

Protest by senior puts spotlight on issue of fees

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript
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Sometimes one person can act as a voice for many, and that's what happened on Jan. 19 when Thelma Smith stepped to the microphone during the Orange City Council meeting.

For some time there have been rumblings from Orange's senior population about what some see as adverse changes in their services.

In the past, under former Mayor Mims Hackett Jr., seniors had grown accustomed to enjoying the perks associated with their age, experience and political savvy.

Senior residents are traditionally reliable voters in New Jersey. That may be understandable considering they have paid taxes on everything from their children's education to their income.

For others, it may also be a given that politicians would woo a constituency that exercises the power of their votes during an election.

The problem in Orange now is that some seniors have seen the perks they have become accustomed to getting for free suddenly have fees attached. Five dollars for the annual seniors picnic or another service may sound reasonable to many, but for some seniors on a fixed income, it can be a lot.

However, the fiscal winds of change are rustling throughout New Jersey toward accountability and affordability as a result of the recession. For some residents in Orange, it seemed a good idea to have seniors begin paying for certain services.

That was not the option last week when Smith spoke to the council. She questioned the members and city officials about why she had been denied a ride to a doctor's appointment even though the city has a transportation system for senior and disabled residents.

"I am 82 years old, I have lived in Orange since 1960 and I have worked as a representative at the library and under four mayors," said Brown. "I have been a president of the League of Women Voters for years, and I would like to ask Marvin Braker how long he has been working for the city."

Braker, the city attorney, said he has worked for Orange since 1998.

Smith asked Braker how it was that someone like herself could be denied an essential service when she needed it most.

"I want to know whose money pays for senior citizen transportation, because I was told I couldn't get transportation because I don't live in senior housing," said Smith. "If I have to go to court, I will. They can't tell me I can't have a ride when I paid \$ 17,700 in taxes last year."

Council President Edward Marable referred Smith's inquiry to Darrell Holcomb, the city's director of community services, which includes the Office of Older Adults. Holcomb said he did not understand why anyone working in senior transportation could have denied Smith's request.

"Our older adult transportation is paid for by taxpayers' dollars," Holcomb said. "I would need to know who told her that. There are two types of transport, and the fixed route does go through the senior housing units. But the other transport could have been used because they do that."

Smith said she was glad to hear it, but it was a too late to help her with her missed appointment.

"I had to pay \$ 50 to catch a taxi so I could go to the doctor," said Smith. " I had cancer and it affects your teeth, so I needed to go see my dentist and they said they couldn't take me. If that's the case, then what do I pay taxes for?"

Afterward, Smith said she was satisfied that something would be done. She said aside from her own situation, she brought the issue to the council because she wanted to make sure no other senior had to go through what happened to her.

" Luckily I had the money to keep my appointment," said Smith. " But what would have happened if I didn't have it or if it was someone else who couldn't have afforded it?"