

The Record (Bergen County)

Judge: State must release info on free rides from troopers Wednesday, July 23, 2008 BY ELISE YOUNG STAFF WRITER

The public is entitled to know details about the travels of former governors and other dignitaries who used state police bodyguards and drivers, a judge ruled today.

The decision, by Superior Court Judge Linda R. Feinberg, will give the Attorney General's Office 30 days to release the material to The Record, whose parent company, North Jersey Media Group, filed suit for the documents.

Feinberg, citing common law, ruled that the newspaper's interest in disclosure outweighed the state's attempt to withhold the records. She told the Attorney General's office to release the information 30 days after she signs the order, which will happen in about a week.

At issue was free rides provided by the state police Executive Protection Unit, which drives and guards the governor, attorney general and out-of-state dignitaries.

A report issued after Governor Corzine's near-fatal car crash last year criticized the fact that the unit also had provided more than 300 rides to individuals who ordinarily don't get such protection.

The Attorney General's office denied an Open Public Records Act request by The Record for details on the rides. The Record's parent company then filed the lawsuit.

Limited documents released as a result of that suit showed the unit provided services to five former governors 152 times. Those records covered only the 30 months from January 2006 to July 2007, a period examined by the independent panel that reviewed Corzine's crash.

Former Gov. Brendan T. Byrne, a Democrat last in office 26 years ago, had 95 rides – all for official business, he told The Record for an article Sunday.

Also using the service were Thomas H. Kean, Jim Florio, Christie Whitman, Donald T. DiFrancesco and James E. McGreevey. In total, the five traveled roughly 11,700 miles at taxpayer expense.

During a teleconference in Feinberg's courtroom Wednesday in Mercer County, Sean M. Gorman, representing the Attorney General's Office, argued that disclosing the riders' exact destinations and other information would pose a security risk for officials and compromise the unit's operations.

Dina L. Sforza, representing North Jersey Media Group, said The Record was interested only in the 300-plus details cited by the report that did not involve travels of current in-state officials, or those out-of-state officials for whom details are provided on a reciprocity basis – meaning that when New Jersey officials travel outside the state, the protective units of those other states provide services to them.

