

## Hillside debates openness proposal

### Legislation would change government

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The proposed open-government legislation under debate in Hillside goes well beyond the so-called transparency in effect or under consideration elsewhere in Union County.

Under the proposal, public comment would come near the beginning rather than at the end of meetings, with speakers allowed 10 minutes instead of the typical three to five minutes and the session extended up to an hour if necessary.

Regular, special and caucus meetings of the township committee would be "cablecast live" on public access Channel 36.

All government meetings, including emergency and closed sessions, would be sound-recorded for uploading to the Internet with confidential information removed.

Also posted on the municipal website would be legal or official advertisements, elected officials' financial disclosure statements, a roster of local government officers, the political party affiliations of municipal committee members and all tort claims against the township.

The proposed legislation also calls for residents to be able to import data files from township accounting software. And, there is a stipulation that photocopies of records should cost only 5 cents per page, with a \$1 charge for audiotapes and CD-rom disks and \$2 for videotapes.

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

Township council president John Kulish has termed the proposal "a little far out," and when it was introduced last month he urged taxpayers to read the ordinance carefully before giving it their support because a tax hike would be required to meet its mandates.

Kulish estimated the cost to implement the proposed legislation at \$350,000, and added it would cost the township \$100,000 a year to comply with its terms. He expressed doubt that any other municipality in the state comes close to meeting the requirements in the proposal.

Second Ward Councilwoman Shelley-Ann Bates, sponsor of the proposal, said the projected costs are intentionally being exaggerated by opponents.

She stressed the township can pursue cost-effective methods of making government information and documents public, noting since 2000 all municipal records have been maintained in electronic form, making it easy to transfer them between various media.

Bates said a primary goal of the legislation is to have the township broadcast municipal council meetings for the first time, and she also called for board of education sessions to be televised.

"These entities are where tax money goes," she said. "This legislation would enlighten the public in terms of what is going on."

Roselle Park also is considering a transparency-in-government measure, but the movement there has become more collaborative than combative.

Republican Mayor Joseph Delorio, Democratic Councilwoman Larissa Chen-Hoerning and concerned citizen Saul Qersdyn this week are to meet for a second time on an open-government resolution.

At a Roselle Park council meeting Thursday, open-government advocate Jacob Magiera stressed the borough resolution would cost nowhere near the projections made in Hillside, stating little was spent to add meeting minutes to the municipal website.

"We've got much of it up there," he said of progress to date on making records available to the public. "At what costs? Not that much. Now we just need to update what we have."

Magiera said "the next big thing" in Roselle Park is televising planning and zoning board meetings as the borough faces development issues at two prominent sites -- the old Romerovski Corp. and the former Sullivan Chevrolet.

In Hillside, the township council was expected to pursue a compromise on the open-government ordinance during a caucus preceding a rescheduled meeting last night.

Some council members have suggested one compromise in posting documents beginning in January 2008 rather than the January 2000 stipulated in the proposed ordinance.

"I think it will be very costly to go back to 2000 and scan every document," said Councilman Jerome Jewell. "That's my only problem with the ordinance, the costs."

Councilwoman Bates stressed scanning would be unnecessary because record-keeping has been upgraded to digital formats. She said it is time the township upgrades the dissemination of information to taxpayers.

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