj.org.

Whose birthday is it, anyway?

We believe the important news at Christmas is not who comes down the chimney, but who came down from heaven. We invite you to join us as we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.



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