

APRIL 29, 2007

## **Writing to elected officials had \$8.00 an hour consequence**

BY TINA RENNA

### **Update as of 5/18/07:**

Since sending our last email to elected Union County Officials regarding the County's newly instituted \$8.00 an hour service fee to show us back-up documentation for vouchers ranging from catering bills to travel expenses for the County Manager, Union County Officials have been offering their support for our county watchdog efforts.

Westfield Councilman Sal Caruana has donated \$1,000 to the Watchdog Association to cover these and any future service fees. And a statement of support was sent to the press today from the District 21 Legislative Office as well. Their correspondence follows.

Regards,

Tina

### Statement from District 21 Legislative Office regarding UCWA's Concerns about County Public Records Fees

We believe all levels of government should be committed to transparency in spending so that taxpayers can truly understand how their tax dollars are being used. That is why we are very concerned about recent reports from the Union County Watchdog Association that the County of Union might be hampering access to expense vouchers incurred by county employees by charging a newly instituted service fee to provide such records. Under Title 47 (Public Records), immediate access is ordinarily granted to budgets, bills, vouchers, contracts, including collective negotiations agreements and individual employment contracts, and public employee salary and overtime information. We encourage the Watchdog organization to challenge the legitimacy of this fee for service practice&nb

Senator Thomas H. Kean, Jr.  
Assemblyman Eric Munoz, M.D.  
Assemblyman Jon Bramnick

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Dear Tina,

I applaud your efforts to expose wasteful spending and abuse on the part of Union County government.

A few years back I attended a Southside Johnny concert in Echo Lake Park and frankly I was shocked at the self-indulgence on and off stage of some connected to county government. Are these events really for taxpayers, or are they opportunities for some over-aged groupies on the public dime to rub wine glasses on stage with rock acts? Like many others I love Southside Johnny, but should the public foot the bill for elements of a private VIP event for elected officials and their friends? Were campaign contributors VIP's too? Perhaps the VIP guest list should be released as part of the public record.

As for the newly instituted \$8.00 per hour service fee to obtain what should be freely accessible public documents: please send me an address to mail a \$1000 contribution to your organization to cover these and future "service" fees, and do not hesitate to contact me when and if you need additional funds for this purpose. There is one condition: please pass on all evidence of obstruction and/or abuse to the U.S. Attorney's office. Enough is enough.

Sal Caruana  
Westfield Town Councilman

P.S. You have my permission to circulate this e-mail as you see fit.

## **Original Post:**

Dear Honorable Mayor and Council Members:

Since paying nearly \$300.00 in early 2006 for the county to convert their check registry data base into a format that could be transmitted electronically to the public, the Union County Watchdog Association has been requesting the county's check registry on a monthly basis and reviewing their vouchers. We then place OPRA requests for any vouchers we think the public should have further information on. We also publish the registry on our website for free public access.

There hasn't been a month that we haven't found some questionable spending item. Last month, for the first time, we reported to all elected municipal officials our latest finding, the \$930.00 catered staff meeting which was held on December 22, 2006 but not processed until 2 months after the meeting occurred.

Since reporting this to you, we have been informed by the county that there will now be an \$8.00 an hour service fee to retrieve back-up documentation for our monthly voucher inquiries. This month we asked for documentation on 35 vouchers and the county is estimating that the fee will be \$56.00 for an employee to retrieve the documents.

All of this months requested vouchers (35) were for employee reimbursements and travel expenses which totaled \$12,085.74 including: \$1,112.78 reimbursed to the County Manager; \$519.78 to the Sheriff; \$210.31 to the Prosecutor. Eleven vouchers totaling \$3,857.02 paid for refreshments including \$1,773.75 for Gourmet Dining c/o Kean; \$42 was paid for a cake for a 'nutrition' meeting (I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried). \$1,200.00 went for in door plants.

From a public relations standpoint even I find it incredible that the county would have the arrogance to charge the public \$56.00 to hand over this spending information. But as we all know, it is a sad reflection on our Union County media who will most likely not find this fit to report on, therefore, there will be little to

no consequence for the county's latest lack of transparency and contempt for the taxpayers.

In our last correspondence to you we called for greater participation in holding Union County government accountable to the people. We informed you that in 2006 taxpayers picked up a \$10,510.83 tab for 27 freeholder meeting refreshments and we have since obtained the catering bill for the Music Fest.

We previously reported to you that over 300 people attended the Freeholder's VIP tent. The bill obtained shows that catering was provided for 425 people at a cost to taxpayers of \$5,525. The bill for the VIP tent alcohol hasn't been provided to date. The county has written that this was an in-kind contribution and no documentation has been offered as to who the contributor(s) were.

Again I will ask you to imagine your own town council participating in these questionable spending sprees and then attempting to charge a citizen watchdog group \$8.00 an hour for the privilege of you explaining how you're spending their tax-dollars.

Imagine further that you provide a free concert in your town and while your residents are setting up their lawn chairs in the mud, you along with your colleagues, family and friends are enjoying a \$5,525 feast provided by your taxpayers in a VIP tent equipped with 'Celebrity' port a potties and kegs of beer and cases of wine.

I'm sure your constituents and your local media would hold you accountable in a manner that would be fast, quick, in-a-hurry and furious. It is apparently beyond the scope of any one citizen, or even the Union County Watchdog Association, to hold county government accountable for the \$413-million tax-dollars they are currently spending annually.

As you know county government takes almost as much money from your residents as your town council does. Some towns, such as Westfield and Summit,

pay more property taxes to the county than their town. It is long past due for all good elected men and women, no matter what your party affiliation, to come to the aid of their beleaguered tax-burdened residents and demand accountability from a county government that is clearly out of control and unconnected to their residents.

Sincerely,

Tina Renna

President

Union County Watchdog Association, Inc

<http://www.unioncountywatchdog.org/>

(908)709-0530

View requested voucher list [HERE](#)

View county's OPRA response [HERE](#)

Freeholder's Music Fest VIP Tent port a potty:



