

NEW JERSEY ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

County Government with a Unified Voice!

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STATE HOUSE NEWS

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PROPERTY TAX APPEALS

NJAC's Legislative Affairs Committee is in the process of reviewing **SENATE. NO. 1896** (*Bucco R-Morris*), which would require fire districts, school districts, and county governments to share in the burden of property tax assessment appeal refunds. In summary, this bill would require the municipal tax collector in each municipality to send a notice of the pro rata share of property tax appeal refunds paid by the municipality during the tax year to the county, each school district, and each fire district for inclusion in their annual budgets. In the year following the tax year in which the refunds are paid, the municipal tax collector would then be required to deduct the applicable pro rata share of property tax refunds from the amounts to be paid to the county, each school district, and each fire district as required under current law.

When property tax board appeals are successful, the municipality must reimburse the property taxpayer 100% of the appealed tax levy as county and school district levies are guaranteed. The municipal tax collector must then adjust the taxpayer's fourth quarter tax bill; and, the municipality must account for the loss as "anticipated but uncollected revenue due to loss in appeal." Several municipalities have established special reserve funds or issued bonds designed to pay for uncollected taxes and outstanding tax appeals. The New Jersey State League of Municipalities (NJSLOM) supports this legislation as one of its top priorities and is encouraging municipalities across the State to adopt resolutions accordingly. NJSLOM contends that the current process inequitably impacts municipalities as property tax appeals force towns to fund the legal defense of the appealed assessment; and, successful property tax appeals force towns to bear the full burden of any monies due as a result of the appeal.

Although certain municipalities may benefit from counties and school districts sharing in the burden of property tax assessment appeal refunds, this bill would not benefit taxpayers in the aggregate as it represents a mere shifting in expenses or liabilities from one level of government to another. As such, NJAC recommends opposing this legislation at this time, but is in the process of collecting additional input on potential solutions to make the property tax assessment appeal process more efficient and less costly.

STATE HEALTH BENEFITS PROGRAM

On April 28th the General Assembly will consider **ASSEMBLY, NO. 1273** (*Coughlin D-Middlesex/O'Donnell D-Hudson*), which would require the State Health Benefits Program (SHBP) to provide certain information to participating public employers. In summary, this bill would require the State Health Benefits Program (SHBP) to provide at no cost, and not more than once in a 24-month period, complete claims experience data to a public employer other than the State that participates in the SHBP and makes a written request for its claims experience information including loss reports and large claims data. The bill would also require the SHBP to provide the complete claims information in an electronic and manual format to the participating public employer within 30 days of receipt of a written request.

NJAC supports this important and timely measure as counties that currently participate in the SHBP have long objected to the fact that claims experience and loss report data are not made readily available by the SHBP. Moreover, the SHBP forces counties to pay for this critical information typically provided at no charge and in a timely manner by private health insurance plans. With this in mind, NJAC supports this measure as it would allow county governments that participate in the SHBP to more effectively shop and compare public employee health benefit plans. Senator Jennifer Beck (*R-Monmouth*) introduced the Senate companion version **SENATE, NO. 2640** on March 11th and the measure is currently in the Senate State Government, Wagering, Tourism and Historic Preservation Committee awaiting consideration.

SCDRTAP FUNDING

NJAC is once again advocating for additional funding to support the Senior Citizens and Disabled Transportation Assistance Program (SCDRTAP), which is projected to lose \$4.0 million in critical funding during State fiscal year 2014.

As a result of Speaker Sheila Oliver's leadership and commitment to the 21 county coordinated transportation systems, last year's budget included a \$2.0 million appropriation for SCDRTAP funding that allowed county governments to continue providing transportation and paratransit services for the senior and disabled population. As demand for these vital services has grown exponentially, monies from the struggling Casino Revenue Fund have declined dramatically by more than 30% since 2011. At a time in which all local governments are struggling to make ends meet by reducing or eliminating critical staff, services, and capital improvement projects, county officials will find it very difficult to continue delivering an important public service for the State's most vulnerable population without some much-needed assistance.

As a strong supporter of legislation that authorized Internet gaming, NJAC is optimistic that the measure will ultimately increase annual casino revenue funds dedicated to county-based programs and initiatives. However, the State does not expect to collect and distribute such revenues until 2016. In the meantime, NJAC recommends that this year's budget include an \$8.0 million appropriation for SCDRTAP funding, which would increase support for county coordinated transportation systems to 2011 levels. More importantly, this level of funding would allow counties to provide a consistent level of service that the aged and disabled deserve, and readily use to live more independently.

PUBLICATION OF ORDINANCE BY TITLE AND SUMMARY

On April 28th, the General Assembly is set to consider **SENATE, NO. 313/ASSEMBLY, NO. 3725** (*Whelan D-Atlantic*)(*Burzichelli D-Gloucester*), which would permit certain county boards of chosen freeholders to publish notices of proposed or amended ordinances by title and summary.

NJAC supports this measure as it could save significant taxpayer dollars for county governments established pursuant to the "Optional County Charter Law." These counties *These counties include Atlantic, Bergen, Essex, Hudson, Mercer, and Union.* Although current law under N.J.S.A. 40:49-2 authorizes municipalities to publish ordinances in a newspaper in their entirety or by title and summary, N.J.S.A. 41A-1-101 mandates charter counties to publish ordinances in their entirety at a substantially higher cost. Except for certain bond, capital expenditure, or health ordinances as required by specific statute, non-charter counties typically adopt resolutions at a much lower cost to publish.

OPEN SPACE PRESERVATION

NJAC is collaborating with PlanSmart NJ to encourage counties throughout the State to adopt resolutions supporting sustainable funding for the preservation and stewardship of open space, parks, farmland, and historic sites in New Jersey. As of this writing, Camden, Cumberland, Essex, Gloucester, Hunterdon, Mercer, Middlesex, Monmouth, Passaic, Salem, and Union counties have adopted the following resolution:

WHEREAS, New Jersey has a long and successful history of preserving open space, parks, farmland, and historic sites;

WHEREAS, the Green Acres Program has helped to preserve over 650,000 acres of land and supported more than 1,100 park development projects over the past 50 years; the State Agricultural Development Committee has preserved 200,000 acres of farmland over the past 30 years; and the Historic Trust has preserved 477 historic sites over the past 45 years;

WHEREAS, all remaining funds for these programs under the Green Acres, Water Supply and Floodplain Protection, Farmland and Historic Preservation Bond Act of 2009 will be fully allocated by the end of 2012; *WHEREAS*, (Insert name) County has been a direct beneficiary of, and partner to, these critical state preservation programs;

WHEREAS, substantial unmet needs remain for additional land and water protection, park development, and farmland and historic preservation, for the health and welfare of our communities and residents; and

WHEREAS, it is imperative that a long-term, dedicated source of funding be established to: sustain open space, farmland, and historic preservation programs beyond the 2009 Bond Act; improve and ensure proper stewardship of parks, preserved lands, and historic sites; provide equitable access to quality parks and recreation in urban, suburban, and rural areas; match and leverage county, local, and private funds for these purposes; protect drinking water supplies, water quality, and alleviate costly flood damages; preserve fish and wildlife habitat and provide public access for hunting and fishing; and, revitalize cities and towns; protect our quality of life and economic prosperity.

COUNTY OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT STRATEGY SESSION

Special thanks to Burlington County Emergency Management Coordinator Kevin Tuno, Camden County Emergency Management Coordinator Sam Spino, Middlesex County Emergency Management Coordinator John Ferguson , and Ocean County Deputy Emergency Management Coordinator Keith Klements for taking the time out of their busy schedules on April 3rd to meet with representatives from various State utilities to discuss strategies on how to enhance communication among county emergency management coordinators and the State's leading utility companies. The group made the following five recommendations:

RECOMMENDATION 1 -If they're not included already, all utility companies should participate in county and municipal emergency management exercises on an annual basis. *Based on input from the telecom industry, the group should discuss this recommendation in more detail at its next strategy session.*

RECOMMENDATION 2 - If they're not included already, all utility companies should participate in monthly Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC) meetings with county and municipal emergency management coordinators.

RECOMMENDATION 3 - NJAC will work with the county office of emergency management coordinators to collect and summarize information on best practices utilized by utility companies that may be implemented in a uniform manner.

RECOMMENDATION 4 - NJAC will work with the New Jersey Utilities Association (NJUA) to develop a "Contact List" of county office of emergency management coordinators and corresponding utility company representatives.

RECOMMENDATION 5 - NJAC and NJUA may hold additional strategy sessions throughout the year, and may host an emergency management workshop in the fall.

Thank you as well to AT&T, Atlantic City Electric, Comcast, JCP&L, NJUA, PSE&G, Verizon, and Verizon Wireless for participating in this strategy session.

"It is wise to keep in mind that neither success nor failure is ever final." Roger Babson