

## **Towns weigh electing freeholders by ward**

**Roselle is latest community to pass a resolution supporting the measure**

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**BY MARIAM JUKAKU**

**Star-Ledger Staff**

Town councils across the county are supporting a plan to elect at least four Union County freeholders by district or ward instead of at large, as they are currently elected.

Supporters of the measure say it makes the freeholder board more representative and accountable, but opponents say it's just a power grab by Republicans who don't have enough political clout county wide to get a candidate elected. The resolution was passed by Republican-controlled councils in Summit, Cranford and Kenilworth during the summer. But last week, Roselle's all-Democratic council passed a similarly worded resolution.

"This goes across party lines," said Roselle Councilwoman Sylvia Turnage at the borough's regular council meeting Oct. 15. "It's about representation. With all nine freeholders being at large, there's no one who represents our interests."

The resolutions, no matter how many towns pass them, are not legally binding. It would take a ballot measure to change the way freeholders are elected. And a ballot measure must be introduced by the freeholders or by collecting signatures of 15 percent of registered voters in the county -- about 39,000 signatures.

Freeholder Dan Sullivan doesn't see either happening anytime soon, especially by the all-Democrat, all-party aligned freeholder board.

"In Union County, they've been electing freeholders at-large since 1933," Sullivan said, adding that 18 of the 21 counties in the state elect freeholders the same way Union County does. He dismissed the plan as a political move by Republicans to try and secure some seats on the freeholder board. "The Republicans need to look at themselves in the mirror and find out why they can't get anyone elected. If we were to have districts in Union County, perhaps they would get one freeholder elected."

When asked how that criticism squares with a Democratic-controlled council passing a similar resolution in Roselle, Sullivan said it was only one town. "They're not organizational Democrats," Sullivan said of Mayor Garrett Smith and his supporters who control the borough's council.

Garwood, which has a Democratic-controlled council, rejected the resolution in July.

Tina Renna, president of the Union County Watchdog Association and a vocal critic of the freeholder administration, supports the measure. She said partitioning the county into districts is a way of reining in the influence of political power brokers....