

The Star-Ledger

Call for government transparency in Roselle Park, Hillside

Thursday, August 21, 2008

BY JASON JETT

Star-Ledger Staff

Roselle Park and Hillside council minority members are calling for measures to pursue greater transparency in municipal government.

Roselle Park Councilwoman Larissa Chen-Hoerning and Hillside Councilwoman Shelley-Ann Bates are the newest members on municipal councils with a majority that has been in control for a decade.

They have proposed using the municipal website to keep residents better informed on township revenues and expenditures, as well as indebtedness.

Chen-Hoerning noted Roselle Park is expected to adopt a 2008 municipal budget tonight, and said the numbers in the spending plan should have been made more accessible to taxpayers.

A resolution she is expected to present for a vote calls for council members to pledge their support for "transparency in government" and to establish a dedicated public finance page on the borough website within 45 days.

The measure also calls for a budget summary, in laymen's terms, to be made available annually when a spending plan is introduced.

"I brought up both ideas on several previous occasions, but have met with some resistance," said the Democratic councilwoman on a Republican-controlled governing body.

Chen-Hoerning noted that state Sen. Joe Pennacchio (R-Morris) has introduced a Transparency of Government Act that would establish a state public finance website, and that the borough council approved a resolution supporting the proposed legislation.

In Hillside, Bates has been trying for nearly a year to get a vote on an ordinance requiring the live broadcast of municipal council meetings and the posting of public records on the township website.

She and supporters in the community collected more than 350 petition signatures seeking council vote or referendum on whether municipal government should end a decade of

intransigency in failing to broadcast meetings on public access cable television Channel 36.

The petition also calls for municipal meeting agendas and minutes, as well as a wide range of government information, to be made available on the township website, www.townshipofhillside.org

The ordinance introduced by Bates states, "Such access enables them (residents) to participate fully in public affairs, help determine governmental priorities and to hold their public officials accountable.

"Inadequate or delayed public access to meetings and information allows corruption to flourish undetected and unpunished," it added. "Government secrecy allows backroom deals to set public policy in the interest of the few rather than the many."

The township council gave preliminary approval to the ordinance at a meeting Tuesday, with council president John Kulish urging the public to carefully read the voluminous proposal because implementing it would require significant tax dollars. A public hearing and final vote is set for Sept. 8.

Councilman-at-large Frank Deo estimated costs at \$200,000 to upload documents dating to 2000 on the website and to pay workers to broadcast public meetings. He suggested a compromise, with uploads of documents beginning from the current year.

Supporters of the ordinance stressed it does not call for every public meeting to be broadcast, noting audio recordings of planning and zoning board sessions could be uploaded to the municipal website.

Jason Jett may be contacted at jjett@starledger.com or (908) 302-1509