



TODAY'S SUNBEAM

County officials dissolve SCUA

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By Randall Clark

rclark@sjnewsco.com

SALEM - The freeholders adopted an ordinance dissolving the Salem County Utilities Authority after a silent public hearing Wednesday, putting its day-to-day operations under the oversight of an expanded county Improvement Authority.

The one objection came from lone Republican on the board, Julie Acton, who voted against the measure despite casting a vote in its favor when the ordinance was introduced in July.

She said she only voted to bring it to the public forum, adding she has come to the realization that if it's not broken, why fix it?

"(The SCUA) has been a well-run and operated government entity since 1988. It has produced surplus for the future expansions and equipment and it has been self-sufficient," Acton said. "It has been rated the top in New Jersey, which is a reflection of the organizational structure ... with that being said, why change it?"

Proponents of the merger say the SCUA's surplus generated from county landfill operations in Alloway can now be used by the Improvement Authority to better the lives of county residents.

It will go toward funding the financial shortcomings of the county nursing home, which has also been merged under the Improvement Authority. Tourism initiatives may be funded by the Improvement Authority as well.

Through the landfill surplus, the county will attempt to offset a \$1.5 million annual deficit at the Salem County Nursing Home and Rehabilitation Center in Mannington Township, which has hereto been shouldered by the taxpayers.

Freeholder Director Lee Ware said this is "one of the largest projects and changes in the history of Salem County."

Several SCUA board members would be realigned as an advisory board, losing their health benefits and salaries, which ranged from about \$2,056 to \$3,347. Out of 10 members and two alternates on the SCUA board, six received health care coverage as of December.

Recently-appointed Improvement Authority Executive Director Jack Kugler said the move alone will save an estimated \$200,000 in board salaries and benefits. Kugler will receive a \$75,000 annual salary. A chief financial officer and landfill director will also be required.

Freeholder Jeffrey J. Hogan said early on in the deal that over the past years, "the nursing home has been running in the red with no end in sight."

"We want the best care for the residents, the most support for the staff and the best cost for the taxpayer," according to Hogan.

Hogan explained two things are necessary to bring the nursing home out of its slump: Quality of care by a dedicated staff and reformed programs.

Despite agreeing there is a need to care for the county's growing elderly population, Acton said dissolving an award-winning authority is not the way to go.

In 2001, SCUA won the state Department of Environmental Protection's Outstanding Achievement in Recycling award and is consistently the winner of the Salem County Community Spirit Award.

"I've talked to employees and board members. They are just afraid of robbing Peter to pay Paul," Acton said.

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