

## Freeholders and free speech in Union County

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It's bad enough when elected officials put family members on the public payroll. Even when they're qualified (and it's legal), it looks like a political handout.

But Union County tried to take it a step further:

If Freeholder Daniel Sullivan had his way, not only would it be okay for relatives (like his) to make a buck working for the county, but the subject couldn't even be mentioned at public meetings by taxpayers exercising their First Amendment rights.

The same taxpayers, by the way, who are paying those salaries and his.

Fortunately, before the freeholders could change the words on the county seal to "Ixnay on the Amilyfay," the American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey stepped in.

Sullivan, the vice chairman of the freeholder board, was presiding over its June 25 meeting when, during the public comment portion, county resident Tina Renna mentioned Sullivan's family members on the payroll.

[Watch the video](#)

"I'm going to tell you right now," Sullivan said, pointing his finger at Renna, "do not mention my family."

"We cannot talk about your family, who are county employees?" Renna asked. "That's right," Sullivan replied. "That's right. You cannot mention my family."

When Renna persisted, she was removed from the meeting by a security guard, acting at Sullivan's request. Sullivan, after mockingly mimicking Renna, told her, "You're done! Goodbye!" as she was escorted out. Then he pronounced to the remaining citizens, "That had to be done."

In other words, Sullivan, an elected official with family members on the payroll, just "had to" remove a citizen who had the nerve to raise a question about nepotism - in New Jersey, no less. Imagine that.

Union County spokesman Sebastian D'Elia said Renna was tossed for continuing to speak over her allotted time. But on the videotape of the meeting Sullivan is heard saying, "If you mention my family I swear to you, you'll be thrown out of here."

There is a history here: Renna is a self-appointed Union County watchdog with a web site that tracks the board's spending and voting habits. She often gets on the freeholders' nerves. Sullivan and his family have been targets. So, it's personal. And Sullivan lost control.

But personal or not, nepotism is a legitimate issue.

And the First Amendment applies in Union County, too.

When Bruce Paterson, another resident, stepped to the podium and wondered about just how "all of these freeholder family members get hired," he was told, by Sullivan, to "move on to your next point."

"I'm talking about good government," Paterson said.

Said Sullivan: "I'm not going to tolerate talking about my family, but I can tell you this: There are any number of people, who may or may not be related to people sitting up here, who came long before people who are sitting up here." Paterson picked up the point and asked how many of Sullivan's

relatives had jobs before he was elected freeholder. "That's irrelevant," Sullivan said.

How many family members does Sullivan have on the county's payroll? D'Elia said, "We don't know. We don't keep lists like that."

Not long after Renna's ejection and Paterson's squelching, the ACLU of New Jersey threatened a First Amendment lawsuit on Paterson's behalf. And Union County blinked. So before tonight's meeting, the chairman will read a statement that says, in part:

"Comments regarding public employees, whether or not they are related to freeholders or others, will be allowed at this and all future meetings, as protected by the First Amendment."

The statement should be followed by a public apology from Sullivan, who should be given the Constitution as required summer reading. And both sides should pledge to keep the discourse civil.