



## **N.J. Libertarian sues 17 Atlantic County towns over access to records**

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A central New Jersey man has filed suit against 17 Atlantic County towns in an effort to make the workings of municipal governments more open to the public.

John Paff, of Somerset, chairman of the New Jersey Libertarian Party's Open Government Advocacy Project, filed his suit Friday, claiming 17 of the 23 municipalities in Atlantic County did not adequately respond to his requests for minutes from closed-session meetings.

"There's too much information that's kept secret," Paff said Monday in a phone interview. "Non-compliance (with the state's Open Public Meetings Act) is so widespread, I can't just do this town-by-town anymore."

But at least one city said it complied with Paff's requests and doesn't understand why it is included in the suit.

Paff said he started with Atlantic County because it has a manageable number of towns and "starts with an A." He is representing himself in the lawsuit, but consults with a lawyer when needed.

Local governments do have a legitimate need to keep some matters secret, Paff said. But at the least, he said, they should let the public know which specific matter they are discussing when they go into closed sessions and make closed-session minutes available within a reasonable amount of time.

Paff said he hopes the lawsuit will be a wake-up call and that the towns will be forthcoming with the information he sought. But if not, he's willing to go in front of a judge.

He held up Absecon as an example. The city sent him a Sept. 2 letter saying that they will send a cost estimate for photocopying within 30 days. As of Friday, Paff has yet to receive the estimate, his suit contends.

But Absecon Administrator Terry Dolan said Monday that the city did mail a copying-costs estimate to Paff shortly after its Sept. 2 letter.

The city sent a follow-up letter Friday, saying it would give Paff eight requested pages on receipt of his \$6 payment and would need 14 additional days to get a legal opinion on the release of closed-session minutes, Dolan said.

"I am not sure why he would chastise Absecon for being derelict in our duties," Dolan said. "Absecon takes every request for public records extremely seriously, and we comply to the letter of the law."

The other towns named in the suit are Atlantic City, Buena Vista Township, Corbin City, Egg Harbor City, Egg Harbor Township, Folsom Borough, Galloway Township, Hamilton Township, Hammonton, Linwood, Longport, Margate, Mullica Township, Northfield, Port

Republic and Somers Point.

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