

DiVincenzo has eyes focused on Orange Reservoir

Council hears proposal for boat house from executive

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, Orange Transcript

Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo appeared during the City Council's reorganization meeting last week to give members a presentation about improvements to the soccer field in Monte Irvin Orange Park as well as plans he has to site a boat house on the Orange Reservoir tract.

DiVincenzo discussed his suggestions for the reservoir site adjacent to the Richard J. Codey Arena and Turtle Back Zoo in West Orange. He gave the council more information about the land deal he has been negotiating with Mayor Eldridge Hawkins Jr. since the end of 2008.

"The property that is Orange's is 15 to 20 feet from the water's edge," said DiVincenzo. "We would like to build a boat house on the water that is similar to ones we've built and are running in other parts of the county. There's actually a track that runs around there that is already in use."

The proposed deal between the city and county administrations involves selling, leasing or sharing the old reservoir site. DiVincenzo said he wants to maximize the area's natural beauty and appeal in an effort to continue transforming the South Mountain Reservation region into a "travel destination" that would yield social, economic and recreational benefits for Orange and county residents.

"This is a treasure you have that I believe can be shared throughout Essex County," said DiVincenzo. "Right now there is not enough parking for things at the Codey Arena and Turtle Back Zoo, and we're at a maximum. What we would like to do is work out an agreement with Orange so we will be able to utilize this. If you want to sell it, we'll buy it. If you want to lease it to us, we will do that for \$1 a year and we will bear the cost of maintaining and running it."

DiVincenzo offered to take council members on a tour of the reservoir land to give them a better idea of what he wants to do with it. He said any agreement reached will be beneficial to all parties.

"I've been working on this for a year and it's not pie in the sky," said DiVincenzo. "It borders South Mountain Reservation and, together with Turtle Back Zoo and Codey Arena, it's becoming a destination. Right now, there's just an empty building or ware house sitting there and the county will be responsible for the maintenance and security and we can share the profits."

DiVincenzo's comments about security and parking at the reservoir site provided a segue for residents who live near the county's Monte Irvin Orange Park to discuss their concerns about planned improvements to the soccer field. The consensus among the residents and officials was the need for more parking in the park so players and their fans would not have to park on adjoining residential streets during matches. Another concern was the need to increase city police and personnel from the Essex County Sheriff's Office at all times to deter crime, indigents and many of the "obscene" and illegal activities they said take place after hours.

"I haven't heard one word from the dais about what they're going to do about the parking in the street," said Eleanor Smith, a member of the old Friends of Orange Park group that fought to clean the park before DiVincenzo embarked upon a campaign to renovate all of the county's parks and recreation outlets. "If you're going to clean up the park, then clean up our streets after ward. Why should we pay \$ 17,000 in taxes, the highest in the city, and my county taxes went up this year, too, when you're not going to do anything for us?"

Smith said she and the other Friends of Orange Park members once fought to get access to the park restricted by closing it to motor vehicles. She said that included limiting access to the parking lots during sporting events, but they never thought there would be many negative unintended consequences to their well meaning actions.

"The reason we fought and had it closed was prostitution, drugs, cockfighting and everything else that was going on in there back then," said Smith. "I've lived in Orange since 1960 and moved here before it became all-black. The cops used to be in there all the time and kept people out. I shouldn't have to furnish parking for the games."

Phil Kale, a resident of the Seven Oaks section, which is adjacent to the park's south side, agreed with Smith. Kale said residents' gripes boil down to policing and law enforcement issues.

"I literally live in the park," said Kale. "I think the beauty in Essex County is in its parks, but there's a huge difference in how you get things done at the county level as opposed to the municipal level. Miss Smith is absolutely right about the litter and parking problems around the park. We strongly recommend you allow parking in the park to reduce the burden on residents and homeowners. If the police would enforce the laws, then there wouldn't be so many problems."

DiVincenzo said he will try to do something about the concerns. He said it would be problematic to open all the unused parking areas inside the park right away, but he would work to resolve the residents' situation as soon as possible.