

HUNTERDON COUNTY BOARD OF CHOSEN FREEHOLDERS

71 Main Street County Complex, Second Floor
Flemington, New Jersey 08822

April 7, 2008

The regular meeting of the Hunterdon County Board of Chosen Freeholders convened at 7:00 p.m. in accordance with the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Act.

PRESENT: MR. PETERSON, MR. MENNEN, MR. HOLT, MR. MELICK, MR. SWOREN.

OPEN PUBLIC MEETINGS ACT

Director Peterson announced: "This meeting is being held in accordance with the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Act. Adequate notice has been given by posting throughout the year a copy of the notice on Bulletin Boards on the First and Second Floor of the Main Street County Complex, Building #1, Flemington, New Jersey, a public place reserved for such announcements. A copy was mailed on or before January 02, 2008, to the Hunterdon County Democrat, Lambertville Beacon, The Express, Courier News, Trenton Times, Hunterdon Review and The Star Ledger, newspapers designated to receive such notices and by filing a copy with the Hunterdon County Clerk."

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Mr. Melick moved and Mr. Mennen seconded this:

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RESOLUTION

RESOLVED, in accordance with N.J.S. 40A:4-8, the 2008 County budget shall be read by title only.

Charles Balogh, Jr., County Treasurer advised that there are several criteria to be met by posting the budget in the Hall of Records, County Court House and the Administration Building, copies being made available by the Clerk of the Board and these conditions have been met. Therefore, the budget can be read by title only.

ROLL CALL: (AYES) MR. MELICK, MR. MENNEN, MR. HOLT, MR. SWOREN, MR. PETERSON.

A motion was made by Mr. Mennen and seconded by Mr. Melick to open the public hearing on the 2008 budget.

Mr. Balogh stated the 2008 budget for the County of Hunterdon provides for total appropriations of \$96,942,564.68; anticipated revenues of \$27,141,564.68; amount to be raised by taxation, County purpose tax in the amount of \$69,801,000.00.

Mr. Peterson opened the floor to the public for comments.

Stephanie Stevens requested permission to make comments first, and then her people who were present can make comments.

Mrs. Stevens, Chairperson for the Cultural and Heritage Commission, thanked the public for their support in attending and showing the Board of Freeholders that arts and history are very important and to cut their grant budget by \$35,000 is unconscionable. She stated the Cultural and Heritage Commission was formed in 1971 and from that day until this they have had a very good grant program. The Commission has done many things to support the arts and history such as put together the historic element of the County Master Plan, done the survey of stone arch bridges and truss bridges throughout the County with the Planning Department, printed books, and give all kinds of help to the public. Last year they had a budget less than \$63,000 parlayed that into \$101,000 from the State of New Jersey. All of these things come from a volunteer board. This money is used to parlay State grants and match grant funds. She urged the Board to consider the whole budget and return the money back to the Cultural and Heritage budget.

Carol Newman spoke on behalf of the children in the audience. She runs the Show Kids Invitational Theatre which is a reputable theatre which has been nominated for over 80 Perry Awards against adult groups. She stated that the arts are important to the children, not all children are into sports nor can all children do sports. They have children in their group from all income levels, all abilities from those who have learning handicaps to the gifted and talented. All the kids are benefitted by the arts. Through the arts they learn discipline and self control. She requested that the Board reconsider cutting the arts.

Maggie Borlan from Franklin Theatreworks in Franklin Township spoke. Franklin Theatreworks is a non-profit organization that works on a donation basis. They work with children of all backgrounds, all abilities, and all incomes. She spoke about how the children learn all aspects of theatre, from acting to costuming and set building. Last year the group did Pocahontas, went to nursing homes to perform for senior citizens and nursing home residents. She encouraged the Board not to cut the budget.

Karen Larsen, representative of Union Forge Heritage Association in High Bridge spoke. They administer Solitude House museum. She thanked County Cultural and Heritage for their advice, support and financial support through grants. The funding received is vital to them. They are working on preserve unique and historic buildings in High Bridge (4 properties) and without the funding, they will be up a creek.

Joann Wolsiefer echoed the sentiment of Mrs. Stevens and others that spoke. She runs a program called Art Goes to School, where they go into schools and present their portfolio and talk to the children about art, trying to get them to understand art. The program is very well received in the schools.

Carmine Grimes, Fleming Castle Museum on Bonnell Street spoke next. They have an outreach program and travel to the schools, meet with scout groups and have opened the castle on the second Saturday of each month and have a program or special exhibit on each one of those Saturdays. The funding comes from Cultural and Heritage, other foundations, grants and fundraisers. Every source from which they get monies is a small part of the whole and every small part matter to them. She urged the Board to consider.

Don Sherblom, Clinton Township resident and currently president of the 1759 Boathouse of Revolutionary War and Homestead, which is a non-profit which hopes to take over the house which is situated on the Clinton Township Middle School property and transform it into another revolutionary era house museum. History is very important in a time where there is budget cuts there is a tendency to think history can wait. Historic buildings need to be restored, maintained and supported. Hunterdon County's history needs to be told to everyone so we can connect with our past. Hunterdon probably has more colonial era and revolutionary era buildings than most other counties in New Jersey. If we don't put resources into preserving physical structures, researching and writing histories, connecting to student and adults, that history will be lost. History is not something that can wait for better economic times; we will lose it if we don't invest in it. They are presently working on a historic booklet which is being funded in a large part by the Cultural and Heritage Commission which will be a resource for their own fundraising and education in the schools and libraries in Hunterdon County.

Sharon Hill, resident of Flemington Boro, representing Hunterdon Watercolor Society spoke. The rest of the members were not able to be present, as their meeting is the first Monday of each month. The County has always supported them, the grant monies help support their demos for the public. They also support workshops, special projects, Flemington Rocks, the Shad Festival and other projects. They ask that the funding be continued.

Hunterdon Symphony member, Nancy Roth from Raritan Township, spoke and requested other Symphony members to stand up. They have been funded for 28 seasons by Cultural and Heritage Commission's grant funding and they have existed by the great help of those funds. Their music sheets have become more expensive and keep rising. They run youth programs and a string program and a summer camp. She urged the Board to reconsider the budget cut.

Marilyn Cummings, Delaware Township Historical Society, spoke. They are a new historical society and have just started a research program that's documenting all early houses, farmsteads, barns and outbuildings in Delaware Township. They get their grant from the Cultural and Heritage Commission. That is their budget for this project and they cannot do this project without the funding. They have just begun a mapping program to map all historic sites. They simply can't go ahead with this without funding.

Kenneth Cummings, also involved with the Delaware Township Historical Society and Holcombe Jimison Farm Museum. Holcombe Jimison Farm Museum has also gotten funding from Cultural and Heritage and without that funding a lot of the projects at the Farm Museum cannot be done.

Michael Newman with Raritan River Music, which provides concerts and community outreach throughout the year. They've been in existence for 20 years and started with the support of the Cultural and Heritage Commission. While they realize there are always difficult economic decisions to be made, in terms of investment, less than 1/10 of a percent of the County's budget that goes to the arts and history, repays multifold in people supporting the restaurants, the hotels and in many other ways. Organizers in the arts are used to dealing with bare bones budgets and the small amount which comes from the Commission allows them to reach out to corporations and other agencies and individuals for matching funds.

Lucinda Chiles, a board member of Raritan River Music and Art Street stated that the arts and historical heritage in the County has been an important element in bringing people to the County to live, to raise their families, to visit and to share what we do have to offer. She asked the Board to strongly consider putting the money back into the Cultural and Heritage budget.

Rosanna Huff, Franklin Township resident and board member of Raritan River Music spoke next. She wanted to point out that everyone who has spoken is a volunteer and all care passionately about the groups they are with. The arts, music and history are things that enrich our lives. It's such a small part of the County budget, she hopes the Board will reconsider as well.

Audrey Nathanson, director of the Hunterdon Museum of Art in Clinton, stated that the arts and history are an investment. Funding arts and history pays you back so much. That money goes into the community. It's extremely important to continue to support those organizations. Yesterday, they opened 3 new exhibits and had over 300 in attendance. Those people went into the town, shopped in the shops and ate in the restaurants. It is critical that you continue to support all the organizations here. She urged the Board to reconsider funding.

Kelly Pellis spoke from High Bridge. Art is not only a big part of her life, but many others here. When they perform, they get to complete amazing tasks and do amazing things. To cut the budget wouldn't enable them to do what they do.

Cindy Pellis spoke next. With community theatre in their lives, her children are off the street, she knows where they are at all times, and it's a family endeavor. The family is together, work together and has major support in the community theatre group. Her children learned a lot from being involved in community theatre. They can speak to adults, they give eye contact, they are not afraid to speak in public and it gives them poise and things they may not get somewhere else. She urged the Board to continue their support.

Mary Dickson spoke as a parent of 2 SKIT children that were present. She was a 3 sport NCAA athlete and when her children were born they were blessed with different gifts. They are musicians, they are singers and dancers and actors and they love all aspects of the performing arts. She asked the Board to continue to give them support.

Jan Motz, who lives in Readington Township, has 3 children all involved in SKIT. This program has enriched the lives of her family as well as those who attend the shows. Cutting the budget would have a bad impact on the programs.

A resident from Glen Gardner spoke next. She echoes a lot of what has been said. Her daughter has been enriched by her experience with the SKIT program.

A resident named Zielinski from Readington Township, who is a SKIT parent expressed that because the school systems are so large, there is not always opportunity to have a theatre experience if it were not for SKIT.

Brianna Zielinski spoke next. She is a SKIT member who got cut from school plays and without SKIT she wouldn't be able to be in theatre. It's really important for the kids to have this.

Mary Melfi, County Clerk, stated that she was there fighting to keep the expanded hours so the public can use the County Clerk's Office. Her mission is to serve the public. Last year, her office deposited over 4.2 million dollars in fees to the County treasury. Her first year in office travelling the county committed to providing public access, education and service. Office hours were expanded to include 2 Thursday evenings a month and 2 Saturday mornings a month to accommodate the public who wished to use their services for passports, county ID's, notaries, trade name filings, absentee ballots. The increase in hours has proven to be welcome by the community and the use of the expanded hours continues to increase each month. In 2007, they processed over 1200 additional passport applications in comparison to 2006. In the first quarter of 2008, passport applications have increase in the excess of \$200. A resident is not obligated to come to the County Clerk's Office for a passport but she believes they come there because they have excellent customer service, there is not appointment required and they have hours available to conduct this business as a family. In preparing her budget, being aware of the desire to decrease spending, she went through every expense before submitting a budget in February that cuts spending 16% over 2007. She was informed after the introduction of the budget on March 18 that an additional \$5,000 and an equivalent of another 8% had been reduced from her budget without any input on how that could affect the services provided by the County Clerk's Office. Without the funding required to process the applications, she needs money for postage to mail the application, film, etc., the Board is leaving her no choice but to reduce the hours to meet the Board's demands. Since passports also generate revenue for the County, this program returns revenue to the County. Having no service and having the revenue reduced is a double slap to the face of the public. She respectfully requests that the \$5,000 be placed back in her budget as to not endanger the expanded hours that service our constituents. As to the \$7,200 for 2 seasonal employees, those dollars actually represent 600 man-hours that they pay the 4 talented teenage employees that work there in the summer. They are responsible for indexing, scanning maps which are required prior to reaching the joint goal of online records management. Since County contracts require payment of \$12.00 per hour, she cannot reduce the hourly rate to \$7.15, she would be able to turn back \$3,000 of that \$7,200. She asked the Board to consider what they are doing to the residents of the County by cutting her budget.

Orville Wright Williamson stated that his family has been involved in the Hunterdon Symphony since its inception and also have run through many youths who have no where else to perform after or during high school and college. Doctors, chemists, students and people from all walks of life have volunteered to be a part of this group. The music alone has increased in cost and the volunteers have to pay for this. He suggested in the future that the Board call in the groups at a special meeting concerning the people from the groups in the room to try to discuss funding.

James King, Raritan Township advised the Board he sings with the Hunterdon Choral Union, performed with the Hunterdon Theatre and his granddaughter is a member of SKIT. He stated that the Board may not be aware of the diverse and vibrant cultural scene in Hunterdon County. He asked the Board consider that by cutting the budget is cutting that off at the roots.

Mary Ann Adams, Alexandria Township Historical Society, stated that she felt she got a 10 to 1 return on the tax dollars she sends to the County from two institutions. One is the Library and the other is the Cultural and Heritage Commission. You can't really leave history and then come back to it because you lose an entire generation. Cultural and Heritage does a fantastic job in preserving cultural history. In order to improve our children's citizenship and give them a pride in where they are, it's very important that they know the history and the Cultural and Heritage Commission supports that.

A resident named Strunk, cofounder and managing director of River Union Stage, pointed out that theatre, arts and a community like this are a partnership among government and among the arts themselves. He also pointed out that Freeholder Sworen understands and has supported River Union Stage as mayor of Frenchtown. He hopes that the Board is hearing the groups and listening to the groups and humbly requests that the Board does not hit the budget so hard.

George Muller, Raritan Township, stated that the Cultural and Heritage commission should be thanked for their outstanding job of dedication and service to the County. Mr. Muller was a Freeholder liaison to the Cultural and Heritage Commission for 18 years, he has seen it grow. He has been to the programs and has seen them grow and benefit the public. The small amount of dollars the Board gives the Commission, Ms. Stevens is tough on turning down groups that don't meet her criteria. One of the programs he enjoyed was a young artist program and he was so impressed with one young artist that he commissioned her to paint the courthouse for a \$100 savings bond. The painting is hanging down in the Freeholder office. She has gone on to art school and from this art award, she has moved on and done something with her passion. He urged the Board to reinstate the full amount of the request. The Board, up until last year, has put aside money for the 300th Anniversary Celebration of the county in 2014. But if we don't focus on the history of the County, what will we have to celebrate.

The Director of Franklin Theatreworks added that she thinks its imperative that the Board support the arts, since the State is cutting back on all the art funding to the schools. There is a serious lack of money going to the younger students. They don't have full time art teachers, music programs, the community art programs are nurturing these children when they are young. Franklin Theatreworks goes from kindergarten to college students who still act with them. The program is completely free of charge to the children. It is through funding from Cultural and Heritage that they are able to make their budget meet. Without the money, it will be tough. Arts are important. Children need it, love it, it inspires them and nurtures them. She urged the Board to support the arts.

Lee Roth, Raritan Township, stated the arts are important. All of the activities of all groups present bring people here to the County. He is here in his role of immediate past president of the Hunterdon Harmonizers. The Harmonizers have performed in all areas of the county and other areas and work with other arts groups. A small part of their funding comes from Cultural and Heritage but they have helped fund special projects for the group. This group counts on funding to do special projects.

Maggie Borlan from Franklin Theatreworks stated it has become clear that America and the world are entering a time of recession. In a time of recession, cultural arts are more important than ever. Without preserving the past and having culture, how can we go forward, how can we have hope, how can we know who we are. It's really important to know where we have come from so we can move forward.

Mr. Melick moved a motion to close the public hearing, Mr. Holt seconded it.

ROLL CALL: (AYES) MR. MELICK, MR. HOLT, MR. SWOREN, MR. MENNEN, MR. PETERSON.

Mr. Melick moved a motion to adopt the 2008 Hunterdon County budget, Mr. Mennen seconded it.

Mr. Holt thanked the public for being there for the hearing. Mr. Holt stated that his definition of fiscal conservatism is based upon long term strategic planning. In many cases, spending money where the anticipated needs are and in the long term generating savings. Several weeks ago, the budget was introduced. Tonight is the adoption of the budget which is accepting the line item allocations not simply what the overall tax rate is. Within any budgetary process there is the ability to transfer once we get to November, but prior to that you live within the line items as they are in the budget. There are areas which may have been missed in this budget. He feels the issues brought before the Board tonight need to be revisited. He stated that this year the budget is moving downward and we may need to do more adjusting throughout the year. There is not the luxury of having excessive funds on hand. A good budget is measured in several ways. You have to be able to attain the goals of that budget in the given year. More important is sustainability of the budget which means that budget does not impact future years in a negative fashion. The purpose of good budgeting is taking advantage of economic upturns and we add to surplus and to capital accounts and take advantage of economic slowdowns by doing the exact same thing which is tapping into surplus and looking to see where we can provide when necessary. Hunterdon County needs to start thinking in terms of regional costs, regional services, and shared services. The Board started to maintain a clear direction of looking at a spending reduction. Mr. Holt felt it is important to look at the items brought forth tonight and reconsider them as part of the process.

Mr. Melick stated this budget is based on a flat tax base, the indication seems to show that we may be in worse shape next year than we are now since the ratables are not there, people are paying less for homes, people are moving out of the area. The Board started out mindful of the responsibility to the residents. Many hours have been put into this budget preparation. The two items which were focused on tonight were not the only cuts made – there were many cuts in many departments – in order to keep the tax rate flat. The Board needs to be mindful of where the revenues are coming from to pay for County services.

Mr. Peterson explained confusion on the part of the amount which was allotted to Cultural and Heritage. The amount allotted to Cultural and Heritage in the budget is \$81,425. The \$64,000 is only the special projects for regranting. A letter was sent to Ms. Stevens not to award out the full amount but allocate \$32,000 initially in the budget. That gives time to sit down and review the rest of the allocation with Ms. Stevens. Mr. Mathews stated the original request was \$84,425; the amount for general operating support was cut \$3,000 which brings it to \$81,425. This is the amount included in budget. Subsequent to that a letter went to Ms. Stevens asking that the County funding, which is the special projects grant awards that is County funding to grantees which is awarded through the Cultural and Heritage Commission, of \$64,800, which is part of \$81,425 – asking that that money not be awarded all at once and limit it to \$32,400 at this time. Mr. Peterson reiterated to Ms. Stevens that the rest of the \$64,800 is in the budget and the Board is asking that Ms. Stevens allocate half of it so that the Board can work on the other half. Of the \$81,425 in the budget, there is \$64,800 for those grants. She has been asked only to allocate, at this time, \$32,400 of it. Mr. Mathews stated that this does not affect the matching grants from the State.

Mr. Sworen echoed Mr. Holt's words. He doesn't think the Board is ready to adopt the budget tonight. He has done budgets on the governmental level for 12 years. He stated he has some issues with this budget in the way it's been pushed through, discussions that took place. His concern is that it does not have a good plan for the future. There's no plan for shared services. Our Governor has attacked municipalities in the County – he removed quite a few million dollars from Hunterdon County. Municipalities don't know what they are going to do. He's happy that this budget does not raise taxes and the Board should strive to keep taxes as low as they can and not raise them unless they really have to. The biggest savings to the County taxpayers is shared services, but in this budget there is no plan for shared services. This budget is going to hurt us in the future. It's lowered our surplus. Last years budget was heavily questioned for capital expenditures, as was done this year. But the Operating Expenses budget was also cut a lot by asking every department head why they need the money and why they need to do things. We have to know why we need the money, what its going to be spent for and if there's a plan and is there a plan for the future. The Prosecutor's Office excelled in that area by coming up with a multi-year plan to go forward. That's what we need to see. We are budgeting in the time of a recession. We have not discussed salary caps or positions. We have not discussed health insurance changes. We're rushing this budget through because our two key professionals are retiring. They are the financial brain trust for this county. This budget is 5 ½ million dollars than last year. There are changes to be made in this budget which will not drastically affect the tax rate. He stated that he is not ready to vote on the budget tonight.

Mr. Mennen stated that in his mind, the Board should be approaching this like a business. He stated that there were multiple hearings, early in the mornings, on the weekends and many hours were put in as a group and he does not believe this budget is being pushed through. There are cuts in this budget and the budget has been cut because we're in a down economy. The Board cut it to avoid a tax increase and a raid of surplus. In 2007, 14 million of surplus was used. In the budget that has been presented 13.275 million of surplus is proposed. That's a decrease in the use of surplus. A lot of work went into this budget and it has not been easy. This budget is the sum total of diligent, involved, cooperative deliberation and effort on the part of everybody here, staff in particular.

Mr. Peterson stated that when it comes to budgeting, he is reminded of an individual he met when he was knocking on door three years ago. When he explained to this gentleman he was running for office, the gentlemen became teary eyed. He told Mr. Peterson he grew up in Hunterdon, raised his family here and his children are living here. He also told Mr. Peterson he and his wife were moving to Delaware because they could no longer live in Hunterdon County due to property taxes. All this man's memories were here in Hunterdon County but he was moving to Delaware – not because he wanted to or because this was a new adventure, but because he was forced to because taxes were too high. Mr. Peterson stated he heard that from many people as he went around. That is a problem. There is a reason the Board is cutting the budget – to hold the line on the tax rate. The Board went through the budget line by line, talked to each department about their budget and did a thorough and complete job on this budget. This was not pushed through nor a half-done budget. There are further savings we can squeeze out of the county operation but they don't all have to be in this budget at this time. Mr. Peterson is for any idea that will save tax payers money. Just because the budget is done, the County is not done saving money. There were tough choices that had to be made to come to this budget, each one was considered. It's hard to make tough choices where people are going to be unhappy. I think government would be better served if government would live within its budgets. Every expenditure will be looked at this year. Every department was asked not to spend in some areas until the budget has been adopted. Everyone was asked to work with the Board and look for ways to economize and save money. This budget is a good start for getting an efficient County government. The Board has to vote their conscience on this budget.

**ROLL CALL: (AYES) MR. MELICK, MR. MENNEN, MR. PETERSON.
(ABSTAIN) MR. SWOREN, MR. HOLT.**

Mr. Sworen moved and Mr. Melick seconded this:

See Page 04/07/08 - 5A RESOLUTION

RESOLVED, approving the sum of \$7,536,000.00 be raised by taxation in support of Hunterdon County's Open Space, Recreation, Farmland and Historic Preservation Trust fund for 2008.

**ROLL CALL: (AYES) MR. SWOREN, MR. MELICK, MR. HOLT, MR. MENNEN,
MR. PETERSON.**

Mr. Sworen moved and Mr. Melick seconded this:

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RESOLUTION

RESOLVED, approving the sum of \$5,699,351.00 be raised by taxation in support of Operating Budget of the Hunterdon County Library for 2008.

**ROLL CALL: (AYES) MR. SWOREN, MR. MELICK, MR. HOLT, MR. MENNEN,
MR. PETERSON.**

There being no further business to come before the Board, Director Peterson adjourned the meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Denise B. Doolan
Clerk of the Board