

12/1999

Taxpayers helped fund freeholder campaign

Taxpayers may not realize it, but they helped subsidize the Democratic freeholder campaign this year. They didn't contribute to any campaign fund, but in a more indirect manner which they might not even notice.

Message & Media of New Brunswick — that's in Middlesex County, by the way — was awarded a \$45,000 contract in the spring to design new county signs. The firm was hired to implement "a new graphic and thematic image devoted to projecting a new identity" for Union County.

Freeholders aimed to raise awareness of what county government is and what it does for citizens, in addition to "renewing a sense of pride" in the county.

The new signs sure are attractive, and helpful too. People can actually drive around the traffic circle in the Watchung Reservation and not have to guess where to get off. There are lovely gateway signs when entering the county and directional signs telling motorists where various county parks and buildings are located.

The county produces the signs in-house. There will be approximately 120 welcome signs at a cost of \$5,000.

My Two Cents

By Mark Hywna
Regional Editor

each to produce and install; a total price tag of approximately \$600,000. There also are park entrance signs which cost \$17,000 since they're double-sided and require two posts.

Message & Media recently received another contract — this one \$55,000 — to produce promotional materials for the county-operated Runnells Specialized Hospital in Berkeley Heights. Freeholders didn't ask any questions about why a firm from Middlesex County was being hired for the job, yet the administrator of Runnells Hospital is grilled each time he presents a resolution to hire someone from outside the county, usually on a per diem basis.

I understand that the freeholders realize it's important to remain consistent with who is developing the signage and similar materials. But I

would guess they also understand the importance of toeing the party line.

What does this all have to do with the freeholder campaign?

Coincidentally, the Union County Democratic Committee spent approximately \$125,000 with Message & Media for work on the freeholder campaign this year. In another remarkable coincidence, the glossy campaign fliers for the Democrats bore a striking resemblance to the new signs Union County taxpayers paid for; almost like subliminal advertising.

I have to give the Democrats credit. It was a shrewd move. Republicans could learn a thing or two for next year. It would probably work better than wasting their entire election season drawing cartoons.

That's the beauty of professional services contracts. You can virtually award them to anyone you'd like. As one freeholder put it, that's where all the "candy" goes.

Daniel Sullivan of Elizabeth and Alexander Mirabella of Roselle Park will become the chairman and vice chairman of the freeholder board,

respectively; when it reorganizes Sunday.

Sullivan had the best attendance of any freeholder in 1999, having not missed a meeting, while Mirabella missed only two meetings. I'm sure that had a lot to do with gaining their new positions.

Linda Stender, along with Don Goncalves, brought up the rear when it came to freeholder attendance; both missed eight meetings but were still at an 80-percent attendance clip.

As a whole, the board fashioned a solid 88-percent attendance rate in 1999 with most of the board sporting an attendance rate of better than 85 percent.

Freeholder	Meetings	Rate
Dan Sullivan	42/42	100%
Alex Mirabella	40/42	95%
Dorah Scanton	39/42	93%
Nicholas Scutari	38/42	90%
Lewis Mingo	36/42	86%
Chester Holmes	35/42	83%
Mary Ruotolo	35/42	83%
Linda Stender	34/42	81%
Don Goncalves	34/42	81%