

Union watchdog cleared of libel

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Mean-spirited. Unflattering. Poorly written.

That is how a judge yesterday described an internet diatribe, and a companion news article, penned and posted nearly two years ago by a watchdog group comparing Union County's official spokesman to Adolf Hitler and questioning his sexual orientation. But what it was not, said Superior Court Judge Marianne Espinosa in Elizabeth, was libelous.

That's because spokesman Sebastian D'Elia, despite his arguments to the contrary, is a public figure -- and legally fair game, even to critiques that may be in poor taste, the judge ruled, dismissing a libel lawsuit D'Elia brought in January 2007, claiming his reputation was besmirched.

The main target of his lawsuit was Tina Renna of Cranford, president of the Union County Watchdog Association. Former Republican freeholder candidate Patricia Quattrocchi, who works with Renna on an internet blog called "The County Watchers," and the weekly Elizabeth Reporter, which printed the diatribe as commentary, was also named in the case.

"Sadly, the old-fashioned ways of civil discourse and accountability are going the way of printed newspapers and record players," D'Elia said after the ruling. "Nevertheless, I do not regret pursuing a legal action. When confronted with an individual whose motives are purely malicious and vindictive, there can never be compromise."

It ended yet another dispute -- and legal battle -- between the watchdog organization and the all-Democrat Union County administration, which have been at odds, in and out of court, for several years over county government operations and Renna's demands for public records.

"This frivolous lawsuit was filed to harass me, to frighten me, to shut me up, to get me to stop being a watchdog of Union County government. It failed on all counts," Renna said.

She and a small band of supporters have made a full-time job out of taking Union County officials to task, accusing them of mispending tax dollars and doling out political patronage jobs -- and internet diatribes are common.

Claiming they turned the county into a banana republic, Renna once posted photographs on her website of officials near beer kegs and liquor bottles outside the county's annual rock concert, accusing them of illegally drinking in a park. On the website YouTube, the group posted a video entitled "Pass the Lies Please," criticizing the freeholders and county administration for spending thousands of dollars annually on catering bills for their public meetings.

The video displays budget figures showing \$16,340 spent on bottled water in 2006, \$1,692 on an 18-flavor coffee machine in the freeholder office and catering bills for whole chickens and ribs, all juxtaposed with freeholders saying they only snack on pizza or a sandwich.

And for years, D'Elia has had the job of standing between those officials and Renna's barbs.

It instantly put the two at odds, and it boiled over when D'Elia became the target of the online article titled, "County Hacks are Soulless Psychopaths"-- a piece the Elizabeth Reporter also carried and which D'Elia insisted was deliberately intended to ruin his reputation and defame him.

"While the judge's decision essentially allows political partisans Renna and her ilk to recklessly portray others, I do accept it," D'Elia said. "While I took this case up on my behalf, I also did so to give hope to

others whose reputations have been 'Swiftboated,' and impugned by malicious political partisans such as Ms. Renna, who not so coincidentally was represented by the Union County Republican Chairman, Phil Morin."

Renna does not deny her political affiliation, or the affiliation of her attorney. But she said her group also has independents and disillusioned Democrats.

"He attacks me, saying I have an agenda, when his attorney is a county vendor, Robert Varady, who handles cases for the county," Renna responded. "Part of the issue is my complaint about his department, in general. Union County spends more on public information than any in the state, and his entire job is to support Democrat freeholder campaigns. This case was about shutting me down, pure and simple."

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