

GOP Freeholder Candidates Vow to Cut Spending, Board Seats; Incumbent Democrats Cite Record on Economic Development

By PAUL J. PEYTON
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

CRANFORD — Taxes, the Union County payroll and the revitalization of parks and downtown business districts were among those topics reviewed during a Freeholder candidates forum presented on October 14 in the Cranford Municipal Building. The two incumbent Democratic incumbents faced their Republican challengers last Thursday in a forum sponsored by the Cranford League of Women Voters.

While Freeholders Nicholas P. Scutari, Linda D. Stender and their running-mate, Angel Estrada, focused on the Democratic majority's initiatives the past three years, the GOP candidates Albert D. Dill, Wally Shackell, Jr. and Richard A. Revilla, continued to pound the incumbents on the current 9-0 Democratic majority on the board.

The Democrats, now in their third year as the majority party on the board, have not lost an election since 1994.

Freeholders serve staggered terms of three years each on the at-large board. Mr. Shackell, a former Mayor of Cranford, attacked the Democrats for taking a pay raise in December of 1998. Calling it "an abuse of power," he said the \$6,000 across the board raise was retroactive to January 1.

"The current situation (9-0 board) is dangerous. We need to bring two-party government back to Union County," he said.

On the issue of taxes, Mr. Shackell charged that the county-portion of property taxes rose in 10 towns in

1998. This year, he said, the county budget rose \$6 million. In addition, he said the county has borrowed \$240 million.

"While local municipalities try to take down the debt, the county is going in the wrong direction," he said.

Freeholder Scutari said while a member of the Summit Common Council Mr. Dill was part of a governing body that raised taxes 53 percent.

Each of the candidates was asked about the county government's role in flood control matters in light of the damage caused by Hurricane Floyd.

Mr. Revilla said overall he believes freeholders should hold town meetings in each of the 21 municipalities in the county to hear first hand the problems residents are facing, such as an emergency like the flooding caused by Floyd.

Freeholder Scutari explained that the county's Department of Public Works and the emergency management staff assisted Cranford residents following the devastation of the storm.

He noted that he signed legislation to enable the county to initiate a \$1,000 emergency grants program. Mr. Scutari said the 90-day, no interest loans were handed out upon a person's arrival at one of the hardest hit areas in the county visited by county representatives.

In terms of flood control, Freeholder Scutari noted that the county has been working on projects on Vauxhall Road and the Morris Avenue bridge, both in Union.

Mr. Shackell said the county should

better coordinate efforts with state and federal agencies in the future. In advance of the hurricane, he said Cranford had to spend its own money to dredge the Rahway River, a waterway that is on county property.

Mr. Dill, a volunteer fireman and former Summit City Councilman, stated that when an emergency like Floyd arises it is the Freeholders' role to "chase down" those state and federal agencies that can provide help to those persons in need.

Freeholder Stender noted that county employees helped evacuate Cranford residents from rising flood waters. She also said the county has been in touch with the Army Corps of Engineers on a number of projects impacting numerous towns in the county.

On the issue of acquiring additional land for open space, Mr. Estrada explained that the county has just 103 square miles of land mass, but a population of a half million people.

"One of the problems for Union County is that there is not enough available land, at least that I have seen, to be turned over into parks," he said.

Mr. Shackell said the freeholder board should implement an open space tax in the county that could be dedicated to preserving recreational and parks land.

"The bottom line here is if we don't have the funding we can't buy the property," he said.

Mr. Shackell said Union County is one of five counties in the state that does not have such a tax. He said the tax should have been on this

November's ballot.

Freeholder Stender said the current board has invested over \$3 million in Pocket Park grants over the last two years aimed at renovating municipal-owned parks around the county. In addition, another \$1 million was used in acquiring land that was added to the county parks system. The county bought a 14-acre lot across from Kean University earlier this year.

On the issue of the open space, Mrs. Stender noted that a bipartisan ad hoc committee has been formed to study what the impact of such a tax would be on Union County.

"While we have identified a piece of property to be developed for park land, we need to better understand what the impact is going to be," she added, noting the current board is "committed to building a better future" for recreational facilities in the county.

Mr. Dill proposed that the county needs to start looking at its largest land parcels adjacent to county parks that could be purchased and added to the current parks system.

He also said the county should consider taking advantage of the Houdaille Quarry in Springfield, an area currently used as the leaf compost site. He said at one point the facility was considered as a location for a small golf course and a baseball field. Mr. Dill said the quarry has "tremendous potential" for the county to expand its recreational facilities.

Freeholder Scutari said the Democratic board is "dedicated to open space." He said the land purchase and Pocket Parks program was ac-

complished while "working within the constraints of a budget that reduced taxes three consecutive years."

He said the board "made prudent decisions without rushing out and asking the voters of Union County to raise their own taxes without a plan."

The six candidates were also asked their views on the impact on the county of the newly opened Jersey Gardens Value Metro Mall on the Elizabeth waterfront, the largest mall in the state.

Mr. Shackell said while the mall is a plus for the City of Elizabeth, the county seat, all 21 towns in the county must be considered.

He accused the current freeholder board of "totally ignoring" the views of the Union County Transportation Advisory Board (TAP) on the proposed light rail connection between Plainfield and Elizabeth and to the mall and Newark International Airport.

The TAP has supported using electric light from the airport to Midtown-Elizabeth and diesel train cars out to Plainfield.

A county consultant, Raytheon Infrastructure, Inc., has given the county eight options to study a 17-mile east-west rail link between the two cities. They range from an electric system to a mixture of electric and diesel.

Mr. Shackell was critical of TV ads which were run in support of the county's job training center at the mall, ads featuring Freeholders Stender and Scutari.

He accused the incumbent freeholders of using \$75,000 in taxpayers money "to promote themselves." Mr. Shackell said the ads ran just five weeks before the Tuesday, November 2 General Election.

Freeholder Stender said the mall, which opened October 16, is a "tremendous success story for Union County." She said the project has brought 5,000 new jobs to the county.

Responding to Mr. Shackell's charges, Freeholder Stender said the ads generated a response of some 7,000 job applicants who attended the county job fair, 2,000 of whom were trained and hired for mall positions.

"That's what that ad did for us," Freeholder Stender responded, noting that the mall is part of a \$4 billion public-private partnership investment in the county.

On the rail link project, she said a special committee will be formed to generate a report with a consensus on which of the eight proposals is best to pursue.

"That's (the rail link) part of our overall economic development plan," she said.

Mr. Dill said the mall is a "boon for Elizabeth."

Mr. Estrada said the county must continue to be "business friendly," in order to grow its economy. This includes the work being done on the infrastructure around the mall along with access to the airport, Elizabeth sea port and proposed rail link.

Calling the mall project a "bipartisan" effort by Democrat and Republican controlled boards, Mr. Revilla said he wants to see that the positions at the mall are "work related jobs" for Union County residents. He said the mall is not intended to be a Welfare program.

Freeholder Scutari said the need to train and motivate workers has been a priority for the freeholder board.

"It (the need to train and motivate workers) was one of the main reasons we felt the need to publicize our job skills training center," he said.

He said the county's "Welfare to Work" program, administered by the Department of Human Services, is a "groundbreaking" program to get people off public assistance. The county received a \$5 million federal grant for its program last year.

Responding again to Mr. Shackell's comments, Freeholder Scutari said the current "new Democrats" on the board felt a "hand up" not a "hand out" was needed to encourage those persons on public assistance to apply for the mall jobs. He said people want to work but need a little bit of help to accomplish that goal.

"Shame on them," he said repeatedly at Republican criticism of the ads promoting the job skills center.

"The Democrats in this county have taken economic development to a new level," Mr. Scutari stated. He said the Jersey Gardens mall will increase tax rates, "meaning that everyone in Union County will benefit from the fact that we will be able to assess taxes more to commercial business and less for residential people who are living in Union County."

The candidates also had an opportunity to answer questions from the audience, the first of which was on crime.

Mrs. Stender said she helped see to it that a prisoner transportation program, developed and administered by the Union County Sheriff's Department, became a reality. Prior to this program, local police departments were responsible for transporting prisoners.

She explained this program enables local police officers to spend time in their local communities rather than transporting prisoners to and from the Union County Jail in Elizabeth.

Mr. Revilla said one of the things a freeholder board needs to do on

crime is to "try to make them (residents) feel comfortable again (in their homes); let them know that the police are available for them."

Mr. Scutari said the Democratic slate has been endorsed by the Union County Policemen's Benevolent Association by Local 73.

"They know we are extremely committed to public safety," he said, citing the board's receipt of an anti-terrorism grant and its new municipal prisoner transportation program. He said only one van is utilized to pickup prisoners at all the municipal jails.

Mr. Shackell, the Director of Public Safety in Cranford in 1997, said Cranford's emergency response time is under three minutes, "one of the best in the country." He said that effort has resulted from new equipment installed at the Cranford Police Department.

The candidate said the morale of county police officers and corrections officers at the county jail, "is at an all-time low" do to a county program that requires county employees to reside in Union County. He said the 1983 ordinance had been enforced by Republicans or Democrats during those 16 years.

"And suddenly they (Freeholder Board) dusted it off and told families that they have to pull their kids out of school and sell their homes," said Mr. Shackell. "Then they turn around and say they are doing a good job on (public) safety." Noting that many of the officers are near tears, he called the decision to no longer grant waivers on the residency requirement, "crazy."

A representative of PBA No. 199, which represents corrections officers, asked each side their stance on the residency rule. He said over 200 of the 300 officers in his union have requested waivers on the county policy citing mostly medical reasons. He said these requests "have gone on deaf ears."

Mr. Shackell said the policy was instituted at a time when county residents were losing their jobs due to a poor economy. In order to stem the loss of private sector jobs, he said the policy of giving these downsized workers first crack at Union County government employment opportunities was initiated.

"It made sense then and it still makes sense today," he added.

He said the biggest problem with the policy has been a "total inconsistent handling" by both parties of the issue in terms of granting of waivers on the policy. Mr. Shackell said long-time employees who had to leave the county for medical reasons should be able to continue to reside out-of-county and keep their jobs. The candidate said he supports a rewrite of the policy.

"Let's not punish the loyal, Union County employees," Mr. Shackell stated.

Freeholder Scutari responded that the county "has rules and regulations which employees must abide by." He said the rules are fully explained in employee handbooks given to all workers.

"We will not sit idly by as individuals break rules and regulations without some sort of answer," he stated.

He said the board will not allow employees to falsify applications without "some sort of disciplinary action" being taken by the county.

Mr. Revilla said he supports abolishing the rule altogether. He said he would support a two-residency law. This, the candidate said, would enable employees to learn about the county.

Margaret Walker of Westfield questioned Mr. Scutari and Mr. Dill on their views of granting a municipality use of county park land for "their exclusive use" for the town's own program.

The county is considering leasing 25 acres in the Ashbrook Reservation to Scotch Plains for \$1 over a period of 99 years. The township says it needs the land to develop additional ballfields and a jogging path.

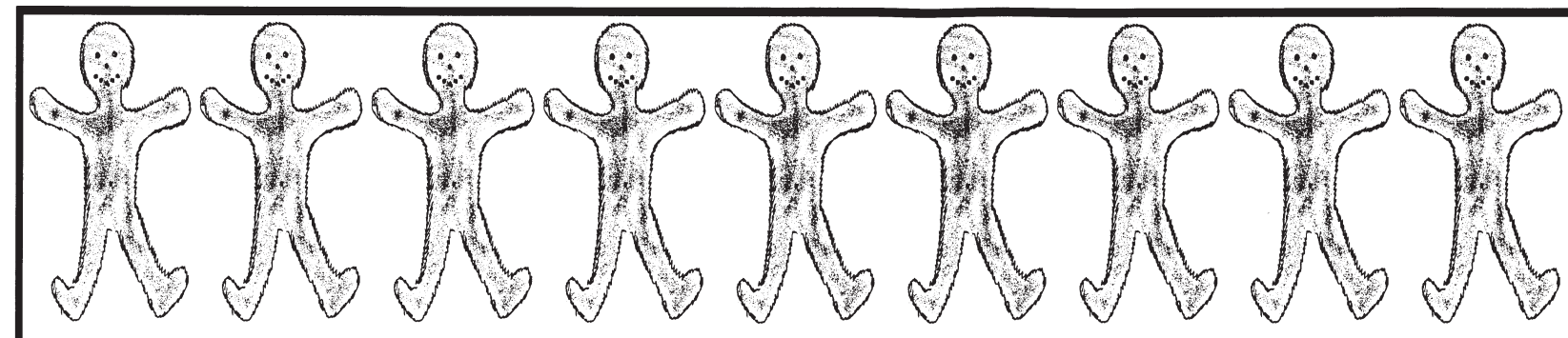
Freeholder Scutari noted that funding for the acquisition of land for towns has been available through the Pocket Parks matching grant program initiated by the board in 1998. He said the program has helped communities revitalize and upkeep their parks and playgrounds.

"We certainly are against exclusive use for any public park land for any particular purpose," he said, adding that the Scotch Plains proposal "still needs further study," although the board is not opposed "to working hand in hand with the municipality to develop this park land to create more facilities for more individuals."

Mr. Dill noted that park land should not be exclusive to any one town. He said perhaps the township could be given first shot at available times for use of the fields but that all county residents should have access and use of the proposed park.

On a question regarding the importance of revitalizing business districts in the county, Mr. Scutari pointed to the \$5 million "Downtown Union County" grant program whereby towns were able to apply for funds that were used to revitalize their downtowns.

"The downtown portion of a community is the heart of a community,"



NINE IS TOO MUCH!

There are **nine members** of the Union County Board of Chosen Freeholders - the people who run our County government.

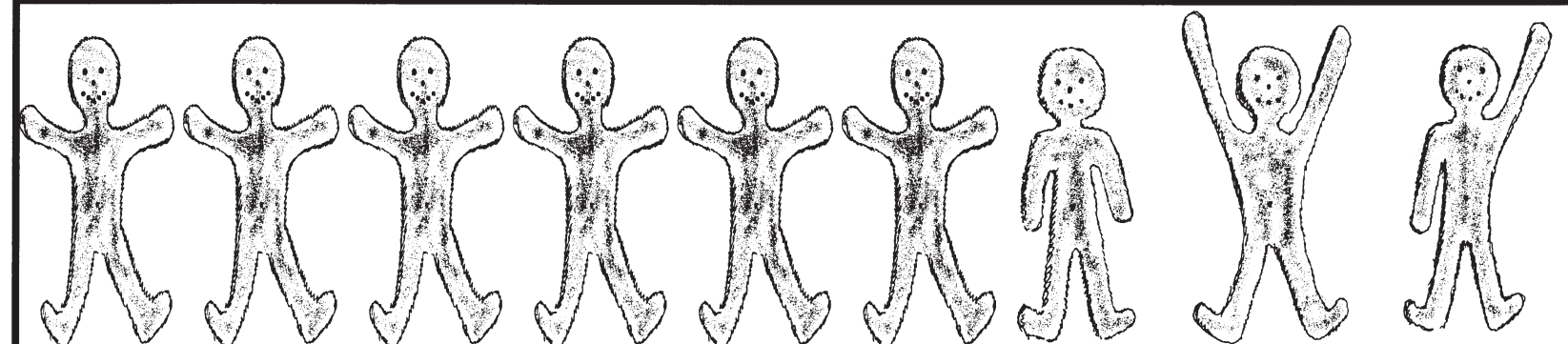
- All nine are Democrats.
- All nine invariably vote the same way.
- All nine often support bad ideas because there is no watchdog to challenge their iron control.
- Bad ideas like **creating an unnecessary patronage job like the \$110,000-a-year post** of Assistant County Administrator invented for the nephew of State Senator Raymond Lesniak.
- Bad ideas like **adding \$120 million in new spending and debt** to the burden already borne by Union County taxpayers.
- Bad ideas like **submitting to the will of Union County Democratic Chairman Charlotte DeFilippo**, who gives all nine Freeholders their marching orders - and imposes harsh punishments on those who dare to differ with her. You didn't elect her to run Union County. But she does.

A different point of view never hurts. And it often helps.

When one side can unilaterally impose its will, it's not healthy. But when another group has the chance to offer constructive suggestions, everybody benefits from the blending of ideas.

This is why we need a minority voice on the Board of Chosen Freeholders. Why it makes sense to elect **three Republicans** to balance the Democrats. Why it's important to have **three Republicans** to serve as **watchdogs**, so the Democrats can't go over the line.

LET'S CHANGE 9-0 TO 6-3



A minority voice provides a badly needed different viewpoint. One missing on a board with all nine members thinking — and voting — alike.

An all-Democratic board is **unhealthy and unnatural**. Don't even members of the closest families occasionally disagree? We're not talking about disagreement for political reasons. We're talking about **three conscientious, qualified individuals seeking to make Union County government work more efficiently and more economically**.

Bring Back 2-Party Government — Vote Republican
KELLY for Surrogate
DILL, REVILLA & SHACKELL for Freeholder

Paid for by Dill, Revilla & Shackell for Freeholder, A. Palermo, Treas., 441 N. Wood Ave., Linden, NJ 07036