

## Hillside to decide on open government

**Caucus, public hearing, vote all to be held tomorrow**

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**BY JASON JETT**

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Hillside would broadcast township council meetings for the first time under an ordinance to be considered for adoption tomorrow night.

The open-government measure, sponsored by Second Ward Councilwoman Shelley-Ann Bates and introduced after the certification of a citizens' petition demanding a referendum vote, does not stop there.

The Joseph T. Loeb Township of Hillside Sunshine Act of 2008 would require the township to record every public meeting and make agendas, minutes, resolutions, ordinances and other records available to the public on the Internet.

Township Council President John Kulish early last month urged residents to come out and be heard on the ordinance, which he and other council members said would necessitate a tax hike.

However the council then inexplicably changed the date and time of the meeting from 7:30 p.m. Tuesday to 7:15 p.m. Monday. The council typically holds regular meetings the second Tuesday of the month, and meets in a caucus the day before. An Aug. 20 notice on the Tuesday cancellation from the township clerk gave no reason for the change.

"We don't know, there must have been a conflict in scheduling," assistant Township Clerk Diane Rowe said Friday. "They made everything Monday night."

Councilwoman Bates bristled at the prospect of a township council caucus followed by a public hearing and vote on the open-government ordinance, "all in one meeting."

"There has been no discussion after a full year since it was proposed, absolutely no discussion," she said, maintaining council debate, a public hearing and a vote should not be crammed into a single meeting.

"I would like to have a discussion on what they would like to move away from in the ordinance (to save money), and have a give-and-take," she continued. "That has not happened. I have called for discussions numerous times, but have either been declined or ignored."

Bates stressed she and community residents have collected enough petition signatures to force a voter referendum on the ordinance should the township council not approve it.

She also challenged Council President Kulish's estimates that it would cost \$300,000 to scan municipal records dating to 2000 for uploading to the Internet and about \$150,000 a year to keep the posts up to date.

"It's very interesting they are only now coming out with these round numbers, and this has been sitting around for a year," she said. "There is a cost-effective method to do anything, and this will not put a tax burden on Hillside."

Bates stressed municipal documents have been maintained in electronic form since 2000, and scanning would be unnecessary. She added high school student volunteers could gain field experience in videotaping municipal meetings.

Kulish said he based his cost estimates on using qualified personnel, stating: "You need professionals to get it right. You can't send a student out and expect to get something that the public wants to see."

He termed Bates' proposed legislation "a little out there, a little far out," because it requires the town to put voluminous documents on the municipal website and televise every council, board and committee meeting.

"It makes a very broad type of requirements that cost money, tax dollars," he said. "I don't think there's a town in New Jersey that meets the type of requirements this ordinance would impose."

Bates and other supporters of the proposed ordinance said its thrust is towards ending township intransigence on public requests to broadcast council meetings.

Such broadcasts and daily community bulletin-board programming on the municipal public access channel is covered by subscriber fees returned to the municipality by Comcast of New Jersey, said officials in neighboring towns.

They added with the rollout of FIOS by Verizon, subscribers' fees returned to municipalities will increase next year.

"Union receives \$70,000 a year in franchise fees, and \$10,000 in sponsorships and donations," said Geri Durso, the township spokeswoman there. The cost of running the station (TV34) in equipment and salaries is \$80,000. Only \$10,000 comes from the municipal budget, she said.

Durso added next year, between Comcast and Verizon, the municipal television station's cost will be completely covered, and additional services are being planned. She noted the award-winning municipal television station utilizes volunteers from the public school system.

"Some towns put the money (from subscribers' fees) in the municipal budget, and use it for something else," she said. "We offer 19 hours of programming a day."

In Hillside, township council members said that after discussions during the caucus tomorrow the transparency-in-government ordinance could look different when it is up for vote.

Councilman-at-large Frank Deo has called for compromises, including posting documents from January 2008 rather than January 2000.

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**NOTE from NJFOG: A full copy of the proposed ordinance can be found here: <http://njfog.org/docs/Hillside%20ordinance.pdf>**