

Morton's lease objection deep-rooted

By Chris Sykes
Staff Writer

The City Council voted against the plan brokered by Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. and Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo to lease the Orange Reservoir so the county could develop the site. According to one member, the seeds of the opposition to the proposal may have been laid after the election of three new members.

That 5-1 vote, with one member absent, during the Nov. 6 meeting, came in another attempt for the county to secure a 20-year lease on the reservoir.

DiVincenzo came to Orange in 2009 to make a presentation to the council about the renovations and improvement projects inside Monte Irvin Orange Park. While DiVincenzo's presentation was a formality regarding the project to install a new multi-use soccer field in the park, it provided a window into the difference in priorities between the county executive and Councilman Rayfield Morton.

Morton said recently it was his self-avowed role as advocate for the park and the residents who use it that he first butted heads with DiVincenzo. Morton questioned him about why the activities on county property were being allowed to adversely impact the quality of life of residents on adjoining streets even though the

county police are responsible for patrolling it. Morton claimed DiVincenzo said while the county installed parking and other amenities to relieve traffic and parking issues in the area surrounding the park, and the county police patrolled the park, the county was limited in what it could do to solve the concerns of nearby residents.

Morton said he was not impressed or satisfied with DiVincenzo's answer.

Since then, Morton's dissatisfaction with other actions the county have taken in Orange, especially the reservoir-leasing deal he brokered with Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr., has not dissipated. He said his dissatisfaction with the amounts and stated benefits and dividends to Orange's residents listed in the proposed lease might have blossomed his opinion into outright opposition to it.

"The Orange council voted down the reservoir lease contract due to a few details that had not been explained," Morton said in an email. "The two questions that really caused the 'nay' votes were the concerns about the \$600,000 tax lien that Orange supposedly owes West Orange for back taxes on the reservoir. We also wanted to know where it is spelled out how the upfront \$525,000 would be used by the city. These two things should definitely be addressed."

In an April article in the *Orange Transcript*, records through the West Orange Tax Collector's Office revealed the city owed more than \$600,000 in taxes. A tax foreclosure sale in September was completed by West Orange.

The fact that those concerns had not been resolved before or during last week's meeting, Morton said, is why he believed the resolution approving the reservoir lease deal was rejected. Unless that situation changes before it is submitted to the council again, he said, he believes the results will be the same.

The proposed reservoir lease deal between the city and the county is for 20 years with Orange receiving \$1.6 million during the life of the contract. Morton said he has a background in contract negotiations and appropriate remuneration from his days as an entertainment manager and event promoter. Based on that knowledge, he said he did not know if offer is sufficient when compared to the millions of dollars he believes the county stands to earn off the improvements and recreational attractions that are planned for the reservoir. He said the figures border on insignificant since West Orange has been seeking to recoup the back taxes it says the city owes on the property.

Managing Editor John Zucal contributed to this article.